THE ANGEL

*The Other Side of Red*
~ Book 2 ~

AR Curtis
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Thank you.
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Bonuses
Gabriel keeps his distance from the passengers inside the train. He’s not like any of them. Any decent tracker knows not to get mixed up with their kind. But he’s not a tracker anymore, not since last winter, when the First Prince of Hell turned him into a vampire.

He sits outside on the ledge, dangling one leg over, while propping an arm with his other leg. He’s long since abandoned his tracker garb, now wearing the leather jacket he stole from the vampire, Raoul. The vampire who’s not only a vampire but also the biological son of the Devil. A demi-demon, as they call him.

The jacket’s a little big, but the chains are growing on him.

It was a funny sight to see the oversized brute without his hardcore leather jacket. His eyes of ice shard blue looked almost…lost. Until, in anger, the demi-demon shouted his final words, “The girl will come to you and when she does, I will take her back to where she belongs,” before disappearing in a smoldering puff of gray.

By girl, he meant Emily.

But Raoul was wrong. It’s been eight months and Emily has not returned. She saw what Gabriel’s become. Why would she ever come to him?

Gabriel turns his gaze to the passing landscape: a purple mountain looming out of darkness. A river runs alongside the train, an occasional fissure appearing here and there. The dying winter wind whips at his nose, its burn not quite so stinging as it once was. The once sandy color on his head is now darkened into muddy tousles.

Only creatures that aren’t supposed to exist roam the dark landscape. There are no humans, save for the passengers on the lost train. But Gabriel wouldn’t exactly call them human.

The train slows. Gabriel peeks his head around the corner. Another dock approaches, more lost souls roaming the wooden platform. It seems the train
grows another car with each stop. The ex-tracker slumps back down against the locomotive wall as the beast crawls to a stop.

He pays no attention to the incoming. He hasn’t seen a single one venture out here where he sits. Which might explain why he doesn’t notice the door slide open.

It’s not until he’s thumped on the back of his head that he’s wrenched from his pity party. He snaps up into a sparring stance, a natural reflex lingering from his tracker days.

“Wha—” He stops, his eyes landing on the other vampire glaring at him. “I know you. You’re Lucian’s pet. What are you doing here?”

Emmet shakes his head, disappointment plastered on his marbled, sallow face. He crosses his arms, and brows. Even his hair, pitch as midnight, seems to be angry with Gabriel. His eyes, though, are just the same as Lucian’s, a blue so clear and pure the color should not be allowed on a creature so vile as what he’s become.

“Idiot,” slates Emmet as the train heaves from the platform, returning to its forceful speed. “You would wind up on the lost train, wouldn’t you?”

“And? What of it?” retorts Gabriel. He slides his back down the metal wall to his seat, fully intending to ignore the intruder and go back to his sulking. “Unlike you, I’ve got somewhere to be.” Doesn’t matter to him that he can’t remember where, exactly, that is. Come to think of it, he doesn’t remember much since the boarding dock that mysteriously appeared right in front of him in the forest.

“Get lost.”

Emmet does not move, his boots planted firmly on the rattling metal floor with disturbing stability. If his hair weren’t so tousled, he’d be able to pass himself off as Lucian, if he ever got the itch to slick it back and don a cloak. The similarity is in their eyes.

“Tell me, Gabriel. What do you remember?”

“I remember just fine,” he answers, stretching his brain… He remembers before the day he boarded the train. He remembers the night he staked Lucian’s heart. And he remembers the dying vampire immediately returning
the favor by turning Gabriel into...this half-life of a blood-sucker. This...beast!

Gabriel’s stake should have killed the old vampire. If only it had...if only Gabriel had grabbed Emily and fled the dungeons, he’d still be himself, tracking monsters like himself.

And after that night, he remembers the castle, it’s secret existence on the other side of red, floating midair above the center of lower Lake Whatcom. He remembers the quiet inhabitants of the palace and all their heavily guarded secrets. Some of them vampires like him, sired by Lucian. Others Gabriel had tracked and lost before. And still others, creatures he’d never seen. Like Timmons, who’s half dwarf and half ogre with buggy eyes and a frog-like tongue. Toad-man, as Gabriel likes to think of him. Toad-man gives him the creeps. He shivers at the reminder.

“That’s what I thought,” says Emmet.

Gabriel snaps from his memories, almost surprised to see Emmet still here.

“Where’s Lucian?” he demands.

Emmet arches a curious brow. “What makes you think Lucian’s alive? Surely, you know by now the lake he fell into is cursed. Even if he hadn’t just been stabbed with alicorn bone, no one survives the lake.” But his tone is devious, like he knows something Gabriel does not. “Of course, he had just swallowed alicorn blood—willingly.”

At this, Gabriel hitches. Alicorn blood? He hadn’t known that. Not that there’d been any time to learn the facts, between rescuing Emily and slaying a vampire. But now it makes sense. It explains why Lucian would survive a stake to the heart.

Gabriel slugs to his feet once more. He inflates his chest confrontationally. “You’re only confirming my theory. The First Prince of Hell lives. I can smell him!”

Emmet does not answer, neither acknowledging nor denying Gabriel’s allegation.

“Lucian taunts me. He mocks me. He’s never far from me. I...feel his
presence.” Gabriel shouts his assertions in every direction as if to address Lucian himself, as if to incite the dead vampire out of hiding.

“He’s not here,” says Emmet, and drops his eyes to half-mast, as if to say he’s quite had enough of Gabriel’s distractions. “Don’t you know not to board the lost train?”


The seasoned vampire shakes his head in disappointment. But Gabriel doesn’t care. He doesn’t answer to this guy. He doesn’t answer to anyone. Evidently, he doesn’t even answer to himself anymore. He stopped that after his first victim.

“Tell me, oh wise one,” says Emmet through a mouth full of sarcasm, dagger-like fangs, and an exaggerated bow. “Just where are you going?”

Gabriel looks at the other vampire wishing he could slug the complacency from the guy’s face with an answer. He’s too pissed to answer the question. That’s what he tells himself.

“Can’t tell me, can you? Lemme guess, a big fiery seraph sold you a ticket?”

Gabriel looks up at the vampire resentfully. “The seraphim help people,” he says, remembering the one that had helped him when Lucian had him pinned to the dungeon floor last year.

“Some do, yes,” says Emmet. “But you never know which ones are the helpful kind, and which only help you get lost. The one that sold you a ticket is no angel of light. She knows only the lost board this train.”

“Of course, it’s of the dark,” retorts Gabriel, gesticulating at the murky surroundings. “What else can you expect in a place like this! Besides, what’s that say for you, then? You’re here, aren’t you?”

“I know how to navigate the train. I’m getting off. And so are you.”

Gabriel studies the older vampire. He’s not older by much. And it’s only in vampire years. Like Gabriel, Emmet must have been around 21 or so when he was turned. And it can’t have been too long ago, either, judging by the modern fashion on him: torn jeans, boots, and a leather jacket—not one like Raoul’s, with its chains and buckles and stiffness, but a softer jacket that one
might wear out for a night of clubbing. It’s the color of a midnight sky reflecting the glow of a distant, blue moon.

There’s some veracity to what Emmet says that Gabriel does not want to look at, let alone admit. And now that he’s thinking about it, he doesn’t remember ever getting off the train. It angers him, as he thinks of the stupid beings in the castle. As if being on this train is all their fault.

He swishes past Emmet into the cabin. He takes the first empty seat and nudges another passenger, an ashy-looking lady with dark hair and eyes so black they look like bottomless holes. She smiles.

“Oh, hello there.”

“Hi, I’m Gabe. Where’re you headed?”

The dead lady’s smile fades and she returns to absently staring out the window.

Gabriel finds another seat, tapping a tall gentleman on the shoulder. The man turns around, slowly bearing a mouthful of rot, though he does not smile. His eyes are crossed, and angry. Gabriel clears his throat and finds another seat, this one next to a plump, bald gentleman with the same ashy complexion as the other two.

“Excuse me, sir, where’re you headed?” he asks.

The man grins. “Why, to visit my son. He just had a baby. My third grandchild.” He pats a cigar wrapped in a blue ribbon in his front pocket. “Our first boy.”

Gabriel’s heart leaps, eager to dive in with his questions: How many times have you ridden this train? How do you know when you’ve arrived at your stop? But, as he takes a better look at the man, he realizes his questions would be lost on him.

It’s not the cigar that tips Gabriel off but the man’s suit. And shoes.

“When was your grandson born?” he asks.

“June twenty-first.”

“Of this year?” probes Gabriel.

“When else, son?” The man laughs, but he looks at Gabriel with
suspicion.

“What…erm, year…is it?”

“What’d, you hit your head or something? It’s eighteen ninety-seven. We’re gonna live to see the turn of the century, m’boy!” The man pops the cigar in his mouth and chews, returning his attention to the window in anticipation of his stop that will never come.

Angry, Gabriel storms to the back and throws himself outside where Emmet waits patiently, not an ounce of *I told you so* on his face. It makes Gabriel furious. The least Emmet could do is give Gabriel a reason to kick him over the edge.

The train speeds through the mountains, shadowed foliage whipping by like the howling wind.

“Why did no one say anything?” the new vampire shouts in frustration, not really expecting an answer. He’s thinking of those he’s met in the castle, all their lies and half-truths. All their exclusions and secrecy. He shouldn’t be surprised. He killed their prince. In fact, he’s half-surprised they haven’t killed him by now.

Which only validates what he’s come to know: Lucian is alive. And everyone knows it but him.

“You’ll soon learn as I did: this is not a world in which you will be *told* the rules. Only those who figure them out get to…live. Those who don’t, well…” Emmet gestures at the window, through which the passengers sit, as lost as rowboats in a storm.

“They’re alive,” retorts Gabriel, knowing full well what Emmet means.

“Alive, yes. But they’re not living. Do you want to live?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“Well, then, follow me.” The seasoned vampire passes Gabriel, turns his back to the edge, and steps backward off the train, leaving Gabriel with a haunting grin embedded in his memory. A trace in the darkness, as Emmet disappears in the train’s wake.

“Why would you help me?” Gabriel shouts fruitlessly into the wind.
He contemplates the implication of Emmet’s promise, or threat, rather. It’s probably a trap. Emmet was Lucian’s right hand. He’s waiting, perched safely somewhere, knowing full well Gabriel does not know how to fly, or whatever it is Emmet just did. Perhaps Emmet is counting on Gabriel’s ignorance. He wants Gabriel to fall to his death. Gabriel would hate to give him the satisfaction. And yet…

He peers through the window at the lost passengers sitting clueless in their comfort. Then, he looks over the edge outside, where no trace of Emmet can be seen. Gabriel would rather jump into the unknown than live the rest of his life wandering lost.

Without another thought in either direction, the vampire leans off the train until his feet no longer touch the metal floor, and he falls. Hard. And fast. Closing his eyes, he waits for the hit.
Chapter 1

Agatha

There are more seers in the world than people think. They come from places most people wouldn’t guess. They don’t need magic. And there isn’t one alive that Livy Inishtar is not at least aware of.

The graceful sorceress practically glides across the open field toward the grand Georgian manor, her white summer dress flapping at her ankles. A manor quite out of place in the upper reaches of the pacific northwest. The woman’s long neck stretches toward the gods. She could be a god, the way she carries herself: poised, regal, and with as much power as her magic warrants.

Though the sun warms Livy’s bare arms, the manor shadows over the property like a permanent storm cloud. Some distance behind the manor, Mt. Baker peeks over a ridge of evergreens, deceptively still. To look at it, no one would believe it houses one of the oldest and largest dragons in existence today.

It’s fortunate the girl she’s looking for lives so close to the coven. It makes what Livy’s here to do easier.

A shiver inches up her spine, almost a sign to turn around. But she’s too in-tune with truth to listen to doubt. She glides up the wide, portico steps and taps the door knocker in the center of two giant white doors.

A moment later, the door creaks open to a portly gentleman in a gray tuxedo. His eyes are slits, his hair as gray as his suit. He looks right through her.

“Madam,” he intones.

“I’m here to see Miss Agatha Darling Calagos. Is she here?” The question is a courtesy. Livy knows where the girl is. It is the reason the sorceress has
come to this unfeeling place.

The butler’s eyes open, and, for the first time, he sees the visitor. One tidy brow arches, his lips parted, not in disgust but in utter curiosity. “Pardon, but did you say Agatha?”

Livy nods politely, not surprised in the least at his response. “I did. Is she available?”

The portly fellow clears his throat and returns his eyes to unseeing. “Is she expecting you?”

