

**Choice and Consequence**

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## Introduction Essay

When I was twelve years old, I was in the middle of what most would call a turbulent time, but what twelve-year-old Erin called the worst time in her life. Too many things were changing too quickly in my life, but at twelve, I didn't really know how to express that, nor did I want to acknowledge it too deeply. I turned to fiction, hoping for a way to ignore the sadness and fear that I didn't want to admit I was feeling.

First, I did this by consuming any fiction I could get my hands on. I had started reading *Harry Potter* around this time, after years of being told that it was satanic. Reading through the books, I didn't necessarily see that claim. Despite the magic and fantasy, what gripped me instead was that I saw a core similarity between me and Harry: we were both scared kids trying to understand the changes going on around us.

As a twenty-two-year-old, I now understand that people often use fiction as a means of escape. In that regard, my reason for being fascinated by fantasy isn't different from many other people. But at twelve, all I was concerned with was finding myself in more of these stories. I latched onto any fantasy series that I could get my hands on, expecting to find this arc of protagonists starting lonely and scared but finding people they care about and who care about them at the end of their story. I didn't find the arc in every story I read, but the stories I found it in became, and still are, some of my favorites.

Of course, that's just the story of how I got into reading fantasy. I was still twelve when I sat down to write for the first time, though admittedly, I wasn't writing an original story. I was writing fanfiction, creating characters and seeing how these new characters might have an impact on the plot of the original story. I wondered if, and how, I could impact the plot and the choices

certain characters had made by introducing new factors to the story. It would be another few years before I realized I could make the leap into making my own stories, but I do think that starting by writing fanfiction helped me get an understanding of how to differentiate my own writing style from the style of other writers.

In many of the stories I have read, especially in recent years, the protagonists always win, villains always end up defeated, and the protagonists tend to get a happy ending, even if they lose people along the way. Growing up and looking at the world around me, this wasn't something I saw in a lot of places, so while a victory is sometimes bittersweet, they always feel well deserved. As long as the heroes win in the end, that is all that matters for the purposes of the story, even if that is not the case in the real world.

Going into my senior project and looking at the world around me, I wanted to reflect the villains I was seeing in the world around me. In fantasy, the villains tend to be some larger than life force, something that is terrifying, but cannot be seen in the real world. The political context of the late 2010s showed, more than anything, that the real villains are still technically larger than life forces, but not in the way that the stories I read growing up portrayed them. In stories, if the villains weren't actual monsters, they at least had monstrous features, something you could see, point at, and say, "*Ah, yes, this is a bad person.*" But the reality of the situation has never been that clear-cut, and the wolves have always hidden in sheep's clothing. How else to showcase such villains, I thought, than to create the reflections of them? In the stories I've written for my senior project, I don't show much of the villains, but you can't have a villain without the world they intend to impact.

All the stories in this anthology revolve around choices. I've always been fascinated by choices, and the uncertainty that revolves around the options presented by choices. Even if you think your only options are those in front of you, even if you plan your choice meticulously and leave no room for error, things may not necessarily work out the way you intend. It was something I played around with back when I was writing fanfiction, something that stuck with me as both a philosophy and something I could incorporate into my writing. Similar to the way that thinking about and creating worlds and specific scenarios is exciting and something I think about a lot, I often find myself thinking about the choices I've made in the past, and wondering what might have happened if I'd gone with one of the other options that I had at the time.

Of the seven short stories in this anthology, two of them are connected. The reason for this is because the world those stories are set in is the most internally developed of the worlds I've come up with. In addition to wanting to expand on how even the most well-intended plans can go awry, I wanted to use my senior project as a chance to start digging into worlds I envisioned when I was younger, to give them more depth and flesh them out. I wanted to make sure I would be able to come back and look at these stories when I was ready to write more about them, and wanted to be able to make sure there was enough in these stories for me to expand on.

The first story in the anthology is set in the least fantastical world. In *Modern Day Magic*, Anya is presented with a choice that is fairly tame, considering the more impactful choices the other protagonists in my stories are confronted with. Anya's choice is whether or not to tell her friend about the witchcraft she practices. On one hand, she wants to keep her hobby as much to herself as possible. On the other hand, she's excited to have someone to talk to about her hobby, even if she knows the other person doesn't have any understanding about witchcraft.

The second story takes a step up in terms of weirdness. In this story, the protagonist, Lena, learns not only that she has superpowers, but that they can destroy her from the inside. Lena has to decide whether she should trust a group of other teenagers that she has never met before. Lena's choice is considerably more complicated than Anya's; in Lena's case, she has discovered that she has superpowers, and that if she doesn't learn how to control those powers, they could devour her from the inside out. Being on her own for the first time in her life and the fact that she does not know what is going on in regards to her newly manifested powers are the two main factors influencing her decision.

The third story, *Doctoral Inquiries*, is about two private investigators, Emma and Felix. After an investigation, while they are patching up some minor injuries, Emma notices that Felix, her partner, has a more serious injury that neither of them are able to treat. They are confronted with several choices in this story: whether to go to the hospital or not, how much they should tell the doctors at the hospital, and how much to tell Felix's parents about the nature of their work.

The fourth story is the first of the two connected short stories. In *Singularity*, two of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, War and Death, are forced to either let a young girl live or to make sure she dies, as she is supposed to. This story has the most complicated choice with the most complicated consequences. I also wanted to take characters that represent something that most people have only a negative opinion of and show that they are not explicitly evil just because of what they represent.

The fifth story is the second of the two connected stories. In *First Impressions*, the main character, Chris, is deciding if he should befriend Aria, the girl that becomes his lab partner, who is also the character from the previous story that should have died. While the choice doesn't

seem complicated or special compared to the choices presented in the other stories, in Chris' mind, at this point in his life, it is an all-consuming choice.

The sixth story, *Wayward Royal*, is about a young squire named Elane. Her goal as a squire is singular: she has only taken up the position to be close to the youngest princess, Isobel, who she is in love with. One morning, Isobel is kidnapped, and Elane has to decide whether or not she should go after Isobel to find her, even though she has not been given any orders from either the knight she answers to or from the king.

The final story, *Lessons and Training*, takes place in the most fantastical world. In this story, Tamara, a thief, meets up with an elf woman named Amaia that she'd met when she was younger. The choices that Tamara has to make are constant: she has to decide whether or not to join Amaia's crew, whether or not Amaia and Jasper can be trusted, and even if she's thinking straight or if her judgement is being clouded by her attraction to Amaia.

Writing is something that centers me. Even a decade after I started writing, I still see it as a process I can use to help me expel pent up frustrations and anxiety. I can give characters choices, and give them the capabilities to confront those choices in one way or another. Even if the choice they make is not right, or does not work out, it can potentially be something that readers can look at as a guideline for how they could make similar choices in their own life.

As I settled into a more consistent writing schedule after high school, I knew that I wanted to use this skill I spent years cultivating into something that could help people the way fiction helped me when I was younger. If I could help even one person by lessening their loneliness, the way reading had lessened my loneliness, I felt and still feel obligated to do so. After all, what good is there in a skill if you can use it to help people but choose not to do so? It

is my choice to take the opportunity to do what I can to reach out and help people, even if it is in what could be considered a minor way.



### **Modern Day Magic**

I dabble in magic, technically. I just don't dedicate a lot of my time to practicing, even though I know I should. I joke that my strong suit is divination, that because I can guess plotlines in shows and movies, I should start buying lottery tickets, and maybe I'd get lucky and come across the right number. Of course, if magic worked like that, everyone would be winning the lottery. I say my strong suit is divination because it's what I can practice most easily.

I use tarot cards. Mostly, I ask the cards yes or no questions, and the answers depend on the card. I usually have to look up the meanings, since I don't use the cards that frequently. Right now, I'm spreading the cards across my desk, facedown. I spread them out a bit more, making sure none of the cards are hidden under any of the others. Then, I close my eyes, and think about the question I want to ask.

I wave my right hand over the cards. After a moment, I start to feel something like a light breeze or fingers moving across mine. I let my fingers hover there, making sure that I actually felt it, and when I feel it again, seemingly more insistent, I let my hand drop, resting on the card. I open my eyes, separate the cards behind this one from the rest of the line to keep the card's place in the order, then flip it over.

Temperance.

I frown. I drew this card last time I asked a question, and I think I drew it the time before that, too. I pull out my phone, double checking what the card means. I already know that in terms of the yes/no nature of the question, Temperance means yes. But the meaning of the card itself might say something about why I tend to draw it so often.

*Temperance is the card for bringing balance, patience, and moderation into your life ... this card calls on your to remain calm ... maintain an even temperament and manage your emotions.*

I know that the cards can be really accurate, but they didn't need to do *this* to me before eight in the morning. I put the tarot cards back in the velvet bag they came in, then start to get ready for work at the public library.

"Anya," Jane calls as she walks in. Her brown hair is in a ponytail today — she changes her style every day — and she sits down at her seat with an unceremonious plop. "Can we just, like, stop working?"

"There's so many reasons why we can't."

Jane puts her head on the desk, and groans like she's in pain. The library's still empty aside from the other employees, so the noise echoes, and when I see one of the pages flinch at the noise and whip her head in Jane's direction with clear panic on her face, I shake my head at the girl. "Let's go out tonight. Please? We got paid yesterday, so it'll be my treat."

I nod, as if I'm paying attention, but I'm still thinking about Temperance. I like Jane. She's only a year older than me, she's nice, she's funny, and she helps me be a little less

introverted when we go out by making sure I'm engaged in conversations. I wonder if she's somehow related to what Temperance meant in the drawing I did this morning.

"Oh, sweet," she says, grinning, her fake whining already forgotten. "Where do you want to go? You want to get something to eat, or do you wanna just hang out at a bar?"

"Well," I say, pretending to check the time. "It's nine thirty in the morning, and we don't get off until five, so I think I have a little more time to decide."

"Alright, alright," Jane says, rolling her eyes. "Anyway, how's your secret magic training going?"

I roll my eyes. "Well, good thing it's not an *actual* secret."

Before Jane can answer, an older woman makes her way over to us, and both of us throw on the fake smiles that people who deal with others all day have to wear when they're working.

"Is there anything that we can help you with?"

"So, like, seriously, what's the deal with the magic?"

We're sitting at a booth at the Applebee's near our library. We haven't ordered drinks yet, but I already know what I'm getting, so I only pretend to read the menu. "It's just something I'm interested in." I shrug. It's not a real answer, and I can see from the look on Jane's face that what she wants is a *real* answer, but it's the truth.

Until recently, I had never believed in witchcraft. I'd always thought of magic as something that could exist anywhere. I'd imagined it could be in a newborn's first laugh, in someone's first true smile after a depressive streak. I got into tangible magic because I was curious about it. Right around the end of grad school, I'd overheard someone talking about a

‘witchy librarian aesthetic,’ and while I hadn’t seen anything specific when I tried to Google it, I thought the idea had sounded neat, and thought, why not make it a thing?

“How does the God thing work?” Jane asks, breaking me out of my reverie. The waiter comes and asks for our drinks, and once he’s gone, she continues, “Like, can you only choose one, or can you worship as many as you want? Can you be your own god?”

“Honestly, I haven’t thought about it.” I frown for a moment, then add, “What’s got you so curious, all of a sudden? And being your own God is an ... interesting place for your mind to go.”

She shrugs, grinning. “I’ve been doing a little independent research. Besides, is it bad that I don’t want to answer to anyone other than myself?”

“Well, it isn’t the worst thing in the world,” I admit. I think for a minute, then add, “I think that what you’re describing might be an aspect of chaos magic.”

Jane’s eyes widen. “Yo, what the fuck? That sounds so cool! What is it?”

Honestly, I’m not sure that I know how to explain it myself. But I try anyway, because Jane really seems interested, and explaining it out loud might help me understand it better, considering I only first heard about it recently. “It’s more like a philosophy than a form of magic. The short version is that you use what’s around you, but you don’t have to use the same things all the time, unlike in other aspects of magic. It’s about being able to adapt, and telling the universe what you want to happen.”

I give Jane a minute to let the information sink in. It’s a lot to process, after all, and I’m sure her independent research didn’t take her this far down the rabbithole. It also gives me a chance to continue gathering my thoughts to further explain it. Plus, the waiter’s come to take

our food orders, and I'm not sure he'd be that interested in listening to two women talk about magical theory.

“So, like, it's not actually something bad?”

I shake my head. “I guess it could be used for something bad, just like anything else,” I admit. “But the name really just comes from the fact that, compared to other schools of magic, there's less rules, less structure.”

“Sounds perfect to me.”

I hesitate for a second. I know the question I want to ask, but for some reason, my mouth doesn't want to form the words, until I ask, “Are you really considering getting into magic, or just curious?”

Jane shrugs. “I'm considering it. It'd be interesting, wouldn't it?”

There's some instinct telling me to be jealous, that Jane is trying to encroach on my interest. I shake my head slightly, making sure she's not looking at me when I do. Obviously, I wouldn't actually stop her from getting into magic if she wanted to get into it; it's not in my nature, and it's not my call to make.

“So I can just, like, do whatever with chaos magic?”

“Within reason, I guess.” I shrug.

“What about black magic? I tried looking into it, but I saw some conflicting stuff about what exactly it is. What's your opinion?”

This is something I've seen answered on Reddit, and while I know that Reddit's not really the most reliable source, I can tell her what I saw and push her in the right direction.

“That's not really the case,” I answer. “Chaos magic *can* be black magic. Chaos magic is the

type of magic, and ‘black magic’ is the result of how the magic is used. There’s black magic, white magic, and grey magic. It really all depends on if it brings you closer to your god or not.”

Another pause to let the information sink in. I’m not surprised when Jane asks, “Huh?”, considering I’m still trying to figure out the exact details, considering how new this topic is to me.

“So, for example, black magic would mean that you’re using magic to make something happen that benefits you. Like, if you wanted to make someone fall in love with you, technically that’s black magic, because you’re messing around with someone else’s feelings and maybe even their fate. I guess, more simply, if you’re using it for something selfish, it’s black magic.”

“Then white magic is ... the opposite of that?”

I nod. “Using the magic for something selfless. Grey magic is when you involve other people, but it has more of a neutral impact on their life, like trying to get in touch with someone you haven’t talked to in years.”

“So ... it’s a methodology thing.”

I nod. I feel like if I open my mouth again, I’ll just keep going on, and I’ll only confuse her more.

Now she’s nodding, but in that way that people do when they’re processing a lot more information than they were expecting. “Okay,” she says, “okay. That’s ... a lot of information. Should I have written it down?”

“If you’re really serious about getting into magic, you can always just ask me again, you know.” Again, that instinct to be jealous, to lie to her about what magic is, what it can be used

for, is nagging at the back of my head. I grab the water I'd ordered and take a long sip, wondering if I can drown the thought out by doing so.

“Yeah, but . . . that was a lot of information. I'd feel bad making you repeat it all.”

I wave my hand. “It's no problem.” I pause, then admit, “It helps me understand the concepts better, like how teachers are able to absorb information they've been teaching to students after a while.”

Jane frowns. “Is that a thing?”

“That's what I've heard. I mean, if you're repeating something often enough, multiple times a day, wouldn't you be able to memorize at least *some* of the information?”

“That's fair. I guess I didn't think about it like that.”

I'm quiet for a moment, then bring myself to say, “Then I guess you'll think about getting into magic.” That annoying, nagging jealousy is coming back.

Another grin. “Yeah, I guess I will.”

I smile back at her, and keep shoving that unfounded, irrational jealousy away.

It isn't until way later, when I'm walking into my apartment, that I remember the meaning of Temperance, that it was asking me to maintain my emotions. I still don't understand why I was so jealous about the idea of Jane getting into magic, but at least I managed to do what Temperance asked, even if I wasn't consciously thinking about it.

I hear the light tread of paws and look up to see Lyria, my cat, walking toward me. I adopted her two and a half years ago, and it's a little too on the nose for a woman practicing magic to have a black cat — I'm pretty sure the old woman down the hall made the sign of the

cross when she saw me bringing Lyria home for the first time — but I couldn't *not* adopt her. I'd heard that black cats are usually among the last to be picked for adoption, if they even get picked at all.

I lean down to scratch her head, and I smile when she purrs loudly. "Good girl," I murmur. When I try to stop scratching her head, she reaches up with one paw, like she's trying to keep my hand there. "Okay, okay."

I keep scratching her head for another minute, then move to the hall closet where I keep her food, and pour it into her bowl. When I'm done with that, I head into my room, leaving the door open in case Lyria wants to come in at some point.

I pull out the tarot cards again. I decide to do a little more research into what the cards mean. I know the Tower is one of the worst cards to pull, but I don't know exactly why, so I decide to look that one up first.

*Sudden change, upheaval, chaos, revelation, awakening.*

Some of those things obviously sound better than others. But it looks like, as in the other cards, or even just general things in life, the Tower has multiple meanings. When a card is drawn upside down, its meaning is the opposite. So, in the case of the Tower, the opposite meaning is more about personal change, or change brought about by yourself.

Next, I look up Death, the card everyone thinks is *really* bad. Everyone assumes that drawing the card means that someone's going to die soon. It really just means that change is coming, and the card itself is usually positive. The opposite meaning of this card is that you're resisting change, or personal transformation.



I'm not sure which card I want to look at next, so I'm about to choose randomly, when Lyria jumps onto my desk. Some cards end up on the floor, some end up on my lap, and a few stay on the desk. I give Lyria an exasperated look, but considering the fact that she's a cat, she just tilts her head at me as if she's confused by my expression.

I sigh, start picking up the cards, and after checking the time — it's only about nine at night — I decide that I'll relax, read, watch something on Netflix. My eyes stray over to the small bookshelf in my room, stacked with books on magic. I wonder if there's anything on the shelf I could look at to give Jane a more thorough explanation on the magical concepts I'd tried to explain to her tonight.

Jane isn't scheduled to work today, so I leave the note I'd written in her cubby. It doesn't say much; just the things I'd told her at dinner last night, and I remind her that, if she's really interested in learning about magic, I'd be happy to teach her at least the basics, since that's what I know the best. I even put down the reference numbers for some of the books related to magic that I know we have in stock. Eventually, I'll explain the more complex stuff, but I'll need to understand it first.

### **Element of Surprise**

My hand is on fire.

The sight of it is so ridiculous that I can't wrap my brain around it. One second, I'm leaning against my tent with my lighter in hand, and the next, my hand is engulfed in flames. Then the reality of what's happening hits me hard, I drop the lighter, and scramble the couple of feet between my tent and the stream that's winding through the campground

There's a hiss as my hand hits the water. I glance over my shoulder, wondering if anyone saw. It must be earlier in the morning than I thought, because I don't see anyone moving around in the other tents. I look at the space I was sitting in. I don't know what I expect to see — a spark from the lighter, I guess — but there isn't any sign of that. As far as I can tell, the grass isn't even singed.

That's when my common sense comes back for a second and the most obvious fact hits me: my lighter has been busted for years. There's absolutely no way it could even light up, unless somehow it *did* have a little spark, and I was so surprised that I imagined my hand being on fire. That's got to be it.

I should look at my hand. It's the first thing I should have done, from a logical standpoint. Now that I have the actual thought to do it, though, I'm fucking terrified to check. This could ruin any chance I have of being an artist. All I can think is *What could have happened to cause my hand to be on fire?*

I force myself to look at my hand. Through the water, it doesn't look too bad. Step two, taking my hand out of the water, is somehow harder for me to do. No, not somehow; I'm dozens of miles from home with no easy way to contact my parents, if my hands really *are* fucked up. I'd have to rely on the kindness of strangers or something.

I shake my head, forcing myself to calm down. I need to know what's going on; I need to see if I need real medical attention or whatever. I count down from five, then pull my hand out of the stream, but doing so only puts more questions in my head.

My hand is completely fine. I stare at it for a few seconds. I do the same with my other hand, thinking that maybe I've shoved the wrong hand underwater, and, God, wouldn't that be fucked up if my hand was still on fire and I just hadn't noticed for a solid minute and a half? But, no, both hands are fine. There's nothing wrong with either hand, and I can't understand why.

I pack quickly, before I fully realize what I'm doing. I shove my stuff in my bag, shaking my hands every few minutes when I notice that they keep flaring up, and only do a quick, far from thorough glance around the inside of the tent to make sure I have all my stuff. It's not the biggest concern on my mind right now.

When I start disassembling the tent, other families are finally starting to move around. I force myself to slow down, if only because I don't want to draw attention to myself. Whatever is allowing me to slow down seems to be the same instinct that's telling me to leave. My hands still

seem to move a little too quickly in my mind, but there are too many questions rushing around in my head for me to focus anymore energy toward that. As I drive away, I wonder if this is what the X-Men felt like when they realized they had superpowers, but this is but at least some of them had something to be excited about.

I'm staring at the diner's menu like I might burn a hole into it. Which, of course, is fucking ridiculous. That would be, like, laser vision, and I can't possibly be developing some kind of superpower. That's impossible.

The waitress comes around and asks if I'm ready to order. I'm not, but this is her third time back at the table, and I feel like I need to justify sitting here for the past fifteen minutes drinking only water, so I order toast and scrambled eggs. Maybe the waitress doesn't care how long I'm sitting here, as long as I pay before I leave.

I'm pulled out of my head by the sound of knuckles knocking against the table.

I flinch and shoot my head up, surprised. Standing at the end of the table, blocking me into the booth, are two people around my age. My gaze falls on the girl first. She has light brown skin, brown hair, and brown eyes, and when she smiles, all I can think is holy shit, I can almost push aside just how fucking weird this morning was and focus on how cute she is. She's wearing a black dress that goes down to her knees, like she's Wednesday Addams or something.

"Hi," she says, and there's a hint of an accent in her voice, but I can't think straight enough to identify it. "You're Lena, aren't you?"

The reprieve vanishes in an instant, and my mind is blank. I can't bring myself to talk for a few seconds, and they seem to stretch out like an eternity. I want to get out of here and run, but

they're blocking me. I could throw the table at them as a distraction. I could just jump out of the window or something, too. I could make it, if I really had to resort to it.

"You don't need to do that," the girl says, and I can't begin to understand what the fuck she's talking about.

"She's scared. You need a better poker face." My attention snaps to the other person, the one who had knocked on the table. They've got blue hair, and when they lift their sunglasses off their face, their eyes are green. "I'm sure that the people on the other side of this diner can tell that you're scared."

"Jules," the girl says, even though she doesn't sound like she's admonishing them, "be nice. You didn't react much differently."

"React to what?" The words come out harsher than I intend, but it gets their attention back to the matter at hand, the matter that's driving me fucking nuts.

"Do you mind if we sit?" the girl asks. She gives me another small smile, and fuck, it's not fair how cute she is.

But that doesn't change the fact that the instinct to run is still pounding through my system. It's battling with whatever instinct forced me to slow down while I was disassembling my tent. The former is the logic I've been trying to cling to all morning. But the latter is telling me that if I at least hear them out, I'll be able to get an answer. So I nod, feeling like I'm about to have an out of body experience.

Both of them slide into the booth, just in time for the waitress to come back. She doesn't seem to care about the extra people, and they don't order anything, but I still feel bad about essentially doubling her work.

“Let’s start with introductions,” the girl says, and I wonder if she’s the one in charge.

“My name is Korrina, and I’m a telepath. This is —”

I choke on my toast. She looks surprised, which doesn’t make sense if she really is a telepath, since she’d be able to know that I’m thinking *Nuh-uh, no way, this is fake*. “I’m fucking sorry?” I manage, still coughing.

“Don’t be,” Jules says. “You’re about to hear a whole lot more.”

Korrina gives them a withering look, then turns back to me. “I’m sorry, Jules is new to this. Unfortunately, I can’t say that they’re wrong.”

Korrina’s words won’t stop going through my mind. A telepath. I’m talking to a fucking *telepath*. I distinctly thought this girl, a telepath, was cute while she was probably reading my mind. My priorities might be in the wrong place, but if what they’re telling me is right, that mind readers are real and I’m about to hear more wild shit, then I think I can zero in on whatever I want.

Suddenly, I realize that neither of them have said a word while I’ve been thinking.

Korrina has a mildly worried look on her face, which makes me think that she’s not reading my mind at the moment, and is that a thing? Can telepaths choose when to listen and when not to listen? I hope so, otherwise, I might actually just drop dead from embarrassment. “How ... why?” I ask. Then, suddenly, something occurs to me, and I add, “Wait, is this just a conversation that we can have in the middle of a diner?”

“Of course,” Jules says, and I realize I’m not even sure who my question was directed to.

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I’m surprised that people aren’t turning around to look at me. My voice must be insanely shrill, or maybe the confusion and shock is just making it sound that way to me. “Because this is the part in a movie where we get picked up by some sketchy government assholes for talking about this in public without a world ending calamity happening around us.”

Korrina frowns. “What, is that a specific movie?”

“I don’t know,” I admit, my hand smacking against the plate. I’d forgotten all about my food, and while my appetite wasn’t really there in the first place, it’s completely gone now. I think I might pass out, and we haven’t even gotten to the issue of what’s going on with me.

Actually, I think I might just want to pass out. The part of me that was desperate to cling to logic is absolutely in favor of putting off the rest of this discussion by fainting.

Then, suddenly, the image of the campground comes back into my mind. How warm the tent was, how peaceful it was even up to yesterday, how I’d started sketching it out to paint one day in the future, and I relax slightly. It was a nice campground, and hadn’t been too crowded, probably because late September is when everyone’s busy with back to school stuff. It almost looked like something from a fancy wildlife Instagram.

Until I see Korrina wince. “I’m sorry.” She won’t meet my eyes. “You were just - ... getting loud.”

“What does that mean?” There’s something gnawing at my stomach, asking me to take the question back, now that I’ve seen the look on her face.

“I’m sorry,” she repeats, and while she sounds like she means it, I still don’t want to piece together what she’s hinting at. “But you were getting frantic, and your hand was smoking, so I figured the easiest way to solve that was by ... well, calming you down.”

I look down at my hand. She's right; the table is singing. The fork is, too, because I was clenching it like I might have to use it against one of the sketchy government assholes I mentioned before. "Calming me down?"

She bites her lip. "Your thoughts were bombarding me," she says. "I just — reflected back the thought that seemed like it would calm you the most, without going too far into your thoughts."