“Yes and no.” Livy hides her smile, for although she’s enjoying the man’s struggle with her answer, she’s certain he would not appreciate her amusement. Normals get so particular about such things. They can be fun to toy with. It’s harmless, she tells herself, as if to appease someone that might be listening in on her thoughts.

“Might I ask who is inquiring?”

She gives him a nod. “I am Livy Inishtar.” She pauses, then adds, “Of the Bellingham Coven.”

There is a slight gasp from his lips, but the gentleman does not question further. Instead, he seems to come to terms and gestures Livy into the vaulted marbled foyer. “This way, Madam.”

“Thank you,” says Livy graciously and steps over the threshold, her white pointed shoes a soft melodic tap across the checkered floor.

The servant closes the door and excuses himself, leaving her in the middle of the room. Across the foyer, he taps on a normal intercom and issues his message, sounding quite shaky and doubtful.

“Miss Agatha. There’s a—” He gives Livy a questioning look. “Miss, is it?”

She nods, and the butler returns to the intercom. “Miss Livy Inishtar to see you.”

Directly across the door are two sets of lavish, sweeping staircases, each circling the back of the room in opposite directions from the other and fanning out toward the door. At the balcony between the staircases, a skinny girl with dark, raggedy hair stares down at Livy.
Despite the rough, holey jeans and flannel, there’s almost a sweetness to the girl’s face.

Livy smiles graciously. “Come down here, if you please, Agatha. I have something for you.”

Agatha does not move, not at first. Livy is not surprised, for she just spoke to the kid as though they know each other. The girl has never seen Livy, not in living memory. After a moment, the girl takes the staircase to her left, her dark eyes on Livy the entire journey down.

To any stranger, she could be twelve. But Livy knows the girl is eighteen. She knows everything about the girl walking toward her.

Like why the girl’s nose is flat and wide while her mother’s is long and hooked, why her skin is dark while her mother’s is fair. Why she’s skinnier than most her age in this area. Why she won’t talk much. Why she’s not concerned about a stranger come to see her. Most importantly, she knows why Agatha will do what it takes to fulfill Livy’s agenda without much thought or consideration.

“Mind if we walk?” inquires the sorceress. Though the butler has blended into the background, standing silent and still as a preying vampire, Livy does not like the hungry ears.

Agatha nods her acquiescence and the two ladies exit out the entrance. They walk in silence down the steps to the wide, open lawn. Livy gestures toward the eastern edge of the property facing Mt. Baker, and they head in that direction. As they cross the lawn, the sorceress steals a glance back at a second-story window, from which the hooked-nose woman eyes them, not bothering to hide her scowl.

“Do you know why I’m here, Agatha?”

“I—think so.” As timid and gangly as the girl looks, she carries a strong voice.

Livy studies the kid. No, she does not know. Not all of it. “I’m with the Bellingham Coven,” she says. “Do you know of the coven?”

Agatha nods. “Everyone knows about the coven. But not everyone believes it’s real.”
Livy stops at a thick, knotted tree drooping over a small pond. “What do you know of it?”

“Only people with magic go there.”

“That’s right, Agatha. Have you ever thought of going into magic?”

“Um…don’t you have to be magic first?”

Livy purses her lips, having heard the excuse from so many normals she does not care to entertain it.

Agatha studies the tall, slender visitor. “Are you a witch?”

“Sorceress, actually, as according to today’s definition of the title.” Livy stands slightly taller than before and takes a seat on the stone bench. “Agatha, I’m here to ask if you’d like to further your studies at the Bellingham Coven.”

Agatha takes a moment to process. She gives Livy a smile full of crooked teeth. “Did my…father go there?”

For the first time today, Livy’s heart sinks a little. “No.”

“But, how—”

“You are a seer, Agatha.”

Recognition hits her face and the girl lights up for the first time today. “I am,” she agrees, no doubt thinking of all those creatures on the other side of red. Livy knows the girl has never admitted this to anyone. “But, how do you know? Is it because you’re a sorceress?”

“Partly, yes. I have a…knack for knowing these kinds of things.”

Agatha’s eyes widen with excitement. “Are there others…like me?”

Livy pinches her brows and waits for the right words to come. “Seeing is rare, even among the magical. But there will be one other at the coven this year who can see just like you. As for magic, you will pick it up quickly, I have no doubt.”

Agatha narrows her eyes in contemplation. “Um…I’m not magic,” she repeats her earlier protest. “Is seeing…magic?” Her voice is hopeful.

“No. Seeing is a supernatural capability,” answers Livy. “One you came
into this realm with. I am convinced anyone can learn it, however, if only one employs the tenacity…” she trails off, thinking… The reminder removes her from peace and she’s ready to wrap up this conversation.

It seems Agatha has the same idea. She looks back at the house. “When can we go?”

Livy retrieves a small black book from somewhere within the folds of her dress. “This is a little black book.”

“I see that.” Agatha gives her a look that says, and you want to teach me?

Livy ignores the girl’s sarcasm, pleased she’s gotten this far without it. She was expecting it sooner. “Those who get accepted to the school are required to submit a spell of their own creation or discovery. However, as you have not grown up learning magic, I have another test for you.”

She waits patiently as the eighteen-year-old flips through the blank pages of the little black book, then narrows her eyes up at Livy. “There’s nothing here.”

Livy smiles. “You’ve discovered your test. You’ll need magic to unlock your instructions. Your first spell. Here.” From within the same gown, the sorceress produces a wand.

Agatha’s brow arches at the stubby, knotty stick, that looks as though it’s been charcoaled.

“Uh…”

“It’s a wand. Take it.”

The seer obeys, staring at it with a new wonder.

“Think of it as training wheels. It’ll help you utilize the elements until your belief catches up with your knowledge. You don’t need to know how it works. Simply point and say reveal.”

Agatha does so, but when nothing happens, she does not hide her frustration and muscles through several more attempts.

“Allow me to help you,” says Livy, interrupting the seer’s seventh attempt. “There are two things that matter most in magic: your focus, and your belief. When those two are in line, magic becomes…natural. When you
can first manage your focus, you’re ready to begin. Keep it on the contents of the book while letting go of the need for it at the same time. Need will keep magic from you.”

“But I don’t know what the contents are.”

Livy’s eyes alight with approval. “When you don’t know what it is, you must ask your mind a guiding question. You are a clever one, dear. I believe you will figure it out quickly. And I will see you at the coven. We start tomorrow.” With that, Livy gives Agatha a smile and walks back the way she came, ignoring the calls after her.

“But—you haven’t shown me! How am I supposed to—I don’t believe this!”

The sorceress crosses the wide lawn, her white dress billowing in her wake and a smile twisting the corners of her thin lips.
If Charlie weren’t here, Emily would never have come. She’d be in the suspended castle on the other side of red, searching for Lucian.

Though Charlie’s been preoccupied with his own failed search, his countenance rarely shows it. As he’s done all spring and summer, he dons the front of strength for the benefit of those around him. Which is probably why there’s a strong lavender spirit hovering over his head. A spirit only Emily can see, for it resides on the other side of red.

They look like a rather odd pair out here in the middle of the wood, if any ole normal were to wander across their path. With Charlie dressed like the accomplished wizard he is, in his fifty shades of purple from his top hat to his scrying staff, all to complement his violet eyes and the thin black line of goatee outlining his lips. Behind him, Emily’s wooden trunk drifts, courtesy of his hover charm. On top of the trunk, his carpet bag sits securely.

Next to the wizard, Emily looks quite like a normal in her cut-off shorts and plain blue V-neck shirt. Even her skimpy strands of dirty blonde hang normally across her back, framing in her round freckled face and round blue eyes. She doesn’t have a spirit with her. She’s never had one. That was what she had Lucian for.

Together, she and Charlie face the reason they’re here: a towering Douglas Fir. To the normal eye, it’s just as ordinary as any other tree in the pacific northwest. Although it is wider than most in the area. There’s something odd about it, too. Emily suspects Charlie knows exactly what might be off. He’s been here before. All she can see is the faint outline spiraling up the tree. It gives her the chills.

“Where’s Nan and Harper?” she asks, scanning the narrow clearing behind her. Over the hill she and Charlie just climbed and through the thicket,
Lake Whatcom glistens in the distance. A jet-skier buzzes across its center—on this side. On the other side of red, the lake mirrors the surrounding green foliage, as motionless as a sheet of glass. There are no buildings over there, or any signs of the living. And the sun seems to shine…less.

“You know your Nan. Probably plucking and pruning every shrub and herb within sight,” says Charlie as cheerfully as he can. Since the incident last winter, his joviality has been more forced than Emily’s ever seen it. “I do wish they’d hurry. I don’t like the look of these woods. Thank the gods the coven is underground.”

“It was the goddess Ninmah who set it up, wasn’t it?” says Emily, wondering why a goddess so in love with humanity would place the coven right smack in the middle of a forest as dangerous as the Bellingham woods are known to be.

“It was. Dangerous terrain can be a great barrier for enemies,” adds Charlie, answering Emily’s unspoken question. It makes sense. It’s the same reason Lucian had his palace built above the center of Lake Whatcom in the heart of the forest—on the other side of red.

The forest preoccupies Charlie’s attention.

There’s an eeriness here Emily wasn’t expecting to run into. Her eyes journey to the heights of the moss-covered trees, most of them spear-like in shape, long and narrow to a feathery point. It makes her dizzy, and she takes in the fresh, mountainous air, a welcome change from the sticky humid stench of her Kansas home.

On this side, tiny wildflowers sprinkle the ground like dots of confetti. On the other side of red, the usual forest-protectors, pixies and fairies and nymphs, sparkle and dance. If it weren’t for the ominous obscurity and glistening webs swaying between branches and draped from the evergreen ceiling, her hackles might not be raised at the feeling of being watched. Or maybe they would.

Maybe someone is watching…

She looks around for the familiar sign of a shadow, one that used to perch on the gable outside her bedroom window teaching her all things useful. Any sign will do—a flash of the glowing scorpion branded on the back of his
hand. The billowing of his enchanted black cloak. A glint from his blue eyes both bright and innocent, their endlessness taking her back to the beginning of history whenever she finds herself caught in their gaze. Or his hiss, low and affecting, on her cheek. But there’s nothing. Lucian has not returned since the night he died.

“Promise me something while you’re here, Em.” Charlie fixes his calculations on the oversized fir. It could be wide enough to fit the four of them comfortably.

Reluctantly, Emily halts her furtive search and brings herself to present. “What’s that?”

“Promise me you won’t go looking for him. Leave that to me. I am trained in tracking such—erm, things.”

Emily sighs. It’s not Lucian he’s referring to. He would have no trouble calling Lucian what he is: a vampire. Somehow, it doesn’t seem to occur to him that she’d want to find her mentor. Unless Charlie’s simply avoiding what should be obvious. There is something he’s avoiding—something he’s been avoiding for some time. This isn’t it, though.

It’s Gabriel he means, her childhood friend-turned-vampire—at the hands of Lucian. The incident Charlie can’t speak about directly. Emily, however, can’t bring herself to blame her mentor, as it happened only after Gabriel killed him—or tried to. Lucian’s still alive. Emily knows it in her gut. She can feel his presence.

“And I don’t want you—you know—crossing over to that side, either. Promise me.” The rattle in his voice betrays his desperation. For Emily has come of age. She can make her own decisions. “Especially since…you know who…probably knows where you’ve been all this time. Let’s not alert him…to where you are now, eh?”

By you know who, he means the Devil. She shudders.

“Don’t worry, Charlie, I have no plans to cross the red.” It’s true. With Charlie watching her like a hawk all year, she hasn’t had a chance to make those kinds of plans. Of course, she doesn’t point out all the freedom she’ll have to plan her crossing once Charlie returns to Kansas.
“And I wasn’t going to look for Gabriel,” she adds. “He’s made it perfectly clear that he wants nothing to do with me.”

Charlie flicks a glance at her, his violet eyes probing for the hurt that came across her words.

“I’m sure it’s nothing to do with you, Em. After what he’s been through, turning into a… Well, vampires are not what we always thought they were. Keep that in mind before making your judgments.”

“I know.” Though she wishes Charlie would apply the same logic to another vampire.

“Promise me one more thing, then,” he says. “Promise you’ll tell me—should you see Gabe, or hear of him. I suspect he’s still around here.” Charlie scans the scenery as if he expects to prove his point any minute.

This, she has no problem with because there’s no doubt in her mind that she’s the last person Gabriel will visit. “I promise.”

“Em, Dad!” Harper’s voice travels over the hill, labored and heavy. She’s the first to come into view, her tiny translucent spirit hanging faithfully at her ear. “What’d you run off like that for?”

Like Emily, Harper looks the part of a normal: a slender, freckled, round-faced girl with a head full of strings. But Harper’s freckles are darker, marching orderly across her little nose. No indication of witchery in her countenance at all whatsoever.

“I had to scope out the place,” says Charlie. “Heard of too many sightings of a sasquatch hanging around the area. They can kill a mountain lion one-handed. And this one” — He pats Emily’s head like she’s a kid again— “is too curious for her own good.”

“You guys were dragging your feet, anyway,” teases Emily.

“Not my fault.” Harper hunches over, clutching her side as she works out the regulation of her breathing. “Alice had to go and harvest every living plant in existence. I couldn’t leave her alone. This place… It’s like it has eyes or something…” She trails off just as hers lands on the strange spiral outline on the tree that Emily discovered moments ago.

“Such are the duties of a good potions witch,” Alice defends herself as
she crests the hill. She does not sound happy about the climb. Although, she might have a better time with the hike if she weren’t wearing those impractical pointed shoes. At least her spirit is a nice bright and energetic blue today.

Nan’s a witch, and, like Charlie in his wizarding fashion, she loves to dress the part: striped stockings, striped dress, a collection of herbs bulging her pockets, and, today, a pointed hat to keep the sun off her fair skin. Her yellow hair bobs around her face and tucks behind her ears. She stops at the top of the hill, panting.

“They couldn’t make the entrance any more difficult to get to,” she complains.

“Naturally,” says Charlie. “If they did, any ole normal could stumble upon it and put themselves in immediate danger. Or worse.”

Instinctively, the four of them turn their heads toward the forest behind the fir. A shiver ripples between them. They all know what worse might be.

“Alright then,” says Nan, clasping her hands together in punctuation.

Taking the cue, Charlie points his staff at the deep red stalk they’ve all come here for, and he begins a string of mutterings too low and constant for anyone to make out with any clarity. A violet beam emanates from his staff. Emily instantly knows why she feels like she’s being watched, and she and Harper both discover what’s so strange about this tree and its spiral outline.

From within the rich bark, the outline starts to define, darkening into a distinct and very real shape, slinking and serpentine. Most of the spiral, which now breathes heavy and low, plops to a coil around the base, while the upper part emerges from the bark into what could be mistaken for a life-size and quite agitated king cobra.

Nope. There’s no mistaking it. The shape before them is a king cobra, as real as magic itself.

Thick and slippery and quite a bit longer than two Charlies stacked on top of each other, this snake does not look pleased to see them.

“Who dares utter the spell of the Goddess Ninmah?” the serpent hisses, its hood spreading, readying his attack.
Harper and Emily stagger back and right into Alice, who firmly wraps her arms around them. Even Charlie, who cast the spell, no doubt knowing full well a king cobra would appear, holds a protective arm in front of the girls, as if he means to stop a cobra from striking. There’s a quiver in his answer.

“It is I, Charlie Abernathy. And my family. Come to escort a new coven member to the cavern below.”

“Good,” sneers the cobra in a serpent-like hiss. “I don’t have to eat you. Too warm and soft for my taste. But, try anything—anything at all—and I’ll have a reason to use my poison.”

The serpent slithers up one side of the trunk and arches down the other, making himself into an archway. Within his frame, the tree trunk becomes hollow and black, like a tunnel or cave opening.

“You are welcome, good sir,” says Charlie, ushering the girls toward the opening. “Just a door,” he explains, his voice still a little rattled. Then, as if to console himself, he mumbles on: “Cobras don’t eat people, you know… unless it’s necessary, for protection…good protection, he is, good protection…no one could get through a king cobra…”

Yeah, on this side of red, thinks Emily. But what about the other?

The "door" is so short, the mages are each forced to duck to get through. And so they do, the trunk and carpet bag following close behind.

Harper’s nervous questions ramble on and go largely ignored the entire six hundred feet down the floorless elevator: “We have to go back through that on the way out? Aren’t king cobras from India? Someone brought it here willingly, wouldn’t they have? Wasn’t that Ninmah’s home, India…? Why would she want that here, in a place for healing?” And so on…

Nobody’s listening.

Inside, is not inside at all. If they didn’t know they were going to be six hundred feet beneath solid ground, they might think they were still outside.

Above is as blue as a Midwestern summer sky. Behind them, the doorway sinks into the knotted and clotted root structure of the evergreen, blending into it until it’s no longer evident that a door was there in the first place.

They’re in a sharp valley. Precipitous mountainsides creep up from
behind a circular courtyard wall, within which the group now stands. Embedded in the mountains are impressive bastions and steepled strongholds.

“They call this the square, I think,” says Charlie. The wall is made of a steely gray brick that could have been plucked from the middle ages.

“Square?” asks Harper with an air of disapproval. “More of a circle, isn’t it?”

An occasional entrance pops up here and there along the wall, which Emily guesses leads to those buildings and outcroppings. And one stone-arched entrance of pitch black that seems to lead into a mountain. It reminds her of the gateway to hell her mentor took her through on her eighteenth birthday, almost one year ago.

“This way,” says Charlie, and he takes them toward a small stone citadel clad in wildflowers and vines. It’s the smallest of all the castles in this place. Like all the other buildings, this one is carved into the mountainside, its blocks made of weathered rhyolite, and faded by the sun.

A balcony centers the face of the building. The entire thing has the look of a palace that never sees the shade, with wide, right-angled overpasses and broad open windows. It seems the sun shines brightest over here, as if to highlight it against the murkier parts of the enchanted coven.

“Headmistress’s offices,” he explains. “It houses the administrative agencies and I believe the chambers of every council member here.”

They enter below the actual building through a stone opening and follow a wide staircase around to an exterior entrance on the balcony they saw from below.

For such a picturesque exterior, the inside, though equally expansive, isn’t quite as extravagant.

Banners hang large and strong and seem to float midair, each displaying a variation of the same coven sigil—an lavender and gold-trimmed circle, inside which a serpent snakes up a spiral ladder. Letters spell out “Ninmah” across the top. It reminds Emily of the medical symbol she’s seen marking normal facilities. But these banners provide more detail and only one serpent, spouting its tongue in a permanent strike.
Other than the coven’s sigil hanging above, there’s nothing in the way of décor. It’s as institutionalized as a normal government building, bustling with start-of-term busy-ness.

A long slab of rough granite serves as a countertop along the east wall, behind which coven members scurry around in service of the lines of incoming witches, most clad in normal wear, some already in robes. Council members in silver robes and white hair greet newcomers at the doors leading some to the lines while assigning a guide to others and ushering them right back out the doors.

The headmistress seems to find herself momentarily idle when Emily and her family walk in. She strolls over to them carrying a regal, yet welcoming smile. Instead of white hair, like most of her counterparts, the headmistress wears hers blonde and flowing. A ghostly spirit follows her, as carefree as a hippie dancing barefoot in a field of grass.

“I’m Headmistress Livy Inishtar. Mistress Livy is what they call me. Or simply Headmistress.” She rolls her eyes on a broad smile, as if to dismiss the silliness of formalities.

Nan does her best to keep Charlie from firing too many questions at Livy, between which the headmistress manages to issue an order to have Emily’s trunk taken to her chambers. Charlie’s carpet bag tags along for the ride. Then the woman reaches for the nearest member, peering into the girl’s face a moment as if deciding something before introducing her as their guide.

“Lilith Jones,” she says.

Lilith does not look like anyone Emily would like to follow around, and it’s got nothing to do with the witch’s sleek, almost greasy dark hair and dark, sunken eyes, or skin so pale it could be translucent. What gives Emily cause for concern is the heaviness around the girl and two shadows lurking about her ankles on the other side of red. She takes a step back, away from the shadows’ reach.

Mistress Livy’s spirit seems to be fighting them off with some measure of success.

“Stick closely to the map,” trills the headmistress. “The tunnels can get confusing.” She saunters off, and on to the next incoming.
Lilith’s shadows return the moment Mistress Livy spirits away. She does not smile or nod or in any way acknowledge the people who are to rely on her for guidance. To Emily, the girl looks rather inconvenienced by the prospect of chauffeuring a new member around the grounds.

“Name?” the guide demands without looking at Emily.

Exchanging a *who-does-this-girl-think-she-is* glance with Harper, Emily obliges.

“Hunts?” repeats Lilith, flicking a glance of recognition at Emily. But she seems to get over whatever her suspicion was, because, without waiting for a reply, the witch points a wand at a wooden box on the countertop. Up pops a roll of parchment. She takes it and disappears through the door. A moment later, she peeks her head through and asks the group, “Are you coming?”

Charlie, Nan, Emily, and Harper exchange uneasy glances before following their questionable leader out onto the coven grounds.

As was feared, Lilith isn’t much of a guide. She doesn’t point anything out or explain any of the statues and monuments. Like the one in the center of the courtyard of a beautiful woman in a maiden’s dress.

The closer Emily looks, the more she realizes she knows this marbled face. But the woman she knows is no woman.

She’d know that head of waves, perfect bone structure, and deep-set eyes anywhere. In life, her head is a vibrant crimson and her eyes a clear hazel framed in thick lashes that command attention. The model’s face belongs to Gretchen, the mermaid Emily met last year.

The effigy’s likeness is so accurate, Emily would bet all her magic that whoever sculpted the marble had been to the other side of red. For that is where she met the mermaid.

Below the woman’s feet, a quote sprawls across a golden plaque.

*For the goddess who sins against love, is no goddess of love...*

Emily has to read it three times to be sure she read that right. And, to her knowledge, the mermaid is no goddess.

Charlie fruitlessly probes for information, his baritone breaking up Emily’s memory like static in a radio broadcast. His violet eyes explore with
wonder and curiosity and then dull when they land once more on their morose leader. Lilith’s answers remain curt and uninformative. She marches across the flagstone courtyard straight to the dark, stone-arched entrance that Emily noticed earlier.

It’s so dark, Emily’s not interested in exploring it any further than this spot right here. Above the archway, archaic markings embedded in the stone grab the group’s attention.

“Hmmm, what language is that, I wonder?” Charlie isn’t asking. It seems he’s given up on that. He’s simply wondering out loud in the way he usually does.

Lilith rolls her eyes and flicks her wand at the words above. Instantly, they rearrange themselves into modern English. Harper reads it out loud, her voice inflecting her skepticism.

“As above, so below?” She scoffs. “S’not a witch in the world who doesn’t know that one.”

Emily gets the feeling Harper’s waiting for an explanation. Like her father has been, Harper, too, is disappointed.

“Good. They’re reaffirming the basics, at least,” says Alice. “Can’t advance without a good handle on the elementaries.”

Charlie strokes the dark line around his lips, his eyes betraying his internal calculation. “I never thought witchcraft had a handle on what that truly means…as above, so below. It’s thrown around in spellbooks so carelessly. Too many miss-spells come of its misinterpretation.”

Lilith rolls her eyes once again and unrolls the piece of parchment she’d taken from the desk and hands it to Emily, who drops her eyes to it at once.

It’s three-dimensional, appearing as though Emily can reach inside and scoop up all the little lines and images and symbols. Some of them are moving as Lilith speaks.

“This is a map of the underground,” Lilith explains dryly.

“Underground? Aren’t we already underground?” says Harper in a condescending tone. But her confidence falls flat at Lilith’s expression, her little aloe-vera spirit ineffectively fighting Lilith’s bullying shadows.
“The map points you in the true direction—if you tell it where you want to go. The map will be your only direction in and out until you can navigate the tunnels on your own.” Lilith shoots a nasty glare at Emily. “Don’t count on it. Upper-level wizards still can’t find their way without it. And council members, too. Don’t lose the map. It’s the only one you’ll get.”

“Why?” blurts Nan, evidently concerned for Emily. As she continues, probably at Lilith’s increasing irritation, her accusatory intonation trails into question. “…er, why is this the only map she’ll get?”

Lilith sighs, and her next string of words comes out like a recitation she’s repeated countless times. “There was a time when the coven would lose too many members to the tunnels. When the headmistress was elected, she created a solution.” Lilith points to the map in Emily’s hands. “The tunnels’ navigation depends on the individual. The maps are spelled individually, specifically for its owner. Only the headmistress can do the spell. She doesn’t have the time to duplicate her efforts every time some spoiled first-year carelessly misplaces it.”

“Ah,” says Charlie, understanding the time constraint.

“Stick to the map,” says Lilith once again.


Lilith narrows her eyes into slits. “The tunnels move. Without the map, you will lose your way. If you want to survive, stick to the map.”

“The tunnels, is that the only way to our rooms?” asks Emily, a growing sense of dread clenching her stomach.