If I wasn't sitting, I'd drop to my knees. I don't want to believe it, but now I *have* to. I wasn't even thinking about the campground, let alone the sketch I'd done. She really was a telepath. I can't help but murmur out loud, "We're talking about superpowers."

I look over at them, and whatever I was about to say dies on my tongue. Jules' eyes are blue now, even though I'm positive they were green before. It's not like how people talk about their eye color changing depending on lighting. Before, their eyes were a super dark green, and now they're blue like the sky. The shades aren't even remotely similar.

"Shapeshifter," Jules says, because this further proof of superpowers has killed any logic I had. They blink, and now their eyes are brown. The fork drops from my hand, reminding me that I was still holding it.

"Okay," I say. Then again, because it's the only thing keeping me from screaming, "okay, okay, okay."

Korrina gives me a sympathetic look, and I almost melt from it, even though I normally hate people pitying me. "I know it's a lot to take in," she says in a tone like she's talking to a scared animal. "I reacted similarly when I first found out, though I have to admit, I was considerably younger."



I can imagine. As far as I know, this is the first time I've done something like this. But if Korrina's really a mind reader, it's probably something she's been dealing with for a while.

"Wait," I cut in, "how the hell did you even find me?"

"We'll get to that," she says in a way that makes it sound like a promise. "We've jumped around a bit, but, yes, we have superhuman abilities, and so do you."

Superpowers. Even though I've already said the word out loud, something about Korrina saying it — maybe it's the way she says it, like the wording or the soft lilt of her accent — gives it the punch to make it really sink in that this isn't a joke.

I slump back in my seat. "Can I still act shocked? Do I get those extra couple of minutes to process this?"

"Of course," Korrina says. "Take as much time as you need."

I nod, put my elbows on the table, then press my face into my palms. Superpowers are a real fucking thing. I try pinching myself, and it hurts, so this isn't a dream. This is real.

This can't be real. "Okay. So, let me see what I've got so far. Superpowers are a thing. You guys have them. *I* have them. Is that it?"

They both nod. "I told you I'd go into how we found you," Korrina says. "That takes a bit of explaining, so I'll start at the beginning. We don't know what causes these abilities to manifest in people. There's no rhyme or reason, and there's no real biological difference between people with these abilities and people without these abilities. They just show up."

"So it's not, like, genetic?"

"It's not guaranteed to be genetic." Korrina pauses, and glances down after she says that. Jules averts their gaze, too, and I wonder if I should, but then Korrina looks back up at me, and I

want to look away for a whole other reason. “There’s a chance it can show up in some members of a family, but not others.” She pauses for another moment, as if trying to regain her composure, then continues. “For example, neither of my parents have any powers, but I’m a telepath.”

I guess there’s a little bit of relief in that statement, even if it seems to make Korrina upset for whatever reason. At least this doesn’t seem to be a secret my parents have kept from me for whatever reason they would come up with. I nod, mainly to show that I’m still listening.

“These abilities technically aren’t rare,” Korrina continues. I wonder if this is a script they’ve come up with in the past, or if, like Korrina said, since I’m apparently making them do things out of order, they’re changing up their explanation. “The abilities start showing up anywhere from early childhood to mid-twenties, and most of the time, people don’t react well at first.”

Jules grabs the toast from my plate. I let them, and as they take a bite, they say, “Because of the sporadic nature of these abilities showing up, we can’t say for certain where and when people with them will show up, but apparently, one of the powers that people can have is just essentially being a metal detector, but for powers.”

Like Professor X with Cerebro. I latch onto the comparison, needing some sort of reference point. “Are you telling me that this is just the plot of the first *X-Men* movie?”

“Beats me.” Jules shrugs, picks up the fork I’d dropped, slides my plate over in front of them, and starts eating my food, which has to be cold by now. “I didn’t see it.”

I want to ask how they haven’t seen it, when Korrina clears her throat, reminding us to get back to the topic at hand. “Sorry,” I murmur, forcing myself to get back on topic. “So, then, is one of you I’m sticking with the *X-Men* analogy, okay? Is one of you Cerebro?”

If either of them are, I would expect it to be Korrina, since, like Professor X, she's a telepath. But they both shake their heads. "Our boss is the one that's Cerebro," Korrina says. "She's not the only one who can sense when abilities have awoken in a person, but she covers New England through DC."

"Damn, that's intense." I don't know why I'm saying that like I have any idea what the relative scale or comparison would be, but it does sound impressive.

Jules nods. "There are others that can reach a greater range, but she's the most precise."

Considering the fact that it's only been a few hours since I first set my hand on fire, and they're already here, I don't doubt it. "So, what, then? She was the one who found me, and she sent you after me?"

Korrina winces slightly. "That's ... not quite how I'd put it, but yes." She offers me another smile, and I can't help the blush that rises to my cheeks. "I have to say, I'm surprised at how well you're reacting to this."

I don't have the heart to tell her that I think it's because, despite how I can't wrap my head around the actuality of this, some part of me has wanted something like this since I was a kid, and that it has nothing to do with me being well-adjusted enough to easily accept my entire understanding of the world being shaken upside down. So instead, I say "Thanks, I guess," and wonder if the smile means something more than just a simple smile.

*Get a grip, Lena*, I think, immediately followed by a succinct *Fuck, damn it*, because I remember I'm thinking around a mind reader. Maybe I should lean in to thinking about how absolutely weird today is, and stop focusing on her looks. "How, exactly, does the sensing, I guess, work? Did this lady know from the moment I was born that I could do this, or could she

only figure it out when I —” I still can’t make myself say it out loud, so I do a weird, half jazz-hands kind of move.

“Only when you use your ability,” Jules answers, apparently finished eating my food.

“As far as we’ve been told, anyway.”

I frown. “You think there’s stuff she’s keeping from you?”

“I mean, yeah.” Korrina glares, and Jules shrugs, amending, “Not in, like, a bad way. I’m sure if we asked for a detailed explanation on everything she knows, she’d tell us whatever we wanna know. It’s more like she tells us just enough for whatever we need at that moment.”

There’s something that sounds like resentment in Jules’ voice, but I don’t know if I’m imagining it or not.

I realize I haven’t asked the question that most people probably would have asked first.

“What do you want with me, then? Aside from ...” I do the jazz hand thing again. Even if both of them seem at ease with talking about this in the middle of a diner, even if I’ve been talking about it, I still can’t bring myself to say *I set my hand on fire* out loud.

Jules looks like they’re about to say something, but Korrina says, “We’d like to offer you training.” I expect her to say something else, to finish her pitch, but that’s all that she says.

“Please tell me this isn’t a recruitment.” The day’s already been enough like a weird, off brand X-Men fanfic. If they’re about to tell me that I have to fight some supervillain in order to save the world, I think I might just go back to the instinct I had when they first showed up, and just jump out of the window.

“It isn’t,” Korrina says. “The training is just a way for you to learn to control your abilities enough that it won’t impact your life in a negative way. Once you get that level of

control, if you want to leave and have no contact with us again, then that's fine. It's up to you. We have no right to force you, nor do we want to."

My phone goes off. I jump, and grab my phone. It's a text from Mom; I'd almost forgotten I'd called her before I walked into the diner. Her text is short: *Saw you called, is something wrong?*

This could be my out. I could lie and say I have a family emergency, that I need to go home, and, as Korrina said, never see them again. But I can't deny that I'm curious, and going with these people could give me more answers than just putting a bandaid over this and pretending there's nothing wrong.

Besides, I should at least learn basic control. It'll only be helpful. So I text my mom a lie about how I was overreacting to some light that flashed in the car. Then I look up at Korrina and Jules, take a deep breath, and say, "Okay, let's do it."

### **Doctoral Inquiries**

The apartment wasn't sterile, but it was clean enough for what they needed to do. They both reeked of whatever the shadow creatures that had attacked them were, but they could take care of that later. They peeled away from each other, Felix going to the kitchen for one of the bar stools, Emma going to the living room, turning on the television for background noise, and opening the first aid kit she'd left on the coffee table.

Felix gestured for her to sit on the bar stool as he started going through the first aid kit. She wanted to point out that his injured side would limit how much he could move his arm, but her shoulder moved slightly, reminding her of the injury in her shoulder as pain ricocheted through her body. She felt more blood seep from the wound, and decided that maybe Felix had a point. She nodded and sat, taking a shallow breath, her signal to Felix that she was ready.

The smell of antiseptic burned Emma's nose the same way it was burning the wound in her shoulder. She was used to the smell, the sensation, but that didn't make it any easier to tolerate it. Felix's hands were steady as he patched her up, more from the repetition of the routine than any comfort he had with said routine. Every few moments, he had to lean away, get a breath of fresh air.

She'd do the same for him once he finished up. She didn't understand why he'd been almost insistent about treating her first, but they alternated who took care of who first so often, it wasn't as if the order mattered anymore.

"You okay?" Sweat was beading on Felix's face as he worked, the only other evidence that Emma could see of the fact that he was mildly stressed about the sensitivity of the medical work.

She must have flinched when he started to stitch her wound closed. She nodded, murmured a distracted "Yeah." Her mind barely registered the pain, but her body, apparently, still did. It didn't matter how often she'd been injured - this was the third time this year she'd gotten stabbed during an investigation, as far as she remembered - her body still reacted.

Felix held his breath the entire time he applied the stitches. They'd run out of surgical masks a while ago, and had forgotten to get more. They were running low on other supplies, too, so it was just something else they'd have to put on their shopping list, right below the eggs and cereal.

When Felix was done, he moved away from her. He stepped the few inches away to the chair they'd agreed without words was his, and sat back with a low groan, as if he didn't want her to hear it. "Alright," he said, and there was a tightness to his voice that wasn't usually there. "So, we got an answer -"

"Your turn," Emma cut in. They didn't talk about the end of a case until they were both patched up. That was the rule they'd set up years ago, when they started this business. "This is gonna be slow going, because, you know." She gestured to her shoulder, freshly bandaged. "You were there, you remember."

“I’m fine,” he said, but the death grip on his side and the obvious tear in his shirt would have been able to tell anyone that he was lying. She didn’t need to have to be a private investigator to be able to tell that.

Emma rolled her eyes. This wasn’t uncommon. Even though they’d patched each other up like this more times than either of them cared to remember, Felix still got anxious about being shirtless around her, almost always saying something about propriety, or something along those lines. Usually, his self-preservation would end up overriding that sense of anxiety. “Felix, come on. Just let me see it.”

“Emma.” His voice was hard, the single word a bite of frustration. “I’m fine.”

His tone was enough of an indication that he was, in fact, not fine. Felix wasn’t a harsh person, especially not with her. Unease raced through her system. She snapped “Take off your damn shirt,” the same tone that he’d used with her evident even to her own ears.

For longer than she expected, he scowled at her. For a second, she thought he’d refuse again, and wondered if she’d have to try to coax him into listening to her. She didn’t know what she would do if that was the case. He knew all of her techniques, the same way she knew all of his.

Slowly, he lowered his hand from his wound. So his self-preservation had won out in the end, as usual. “I can’t lift my arm.”

Emma’s unease shifted to anxiety. She walked to the kitchen, grabbed a knife. When she came back into the room, Felix’s eyes darted to the knife, and he asked “What, after all this time, *now* you’re going to kill me?” It was a weak attempt at making a joke, and they both knew it.



“Hold still.” She knelt next to him, gripped the bottom of his shirt, and slowly started to cut the shirt away from his side.

“Come on, Em,” he murmured, the words almost coming out like a whimper. “This is my favorite shirt.”

*Really?* She didn’t bother answering him, just peeled the remnants of his shirt away from the wound, sucking in a surprised gasp. The wound was deep, but somehow, wasn’t bleeding as much as it should have been. He’d either been bleeding for a while and it was slowing down, or the nature of the creatures that had attacked them made it so that the wound *wouldn’t* bleed a lot. Even then, the wound was shot through with black; whatever he’d been hit with had colored his veins the color of shadows.

Either way, there was still too much blood coming from the wound. “*Shit.*” She jumped back to her feet, running to the bathroom. She grabbed the first towel she saw — plain, white, certainly not hers — and ran back to him, shoving the towel against his side. “Get up,” she ordered. “We’re going to the hospital.”

“We’re not.” He jumped up and grabbed her arm, the death grip he’d had on his side now on her wrist. “We can’t. You know why.”

Because his parents worked at the hospital. Because he couldn’t figure out a way to explain to his parents that not only was the supernatural real, but that he dealt with it on a daily basis, and had been for years.

“They wouldn’t be able to work on you,” she said, walking around to his uninjured side and draping his arm over her shoulders. She’d heard about something like that once before, that

doctors and nurses couldn't work on people they knew, but she didn't know if that was actually true.

Either way, the fact didn't seem to comfort him. "But—"

"I'll come up with an excuse for why you're there." They'd have at least a twenty minute ride for her to think of something.

"Emma." His voice was desperate, and she expected some further plea, but as he moved to take a step toward her, he staggered and almost dropped to his knees. She managed to catch him, but he was half a foot taller than her and at least a hundred pounds heavier, so it was a bit of a struggle.

"We're going to the hospital, and you're going to stop bitching about it." She didn't give him a chance to argue about it, just wrapped his arm around her shoulders, put his arm around her waist, and let him lean on her as they made their way out of the apartment.

When they finally got to the hospital, Felix's side had stopped bleeding, but his face was pale, way too pale. He'd explained that one of the shadows had clawed at him, that at the moment it had felt shallow, but the more time had passed, the worse it had gotten. He'd also told her that he'd intended to go to a different hospital later on, but he just didn't want to worry her.

It was an answer she'd expected from him. But even with how often he gave into self-preservation at the end of a case, Felix had a near suicidal dedication to their job, and she wasn't sure that he would have actually gone unless he was about to die. She didn't want to think of the alternative, what she was certain would actually have happened if she hadn't noticed the wound.

The nurse behind the desk was calm when they started to explain what happened. He probably had to be, considering the nature of his job. If people came in half dead and in shock, someone needed to be calm and grounded, she supposed.

She really should learn something about the medical field besides basic first aid.

The nurse ushered Felix away, toward the emergency room, and since Emma was only his roommate, his business partner, not his family or significant other, she was ushered to the waiting room. It was fine; she was used to it.

More importantly, she was stuck on the black veins that had shot through Felix's wound. The two of them together could figure out an explanation that sounded plausible enough for people that weren't associated with the supernatural. But she wasn't entirely sure that she could come up with something coherent without Felix's help.

She hoped Felix would be okay. The wound was deep, as far as she'd been able to tell, not serious, but the thought didn't soothe her that much. After all, it wasn't like she'd actually know until the doctors told her, and even then, she'd have to worry about their questions about the black woven throughout the wound.

She wanted to start pacing. She wanted to close her eyes and bury her head in her hands, just for the dark, just to have a void to think back to, bounce ideas off of. Some small part of her wanted to pray to a god she wasn't sure she believed in.

"Emma?"

She jerked her head up at the sound of Felix's mother's voice. She'd known there was a chance that they'd run into Felix's parents, hadn't she? She really had no reason to be surprised. She managed a weak smile, and said, "Oh, Dr. Hollis."

“I’m surprised to see you here.” Not questioning her presence in a hospital waiting room at nearly two in the morning, but commenting on her presence as if it was an unexpected variable in an experiment. Emma had never been able to get a decent read on Felix’s mother, and this was just one of those moments that proved that. “How have you been, honey?”

*Honey.* It wasn’t that her parents hadn’t been affectionate with her, but they’d never called her that before. They’d only ever called her by her name, with the occasional ‘baby’ thrown in, in what she’d considered a way to remind her that they were her parents, as if it was something they were afraid she’d forget.

“I’m okay.” Not a lie, not the complete truth. “How have you been?” Forced, expected conversation was taking her mind off of Felix and his injury, but she wasn’t sure she wanted to take her mind off of it right now.

Dr. Hollis would allow her to, anyway. “I just saw Felix,” she said. There was a slight tremor in her voice, motherly concern that crept through what Emma thought was a cultivated instinct of doctoral calm. “Did he say anything to you about what happened?”

“No, he didn’t.” She felt bad about the lie, wondered if Dr. Hollis would be able to tell that she was lying, since Emma was lying about the condition of her son. In her experience, mothers tended to be more in tune to things like that. “He wanted to go somewhere else, didn’t want to risk making you worry, but —” She cut herself off, hearing more fear sneak into her voice than she wanted to acknowledge. She had to keep the calm mask on, even if she didn’t want to, if only to make sure Dr. Hollis didn’t ask any questions, even though the black marks in the wound would be way too specific of a question for someone that didn’t know anything about the supernatural.

“He’s always been like that.” Dr. Hollis smiled as much as could be considered appropriate for the situation. “Allow me to sit.”

Emma didn’t understand that insistence, but waved to the empty seat to her right all the same. Sure, it was late, but Dr. Hollis probably had some work to do; maybe they were allowing her a few minutes to process the fact that her son had been brought in for surgery.

She felt Dr. Hollis’ eyes on her, and turned to look at her. “You both are hiding something about the work you do, aren’t you?”

Emma could try to lie to her, but she didn’t think she could convincingly lie to Dr. Hollis. “We are.”

She expected Dr. Hollis to press her for more details, but instead, she just sighed. “I suppose that’s to be expected.”

Emma frowned. Dr. Hollis sounded like she was about to confess something other than the fact that she was coming to grips with the fact that her twenty-six-year-old son wasn’t telling her every detail about his life. If there was one thing Emma had learned over the course of her time as a private investigator, she knew how to wait for someone to spill their secrets. So she furrowed her brow, frowned, and let herself look as confused as she felt.

Dr. Hollis continued, not even waiting for Emma to ask what she meant. “You know at least a little bit about the true nature of this world, I’m assuming.”

Emma nodded. ‘The true nature of this world’ was the exact phrase she would use to explain to clients or victims that monsters and demons and magic were real. That, unfortunately, they happened to be mostly utilized by people that could only feel strong when they were taking

advantage of others. It could have been a coincidence, but Emma didn't think so, especially because of the slight shift in Dr. Hollis's tone.

Dr. Hollis waited to see if Emma would cut in. When she didn't, Dr. Hollis continued, "We didn't think he would ever find out, never mind looking for the hidden parts of the world himself."

Emma should have been more surprised by this half admittance that Felix's parents had been hiding their knowledge of the supernatural from their son. But she'd seen too many strange things over the years for this to even make her raise an eyebrow. "Do you regret not telling him?"

"No. There's no sense in regretting something I can't change." Dr. Hollis stood, the movement more graceful than Emma expected from a doctor. "I'm afraid I have to go," she said, giving another one of those tense, well intentioned smiles. "Will we still see you two next week for dinner?"

Emma allowed herself to drop the confused mask, and returned the smile. "Of course," she said. "Well, depending on how Felix is feeling."

"Of course. We'll see you then."

"See you then."

An abrupt end to a conversation. Talking to either one of Felix's parents was always like that. They wanted to get to the point as quickly as possible, and weren't great at small talk. It wasn't like talking to Felix, who prodded almost every sentence that was spoken to him, a trait Emma attributed to his English degree.

Emma leaned back in the chair and stared up at the ceiling. It hadn't been long since Felix had ushered away, and she was certain that she would have a long time to wait. The scent of antiseptic was faint in the waiting room, but still drifted its way toward her. Maybe she should tell Felix that his parents knew about the supernatural, too. But, no; that was their secret to tell, not hers.

So she settled in for the long wait, and filed the new information she'd received away in her brain for later.

## Singularity

“Please, *please*, just tell me I misheard you.”

War’s fingers dig into Death’s shoulders, and she has to crane her neck to look up at him, to meet his eyes as she tells him, “No, you heard me correctly.” She glances towards the figure a few feet away, huddled on the ground, bleeding out. “Chiaki Fujioka is supposed to die, but I’m not going to do it.”

War lets go of her, throwing his hands in the air. Deities can choose when mortals see them, so for the moment, Fujioka can’t see or hear them. Death wonders if she’d shout at them to ask for help, or if she’d shout something along the lines of, “Why the hell are you standing there while I’m bleeding out?”

But Death doesn’t know how this girl would react. She’s sparing this girl for what most would consider a whim. It’s a shame, though, that the whim isn’t entirely her own.

“Why, damn it, just why? We’re already the most hated pantheon! When the others find out about this, what do you think is gonna happen?”



She turns back to War, surprised by the vehemence of his anger. “First of all, we both know that we’re not a pantheon. Second, since when have you ever cared what others have thought about us, or yourself, for that matter?”

War points at Fujioka, as if directing his aggression at a dying girl who can’t see him will solve anything. “This is a pretty big issue, Death, so *excuse me* if I’m worrying about how this will look. Just — listen.” He puts his hands back on her arms, shaking her slightly, as if she’s walking around, half asleep. “You can fix this, Death. You just have to walk over to her, say, ‘Hi, nice to meet you, you’re dying!’ and take her to whichever afterlife she’s supposed to go to.”

Death meets his gaze, surprised to realize that her temper was rising slightly. This is her role, her call to make, and he knows it. He’s just angry that the one time she allowed him to accompany her on a reaping, it was one she was letting fall apart. “I have made up my mind, War. You won’t make me change it, and we both know it.”

He holds her gaze, his expression incredulous. He’s pleading silently, asking her to reconsider this with only his look. Death doesn’t back down. After a moment, War sighs. “Why did you tell me?”

“If I walk away now, she’s still going to die.” She nods at Fujioka. “Someone else will just come for her. Izanami, or Ereshkigal, maybe.” She looks back at War. “She’ll need some way to *heal*. I want you to take her on as a Ward.”

War flinches. His fingers dig into her arm for a second, a wordless demand that she say she’s lying, but when she doesn’t add anything else, he lets go of her again, quickly taking a step away, as if she’d said she had an infectious disease. “Damn it, Death! That’s not funny!”

Death crosses her arms, raises an eyebrow. “I’m not joking, and you know that. Mortals that become Wards get a slight healing factor, which will stitch her up a little bit faster than waiting around for a doctor will.”

War throws his arms in the air, exasperated. “We’re fucked, you know. If — *when* — the Fates find out about this, we’re fucked! At least tell me you have a reason!”

Death looks towards Fujioka again. “Human beings fear death,” she says. “They fear an ending they have no power over. Every human I’ve met has had that fear.” Her gaze remains on Fujioka, one hand pressed to her shoulder, one to her stomach, futilely trying to slow her bleeding. The girl is a magnet, each strained breath that leaves her lips screaming *Look at me, help me*. “Except for her. Either she’s certain she’s not going to die, or she’s buried that subconscious fear so far down that she can’t even pick it up. Either way, there’s some stubbornness, some *fight*, that I haven’t seen in other humans that I’ve met. So I’m curious, I suppose.”

“*That’s your motivation?*”

“If it turns out to be a mistake, War, I’ll fix it.”

A few seconds of silence pass. She can see his eyes narrow, can see the gears turning in his head. “You have another reason. You wouldn’t be doing this *just* to feed some curiosity.”

She nods, but stays silent. *If he asks, I’ll tell him.*

He doesn’t ask. He wants to, though; she can see the question on his lips, even if he won’t ask it. He turns his gaze to Fujioka. “You’re sure you want to do this. That you won’t regret it.” He looks back at Death, as if he’ll see the answer to the question he refuses to ask.

“What do I say?” he asks. He hesitates for a moment, a scared human child, before adding, “When one of us gets caught?”

Her throat tightens, though she can’t explain why. Of course War was going to help her, even if he’d been reluctant at first. They were siblings. “Lie,” she says. “Wash your hands of the situation and pretend you weren’t here.” She takes a step forward. “Wash your hands of me.”

He flinches, but nods. She knows he won’t write her off until the last possible moment, until there’s no other option for him, if he wants to avoid consequences. “Then this is it,” she says.

War pulls her close, hugging her, like he thinks they’ll never see each other again.

*Maybe we won’t,* she thinks, hugging him back for a brief moment. When they let go, she doesn’t look back at him until she reaches the end of the alley. He’s holding a cellphone out to her, no doubt talking Fujioka into agreeing to become his Ward. He almost looks gentle, as if that was a concept that either of them could ever understand.

As she turns the corner onto the main street, she wonders how quickly the girl will cave into her will to survive and agree.

After several minutes of walking away from the alley, Death wasn’t sure where she should go now. If she went to the Central Hub, the Fates might already be waiting for her. Given its existence in a space outside of linear time, even after several instances of eavesdropping on different deities associated with space-time, she didn’t understand exactly *where* or *when* the Central Hub existed, and there was a high chance they already knew the choice she’d made. It’s not like she’ll be able to hide for long, anyway, since they’d just come after her.

An ambulance speeds past her, lights and sirens blaring. She doesn't glance in the windows in the back, doesn't check to see if it was Fujioka, if War was with her. It doesn't matter anymore. *What's done is done*, she thinks, shoving her hands into her jacket pockets.

Ten more minutes pass, and someone falls into step beside her. "You know, after all these millennia, I never expected you to be the misbehaving type."

Death doesn't look over at Lachesis, the second of the three Fates, who she had been planning to avoid. She only clenches her hands into fists. "You made me lie to War."

Lachesis waves a hand, dismissive. "You had every chance to say no to us. It isn't our fault you were curious, too."

Death remains silent for a moment, until they go into a park, and Lachesis sits on a bench. "Why did you have me spare that girl?" Death asks, choosing to remain standing. "Why her, specifically?"

Lachesis shrugs. "No special reason," she says. "It was the first name Clotho saw on the list. And, so far, the plan's worked. I can't tell if Chiaki Fujioka is dead or alive."

Death crosses her arms. "I still don't understand what the plan *was*."

Lachesis tilts her head. "As you know, my sisters and I have the power to decide fate. Since our creation, it's all we've done. Then, recently, we got bored." Another shrug. "We decided to see if we could *change* someone's fate, make them unseeable to us. The easiest way to change someone's fate, we thought, was to keep them from dying." Lachesis looks up at Death through her eyelashes. "Like I said, Clotho just happened to pick someone assigned to you, and you happened to have enough of your own curiosity to follow along."

Death clenches her fists, tighter, digging into her palms, trying to draw blood, to keep herself focused. There's a lie, a deception, somewhere, but Death isn't sure where, though she's fairly certain that this isn't the first time the Fates have attempted to try something like this.

“And how am I going to be getting *punished* for this?”

Lachesis smiles, and in that smile, Death can see a hint of a more calculating personality than she's ever seen from the Fate. “A fake trail,” she muses. “We'll come up with something that sounds like a bad punishment, but wouldn't be the worst thing for you to face.”