Lilith drops her eyelids to half-mast as if the question is beneath her. “Naturally.” She points at five figures huddled together on the map, tiny replicas of them in uncanny likenesses and mirroring their every movement. According to the map, they’re standing at the entrance to what looks like a vast and complex system of pathways.

Emily peers past the threshold. All she can see from here is pitch black.

“Your rooms are on the mid-level.” Lilith points to a series of dormitories surrounding a common room some distance in and on a lower tunnel. When she does so, the three-dimensional image shifts. It’s as though they’re
viewing through a camera lens that moves through the floor on the map to the level below.

“The arrow will take you right to your rooms.” And she starts to stalk off, but turns around. “Oh, for normals” —her glare grazes over her audience, as if to pinpoint who here might be a normal, someone who does not own a shred of magic and therefore doesn’t belong here— “when you’re ready to come back through the tunnels, use the bells to summon a guide.”

To no one’s surprise, the girl does not explain what she means. No one bothers to ask, since no one here is a normal.

“Stick to the arrow,” she warns one final time. “You don’t want to get lost before you got started.” And for the first time, a smile flirts with her lips. It’s not a real smile, or a real flirt. But one that says she’d love to see Emily get lost in the tunnels.

Then she walks between them, parting their small assembly like old dusty window drapes that haven’t been cleaned in a century, and beelines it back to the headmistress’s chambers, her head down the entire way.

“Interesting character…” Charlie frowns, casting a wishful glance at the group a few yards away where a girl in shorts too short to cover her cheeks, eyes the shape of almond slivers, and shiny black hair as bouncy as her bubbly personality animates her spiel to another family, answering questions with eagerness and verve. Spirits he can’t see, as cheery and colorful as their leader, bounce around that group.

Charlie’s frown invites a wisp of shadow into his own group.

“Coven life isn’t what it used to be,” says Alice. “Just what darkness can be allowed to lurk on campus nowadays? Did she say the coven has lost people to the tunnels?”

“That’s just it,” replies Charlie. “Covens haven’t ever been safe. Before, covering it up was easier. Now they have maps, at least. And awareness, don’t forget that.”

“I don’t remember this kind of danger.” Alice splays a pudgy hand across her full chest.

Charlie wraps a comforting arm around her. “Yes, well, my dear. Like I
said, it was covered up. Besides, your coven was quite different, wasn’t it?”

“I suppose.” Nan’s coven, though renowned, taught the magic of the goddess Inanna, who only played a small part in healing. Her gifts were warfare and love. Although Emily has suspected for some time that Nan wishes she’d learned the healing arts from the original source.

“May I?” Charlie asks Emily, gesturing at the map.

“Sure.”

His face brightens like he’s just been given a cookie before dinner, like this’ll make up for the rather disappointing tour. On the other side, his shadow vanishes and a bright, violet spirit bursts into view above his head. He takes the map and scrutinizes the entire thing, flipping it over, hovering a hand over it. He even does something to it with his staff, issuing a violet light from the tip.

“Hmmm…” he finally mutters, furrowing his brows. “This is old magic… very old. If I could figure it out, I might be able to duplicate it… Or even configure a more direct route than this labyrinth of a mess. Wish Ez was here… She’d be able to—” But when he sees the horror on Alice’s face, he stops and wraps an arm around her. He’s been so careful not to mention Esmeralda, they all have been.

Shortly after her son, Gabriel, had been turned into a vampire and gone missing, Esmeralda announced that she was taking a trip and no one has seen her since.

Every day since, Charlie has buried himself in Kyteler’s Hollow with Jeb. Nan has found herself busier than ever, though her client roster has not increased. And all the while, Harper and Emily became tighter than peas as they prepared for a spell that would identify who Emily’s real father was.

Charlie lifts Nan’s chin and gives her an infectious smile, to which Nan can’t help but reciprocate. He drops his head and flails a hand in a grand gesture toward the entrance. “Your rooms await! This way!”

Harper hangs her head, darting a glance around as though hoping no one sees her father’s ridiculous antics. Emily chuckles to herself. She wouldn’t have Charlie any other way. Especially as they enter the tunnels. She has the strange feeling that they’re going to need all the positivity they can get in
there.
Chapter 3

The Captain

It’s so dark in the tunnels, Emily can’t tell if her eyes are even open. Not that it would matter, because Emily can see with them closed. A side effect from dying last winter. Unfortunately, the gift does not help her see in the dark.

When she turns around, she finds no trace of the entrance they just walked through. It must have closed. Though she’s surrounded by her family, she feels very much alone. They’re all alone—Nan, Charlie, Harper—each of them swallowed whole by the darkness.

She can’t even see the other side of red. Or any spirits.

The silence carries with it an eeriness that keeps the hackles on Emily’s neck at attention.
Once more, the feeling of being watched creeps in. As though there’s someone right here, inches from her nose, who can see her clear as day. She doesn’t move, afraid she might run right into whatever watches her.

The sound of feet shuffling finally breaks into her runaway imagination, bringing with it a small taste of relief. It means her family’s still here, each of them groping around for their way in the false night.

“All right, all right. Nobody move.” Charlie’s voice comes from her left, a few paces away. And she can tell he’s going through his own struggles.

“My cell’s not working.” Harper’s voice comes from her right.

Emily doesn’t bother checking her cell. She was told it would be useless in the coven.

It’s in her trunk anyway.

“Tried three spells from my staff,” Charlie admits. “Wait a minute—seems there was something the tracker said—oh, I’ve got it.”
“Who?” asks Harper. “We haven’t met any trackers.”

“Last time I was here.” Charlie’s voice is flustered. It’s not usual for him to stray from his lighthearted calm. In an instant, the tip of his staff sparks a bright probe of violet, then dies. A moment later, light comes—not from any obvious fixtures, but it would seem it’s coming through the walls. A glow as yellow and bright as a warning light.

Though she’s not sure what she was expecting to see, it certainly isn’t what she finds staring back at her.

These are not naturally formed tunnels, as Emily might have imagined. The walls seem to be polished like stone countertops. Curious, Emily runs her fingers along a wall. The feeling is not the cold hard stone she expects, but more of a malleable plastic texture. Yet it’s sturdy and strong as steel. The ceiling mirrors the walls. But none of this is the sight that gives Emily and her family pause.

The silence seems to have increased its volume with the light. It’s so loud, it’s almost visible. Until Nan’s voice slices through it, her attention is caught by the same things that have everyone else’s.

“Oh, my. I…don’t know what to say. This is nothing like the coven I went to…”

“Interesting,” adds Charlie. “They’re so…”

“Real,” finishes Harper, referring to the lines of animals and creatures edging the walls. “Animals—real animals.”

It gives Emily the sense of walking through a saber arch and reminds her of the halls of Lucian’s castle. Though those statues weren’t animals, she felt their eyes nonetheless.

“Are they…” Harper trails off, inching close to a brown bear standing on its hind legs.

“Don’t get too close—” says Alice.

“Taxidermized…animals?” Harper’s voice betrays her doubt, and she takes a step back. “They’re—”

“I don’t think so…” says Alice, studying a cougar. Reaching out a hesitant, pudgy hand, she tests Harper’s theory. “It doesn’t feel…stiff, or
stuffed…. It feels…”

“Real,” says Harper, repeating her earlier assertion. “Like it’s alive. Like it’s breathing…”

She tests out her own theory, smoothing her palm toward a bear’s heart. Emily’s almost certain the bear’s head moves. Her heart skips. Charlie grabs Harper’s arm. And Emily moves her attention across the hall, right into the biggest serpent she’s ever seen.

“That’s not a snake…is it, if it has…wings?” says Alice, coming up behind Emily. “I don’t think it’s an…animal.”

“That one’s not an animal, either,” says Emily, pointing at a large beastly looking thing, as tall and wide as a mammoth. Although it’s shaped more like a…Chewbacca’s the only thing that comes to mind, though with a considerably less friendly face. The fur on this one is matted, too, rather than the groomed hair of the Star Wars character.

“It’s an animal, all right,” says Charlie. “Even if lesser well-known. The sasquatch has been pursued by a number of trackers.”

Which would make it a magical creature, not an animal, Emily thinks to herself.

There doesn’t seem to be any order to the animals, nor do they seem to have partners or offspring. They stand still as effigies, although it very much feels like their eyes follow the group down the corridor. Once again, Emily’s reminded of the statues and suits of armor in the halls of Lucian’s castle.

“Surely, live predators wouldn’t be allowed on campus,” concludes Nan, reminding them all that they are indeed at a coven, safe and sound from outside influences. “Covens are known for their security. Now, let’s find your room.”

They follow the arrow on the map down two more identical corridors, each with a different set of animals and creatures, and down a flight of stairs opening to a low-ceiling antechamber surrounded by wooden doors. It’s a different kind of chamber, more natural, with small stalactites pointing down from above and a few stalagmites surrounding a spiderwebbed path made of smoothed sandstone. Natural tables and cushioned seating areas pepper the room. A small waterfall pours into a tiny pool in the corner. And a firepit sits
in the opposite corner.

“It was too easy,” says Harper. “I mean, after all that nonsense about sticking to the map and oh, they’ve lost so many people to the tunnels…” Harper flails her arms in mock terror. “I expected more of a challenge. And what are those animals for? To creep people out?”

“It’s working,” admits Emily. She’s not looking forward to facing those halls alone. For this reason, she’s looking forward to meeting her roommate.

“They could’ve made it a little less terrifying,” says Alice. “Especially on the first day. It’s hard enough to get up the nerve to show up in the first place.” An argument they’re all inclined to agree with.

They find Emily’s door, and the four of them spill into the room.


“Like what?” asks Charlie, a brow arched.

Harper shrugs. “Spells…study…practice.”

“Probably in safe and controlled environments,” answers Nan, hopefully. “There’re study halls and spell rooms everywhere.”

“True.” Charlie hands the enchanted map to Harper, who scours it eagerly. “They’re all over the place.”

Nan scans the room with an air of contempt.

Each side of the room mirrors the other with a small cabinet, a tiny closet, and a single bunk. Even the blankets are the identical wool-gray.

“Good thing you brought your own bed dressings,” says Nan, plucking up the sorry state of the beds. “Looks like you get first pick. Which bunk will it be?” But it seems Nan has already chosen. She opens a closet and, by the command of her wand, dust flies off the shelves.

There’s a single window between the beds, outside of which displays a stormy sky over turbulent ocean waters. Emily peers down over the sill to find stacked boulders balancing precariously on jagged cliffs. If she didn’t know they’d just descended six hundred feet into the earth, she’d think her room was sitting at the edge of a precipice—outside, on the surface of the
planet.

Charlie sidles up to Emily. “A mighty advanced spell, this is! My academy had nothing like this. I bet it’s a blanket spell over the whole place. Keeping it hidden. Safe. Let’s see, there’s perception, naturally, and influence, of course, or we wouldn’t be seeing any of it, and—”

“I think there’s a little of those in just about everything,” interrupts Emily, earning another pat on the head from Charlie.

“Suppose you’re right.” Charlie sighs, looking for something to do.

When she returns her glance out the window, a strange sight meets her eyes.

Level with the glass, an ethereal, angel-like form seems to be staring at them. It’s not a spirit, though, not like the ones she’s seen all her life on the other side of red. That much she can tell by the way it seems to be studying them. Its hue glows the color of Luke Skywalker’s lightsaber. Nothing definitive can be made out, other than its human-lish form and wings as wide and as long as a dragon’s.

Alice appears at her side. “Oh my. Is that an…angel?”

Emily’s jaw drops. “You can see that?” Which means it’s on the living side. Strange that she couldn’t tell. “No,” she answers Nan’s question. Angels are hard to see, her mentor used to point out with the regularity of a parent nagging about the benefits of eating your vegetables. It must be of the light, at least. If it weren’t, everyone in here would feel the fear of it.

“Not one of your spirit things, is it?” questions Charlie.

“Can’t be if it’s on this side of the veil.” Emily’s the only one she knows of who can see the other side of red.

“Someone must be protecting you, Em.” Nan squeezes Emily’s arm.

“What makes you think it’s here for me?” asks Emily. But a horrible thought stakes her in the chest. No, she decides, despite the anchor in her stomach. If Lucian were really dead, he wouldn’t come back in some strange spirit form. Would he?

*There is no death*, her mentor’s voice rings in her mind.
Harper shakes her head. “No, it must be part of the blanket spell.”
Everyone in the room deflates.
It is the most likely explanation.
The four of them lose interest in the window and return to the diminutive room.

“Guess I’ll take this bed,” says Emily, bringing the conversation back to Nan’s and away from her disappointment. She points at the bed next to the wardrobe Alice has already claimed with Emily’s V-necks.