“An exile, then?” Death asks. She fights to keep a sneer off her face at the thought of the *trial*. What would making an example of her do, other than serve as a reminder that the Fates, as allotters, had the most knowledge, the most power, over most other deities? *Even over me*. “And when will this fake trial be?”

“As soon as we return, I would guess.” Lachesis tilts her head once again, then asks, as though the thought only just occurred to her, “Has she gotten help yet?”

“I don't know,” Death lies. “I watched the fight that was supposed to kill her, then walked away. Just like we planned.” If Lachesis can't tell if Fujioka's been helped, then maybe, somehow, she might not know that War made the girl his Ward. Death wouldn't say anything, then, if she didn't have to reveal that she'd gotten him involved.

Lachesis pouts, as if they were talking about bad weather, not a girl's life. “Well, that's no fun. You should have at least called an ambulance for her.”

“What point was there?” Death asks. “She wasn't my responsibility anymore.”

Lachesis blinks, as though surprised by the answer, before a callous smile breaks across her face. “How *cruel*.”

“If you wanted someone to be merciful, then you shouldn’t have asked for help from a Horseman of the Apocalypse.”

Lachesis just stares for a moment, the smile quickly fading, replaced by that calculating look. Then, slowly, she stands, and walks further into the park. “Well, then,” she says, “your trial awaits.”

The trial had been a farce. If anything, it was more of a public lecture than anything. Her punishment, according to the Fates, was simple: she was exiled from the Central Hub for at least two thousand years, and she wasn’t allowed to talk to any member of any pantheon other than her own, restricting her interactions to only the other Horsemen. They must have decided on the ‘punishment’ in the hour between her and Lachesis’ arrival at the Central Hub and the start of the trial.

She had known that there would be plenty deities to come watch what they would assume was a public humiliation. She wonders what they think of her ‘punishment,’ if any of them see through the Fates’ staged trial. It doesn’t matter, in the end. She won’t be able to ask anyone what they thought, and for a short time, she doesn’t have to worry about the politics of the Hub, doesn’t have to pretend she cares about who’s fallen for whichever mortal, who’s stabbed who either metaphorically or literally in the back.

Lachesis escorts her to the living quarters. “To keep up the guise of your little vacation,” she explains, “I’m escorting you to your apartment, to help you gather the things you’ll need. Oh, and, if you’re curious, I *still* don’t have any grasp on what Chiaki Fujioka might be doing.”

“I told you, she’s not my responsibility. I don’t care.”

The halls are empty, as if everyone really did go to her trial. It makes the walk to the apartment seem quicker than it ever had in the past. When they walk inside, Death walks to her room, and packs a duffle bag. Because she was going to be living in exile, she would have to pick everything she would need, at least until she found a home. Once she reached that point, she could ask her siblings to send her anything she needed.

“Have you decided what time period you’ll be going to?” Lachesis asks, leaning against the door frame, watching her. As if she’ll run out and try to get out of this exile. As if she has any other option.

“The twenty-first century,” Death answers, walking across her bedroom and throwing open the door to her closet. She doesn’t know why Lachesis is even bothering to ask what time period Death will go to. The information is worthless to her.

Lachesis tilts her head. “Some of humanity’s highs and lows, wouldn’t you say? Hoping to take a page from their book?”

“Something like that,” she murmurs. There’s no reason to tell Lachesis that she plans on keeping an eye on Fujioka. *I owe War that much for dragging him into this.* She throws the bag over her shoulder, then turns to Lachesis. “I’m ready.”

They start walking back towards the living room, and Death crosses into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water when she notices Lachesis walk into War’s room. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she asks, dropping her duffle bag out of shock.

Lachesis sits on War’s bed, as if the two of them are friends, as if she has any right to be here. “I’d like to talk to War,” she answers. “I found it odd that he didn’t come to speak in your defense, and just watched, sitting behind you with a look of a terrified child.”

Death keeps her features still. “And that’s all?”

A sharp, dangerous smile from Lachesis. “Unless there’s something else he wants to tell me.”

Death doesn’t say anything else, just turns her back, picks up her bag, and finishes the task she’d started a few seconds ago. The door to the apartment swings open, and she barely looks up to see War before he’s running, hugging her, and calling, “*adelphé, adelphé,*” sister, sister, like it’s the only word he knows. She returns his hug, and when she feels him trembling, holds tighter.

She only extends their hug for a moment, then pulls away, saying, “I need to go. They’re waiting.”

“Famine and Pestilence should have been here,” War says. “We should have told them, they could have -”

“What could they have done?” In their countless years, they’d seen just as many countless battlefields. They both know the dangers of misplaced, misdirected hope. If the last thing she can do before their contact becomes limited is cut that off before it reaches a truly dangerous level, then she wants to do so. “Gotten into a fight with the Fates? Tried to keep them from finding me? I knew this would happen, and so did you.”

War flinches, taking a half step away from her, and she hates the hurt look that crosses his eyes, hates that now, she’s created a situation where they won’t be able to understand each other the same way anymore. “How could you?”

She doesn’t want to know his next question, just whispers, “Lachesis is waiting for you, and she’s expecting the truth. I’m giving you permission to ignore what I said in the alley.” She



reaches up, kisses his forehead, ignores the shocked look in her brother's eyes. "You know where I'll be." Most deities had residences in the mortal world, and she was no exception. "If you need anything, come to me, and tell Pestilence and Famine the same thing."

She turns to the door, not looking back at her brother. At least she'd managed to give him advance notice about Lachesis. *Too bad I can't see her reaction to the change in her plan.*

Fujioka is asleep, the heart rate monitor steadily beeping. She's been placed in a private hospital room, most likely due to how long she'll be here. Death sits in a chair next to her bed, listening to the conversation between the doctor and Fujioka's mother, unnoticed by either of them.

She and War had cut it a little close. Fujioka arrived just in time for a blood transfusion, but even a minute later would have changed everything.

Death doesn't know. Would Fujioka still have died, stuck in limbo? Would her essence, without an escort to an afterlife, vanish entirely? Would she have stayed alive, with no logical human explanation to justify her survival?

The only ones who may have an answer would have been the Fates, but as Lachesis reminded her, even they don't currently have any idea about Fujioka's actions.

*Do I even care?*

Death sees the strain in Fujioka's mother to stand so close to her daughter without even being able to hold her hand, but wonders exactly how difficult it must be for her. So it surprises her when the doctor leads Fujioka's mother out of the room, and all she does is stare. It must be shock, she supposes.

She doesn't move for a few moments. She doesn't have anywhere she needs to be at that exact moment, and her next assignment isn't for a few more hours. The Fates couldn't have *fired* her, after all, so of course she still had assignments.

The lull of the machines is soothing, in a way. One thing she'd had in common with the other death aligned deities was their disdain for the advancement of technology, how mortal medical advancements had made their jobs slower. But it works to fill the silence, to give her time to gather her thoughts.

"I was close to not going through with it, you know." There's no use in speaking to someone unconscious, but there's something about having someone to talk *at*, she guesses, that encourages her to continue. "Even with the Fates coming and asking me to participate in this scheme, I was ready to just ignore the plan." She shrugs, another thing that's pointless about this confession. "Lachesis wasn't wrong when she called me cruel, I suppose."

Even unconscious, the silence from the girl feels incriminating.

Death knows that she should care, that some part of her should feel some sense of guilt over the trauma she's caused this girl. "If I had the chance to redo this, I'm not sure I would make the same choice I made tonight." She finally turns her head, looking at the girl. "I've been thinking of getting a Ward, myself," she says. "He's from near here, but I'm not sure if you know him. I thought it would be beneficial for him to know someone who understands what it's like to be a Ward. *That's* why I decided to go through with it."

She lets the silence fill the room for a minute before she says, "If you remember me or anything I've said tonight, you can hate me. It won't change what's happened, but it's the best consolation that I can offer you."

She stands up and walks out of the room. There'd been no point to the confession, so there was no reason for a goodbye, either.

## **First Impressions**

The professor was five minutes late. Chris knew that it had nothing to do with him, that it was no reflection that the professor hated him, but he couldn't help the surge of anxiety that raced through him each time he checked his phone. Biology was the one class he was taking this semester that actually counted toward his degree, so he wanted to start on the right foot with the professor.

“So, according to my brother,” the girl behind him said, “there's this unofficial rule that if the professor's fifteen minutes late that we can leave. Think that applies on the first day of class?”

“Probably not,” the person she was talking to said. “Even then, I don't think that it will happen that often.”

Chris wasn't trying to pay attention to their conversation, but he couldn't help it. There was something about the voices that were measured, steady, calming. He still felt his anxiety like it had its own pulse in his body, it didn't lessen, but it was easier to push aside. At that, the door opened, and a woman Chris assumed had to be the professor rushed in, apologizing for being

late. She turned her back on the class, writing her name, the class, and the days they met on the board.

Chris took a deep breath, focusing on further calming his anxiety now that the professor was here. He was surprised to see that she was, at most, only a few years older than his oldest brother. He'd been expecting someone in their thirties, at least.

He flinched when he felt a poke in his side. He turned, but it was only Matty, fiddling with his glasses the way he always did when he was bored, who asked, "Is it bad that I'm already bored?"

"If I didn't know you, I'd say yes."

He heard stifled laughter. Chris assumed it was the girl from before, but he didn't say anything about it, not really caring if she *was* eavesdropping on them, considering he'd been doing the same. *Just focus on the class*, he told himself. The sooner he got through his degree, the sooner he'd be able to start the life he wanted.

The class let out early. Chris assumed that, really, the professor could end class whenever they wanted to, but he remembered his high school teachers saying that college professors didn't really care about if students showed up, wouldn't take late work at all, and were generally strict. But according to the syllabus, Dr. Walker would take late work with a penalty, would allow a few absences before the absences had an effect on their grade, and that if there were days someone needed to leave class early, they would be allowed to leave as long as they sent an email explaining why.

Maybe he should have asked his brothers for advice adjusting to college, after all.

As he was putting his books back in his bag, he tried to glance behind him. He wanted to get a look at the girl and boy that had been sitting behind him, wanted to see if there was anything notable about them that would explain why listening to them had calmed him down.

He was surprised to see that the girl was already halfway down the row, the lecture hall making it difficult for her to get a clear shot out of the row. All he could make out was that she might have been tall for a girl, and she had long black hair tied up in a ponytail. He wondered, briefly, if she'd even bothered taking anything out of her backpack.

Her friend was carefully placing his supplies back in his bag, and Chris couldn't help but notice that the other boy was gorgeous. His skin was light brown, his hair wavy and black a shade or so lighter than his friend's, and eyes that were a lighter shade of green than Chris'.

“Hey, are you looking for a lab partner?”

Both Chris and the boy flinched, turning to Matty, who'd spoken so suddenly. Matty was leaning against the row of tables the girl and boy had been using, his chin resting on his hand. Chris noticed that Matty's hair, normally messy, had been smoothed down as well as it could be, as though he was trying to look less like Harry Potter.

The boy stared incredulously at Matty, as if he'd grown a third arm and extended it forward to shake hands. “Uh.” He glanced at the spot where his friend had been, as if he could make her materialize back in the spot. “I ... yes, I suppose.”

“Great!” Matty smiled, and held his free hand out toward the boy. “I'm Matty.”

The boy looked utterly surprised, and after staring at Matty's hand for another few moments, shook his hand. “Emil,” he answered. “Nice to meet you.”

*Oh.* Chris wasn't completely surprised. Matty was eccentric in a way that led to him being horribly impulsive, but Chris hadn't expected Matty to essentially abandon him. Then Matty turned to him, and said "Oh fuck," as if only just coming to the realization what he'd done. "Hey, Emil, can your friend be Chris' lab partner?"

Emil seemed surprised again. He glanced at Chris, and something that Chris couldn't name crossed Emil's expression. After a moment, he pulled out his phone, and clearly started texting. Another moment passed, and Emil looked up at Chris again, that thing Chris couldn't name still on his face, and said, "Aria said it's fine."

Emil gave Chris Aria's number, then walked out of the room. Matty followed after, apologizing to Chris, promising an explanation when he got back from class. Chris didn't know what else to do, so he texted Aria, asking if she was free to meet up. He wasn't expecting an answer, but she replied fairly quickly that she was free, that she'd meet him at Starbucks in about a half an hour.

Chris' anxiety hadn't really faded since the beginning of class. Sitting in Starbucks, waiting for Aria, he felt it coursing through him, making his stomach clench tighter and tighter, as if his body thought that was a way to suffocate himself.

After a few more minutes of waiting, he got on line and ordered the first hot drink that came to mind. He'd found in the past that sometimes, drinking something warm would at least settle him for a few minutes. As he waited for the drink, he looked around one more time, and saw Aria walking in. She was wearing the same workout gear that she had been wearing in class, her hair still in a ponytail, and she smiled at him when they made eye contact.

“Hey,” she called out to him as she walked closer. “You’re Chris, right?”

He nodded. Up close, he could see that her eyes were a similar shade of black to her hair. He also noticed that she was only a few inches shorter than him, which, given the fact that he was six foot two, he thought was pretty impressive. “Uh, yeah,” he answered. “And you’re Aria? Nice to meet you.”

“Right back at you,” she said. “Wanna grab a seat while you’re waiting?”