“At the academy I went to,” says Charlie nostalgically, “we had about twenty boys to a room. The room had to be ship-shape. And us, up and dressed and beds made at the vampire’s curfew. If one of us were late or out of order, we all paid the price.”

Harper rolls her eyes. “Thank the gods times have changed.”

“It’s still that way in most tracker academies. Like the one Gabe—” He stops suddenly, catching himself yet again. The four of them avoid each other’s glances. A pang tightens Emily’s heart. And three shadows infiltrate the room, chasing off the spirits.

Nan spends a half hour unpacking after dismissing Charlie’s offer of wizardry, saying, “What use am I if I can’t do it myself?” and then enlisting the girls’ help instead.

Half an hour later, they’re ready to head to the family dinner.

“You two go on ahead,” says Nan to Charlie and Harper. “We’ll meet you in the courtyard.”

Once the door closes, Nan reaches for Charlie’s carpet bag—the one from which he once pulled a giant cake in the shape of a medieval castle for Gabriel’s welcome home dinner party.

Alice sinks her entire chubby arm into the bag and fishes around, pulling out an old book too wide to fit in there, and thick enough to contain the life’s work of a legendary sorceress. It’s bound in leather and on the cover, a sigil is engraved: an eight-pointed star framed in a thin circle and feathered by a knot of twisted reeds.
“Our family grimoire,” says Alice. “It first belonged to the first sorceress in the family. You know who that was. Never thought I’d be able to pass it to you because of the curse. No one outside the bloodline can know of its contents. But now that we know of your blood…Now that we know your mother was my great ancestor, the sorceress Elizabeth the First…”

It’s still hard for Emily to believe that she’d survived as an infant on the other side of red all these hundreds of years. Aging does not exist on that side, her mentor told her.

“In here…” Alice gives her a look that Emily does not recognize. “It’s all your mother’s work. Maybe you’ll have better luck unlocking its mysteries. And, now that you’re here, on your own, all grown up…” Alice dabs her moistening eyes with a readymade handkerchief produced from one of the many known and unknown pockets of her dress, one that is not overflowing with sprigs and leaves and flowers. “I thought it time you have it.”

Emily accepts the heavy book, her eyes wide with awe. Strange, she contemplates, not for the first time in the last six months, all that time she spent looking for answers about her mother, they were in her own house.

“Thank you, Nan…” She accepts Alice’s signature bear hug.

“Now, don’t you mind that—” Nan catches herself. “Erm…don’t mind your…mentor. I don’t care what he said. Your mother was legendary. Honestly, if he truly cared for you as he claimed, why wouldn’t he want you to learn your own mother’s magic?”

Emily doesn’t have an answer for that. Perhaps it has something to do with him killing her mother.

“You can’t be under his influence all your life,” says Nan. “We still don’t know what he wanted with you.”

“He saved my life, Nan.” And he’s still here, she doesn’t say. There’s no need to say it. The fact was confirmed when she found the amulet on her window seat shortly after he disappeared. He was the last one to be seen with it.

“To what end? That’s what I want to know,” questions Nan, as she and Charlie have questioned so many times since Emily returned from that awful night.
“There’s a spell in there that I tried once…” says Alice cautiously. “I had attempted it the day you arrived, actually. Failed miserably.” She forces out a chortle.

Emily peels her eyes from the ancient tome to study her nan.

“I know you’re curious about your father. Don’t think I don’t know what you and Harper are planning. But, if your…mother…” The word seems to have been clutching Nan’s throat, “…if she made this spell, then it’s reasonable to assume…”

“Assume what? What spell?”

“Well, there’s a spell in there…erm, I always wanted a baby, see… You could say, you were my miracle.” Alice attempts a smile, though it comes across shaky and half-hearted.

“Do you mean you think I was…artificially—”

“Em,” she says pointedly. “You know as well as I: there’s nothing artificial about magic. It’s all natural.”

“But that would mean I don’t have a father at all.”

“It would mean your father wasn’t…involved. That’s all. But there would have been someone, I’m sure. Now, let’s get on with dinner before Charlie sends out a search party.”

Emily tucks the grimoire at the bottom of her trunk, safely beneath the red cloak Lucian gave her, his book, and the knot-shaped amulet that Gabriel had spelled for her protection.

“Oh, there you are, dear,” Charlie says to Alice when she and Emily emerge from the tunnels. “Dinner’s started already.”

It seems the blanket spell is going by the time of day, as the sun’s light has diminished and the first twinkling of stars have come into view. The four of them follow the herd across the square to an opening, where they cross a narrow creek that perimeters outside the courtyard wall to the dining hall.

It’s not a bridge they cross, but a drawbridge, laid out from the mouth of the dining hall. Which doesn’t look like a dining hall, or any kind of hall. On the face of it, the building resembles a steepled, gothic castle. Pointed
parapets and polished stone rise to the tallest peak of the cavern, like the cloak of a sorceress falling from the heights of her arms.

They scuttle into a dark foyer, through which the throng leads them into a vaulted and bustling dining hall, as black and dark as the outer walls. The ceiling is so high, it seems there’s no end to it, and the floors are a cold slate.

Flanked along the perimeter are long, wooden tables, each spread with colorful and fragrant varieties of edibles from which to choose. Tall, wooden pub tables dot the rest of the hall. A stage centers the front of the room, on which a table accommodates seven thrones. Emily recognizes the only one sitting there as Headmistress Livy Inishtar. Though there’s a tray of food in front of her, the woman keeps her attention on the assembling mages.

And everywhere students and their families collect platters of food from the buffets and meander to their tables.

Emily and company follow suit, falling in line with the rest, filling silver trays with all manner of sustenance. Dishes of many shapes and sizes incite the palate. There must be samples from every corner of the globe on this table. Emily selects a taste of home—a fatty strip of ribeye and corn on the cob.

Charlie’s meal is a meager helping of kalua pig surrounded by small mountains of puddings, cakes, mochi, and other soft desserts Emily’s not familiar with. A taste of everything, it seems. His smoky brew seeps a swirling blue over the lip of his chalice. Harper’s piles of carbohydrates are uniform and don’t dare touch each other. Nan takes a more nutritious approach to eating than the rest of the group, piling hers with fermented vegetables, fatty steaks and fish, teas of green and matcha, and witch’s brew.

As they continue down the line, filling wooden trays and bowls and goblets, Emily notices an array of foods she’s never seen before. Like the chocolate in the shape of what must be some kind of large beetle. No one else seems to touch them.

“Chocolate-covered cockroaches,” says Harper, pointing at the clearly marked label.

“Can’t be real,” says Emily.

“There are cultures who eat those—live. A good source of protein,”
explains Harper, as though it makes all the sense in the world. “What? I read it somewhere.”

“Shouldn’t believe everything you read,” says Charlie.

“Not for a million bolts of power would I ever eat a roach,” says Emily, disgusted.

Eventually, the group surrounds a round table as the rest of the chamber melts into a hum of constant murmur and a blur of movement. Until one movement catches the corner of Emily’s eye: A hand lands on Charlie’s shoulder.

The man belonging to the hand is tall and broad and as confident as a tracker. His hair resembles cut grass that’s been dried into a dehydrated yellow and carefully windblown to the side. A silver stud glints from his left earlobe. None of that is disconcerting to Emily. Not even the two spirits—or shadows; she can’t tell—slithering around his ankles bother her. They’re smoky and deceptively attractive. But no, those things are not what she notices first. It’s what he’s wearing.

By the painted-on black t-shirt, tight black jeans, boots, and especially the belt holstering an array of weapons and implements, she has a good idea of this guy’s job. It’s the same standard uniform Gabriel used to wear when he killed vampires for a living. The only difference is the scepter this tracker carries.

It’s a burly wizard’s staff, dark and polished and jagged, and coiled in some kind of thick petrified serpent Emily’s not familiar with. It could be part lizard and a lion and…a dragon, even. But definitely some kind of serpent. With small bat-like wings. Sort of like the one she saw in the tunnels. Its mouth opens in a bite, its fangs chomping down on a red scryer. And its coloring seems to be in constant motion. It’s so massive, she can’t imagine what kind of muscle it takes the tracker to cart the thing around all day.

“It’s a basilisk,” says the tracker proudly when he catches Emily and Harper gawking at it. “Created the spell myself. It can stun anything with one look—even vampires. All I have to do is open its eyes. No one can do it but me. You could say it’s my animal totem.”

Emily opens her mouth to ask a question, but nothing comes out, and
“Em. Harp. This is the tracker I told you about. Captain Hans Streicher. A fine gentleman. It’s his enchantments that protect this place. You’re in good hands with this one.”

“You flatter me, my friend,” says Hans in a deep and throaty voice and what seems to Emily to be feigned modesty. “It’s true. We maintain centuries of security and have added a few curses and hexes of our own. Nothing can penetrate our barriers. I have the best team in the country. Trained them myself.”

Charlie starts introductions with Emily.

“You didn’t tell me the famous Emily Hunts was your daughter,” says Hans.

“Well, I’m not her father, per se, but I—”

Hans hears none of Charlie’s awkward explanation, his grin fixed intently on the new prize. “You’re the one who came up with that spell—what are they calling it? Crossing the Red?” He quotes the air. “Brilliant! Couldn’t’ve conjured a better spell myself. Mine, well—” He gestures at his staff. “Works instantly. Not a tracker alive today who doesn’t know about it.”

“True,” says Charlie. “I’ve heard of it before we met last year.”

“A delight to meet you, truly,” says the tracker. “I’d love to hear more about this…other side of yours.” Hans takes Emily’s hand and starts a line of pecks across her knuckles. Emily wrenches it back before his lips find the third knuckle.

She gives him a nod and forces out a small smile. As Charlie continues his introductions, Hans does not peck any more knuckles. But he keeps an interested eye on Emily.

“Great guy,” says Charlie once Hans has drifted away. Reminds me of—” He stops short of the name everyone knows he was going to say. “Anyway, if you run into anything while you’re here, go straight to him, you hear?”

Yes, she hears, but she does not want to listen.

Next time Emily looks at the stage, the thrones are filled with council members in silver robes and hair. With the exception of Livy, who centers the
table in white. She gets up and walks to the centerstage.

Like the other council members—Elders, she heard someone call them—Livy’s robe flows to the floor. Her blonde hair falls over her shoulders to the gold tassels tied at her narrow waist.

Using an elegant crystal wizard’s staff like a microphone, she clears her throat so softly, it could be missed.

“Welcome, welcome!” she says, hushing the assembly.

The cavern quiets, heads turning. When she speaks, she meets people at their gaze and mirrors their sentiment.

“For those who I have not had the pleasure of acquainting, I am Headmistress Livy Inishtar. A simple Mistress Livy will catch my attention, if you so desire.” She raises her hands to gesture at the audience. “On behalf of the Bellingham Coven Council of Elders, I’d like to welcome newcomers and returning members to the greatest healing arts coven this plane will ever know.”

Cheers erupt throughout the hall, the most thunderous coming from what seem to be seasoned members. Banners roll down from above, the same ones that hung in the administration edifice. Once again, Emily’s reminded of the serpent granite pillars throughout Lucian’s palace. Those too were frozen in permanent attack, their obsidian eyes on their target.

“Now, now. Let’s not scare away the newcomers.” Mistress Livy pats the air, her slender arms easing the clamor.

“First, a few preliminaries. As you know, we are in the heart of the Bellingham forest. The surrounding wood is renowned for disappearances and strange sightings. Last week, a brown bear was found with his neck snapped. No one’s safe outside the coven boundaries.”

Murmurs and gasps circle the assembly.

“For these reasons,” continues the mistress, “great efforts have been made to keep this coven concealed. We have year-round protection from the best trackers in the country. While you may leave the grounds, no one unauthorized may enter.

“Let’s give a round of applause to the tracker responsible for our safety,
and honorary alumni member, Captain Hans Streicher."

Hans, who’s standing guard at the edge of the stage, takes his cue to step front and center, offering a gracious bow that is met with standing ovation.

“New members!” says Mistress Livy as Hans reluctantly slinks back to his post within the stage’s shadow. “Your agendas will be disbursed tomorrow at breakfast. Do not be late—or you will be lost the entire term.

“As you know, we are a coven of equality and unity. For this reason, our policy dictates that each member must wear the customary robes while on the grounds. You may, however, express your colors of choice and accessorize to your hearts’ content. You will be given one as a courtesy and may purchase more in the supply vaults, which you’ll find in the secret salt mines on your maps.

“I didn’t know there were salt mines here,” whispers Emily to Harper.

“Probably why they’re secret.”

Mistress Livy dismisses the assembly to finish their meals and mingling.