He nodded, and let her lead him to a table where he’d still be able to listen to the barista call out his name. “So,” she said, leaning back in the chair. “Your friend took my friend as a lab partner, right?”

“Yeah,” Chris answered. “I’m sorry if that’s —”

Aria waved her hand as if she was clearing the air. “Don’t worry about it,” she said. “Sure, Emil was caught super off guard, but he also needed the excuse to make a friend.”

Chris wasn’t sure if lab partners made good friends, especially considering the type of student that Matty was. But Aria seemed optimistic, so he didn’t speak up. “What about you?” he asked. “Are you okay with this?”

She shrugged, the movement casual and somehow graceful, despite the fact that she was sitting down. “Why wouldn’t I be? It’s just lab partners, it’s not something serious.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Chris answered. The anxiety rolled back in, even though he knew she didn’t mean the comment to be rude.

“Are you okay?”

He flinched, his attention snapping firmly back to her. As far as he knew, he hadn’t given any hint that what she’d said had bothered him. He’d kept his tone even, his expression neutral.



But she was frowning, a clear look of concern in her eyes. His anxiety grabbed at him, whispering that she knew, threatening to drag him under.

The barista called his name, offering him a minute to collect himself. He grabbed the drink, thanked the barista, and took a deep breath before turning back and walking to the table. “Sorry about that,” he said, and the smile felt fake even to him. “What were we talking about?”

Aria’s frown deepened for a second, but she was generous enough to let it go. She changed the subject as if it was an art form she’d mastered, and waited for him to speak up, as if doing so was her way of apologizing. He wasn’t used to an approach like this, but he wasn’t against it.

When they met up in the bio lab, Chris was surprised that Aria was good at the work. He didn’t overestimate his own intelligence or want to underestimate hers, of course, but when she’d said she wanted to be a politician, he didn’t think she’d care about the biology class as much as he did. They were almost done with the lab after about half an hour. He was glad he’d been wrong.

Matty, on the other hand, seemed to be trying to overplay his intelligence. Chris remembered that in high school, Matty would barely pay attention, would do work for other classes later in the day, and, on a few occasions, he’d even nap during the lab. Now, he was taking time to read the instructions, to double check his answers, and was listening intently to Emil.

“Hey.”

The room wasn't quiet, but Aria's voice still cut through him. They'd spoken throughout the lab, but they hadn't had a real conversation since meeting up in Starbucks the other day. He looked over at her, and, for a moment, was terrified that she'd try to bring it up.

She nodded discreetly at Emil and Matty, not taking her attention away from the lab workbook as she wrote in the last few answers. "Those two. Emil and Matty. They'd probably make a good couple, right?" She'd lowered her voice, as if she didn't want to risk them hearing their conversation, even though they were on the other side of the lab.

A sinking feeling settled in Chris's chest, one he didn't want to examine too closely. He didn't want to talk about what had happened, but maybe a part of him did. "Oh," he said quietly, unintentionally. It was like the single syllable was ripped from his mouth before he could think. "Well- ..."

She looked up at him, her brow furrowed slightly. She wanted to talk about it, too, maybe, but seemed to be waiting for him to bring it up first. "Are you interested in one of them? Do you want me to stop talking about this?"

"No, it's fine." He'd gladly talk around the issue. "I've known Matty for too long for that to be an option," he answered. "But I can't say that Emil's not attractive."

"A lot of people tell me that," she said. "What's Matty like, anyway?"

Now Chris frowned. "I thought you wanted him to be with Emil?"

Aria shrugged, picking up the microscope they were supposed to be inspecting. "It's not wrong to want to get to know the guy that I'm trying to set my best friend up with."

"He's a little scatterbrained, I guess," Chris answered. "Not in a bad way, he's just easily distracted. *Very* easily. But he's optimistic, and he has a one track mind. When he sets his mind

to something, he'll do it in whatever way he can, unless someone's telling him exactly what to do."

Aria peered around him, and Chris followed his gaze. Matty and Emil were on two opposite sides of the table, and while Emil was looking down, writing something down, Matty was taking the opportunity to be more open about staring at Emil, even as he was trying to finish the lab.

"He's also mastered the art of subtlety, I see," Aria said.

Chris shuddered. "If Matty's ever subtle, that's what you need to be worried about."

Aria turned back to the workbook, filling in the answers for the lab. Chris did the same, wanting to hand his work in early, before the short quiz they'd be having. "What happened last time he was being subtle?"

Chris shook his head, but said, "He got in a fight. Suspended. He wouldn't tell me anything else."

"Huh," she said.

Panic spiked through him. He hadn't meant to say that; he wished he could take it back. "He's really a good person, though -"

"Did he do it for your sake?"

Chris blinked. "What?"

"The fight," Aria said. "Did he start it for your sake?"

Chris was silent. It wasn't that the possibility hadn't crossed his mind before. They both used to get picked on for not acting enough like a stereotypical guy, but Chris had always told

Matty that he didn't care, that it wasn't worth it. Had something happened one day, then, for Matty to decide to get into a fight anyway?

"I don't know," he answered, starting to take the lab pages out of the workbook. "I don't think I *want* to know." It wouldn't affect their friendship that much, he knew, but Chris wouldn't forgive himself if Matty had put himself in danger for his sake.

Aria nodded. "If he did, I'd respect him for it."

He didn't want to think about this anymore. "What about Emil?" Chris asked. "What he's like?"

Aria scoffed, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Emil look over at them, eyes narrowed. "Standoffish, at first," she said. "It takes a while for him to warm up to people, you know? Even then, he's kinda aloof, but even then, he'll be decent to people as long as they're not like, literal garbage."

"Decent?"

"Like cashiers at a store," she clarified. "You know how they'll say 'hey, how are you,' but they won't pry into your personal life? Like that."

Chris looked back at Emil and Matty, who were now walking their labs up to the professor. "An opposites attract kind of thing, huh?"

Aria stood up, stretching. "That's the dream," she answered. "So long as it works. You willing to help?"

He looked at Matty again as he sat down. He looked giddy, happy, in a completely different way than Chris had ever seen him. "Okay," he said.

The professor announced that there were only ten minutes left before the end of the lab, that they should start clearing up their work areas. Chris scribbled down the last of his answers, satisfied with the work he'd done, and moved to pick up the microscope and put it back along the wall when he saw Aria pick it up. She paused long enough to be sure she had his attention, then said, "I'm sorry if I upset you the other day. I didn't mean to." Then she turned, continuing to walk down the row to return the microscope.

And Chris, coward that he was, only shoved his things in his bag, left the lab at the front of the room, and sped out of the room.

## Wayward Royal

“Get up, El.”

Elane’s eyes cracked open enough to see Isobel standing above her. The look on Isobel’s face was exasperation, mixed with mild concern, and Elane couldn’t blame her. Her breath was coming short and quick, and she knew that she was the only squire that would still be on the training field at that time. The bit of sky that she could see is dark as the bottom of the ocean, no sign of the moon in sight. “What time is it?”

“Late enough,” Isobel answered. Her brow furrowed, the way it always did when she was worried and trying to hide it. She brushed some of her brown hair behind her ear, adding, “Far too late for a woman to be alone at night, even if you are the strongest squire of our generation.”

The words were a warning in more ways than one, but Elane didn’t stop the sly grin that crossed her face. “Is it so bad for me to want to practice as much as I can?” she asked. “Not everyone gets the chance to serve such a fair, beautiful princess, and I intend to perform my job to the best of my ability.”

Isobel’s face flushed, and in the moonlight surrounding them, Elane decided that she’d never seen a more beautiful sight. “You still need your rest,” Isobel said, both a deflection and an

answer. “Your strength won’t be of use to anyone, least of all yourself, if you end up fainting from exhaustion.”

“Yes, yes, Your Highness.” She knew that she shouldn’t act so casual, and certainly shouldn’t be sarcastic, with the princess. The guards might be just out of Elane’s line of sight, but they could most likely see and hear them. If they felt inclined enough to need an excuse to get rid of Elane, they could twist the facts, say she was rude and acting in a manner unbecoming her station, in order to get her out of the palace and away from Isobel. But the slight frown on the princess’ face, and the way her nose scrunches ever so slightly, was an adorable sight, and made the possible punishment worth it.

Isobel held out her hand, and Elane took it, pulling herself to her feet. The soreness of her body momentarily came into sharp focus with the movement, but because of how often she’d done this late night training, it was something she’d long since grown used to. Besides, the soreness was nothing compared to the warmth of Isobel’s hand in hers.

The walk from the training field back to the castle wasn’t long. Elane and Isobel filled the walk back to Elane’s room with the sound of small talk, and while Elane could clearly hear Isobel’s words, she didn’t focus on the words any more than she needed to in order to carry on the conversation. They kept a respectful distance between them, but Elane felt the gaze of the guards digging into her back like knives. It wasn’t like she could blame them, considering the fact that their entire lives revolved around keeping Isobel safe and alive. So Elane could play nice; she could keep her flirtations tame, even though the only people in the castle that didn’t seem to be aware of their relationship were Isobel’s own parents.

When they stopped in front of Elane's door, the guards continued to stay just out of sight, as if they believed that counted as giving them a moment alone. Isobel took Elane's hand and squeezed it gently, as if to divert her attention from the guards. "Sleep well," the princess said, and smiled, bright as a child's laughter.

Elane returned the smile, and brought Isobel's hand to her lips, kissing it gently. Isobel blushed, the same way she had when they were sixteen, despite the years that had passed since then. "Sleep well, Your Highness," Elane answered, squeezing her hand in return before Isobel and her guards turned and continued down the hall.

As Elane entered her bedroom, she began to get ready for bed. Isobel was right, after all; it didn't matter how strong she became as a result of extensive training, if it just drove her to exhaustion, her strength wouldn't be of any help to anyone.

They were technically lucky to have been born into the nobility. They would never want for anything, she knew, but because of their positions, they had roles they were expected to fulfill, and those roles interfered with their relationship. Isobel was the youngest of four, which kept her out of the succession for some time; they both knew that was part of the reason nobody commented on their relationship out loud.

Besides, Elane thought as she made her way to her bed, she would be lying if she said that the fact that knights were among those considered as suitors for the royal family wasn't part of the reason she'd been pushing herself so hard recently. They were both getting close to the age where their parents were starting to get less subtle about marriage prospects. She thought of the last letter she'd received from her parents, how they'd hinted that one of the boys she'd been



close with during childhood had grown to be a fine, handsome young man, and that maybe they would bring her up next time they saw him.

Elane was in a similar situation to Isobel, being the youngest of three. At least, unlike Isobel, her family was lesser nobility; it would be less of a problem for Elane to marry whomever she wanted. It didn't matter that in all the years she'd known Isobel, she'd shown an obvious preference to women. Because Isobel was a princess, she still had a role she was expected to perform.

She thought back to the day she realized she was attracted to Isobel. They'd known each other for years, and had taken lessons together. But then, when they turned thirteen, Isobel's lessons had become more focused on helping her better understand her role as a princess, so they hadn't seen each other as often.

Three years later, Isobel's sister was married, and their paths had crossed again. Elane snuck onto one of the palace's balconies, considering tearing the excess, useless fabric off of her dress, only to stumble upon Isobel standing alone on the balcony. Elane tried to step back, to leave Isobel to the solitude she'd attempted to find, but instead, the princess had insisted that she stay, and they had spent the night talking about nothing important until one of the guards had pulled Isobel back to the party. The princess turned, smiled at her, and said, "I'll talk to you later, El."

The next day, Elane told her parents that she was going to return to the castle to try to become a squire. They were surprised, but they hadn't tried to fight her opinion on it, and had gone along with her demand when she'd told them the half truth that she wanted the position to

become closer to Isobel. Unfortunately, in the time since then, she had learned that it would be easier for the two of them to run away together.

It *had* been something they'd discussed. Only once, a few weeks ago, but Isobel had been reluctant, and Elane understood, even if the rejection of the idea had hurt a little. But Isobel wanted to be near her family, and she also didn't want to take Elane from a job she'd grown to love.

She dropped to her bed, groaning slightly as the soreness returned to her body now that she wasn't moving. There was no need to rush, she told herself, they had plenty of time to figure something else out. The male heirs of other kingdoms had already been married, so unless something changed between tonight and the time Isobel's parents truly started pressing the issue of marriage, the plan to become an eligible suitor by becoming a knight was their best option, even if there was only one other case where something similar had happened. But she didn't want to be Isobel's lover; she wanted to be her wife. She closed her eyes, and let herself drift off to a night of fitful rest as she tried to think about some other way for them to be together.

The morning was far too quiet. It was the first thing she noticed when she woke up, and the silence was jarring. Normally, there would be sounds from animals or whatever coming in from the open window, or the sounds of servants bustling around outside her door, but no, today there was nothing.

Something was wrong. Elane didn't know where the instinct came from, but of course something was wrong, why the hell else would it be so quiet? The thought sent panic racing through her body, forcing her into motion. She jumped out of bed and dressed quickly, going

over a mental list of what could possibly be wrong enough to set every warning bell in her mind off in such a way. She dressed in record time and raced out of her room, breaking every palace rule and refusing to give a shit. She watched the faces of the servants as she passed them, trying to get a read on what had happened. But, as if they knew what she was trying to do, they averted their gazes.