Later, after some time hanging out in the courtyard, Emily walks her family out to the main entrance they came through earlier today.

“Thanks for the grimoire,” Emily tells her nan, accepting Alice’s bear hug and promising to visit for the holidays.

“Remember your promise,” says Charlie, once he’s successfully extracted Emily from Alice’s teary embrace. “You won’t go looking for him. I know it’ll be tempting, this close to…you know, where it all happened… Jeb and I have it well in hand.”

Emily nods, thankful once again that he doesn’t ask about Lucian, and she therefore does not have to lie. “I won’t go looking for Gabriel.”

“Good girl.” He crushes her in a teary hug and lets her go, joining Alice at the gate. “Don’t forget who your family is.”

“How could I?” She shakes her head. Even if she’s centuries older than them, and all of her real family is long since dead and gone.

Harper says her goodbyes and reminds Emily of the spell they plan to cast on the first full moon after winter solstice.
“We’ll find out who your father was,” Harper promises.

“Don’t go to too much trouble,” says Emily. After what Nan said earlier, Emily’s not so hopeful anymore. But the grin on Harper’s face tells Emily it’s a vain request.

After one last look at the secret underground coven, Harper steps through the serpent-framed arch and disappears.

Emily turns around to find a rather eager Hans leaning against a maple tree.

“Shall I walk you to your room?”

She’s about to decline when her gaze crosses the square and lands on the tunnel entrance. She had hoped to have met her roommate by the time she had to walk through there alone. She shrugs her acquiescence and follows the tracker across the courtyard and into the mouth of the dark tunnels, wishing it were Gabriel here with her.
Chapter 4

Mission Failed

The place is as dark and empty as she left it. The message CLOSED INDEFINITELY hovers in the window in firelight trace. It goes unnoticed that no soul has entered or exited her offices in half a year. No one knows that, despite leaving a wizard and returning a sorceress, Esmeralda’s mission failed miserably. And no one seems to care that her son is still missing.

No one down here recognizes her, not even Jeb Farmer, who’s standing at the dock when she passes him. She looks nothing like her regal, god-like self, not anymore. Her once tidy mass of silky black hair barely supports itself in a loose bun, its shine faded into a straggly mess. Her almond-shaped eyes are sunken in pits and muddied from too many sleepless nights.

She slips into her abandoned office.

With an absent wave, the sorceress closes the cobwebbed door. The drapes draw to a close and the lights flick on, illuminating shadowed walls engraved in glyphs and images reminiscent of the great halls of ancient Egyptian palaces.

She scoops up the pile of letters and grams and small parcels from the floor and drops it on a table. With a heavy head and heart, she removes her jacket, uncovering a short and tidy black dress over a black and plum-striped top, stockings, and pointed boots tied up to her slender mid-thighs.

Distracted by a letter at the top of the pile that catches her eye, she stretches her arm out to hang the jacket toward the coatrack. The hook, noticing Esmeralda’s outstretched hand, reaches in turn for the jacket. But, as it’s attached to the wall, it cannot stretch far enough. The jacket falls to the floor without so much as a look from Esmeralda.

It’s not a letter, but a gram, square and thick and marked in the right
shade of green.

Hope flits to her chest, but she does not entertain it. Who knows how old this message is, anyway?

It’s an archaic way to communicate. But no one can record a gram, not even its maker. Which is why it remains the method of choice for sensitive communication.

For this reason, before opening it, she scours the envelope for a return address, point of reference, position, something. Anything. There’s nothing but the familiar wax seal.

The seal is like a demon’s sigil. It’s green and encircles a V conjoined with an inverted V, and a line striking through them both. She taps the wax seal and immediately the entire gram transforms into a beautiful man. It increases in size until it is as tall as a tall man. It is a tall man, looking down at her as real as if he were really standing here, his head of dark sandy waves framing a pair of other-worldly emerald eyes. Eyes like her son’s. But this is not her son.

The reminder stakes her in the chest, the burn spreading its heaviness in every direction.

“Esmeralda,” says the man. Static interferes with his message. Though she can see him speaking, his voice is in and out. “I know—looking—me. I have—bits and pieces—message. And—calling—tell you—important—Bellingham—Do not—”

“What?” she demands in vain.

“I repeat. Do not—”

The image fuzzies like an old analog television caught between channels. The message must come from farther away than his previous messages. It would explain her failure to connect with him, even from the most likely place in the world.

And when he looks at her, warm memories flood her, goosepimpling her all over. Then, the beautiful figure disintegrates into sparkling ash and drops to a pile at her feet, where it flurries away like pixie dust in the wind. It was only a message, pre-recorded in another time.
Yet it still has the power to leave her with a feeling of profound loss. She blinks back a collection of stubborn tears. She’s too strong for weakness. Her son needs her.

Wiping the streams from her cheeks, the sorceress goes straight to her scryer, a marbled globe the color of a desert and size of a basketball, suspended midair within a sleek, obsidian frame. As she hovers her palms around the smooth, image-less globe, it illuminates a dark hue.

Scouring within the scryer, incanting ancient, Sumerian words, she does not give up until well into the night. However, as she’s too many levels below ground, she has no way of knowing what time of night it is.

It has been almost a year since she saw her young, ambitious Gabriel disappear to the other side of red by that dead witch’s spell. Almost a year since he was violently turned into… Even now, she can’t say it, not even in the privacy of her thoughts. Thoughts have a power equal to spoken words. No, for the sake of her son, she will not give it the power of words or thoughts.

No matter her conscious efforts, the thought must be there beneath the surface, for her body silently cries.

Gabriel’s punishing himself, she knows it, giving in to guilt and fear and all manner of dark emotions that will do nothing but shackle him to the dark side of red.

Blind with tears, she reaches for something—anything—to throw. Forgetting how powerful she’s become, her grip clasps around a cold and solid object. And she throws it at the story-etched wall.

Glass shatters. She doesn’t even know what it was she broke, unable to see through the blur in her eyes.

“Where is my son?” she shouts at the walls.

They do not answer her.

Either he wasn’t in Bellingham when she was there, calling out to him, or he simply couldn’t hear her from the other side of red.

Vampires can cross the red at night. And she had camped out at the edge of Lake Whatcom through the night until the first rays of dawn shined on her
failure.

Now she sits here with not one failure, but three. What good is it being a sorceress if she can’t manage a basic location spell? So what if the one she’s locating is on the other side of a veil that’s not supposed to exist.

But those are the wrong questions. Why didn’t she think of this before? It’s basic wizardry: Answers to every question come without exception—in their own form and time, yes, but without exception.

Running her palms around the scryer in the center of the chamber, she internally asks the question she should have asked long ago: *How can I cross the red*?

The answer comes in an image. A girl she knows well. The girl who Gabriel followed to the other side of red—to his death.

Emily Hunts.

Esmeralda’s chest tightens.

The sorceress disappears into the back room. When she emerges, her stripes are gone, replaced by a hooded cloak the color of Slytherin’s banner. It falls to her feet. She pulls the cowl over her head and leaves her offices behind, a single face embedded in her mind:

Emily Hunts.
Chapter 5

Kyteler’s Hollow

Charlie Abernathy and Jebadean Amos Farmer started under the pretense of understanding the enemy. It’s what led them to the lesser known arcane resources vaulted in the caverns deep below Topeka, Kansas. They were going to win Gabriel back, no matter what it took. No matter what they discovered.

On that bitter, wintery day nearly half a year ago, together, mentor and student strolled through the four-pillared opening across the stone floor toward the throat of the entrance to Kyteler’s Hollow. Behind them, Charlie’s magicked pillared opening closed, leaving the unassuming grassy knoll outside as they left it. Ahead of them, a balcony overlooked the most impressive sight Jeb could have ever imagined, let alone seen in his lifetime.

He blinked back disbelief, his intake of breath pulling a smile from Charlie, who was peering over at him. He fiddled with the charm hanging from his neck like it would protect him against the unknowns laid out before him. It wasn’t that kind of charm.

Charlie patted his back. “Jeb, my boy, this is only the beginning. Trust me.”

But that wasn’t what took hold of Jeb’s mind. In his mind, he simply didn’t deserve to be here. Someone like him didn’t belong here. He was unworthy of such privilege. Who was he, anyway, but an orphaned normal with no magic at all whatsoever to his name? No one in that exclusive resource center could ever know who he really was.

Of course, it would be obvious to anyone passing by that Jeb didn’t belong here. That much was as plain as his stretched frame and square, mocha-color face. His new haircut was just a fade, shaved on the sides and tall on top. Even the chain hanging from his neck was nothing more than old
faded tin, not meant to last as long as it had. But he’s kept it close to him his entire life.

Next to Charlie, he looked like a normal brought in from the streets, here to beg for a bit of magic. Quietly as they walked, he tucked his old necklace under his shirt.

Charlie, of course, wouldn’t go anywhere in anything but his customary wizarding attire of velvets and silks. For he was a wizard, and it seemed he liked the world knowing it.

He gave Jeb a wink and led the way.

Layers. The hollow was all layers, circled into a great coliseum. Only instead of seats, the layers were corridors spiraling downward, closed in by intricate ivory balustrades and overlooking an unbelievable sight.

There, hovering in the center of the coliseum, was an island. Yes, an island—it was the only thing it could have been. It looked as though the entire clump of earth had just been dug up with a massive shovel. A big block of rooted earth, topped with a head of green foliage.

Within the greenery, a fortress of some sort nestled at the tip of its highest peak, long paths sprawled out like the legs of a restless tarantula.

As far as Jeb could tell, there was no way across the chasm to the island, short of flying.

High above, a glowing purple twilight lit the entire coliseum. It wasn’t a sky, exactly. He’d never seen a sky with quite that coloring. It must have been painted. Yet, it didn’t seem to have a cap.

Jeb followed Charlie through the crowded halls, which were as wide as a four-lane city street. He’d never seen such a collection of mages concentrated in a singular place. Some looked as classic as a picture book, in pointed hats and robes, while others dressed in fine, modern materials bearing the mark of their magical status—stripes and wands for witches, and top hats and staffs for wizards. Why? Who knew? It was probably a fad, Jeb concluded. Still some looked as normal as normals, clad in everyday wear, typically in a style pioneered by some witch or wizard making a mark in history.

Trackers were posted here and there, standing guard as though on
assignment. It reminded him of the friend he’d lost to vampirism. Gabriel had always been souped-up in the typical tracker uniform: skin-tight t-shirts, ripped muscles, boots made for crushing, and a tool belt of killing paraphernalia.

Shops strung together on one side of the hall. They came in the forms of apothecaries, professional services, restaurants serving foods the gods wouldn’t refuse, and any other thing a witch or wizard might find useful.

A cappella swirled through the air. Illusionists begged for his attention. Ice cream makers and slither-pop vendors and cotton-candy spinners dotted along the balustrade in umbrellaed wagons. Occasionally, as they passed apothecaries and other supply shops, whiffs of lavender or frankincense rushed his nostrils. And, once in a while, the smoky scent of barbecue from a passing restaurant would arouse a growl from Jeb’s stomach.

And the view of the island followed them as they descended the spiral hollow. No place in here remained untouched by the island’s presence.

The place was a bustling, prosperous atmosphere that Jeb would have loved to be a part of. The more they descended the spiral halls, the thinner the crowd became, and the dimmer the light until they reached the eighth level, where only a handful of mages in strict suits walked with purpose. A single vendor tended this level—a tall, stilted ice cream maker in pink and white candied stripes and a tall top hat.

Charlie and Jeb stopped in front of a large set of double doors, above which a set of letters spelled out “The Den” in sparkling firelight, like a trace that’s meant to evaporate but doesn’t.

“Largest in the country, second to none. You know the history of Kyteler’s Hollow?”

“Was it founded by Elizabeth, the sorceress?”

“Very good. Very good.” Charlie grinned proudly, tossing a nod at the doors. “One of her greatest accomplishments. The knowledge in there was collected from all corners of the globe and, I’ve long suspected, even beyond.”

Charlie opened the doors and continued. “As an aspiring witch, you must get familiar with the legends. What do you know about Elizabeth the First?”
“I know what you told me before,” answered Jeb as they stepped into The Den, although Jeb had learned of her last name during his own research. “That she cast the veil of red that separates this side from the other. She wasn’t the queen Elizabeth, but a sorceress that lived long before the queen. She was a healer. I—I found some material on her. It’s said she performed some miraculous healings.”

“Right you are, Jeb.” Charlie paused to allow Jeb to take in the scene.

Like the upper level of the hollow, they entered the Den from the top of its chamber. Over the short railing, a sea of shelving went on as far as the eye could see, fading into distant shadow.

The shelving themselves were wooden and packed solid with tomes and relics and archaic papers, rolled and tied.

“Are we going to go through all of this?”

“Good gods, no.” Charlie laughed a boisterous laugh that infected Jeb with a warm feeling of acceptance. A feeling that was short-lived, as Jeb knew down to his bones that he did not belong there. He did not belong anywhere. And he was half-surprised someone hadn’t come along to kick him out of the world of magic.

Charlie’s laugh garnered a few nasty looks from researchers out on the floor. Red shaded Charlie’s chubby cheeks. He cleared his throat and straightened his violet jacket that did not need straightening. Lowering his voice, he leaned closer to Jeb. “Something you may not know. There’s an entire section here of works collected from the Library of Alexandria—before the fire. It’s called the Alexandria Collection.”

“How?” was all he could think to ask.

Charlie shrugged, rounding a corner and heading down a long, narrow aisle too tall to allow much light in.

“No one knows for certain. Elizabeth wouldn’t be born for another some odd thousand years or so.”

“Crazy,” muttered Jeb, trying to wrap his mind round it all.

“Now,” continued Charlie. “Elizabeth, as you know, founded Kyteler’s Hollow, but it wasn’t named for her until after her death. Before, they called
it the Hollow. She wanted to spread knowledge everywhere, to everyone. But...times were different then. Education and reading were a privilege that most were not privy to. Elizabeth was way ahead of her times."

“But, why, even now, is it only available to mages?” asked Jeb. “I mean, we’ve come a long way, haven’t we?”

Another shrug from the wizard. “It’s not that it’s not allowed. It’s just not known.”

“The test,” said Jeb, remembering the entrance he had to see in order to enter Kyteler’s Hollow.

“Right. The test. Which you passed with flying colors.” Charlie cleared his throat, getting back to business. “We’re going to do two things here: You’re going to learn witchcraft. And we’re going to research all we can on vampires.”

And research, they did. There wasn’t much in the way of learning witchcraft—not much that Jeb could tell. It all seemed to be in passing, in the way life passes, from which one could learn if they so chose. Or one could go in circles, never learning magic.

As they scavenged, the pair followed their fair share of bunny trails. And each time, they corrected their course and returned to the research.

One such trail led Jeb down an ancient prophecy. It was the legend of Elizabeth that stole him away. And it came in the form of books, not written by her or anyone who knew her but by people who lived after she had perished. It said things that she was supposed to have said.

“You can do what I do, she said,” Jeb told Charlie for the hundredth time that afternoon. Which means, he can be like her. “Right, Charlie? It means I can heal in the same way she did? If I just learn what she knew...”

“Those were different times, son,” said Charlie, distracted by his own bunny trail, a thick volume titled Where on Earth did the Gods Go and Why Won’t They Help Us Anymore?

But the seed had already been planted. Jeb believed—or, he wanted to believe. But somehow, his chemical makeup was interfering. Still, when he turned the page, he bought the prophecy with the same currency a child buys
the myth of Saint Nicholas. It said: *There will be one who proves her teachings, not with the aid of her blood, nor special endowment, nor familial magic.*

He closed the book and returned to the research.

Eventually, they found themselves sequestered in a section of god-inflicted ailments and plagues in a buried row of the stacks. According to a three-volume set of ancient tomes called *History of the Punishments of the Gods*, they discovered that the gods’ taste for vengeance was even worse than the legends portrayed, wreaking punishments for generations to come.

“It’s enough to drive fear into any man,” said Charlie. “If they knew their punishment would extend to their children and children’s children and…”

As the volumes were organized in chronological order, Charlie found the infliction of vampirism near the end of the third volume, along with it the very thing Charlie was not expecting to find, and, Jeb was most certain, had even been hoping to avoid.

It was a mere note in passing, not meant to be studied. Yet this one piece of information would have made all the difference last winter. Perhaps it could have stopped Gabriel from being turned into a vampire in the first place.

After all they had discovered about Emily—that she’s a seer, she’s hundreds of years old, the daughter of the great sorceress Elizabeth the First and, for that reason, she’s hunted by the Devil himself—it all paled in comparison to this one piece of evidence they could not deny. Evidence that would suggest Emily was not at all who they were beginning to think she was.

It changed everything.

That was then. Now, some six months later, Jeb’s still scratching his head over it. For what Charlie *did* with the discovery Jeb never would have expected from a wizard of his caliber.
Chapter 6

Roommates

Whatever Emily’s expecting in a roommate, it isn’t what walks through the door. Or what doesn’t. The new girl comes without any spirits or shadows.

The last time Emily saw someone with no spirits or shadows following them around on the other side of red, it was Gabriel. And only once, very briefly. Emily’s the only other one she’s ever known of without a spirit.

And now this girl who just walked through the door.

The new girl stops short, as though she, too, isn’t expecting what she sees. She looks too young to be here. And skinny. She’s dark—a different kind of dark than Emily’s friend, Jeb. She’s less sun-kissed and golden than Esmeralda and more like she was dipped in medium-roast coffee and hasn’t fully dried yet. The distinguishing feature that grabs Emily’s attention is the girl’s wide and flat nose. And her face. If it weren’t for the girl’s scowl, she’d look too sweet and innocent to be dressed in all black.

“Hey,” says the girl easily, neither friendly nor unfriendly.

“I’m Emily.”

Toting a single duffle bag, the new girl takes in the room, evidently not the least bit interested in Emily. Then, she says in a bored voice and without looking, “Agatha.”

“Erm. My nan already unpacked.” Emily points toward the closet nearest her bed.

“Guess it’s this one, then.” Agatha plops her bag on the other bed just as an older woman walks in behind her.

The lady is considerably taller than the new girl, too stiff for her long, hooked nose and so ghostly white there’s no way she can be related to the
brown girl.

Behind her, three wispy shadows follow. Not quite as dark and heavy as typical shadows, their long and slender ethereal bodies billow like flags in the wind. They’re almost close enough to being spirits, if they weren’t shadows. The general feeling is one of judgment, and Emily’s on the receiving end of it.

She’s hoping there’s nothing on her own face that might betray her curious thoughts.

She introduces herself to the ghostly lady, proffering a smile weaker than she’d like. This would be a good time to have had the social skills attending a normal school would have provided. That’s the thought that comes under the scrutiny of this lady, who peers down her long, hooked nose at Emily.

“Birgitta Nilsson,” she says curtly.

“My mother,” Agatha explains with a snark.

The woman gives Emily a nod and the slight twist of her upper lip, as if she wants to smile but doesn’t know how. Were it not for that, and her hooked nose, she would be a beautiful woman—blonde hair, blue eyes, tall as a supermodel and only slightly less slender than one. Her skin looks as smooth as ivory, especially for an older lady. As thin as she is, she really shouldn’t have curves, but there they are, as stubborn as the scowl on the woman’s face.

“And where do you come from?” she inquires.

“Kansas,” replies Emily, her eyes returning to Agatha, who stands stiff as a statue.

As if coming to from a stupor, Agatha dives into unfastening the lock on her bag. It doesn’t seem to want to obey the girl. “Stupid, f—”

“Here…” says Emily, proffering a hand for Agatha’s key. “I know a spell to make it easy.”

After a moment of hesitation, Agatha drops the key in Emily’s palm, *I’d like to see you try* written in her scorn. Emily slips the key into the keyhole, incants a quick spell under her breath, and waves a hand over the lock. There’s a tug of energy within her hand as the lock unbolts.
Agatha hardens her features, puffing out her chest like she has something to prove. “Which spell did you use? I…er, don’t have that one.”

“Not sure what it’s called,” admits Emily. “My mentor taught me it. Never thought it’d come in handy—you know, opening someone else’s lock.” Still, it’s not like she did perception or anything really advanced. She smiles, absolutely certain she just explained way too much and she’s on the fast track to having no one to walk the tunnels with.

Mrs. Nilsson does not seem impressed by the exchange, or Emily’s witchcraft. She interrupts with the clearing of her throat. “Seems you’re settled then, Agatha. I have appointments this afternoon. Where is that bell…?”

“What does it look like?” asks Emily.

“How should I know?” demands Mrs. Nilsson. The woman looks at Emily expectantly her thin brows arched in utter displeasure. “It’s your… magic. I’m only here for her.” She thrusts a gesture at her daughter.

Agatha sighs and explains. “Our tour guide said to ring the bell when she’s ready to leave—the one for…erm…normals.”

Remembering her own useless guide, Lilith, who’d failed to shed any light on the issue of the bell, Emily snaps her fingers and holds the thought of a bell—not an image, though, as she doesn’t know what it looks like.

“Reveal,” she orders to the universe. Instantly, her mind reveals to her an image of a miniature liberty bell. It chimes. Three heads turn to Agatha’s pillow, from under which Agatha pulls out the miniature replica of the chipped bell. Of course, Emily didn’t create it. She hasn’t even begun to master manifestation yet. What she did was a simple location spell. Someone else must have placed it under the pillow.

Both Agatha and her mother avoid any pretense of indifference and drop their jaws. The older woman is the first to recover.

“Now what?” she asks.

“I’m guessing you ring it,” says Emily.

Agatha rings the bell. Moments later, a knock taps on the door. Mrs. Nilsson, who hasn’t stepped more than two feet inside, answers it.
“Well then, see you...when is it, again?”

“Christmas, I guess,” answers Agatha, shrugging.

“Right. Christmas.” The woman straightens her blouse and walks out, following whoever knocked on the door. All shadows in the room disappear with her, leaving Emily and Agatha alone with no one else, on this side or the other.

But that angel is back in the window, staring in like it wants to say something. Agatha seems to notice it, but she says nothing, as though she sees that sort of thing all the time.

“She’s not magic,” says Agatha, probably at the surprise on Emily’s face. It takes Emily a moment to realize it’s not the angel the girl’s referring to, but her mother.

Although, now that she mentions it, Emily was rather taken aback by their goodbye. Nan never would have left without a million kisses and smothering Emily with enough hugs to keep her warm through a long and bitter winter. And she’s not even her blood mother.

That woman that just left—Emily can’t imagine someone like that willfully adopting a child. It was more like the woman got landed with a kid she didn’t want. That could be it, actually. It’s not like Nan went to any agency to adopt Emily. Her uncle Raoul, who she now knows is the biological vampire son of the Devil, left Emily with Nan when she was an infant.

“Anyways,” says Emily, trying to think of a way to remove her thoughts from her face. Who thinks of this stuff, anyway? She decides to sort through the contents of her cauldron. “My best friend will be here next year. Well, she’s more like my sister. Her dad’s with my nan, see...” and on she blathers, sorting through her supplies.

Agatha shows no interest in Emily’s so-called sister or next year and continues to stuff her clothes into a drawer. She does not bother with the art of folding. Every piece of clothing Agatha pulls from the trunk is black. Although Emily might have seen an occasional glint of red. And some metal, like a chain or something.

“So, Agatha,” says Emily. “What is your concentration?”
“Huh?” Agatha turns around, sizing up the skinny witch.

“What are you here for?”

“Um…magic,” answers Agatha, stopping just short of 

duh. And without bothering to fold them, she stuffs a pair of pants into the drawer.

“Everybody here studies magic,” retorts Emily, starting to get nettled by Agatha’s attitude.

“I know that,” snaps the new witch, catching herself. “Why don’t you ask Livy Inishtar. She’s the one who wanted me to come.”

Emily goes from gross offense to curiosity in the span it takes for Agatha to look up and for Emily to drop the handful of vials she was just about to tuck into the drawer in her nightstand.

She plops herself on Agatha’s bed, ignoring the girl’s disgust and horror. “The Headmistress Livy Inishtar? Came to you?”

Agatha shrugs. “Didn’t tell me she was the headmistress. Only said her name was Livy Inishtar—like the goddess.” However, the weight has been applied, the dawn of new realization spreads across Agatha’s taut features, which are remarkably paler than her brown complexion was moments earlier.

“You must be really advanced,” suggests Emily.

The new girl seems to abandon the one-at-a-time deal and grabs a final pile of black materials and stuffs them into a cabinet. She kicks the door shut, bringing Emily’s attention to the girl’s boots, thick and combat-like, the boots of a tracker. Or vampire. They remind her of Gabriel, and she swallows the pang that tugs at her throat.

“A-are you a…wizard?” she asks her new roommate.

Agatha responds with a blank look. She folds her arms and darts her glare at Emily as though preparing for battle.

“You must know something to be recruited,” insists Emily. “Most witches have to apply to get in.”

“I know some things,” says the girl.