As she passed the Great Hall, Elane could hear the King's muffled shouts through the closed doors. She couldn't hear the words, but she could hear the anger that permeated them, and only served to remind her just how wrong things had to be.

She knew she should probably have waited in her room. Protocol dictated such. But her body moved of its own accord; her priority, over everything, was always Isobel. She took the steps two at a time as she raced the familiar path to Isobel's room.

She stopped short at the sight in front of her. Sir Gabriel was standing in front of Isobel's partially open door. From what Elane could see, there wasn't too much out of the ordinary, except for the mere fact that Sir Gabriel was there, that Elane couldn't see Isobel.

Sir Gabriel's eyes met her. He waved her over, and when she was close enough, he didn't bother to soften the blow, just said, "Princess Isobel is gone."

She blinked. She opened her mouth, closed it, not sure if she even intended to speak. She was certain she'd misheard him. He said it too casually, more like it was a piece of gossip he'd overheard, and not something that could shatter her entire life. "Huh?" It felt like it took all her energy to stay upright, to get the word out.

But Sir Gabriel's face was set in stone. He was serious. He had to be; this wouldn't be something he would joke about in the first place. He knew her question was more a response of

surprise than misunderstanding. “I’m sorry,” he said, and the words hit like a blow to her knees, almost knocking her off her feet.

Elane’s first instinct was to scream, to grab Sir Gabriel and demand to get more information about where Isobel was. But losing herself like that won’t get information out of him any faster, so she took a deep breath, forced herself to calm down, and asked, “When did this happen? What do we know?”

Sir Gabriel kept his eyes on her for a moment, as if trying to judge whether she could actually handle the rest of whatever information he was about to give her. She had to be; she needed to start coming up with a plan to find Isobel. He gave a short nod, almost as if to himself, before he said, “Nobody is sure, but it had to have happened early in the morning. As far as we know, she entered her room last night, but when the guards opened the door to escort her to breakfast, the room was empty.” He paused, allowing her the time to piece the information together.

If nobody had walked into the room, from the front door, then they’d had to have come through the servant’s corridors or climb through the windows, but it still didn’t explain how nobody had seen Isobel. “What else?” she asked. It felt like there were too many pieces of information missing.

Sir Gabriel hesitated again, and she thought guilt crossed his face. She frowned, watching as he pulled a slip of paper out of a small pouch that he’d attached to his scabbard. He slid it into her hand, then whispered, “This was on her bed.”

Her frown deepened. He’d taken evidence that should have been in the king’s hands, and shown in to her instead of the king. *Why?* Her eyes scanned the paper, but the note itself wasn’t

particularly long. The handwriting was similar to Isobel's, but it clearly wasn't hers. The letters were too neat, and while Isobel's handwriting was neat, this was . . . unnatural. The only words on the page were, "We're in the cottage in the woods. You'll find her there."

"The king already saw." Sir Gabriel's voice was strained, and when she looked back up at him, she was surprised to see a little bit of irritation there. "His face paled when he saw the note, but otherwise, he didn't acknowledge it."

Elane heard the words, but she couldn't understand them. She knew she could, obviously, but she didn't want to. "But, that's —"

She couldn't think of any words to describe it. Well, she could, but anything she could say would be tantamount to treason. She didn't bother to say aloud what they both knew, that if the king had had that reaction to the note, it meant that he at least had an idea about who left the letter.

Elane looked down at the letter again. Exact directions to where Isobel would be. She scanned the words several more times, as if she could find the trap hidden within them. It seemed like this person's goal was to draw out the king, but they had to know that there was no way the king would go there himself. What was the trick? To have the king send the best knights, and weaken the kingdom in the process? And why take Isobel, and not Nate, the heir?

She realized that Sir Gabriel was looking at her. He'd apparently recovered from his momentary lapse of self-control, allowing both of them the time to process the truth they both knew. "Do you know why I chose you as my squire?"

She didn't know where the question came from, but knew it had to be related to why he'd shown her the note when the king refused to do anything about it. "No, sir." She'd assumed it

had been because she'd shown promise worthy of the title of squire to the best knight in the kingdom, or whatever the cliché was. And while that may be true, in the time she'd been training under him, she began to suspect that there was another reason that he'd apparently been waiting for a good moment to tell her.

“It's because you don't care about the position.”

Elane frowned. She hadn't exactly been subtle about the fact that she was using the prospective knighthood she'd receive to be considered a suitor for Isobel, but it didn't make sense that the best knight in the kingdom would choose someone who barely cared for the position. “I'm not sure I understand, sir.”

He nodded. “That's another reason. You don't care about the position, you aren't ashamed to admit when you don't know something, and you question things that don't make sense to you. All of those qualities lead to you not blindly following orders, and I believe that those qualities will make you a better knight than I am.”

Elane stared at him for a moment, piecing together what he was implying. “You want me to bring back Isobel myself.” He nodded, and Elane only thought for a moment before she said “I'll do it.” She would have done so even without him asking.

By the time she snuck into the stable, word about Isobel's disappearance had spread, and the stablehands were too distracted to notice her slip in and take one of the horses. Sir Gabriel told her he would come up with some excuse for why she wasn't around, then wished her luck before giving her the sword at his hip. The sword was hanging on her left side, and was slightly throwing off her sense of balance.

She waited until she left the grounds to mount the horse, holding the sword in her hand as she got onto the saddle. The few people she'd seen between the stable and the gates hadn't stopped her; maybe somehow they hadn't seen her, or maybe they were too distracted to call out to her.

She'd never been to the woods, but they weren't large. Besides, there couldn't be that many cottages in the woods. It took a few hours to get to the woods and search them, but when the horse started to get skittish, Elane was sure she was heading in the right direction. When a cottage came into view, vines sneaking up its walls, the horse stopped, refusing to move forward.

She dropped to the ground. She took a steadying breath, and moved to the cottage door. She barged in, not bothering to knock, because why should she? She was coming to rescue a princess, not visiting a childhood friend.

She half expected the room to be dimly lit, destroyed furniture with no one in sight. She found the exact opposite. The room was brightly lit, and the furniture was fashionable. Similar to the furniture she'd seen in certain parts of the castle, almost. But the most surprising thing about the room was the woman sitting in one of the chairs. For a second, she thought she was looking at Isobel, but no; this woman was older, taller.

Elane blinked, thinking the woman's eye color was a trick of the light. But, no, they were golden, the color of leaves in autumn. When the woman's eyes met hers, her body screamed at her to run. "Is this the best the king can send?" Even her voice was unnaturally cold.

"I don't know," Elane said. She didn't bother to hide the slight tremor in her voice. It didn't seem like a fight was about to start, though she could very well have just been reading the room wrong. "I didn't exactly wait around to be told what to do."

The woman arched an eyebrow, then reached out to the coffee table in front of her, pouring wine from the bottle into a glass. “Sit,” the woman said, gesturing to the empty chair opposite her. “Have a drink, and we’ll talk.”

“Where’s Isobel?” Elane remained in her spot by the door. It seemed too easy a trap to fall into, even if the woman didn’t seem to be in any hurry.

“Oh?” the woman asked. “Did I kidnap the wrong woman? I’m quite certain I kidnapped *Princess Isobel*.”

“I don’t think you heard me.” Elane’s irritation got the better of her. She needed to see Isobel, to make sure she was okay, and she’d be damned if this woman was going to distract her. “*Where is Isobel?*” Her hand twitched toward her new sword. She’d never used a real sword before, only the wooden practice sword they used during training, and had no idea if she’d be able to use the weapon effectively, but that wasn’t about to stop her.

The woman slowly finished her glass of wine. When she drained the glass, she looked back at Elane, as if studying her to see what she would do. “You’re afraid,” the woman said.

She said it like a matter of fact, which, Elane supposed, was right. Of course she was afraid; she was fucking terrified. Who wouldn’t be? “I am, but that won’t stop me from doing what I need to do.” There was no point pretending she wasn’t, if the woman could tell from just looking at her.

The woman stared at her for a moment. Elane wondered if she was surprised, or if she was trying to make Elane more afraid. Then, slowly, she stood and walked past Elane. “Come along, then, if you’re so desperate to be reunited.”



It couldn't be this easy. She thought back to every story she'd heard as a child, how when a princess was kidnapped the knight who rescued her had to go on a long journey, and usually had to fight either the person that had kidnapped her or, in the more wild stories, a dragon, in order to rescue her. But this woman wasn't doing anything like that. There was still too much Elane didn't understand, and she felt that she had no other choice than to follow along behind the woman.

The cottage wasn't large, and even though the woman only lead her down the hallway about seven feet, Elane made sure the woman stayed in her line of sight. When the woman stopped in front of the door, she knocked, and Elane *really* didn't know what the fuck to expect anymore. "You have a rescuer," the woman said. "A young woman who thinks she's a knight."

The door wrenched open, and Elane put her hands up, expecting an attack. Instead, Isobel was standing in the doorway, looking mildly furious. Her hair was disheveled, as though she'd been running her hands through it, and Elane was surprised at the ferocity of the glare on Isobel's face. "*Stay away from me,*" Isobel shouted at the woman, and Elane could hear the fear and anger in her voice. "Bring me back to the castle, or I swear, I'll tear you apart with my own hands."

"Is —" The threat surprised Elane, but she was mostly relieved to see that Isobel really was fine. Other than the disheveled hair, there wasn't any sign that she was injured or distressed. "Is, honey, are you —"

Isobel snapped her head in Elane's direction. Elane watched as surprise, disbelief, and relief flashed across her face, then launched herself into Elane's arms. "El, you're — what are you —" She couldn't seem to finish a sentence, just relieved to see Elane.

Elane kept her arm around Isobel's waist, then pulled Isobel behind her, taking a step back from the woman. She could have thrown Isobel over her shoulder and run, but she didn't want to take her eyes off the woman, and she still had too many questions. "Why did you take Isobel?"

The woman tilted her head to the side, almost as if she were studying prey. "I was trying to get the king's attention, of course."

"But why me?" Isobel's voice was steady, and Elane wondered if Isobel had been scripting the question for however long she'd been in that room. "My siblings are more important to the kingdom and the order of succession. Their absence would be felt more widely throughout the kingdom. So *why me?*"

The woman kept her eyes on Isobel. "We're similar. We have more in common than the king's other children."

"Similar?" Isobel's voice was filled with justified bitterness. "No, of course, I forgot, I also have a hobby of kidnapping people in my spare time."

The woman sighed, as if she were exasperated by the fact that Isobel was angry. "You aren't listening."

"Why would we?" Isobel shoved Elane's arm out of the way, moving to stand at Elane's side, as though they could take on the woman together. "You *kidnapped me*. If all you wanted was for me to listen, then you could have walked into the palace, or, if you insist on being creepy, you could have spoken to me in my bedroom."

The woman locked her jaw almost at the same time as Isobel, and it only served to remind Elane how similar the two looked. Then, something the woman said clicked in Elane's

mind, and she asked, “What did you mean, the king’s *other* children?” She remembered the king’s reaction to the note, how Sir Gabriel had said that his face had paled, how similar Elane and the woman looked, and she blurted, “Are you and Isobel related?”

The silence that filled the room stretched out longer than it should have, as if even the woman was surprised that Elane asked the question out loud. “El,” Isobel whispered, grabbing her arm again, her nails digging into her arm, almost sharp enough to draw blood. “El, what are you talking about?” But Elane could hear in Isobel’s voice that she knew, she saw, but she didn’t want to accept it.

“Yes,” the woman said, and Isobel’s head turned so quickly that Elane was worried that she might snap her neck. “My name is Karolina. I’m Isobel’s oldest sister and the rightful heir to the throne.”

Isobel’s face was pale. “No,” she said. “Nate is my oldest sibling. He’s the heir to the kingdom.” Isobel’s knees buckled beneath her, and Elane caught her. Isobel shook her head. Elane couldn’t blame her for being surprised; it was a lot of information for her to process about her family.

Elane turned her attention back to Karolina. She was having a problem with processing the information, herself. She didn’t agree with all of the king’s decisions, but she couldn’t imagine the king discarding a child just because he wanted a male heir, even if that child did have unnatural golden eyes and was still as a predator. “What do you want?”

Karolina’s eyes were on Elane’s hands around Isobel. “I know my father rather well, for someone who hasn’t seen him for over two decades.” Karolina’s eyes drifted to Isobel’s face.

“He enjoys his power. So I want to take it from him. I want to take the thing that means the most to him, the same way he did to me.”

Elane looked to Isobel. She agreed with Karolina that abandoning a child for little apparent reason was horrendous, but her primary allegiance was Isobel, and she refused to do anything that would hurt her.

But the expression on Isobel’s face was torn. She clearly didn’t know what the hell she wanted to do. She gritted her teeth, then looked back up at Karolina. “Tell us everything,” she said, desperation bleeding through her voice. “I deserve to know the worst about my family. Then we’ll make a decision about what to do with you.”

### **Lessons and Training**

Tamara paced the length of her new room. She'd been at it for a few minutes, and could guess that the room was about fifteen feet wide and twenty feet long. There was an armoire, a bed, a rug in the center of the floor, a desk with a new kit of thieves' tools, and a chair. When she had seen the thieves' tools, she made sure to inspect every item. The file, lock picks, the hand mirror, the small scissors and pliers. Her expertise had been mostly pickpocketing, but she couldn't deny the fact that the tools fit perfectly in her hand.

Jasper and Amaia were really serious, then, about getting her involved in whatever they were planning. Neither of them had explained much, not even why an elf and a human were working together. Not that it was *that* strange, of course, but there were still people that feared elves, their immortality and unnerving grace. Anyway, all they'd said was that she wouldn't be asked to do much, just participate in the occasional heist. In exchange, they'd give her a room, and wouldn't charge her for the room. They'd even let her do whatever she wanted, so long as it didn't interfere with the few times they'd need her for things.

Honestly, they'd had her with the 'no charge' angle. Waitressing at a tavern didn't bring in much money, especially considering that she tended to donate at least half of the money she

made — not including the money she pickpocketed — to different orphanages in the country. So she'd gone back to her old room above the tavern, taken the few items she had, and told her landlord she'd be staying with distant relatives who had just moved into the area.

She forced herself to stop pacing. She dropped to the ground, and peered under the bed. She didn't think this was a trap. Still, it didn't hurt to check for trap doors, for anything that might not seem right. She knocked on the floor, pressing her ear to the floor for any spots that sounded like they'd been hollowed out, a trick she'd used in the orphanage to hide sweets and toys.

Nothing. She was overreacting, and she knew it, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she was getting into something more complicated than she'd initially believed. She had no real reason to think that, and it wasn't like Jasper or Amaia had done or said anything to indicate that. In fact, they'd even told her that she could back out of the arrangement any time if she really wanted to.

She laid down on the bed, closing her eyes. There was nothing for her to regret, she knew, and she had every opportunity to leave if she needed to. So why, then, did she feel like she needed to get out of here now? She'd sleep on it, she decided, and rolled onto her side, facing the wall. If she couldn't explain the unease she was feeling when she woke up, she would find either Jasper or Amaia, lie, and tell them that unfortunately, she remembered something that came up, and she would not be able to participate in any heists for the foreseeable future, thank you very much.

Or, she thought as she drifted off to sleep, she could do the rational thing and just ask them what was up with all the secrecy.

Tamara was awake long before she heard the knocking at her door. She hadn't slept well. She tossed and turned for about two hours, then gave up on the prospect of sleep, and started fiddling with the thieves' tools, letting herself get used to the weight of each tool in her hand.

The knocking started again. She sighed, forced herself to stand, and called, "I'm coming." She ignored the tremor in her knees as she started walking to the door. She paused before it, took a deep, steadying breath, and swung the door open.

Jasper was standing there, his fist raised as if he were about to start his damn knocking again. Most of his auburn hair was hidden by a dark green bandana; the only part she saw sticking out was a small ponytail at the base of his neck. "Oh, so you were up," he said, leaning against the doorframe. "We've got a job for you."

Tamara frowned. "Already?" she asked. "It's only been half a day since I came here."

Jasper shrugged. "What can I say? We found a good opportunity to get you close to a target."

She shuddered. "I'm not *assassinating* someone."

"Fine, then, your *mark*." He waved his hand, dismissively, as if the distinction made no difference to him. "Odd, though, that a pickpocket would make arguments for her own morality."

She clenched her fists, and hated that she had to raise her head to look at him. But, at least, she could use this as an excuse to try to work some answers out of him, to ease that weird feeling she'd had the night before. "My morality is the one thing I can trust."

Jasper raised an eyebrow. "Yet you think you can trust me and Amaia."

“For years, Amaia donated money to the orphanage I lived in,” she said. “Somehow, she remembered me, a child she’d spoken to for no longer than five minutes. I can’t imagine someone who would give away that much money to children who wouldn’t appreciate it would be truly bad.”

He shrugged. “I suppose I’ll have to give you that,” he said. “Even if her methods are unconventional, I don’t think she has the nerve to do something cruel without motive.”

“Yet you don’t think the same about yourself.”

He tilted his head, as if considering his next words. “Would you rather I lie to you?” he asked. “Would you like to hear how I’m soft-hearted, how the thought of harming any person in any way pains me? Because I’m not one for wasting my words.”

“Are you sure about that?”

He grinned, wicked and savage. There was a glint in his blue eyes that had her hand twitching, and if she’d had a knife, she might have pulled it out. “You’re right,” he said. “I don’t go out of my way to put people at ease. That’s how I should have described myself.” And she supposed that was true, considering he didn’t tell her anything more than she’d asked. “And, now that we’ve gotten this little talk out of the way, it’s time that we started your lessons.”

Tamara frowned as Jasper turned around. “*Lessons?* On what?”

“How to behave like a proper lady, of course,” he answered, and she could hear the smirk in his voice, wanted to slap it off his face. “Your first job will be to sneak your way among the nobility.”



They had two months, Amaia had told them, as she poured over pages and pages of information. She stood at the head of the table, and despite her short, elvish stature, she reminded Tamara of a general in a war council as she dropped one scroll and picked up another. Tamara couldn't read well, and could only write well enough to get orders at the tavern correctly, so the words on these scrolls, tossed about the table in disarray, were nearly impossible for her to make out.

“The ball is celebrating the twentieth year of the local duke's rule. Between the two of us, we should be able to get you to fit in,” Amaia said. Her white hair was braided into a bun, but one strand was loose; she was twirling the strand around her finger absently, and it took all of Tamara's focus to pay attention to what she was saying. “You'll be on your own once you're in there,” Amaia said. “I'm too recognizable, and so is Jasper. Do you think you'll be able to handle this?”

She straightened her back, even though she hadn't been slouching. “Of course,” she said, “but it depends on what these lessons entail.” She was also surprised to hear that both Jasper and Amaia might once have been members of nobility, and tucked the information away for future use.

Amaia smiled. “Basic etiquette, dancing, how to look, how to stand. Basically, we're going to have to teach you everything from the beginning, as if you actually were a child among the nobility.”

At least, Tamara was fairly certain that was what Amaia had said, but she *had* gotten distracted by the elf's smile. “You dance?” she asked, and mentally kicked herself when she heard the slight hitch to her voice.

“No, I don’t,” Amaia answered. “I never got the knack for it. I was never graceful enough. So, instead, Jasper’s going to teach you.”

Jasper waved, and Tamara tried not to remember his words from earlier, his implication that he could be cruel if he wanted to. *Does Amaia have something on him, to keep him complacent?* But what was the point in keeping someone around that you weren’t sure you could fully trust? “Then you’ll be teaching me everything else, Amaia?”

Amaia nodded, but she’d gone back to reading the scrolls. “Here,” she said, laying the scroll in her hand flat on the table and pointing to a spot. Tamara nodded, even though she could only barely make out the letters on the page. “We’ll say you’re a distant relative of the Whitecrest family. *Very* distant, considering it’s been almost ten generations since a Whitecrest married a human, but still.”

Tamara had heard a little bit about the Whitecrests. They were a noble family of elves, named after the mountains that rose from the Greenbriar Forest, where they lived. The woman in charge of the family wasn’t necessarily evil, from what she had heard, but she wasn’t a good person either. “Are you sure people wouldn’t question it?” she asked.

Amaia shrugged. “There is a risk,” she admitted. “But, to be honest, many of the people that attend these balls tend to be pretenders in some way. Unless you try to call someone’s bluff, they’ll let you continue to act the part, unless you do something truly unexpected for the nobility.”

“So there’s only a little bit of pressure, as opposed to all of the pressure. That’s fun.”

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” Amaia said. “If you’re afraid of the risk of being caught, we’ll back out and find another person to be your mark, after there’s more time to prepare.”

But this was a test, at least as far as Tamara was concerned. If she couldn’t handle this much of a challenge, she wouldn’t be able to handle anything. “I’ll do it,” she said. “What do I need to do once I’m there?”

“We’ll go over that later,” Jasper said, and Tamara flinched slightly at the sound of his voice. She’d forgotten that he was there. “First, we teach you the basics.”

Amaia was still pouring over the various scrolls, so her first lesson would be a dancing lesson with Jasper. They had rented a building on the opposite side of the village from the tavern where Tamara worked. A room on the second floor served as their meeting area, and Amaia didn’t seem inclined to move, so Jasper and Tamara moved to the empty room across the hall for their dance lesson. She didn’t even look up at them as they left.

She couldn’t deny that Jasper *was* graceful. He had her watch first, his hands outstretched as if he truly had a partner dancing before him. He moved as if he had every inch of the room memorized, and his steps didn’t falter, keeping him well away from the walls of the room. It was hard for her to imagine him dancing like this, while simultaneously, supposedly, having the capacity for being cruel.

When he called her over to start teaching her, she was surprised when he immediately put his hand on her back, even though she’d seen him act out the action only a minute ago. “You need to relax,” he said.

“I am relaxed,” she snapped.

“Well, I’d believe you,” he said, “if I couldn’t feel how tense your muscles are.”

She scowled at him. “Well, then, how am I supposed to keep my muscles from being tense, jackass?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Let’s start by not calling people a jackass when they’re trying to help you,” he said as he started the dance.

She watched their feet, wanting to make sure she could memorize the steps. It wasn’t that they were that hard; all she really had to do was step back when he stepped forward. And even if she wanted to step on his foot, wanted to make him squirm, she should at least practice the right way, so she didn’t fuck up when it came time to do the real dance.

“You’re impatient,” Jasper said.

“Yeah, yeah, right, and how can you tell that?”

“It’s similar to the way I can tell that you’re still tense,” he said, releasing her back to spin her. “I notice the twitch in your leg that happens before I step.” When the spin finished, he returned his hand to the exact spot it had been in. “You’ll be expected to follow, not lead, so you have to wait for the lead to step. But you don’t like that, do you?”

“Well, you’re condescending enough to have been a member of the nobility.”

Jasper frowned. “You think I was ever part of the nobility?” he asked. “What could have possibly given you that impression?”

Tamara frowned in return. “What else would make you recognizable to the nobility?”

Another spin, but this time, his hand didn’t return to the spot on her back. “Many of them had hired me previously,” he said, bowing.

It took her a moment to realize that he was waiting for her to bow back. “Hire you for what?” she asked, bowing back to him.

“Mercenary work, of course,” he said, straightening himself out. “And you’re supposed to curtsy, not bow.”

A mercenary. It would explain how he and Amaia had met, then; maybe her parents or she herself had hired him for a job once, and whatever the two of them were planning now had started back then. She stood, adding, “So that’s why you gave me a roundabout way of saying you have the potential to be cruel.”

“A mercenary’s life isn’t one that allows for *morals*,” he said, taking a few steps to the wall behind him and leaning against it. “If a mercenary had morals, it limits the jobs they can take, as they’ll want to know the details around who they can help, who it will hurt ...” He waved his hand, as if he couldn’t be bothered to list the other reasons he might be able to think of. “It’s easier to be in this line of work without morals.”

“Have you considered just not being a mercenary anymore?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Have you considered aspiring to be something more than a pickpocket?”

Her lips curled into another scowl. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

He smirked. “For nothing more than a schoolgirl’s crush, from what I understand.”

Her temper flared, but before she could act on it, he tossed something in her direction. A knife, sheathed in leather, that she could keep hidden under skirts. “A gift from Amaia,” he said, “as the other part of our lessons involve knifework.”

She'd knicked her fingers about ten times, once for each finger, even when they'd alternated between a few minutes of dancing and a few minutes of knifework. Her previous line of work hadn't offered her the opportunity to handle a knife in this way, after all.

When she returned to her room later that night, she was exhausted. She hadn't seen Amaia the rest of the day; she must have been really busy with her work, whatever she was doing.

Just as she was closing her eyes, there was a knock at her door. She groaned, but she got up, and walked toward the door. If it was Jasper, she'd slam the door in his face without a second thought.

Instead, it was Amaia, white hair still in the braided bun, but now there were a few more strands loose. "Oh," Tamara said. "Uh, hi, what's going on?" *Subtle*, she thought.

But Amaia didn't seem to notice. "I just wanted to thank you, again," she said.

"Of course," Tamara said, even though she wasn't completely sure what she was being thanked for. "Don't worry about it."

But Amaia kept talking. "You've had every opportunity to say no, but you haven't taken any of them. If I were in your position, I would have backed out right away."

"Well, uh," she said, "I mean ... I don't have anything to lose, right? It just makes sense for me to help out, especially after everything you did for the orphanage I was raised in. What's Jasper's deal?"

Amaia rolled her eyes. "He's dramatic. He preaches about his lack of morals, his devotion to money as his one true god, or whatever, but he's done good things for the sake of being good. I think he just likes playing the role of a douchebag."

“You’ve got that right.” She thought back to their dancing lesson, their knifework lesson. He’d been antagonistic, sure, but it had been effective. She’d wanted to prove him wrong, to get everything done correctly. Even if spite wasn’t the best motivator, it still made a decent one.

“I wish I could tell you more about what we’re planning,” Amaia said. “It’s just ...” she trailed off, then, after a moment, finished, “I don’t want to give myself false hope in this plan, let alone anyone else. That’s why we’re starting by getting money.”

“Through any means necessary?” Tamara asked.

“Not any means,” Amaia shrugged. “Just a few immoral means, considering we have to be secretive about this.”

Tamara nodded. She still didn’t understand, not really, but she supposed she could wait out the answers.

“Thank you, again,” Amaia said. “Goodnight.”

“Night,” she said, shutting the door, and instead of returning to her bed, she went back to her desk, and picked up the thieves’ tools. She had a long night and plenty to prove, after all.