But it’s too late. Emily has an insight. “Wait, if your mother’s a normal, then…you haven’t learned magic yet, have you? But if you haven’t, then why
“What’s it to you?” retorts Agatha defensively, her brows checkmarks and her arms folded.

“Um…just curious,” says Emily in a wounded voice, returning to her side of the room.

But the truth has already come through. Emily now has Agatha’s full attention. However, not in the way she was trying to get it. But more like the way she’d have the attention of a wild cougar’s, if she’d cornered one.

The air is thick as meat pies and neither girl speaks for a long while.

Finally, Emily decides to take a risk. It’s not like she’ll lose anything if Agatha says no. “Wanna check out the campus?”

Agatha doesn’t need to say no. Her face says that for her. From her bag, she grabs a small container of toiletries and a little black book and closes herself in the restroom, leaving Emily to stew in silence.

The silence gives her the opportunity to wonder once again why, if the girl doesn’t know magic yet, Mistress Livy would have recruited her, and if that answer has anything to do with the fact that Agatha has no spirits or angels. More importantly than all that, however, is what the hell is the girl’s problem?

Emily sighs, bracing herself for what she knows will happen: she’ll be walking the tunnels alone, all session long.
Chapter 7

Modalitas and Magical Creatures

Someone’s watching her.

Emily keeps her eye focused on the stone mermaid in the center of the courtyard where she’s been sitting for the last thirty minutes, waiting for the mandatory breakfast to begin and trying to forget her sprint through the tunnels.

The fabricated sky helps, gifting the coven with a clear blue summer morning and refreshing, even weather to go with it. Just the right amount of breeze spirits the place with the feel of summer’s end and promise of autumn’s beginning.

She ignores her observer and pretends to occupy herself with her journal.

“Sooh…” The voice is as casual as a cat’s. Wrapping around a maple tree, Captain Hans Streicher slips into her view, basilisk scepter in hand.

On a long intake of breath, the witch sets the pen in the crux of the book and closes it. Then she dresses her light freckled face with a faux but gracious smile.

“Hans,” she says.

He’s now leaning against the tree, one boot folded casually over the other, a hand in his pocket and a cheese-eating grin stretching from dimple to dimple. Emily’s almost certain she catches a sparkle from one of his pearly-whites.

“I was just—” she begins, but, by the grace of the gods, at that moment the bell chimes.

“That must be the breakfast bell,” she says, knowing he can’t argue with the headmistress’s orders. And she scuttles off toward the dark, steepled hall.
After collecting a tray of waffles with peanut butter and a tall tumbler of coffee, she settles at an empty table near the rear entrance and waits for announcements, which come some time later as Mistress Livy addresses the assembly with her staff.

“As promised, your term agendas are here. Remain in your seats, they will come to you.”

Emily, along with the audience, scans the place for those who will hand out the agendas, but they find no one.

“They’ll come by way of folding, at the end of my announcements,” Mistress Livy explains. “For novice witches and new members, you’ll find you share a number of lessons in common with your roommates and others in your quarters. This is done intentionally, as you must experience a spectrum of studies before advancing to higher levels. The only exception is the elective you chose when you submitted your placement spells.

“Your robes can be picked up in the Vaults in the salt mines. Lessons commence tomorrow!” And she returns to her chair.

On the table, a folded and sealed parchment materializes from thin air. Tearing off the seal and flinging it open, Emily reads her agenda:

*Modalitas,*

*Chamber 12, tunnels, lower level,*

*Mondays and Wednesdays, after breakfast—lunch*

*Manipulation 101,*

*Under the Mermaid Statue,*

*Tuesdays and Thursdays, after breakfast—lunch*

*Elective: Myth and Mythical Creatures*

*Whatcom Underground Meadows,*

*Mondays and Wednesdays, 3pm—dinner*
Emily folds her sheet and tucks it into her back pocket as students around her investigate each other’s schedules. Briefly, she scans the hall for her roommate, who was already gone when she got up this morning. But Agatha doesn’t seem to be anywhere.

Emily pulls the map from another pocket and finds the Vaults. “Great,” she mutters. Through the tunnels. Of course, the salt mines would be through the tunnels.

It’s not going to get any easier, she tells herself, so she might as well get this over with. And, dumping the tray of peanut butter-covered waffles, which taste nothing like Nan’s, she leaves the dining hall alone.

The tunnels aren’t any better than being alone in the dining hall. At least in the hall, people surrounded her. If anyone’s in the tunnels, they’re not around her. It’s almost as if everyone gets their own individual tunnel. Lighting the map with her wand, she follows its arrow, that feeling that she’s not in here alone coming to her just as she passes the sasquatch. And as she turns the corner, she sees for herself: there is someone in here.

He grabs her by the arms.

She screams.

“Emily. It’s me!”

She breathes. “Hans. How long—”

“I was just making my rounds,” he says, cutting her off. “The tunnels aren’t the best place on campus to walk alone. Where’re you headed? I’ll take you there.”

She does not argue. “The Vaults.”

“Good. I haven’t been that way yet.” And he sets off in the opposite direction of her arrow. “I know a short cut.”

“When you say the tunnels aren’t the best place—”

“Don’t worry, my barriers are secure. But, if anything were to get through…this is the first place I’d look. Between you and me, there is something lurking around the campus borders. Vampire or demon or something—dark. He’s stalking someone.”
Instantly, Emily is reminded of the one who’s been hunting her all her life, the one Charlie fears might find her: the Devil.

“You ever…see a vampire?” asks Hans, his baritone voice echoing back to them.

“Why do you ask?”

He shrugs. “Thought you might have—on the other side.”

Oh, right. He knows about that. And seems to believe in it, too.

“They do walk the other side, don’t they?” he goes on, more as if he’s musing to himself, his staff tapping the floor like a walking stick. “It would explain a lot… You have nothing to fear, of course. Not here.” His confidence eases her anxiety, despite the two deceptive shadows lurking at his ankles.

They rear a corner and descend a flight of stairs that lead into what can only be the salt mines. There’s a freshness to the air down here, like a beach on a cool day. Right in the center, next to a trolley on tracks that lead down a dark tunnel, there’s an open storefront overflowing with members. High above, the sign spells out: “The Vaults.”

And Emily wonders how on earth they got here without her running into a single witch in the tunnels.

“Ah, here we are,” says Hans. “At your service, my lady.”

“Thanks,” she says, as a sliver of guilt trickles to her throat. Perhaps ditching him this morning wasn’t the nicest thing she could have done.

She finds her way through the throng to the end of a long, meandering line.

As the line moves through the rows and rows of supplies and books and robes, she finds her size robe, each in three shades of blue. And one in black. When she reaches the front, she’s handed her standard white robe. She pays for the others and turns around, right into Agatha, who carries a single black robe and a knobby, charcoaled wand. And no spirits or shadows. Although there are plenty to go around in this crowd.

“Hey,” says Emily.
Agatha replies with a smirk and brushes past her.

Emily finds her own way out, wondering what she said to offend her roommate.

She finds her rooms quickly, drops her new robes and leaves for her first class.

She manages to get to the lower level without much incident.

It’s not darker, as one would expect, but the corridors are wider, more earthy and inviting, and there are no menacing creatures lining the way. It’s bright like the sun’s own rays spill through the canopy of a friendly forest, although there is no trace of a sun anywhere to be seen. She finds chamber twelve with no struggle at all and slips through the cave-like opening with four minutes to spare.

Robed members gather on the stage at the bottom of the room, which is no room at all but a crater-shaped stadium too big for the dozen or so members collected in here. The ceiling is so high above, it’s nothing more than a distant light shadowing the towering cliffs.

Center stage, a small fire burns, casting dancing shadows on the wall, on which a collection of words spells out in chalk:

*Modus Operandi*

*Attention*

*Know Thyself*

*Realities*

At present, no instructor seems to be here. Coven members form a half-circle around the fire, mesmerized by the shadows on the wall. Emily follows suit, squatting behind a trail of girls giggling amongst themselves. They greet each other in kind, although Emily notices the eyes sizing her up. Then Agatha plops next to her.

She doesn’t seem to notice at first.

Emily doesn’t bother with any niceties. She rolls her eyes and faces
forward. Agatha does the same.

As the last band of members straggle down the empty stadium steps and find a seat within the semi-circle, a voice sounds from somewhere, amplified as though through a microphone.

“Interesting…”

Heads turn and bob in various directions. But the source of the voice is nowhere. Then it becomes clear, and all heads return to the rock wall on the stage.

“You formed the semicircle on your own. I hadn’t even instructed it.” The man walking toward the fire casts a towering shadow on the stone. And, as he gets closer, his shadow diminishes. In his right hand, he clutches a small, withered book to his chest. In his left, his wizard staff, a white rod with a crystal ball at the tip as plain and boring as his monotone voice. “Can you guess how I did that?”

A hand in the front row shoots in the air. It belongs to a dark, thick girl with a round afro and black-rimmed glasses. She’s wearing a bright pink robe that goes nicely with the plump pink spirit lounging in the thick of her hair. Its shape reminds Emily of a cupid. “Are you saying you—somehow influenced every one of us to sit here?”

“Interesting way to answer—in the form of a question. One might think you doubt your own ears. Or worse, your intuition?”

Silence.

“Welcome,” he says to the class, beaming at the blank and confused faces staring back at him. His hair is cut with purpose and precision, and his full beard trimmed into a tight, white shadow along a square jaw. “I am Master Dr. Stein. Master is fine. Or Dr. Stein.

“Perception!” he announces, pausing long enough for every student to check their agendas, circling whispers around the semi-circle. Thought this was modalitas. What’s perception got to do with modalitas? Are we in the right chamber? What room is this?

“Yes, yes,” confirms the wizard impatiently. “You are in the right place. You have found modalitas. Perception, you’ll find, runs hand in hand with
the study and use of your modalities.”

Sighs and ah mans echo in whispers. “Perception is so hard,” Emily hears someone behind her say.

“Pay attention,” he says with no inflection whatsoever. “Question everything—within your own mind. Seek it out. Everything…For your mind is your greatest magical tool. Until next time.” When no one moves, he shoos the class like they’re a group of rug rats under his feet.

Again, a hand shoots up. It’s the same girl in the dark-rimmed glasses and bright pink robe. And Emily is certain she hears a sneer from her roommate, followed by a string of inaudible murmurs under her breath. Using the trick she inherited when she died last year, Emily closes her eyes and looks over to find the usual scowl on Agatha’s face. So, Emily thinks to herself, it’s not just her that her roommate hates.

Master Stein stares at the pink-robed girl like she’s an anomaly. She seems to take that as a cue to speak.

“We just got here.”

Agreements circle the semicircle.

“Is there an assignment?” blurts out another, confrontationally, a gorgeous sun-tanned girl in a leopard-print robe too form-fitting to be a standard issue, wide hoop earrings, and an accent that rolls from her tongue like candy. “Something to learn?”

“Yes, of course,” says the master, like it should be obvious. And he scans the collection of confused young adults. “Any other questions?”

“Why modalitas? I thought this was a coven for healing?” Afro girl doesn’t bother raising her hand this time. Next to her, a skinny pink-haired guy buries his head in his hand.

Dr. Stein grins, although it comes across more like a face a puppet would make and doesn’t reach his eyes. “Good question. You do want to learn.” He points his staff at the words chalked on the rock wall: Know Thyself. “When you know that, you can begin the journey to your healing.”

“Our healing?” cries the same girl in the front row, pushing her dark-rimmed glasses up her nose. “And if we’re perfectly healthy?”
“My dear, health has nothing to do with it. Everyone on this planet needs healing. It is both the reason we grow and the result of growing.”

When it seems the rest of the student members are in league with the afro girl, he slumps his shoulders, tossing his hands in the air, book included. “Just pay attention. That’s all you need to do. Truly. Now, be gone. I have things to do.”

With that, members file out through the cave entrance, grumbling questions like *that’s it? what’re we supposed to do with that? pay attention to what? and you think it’ll be tested? maybe it’s in the book, and what book? there is no book!*

In the tunnels, the crowd thins as students head in their own directions. Having been excused three hours early, it’s too early for lunch. So, lighting the way with her wand, Emily eventually clambers her way to the mid-level dormitories to her room, where Agatha is already sitting on her bed, her nose in that little black book of hers.

“How—” Emily was going to ask Agatha how she got here so fast, but then she remembers that they don’t like each other. She plops onto her bed and closes her eyes. She’d like to magic her roommate into another person.

“I found a shortcut,” says Agatha in an even voice. She sits up. “Weird place, isn’t it? Not like a normal college would be.”

“Well,” says Emily as sarcastically as she can, “It’s not a *normal* school, so I don’t see why’d you expect it to be.”

Agatha puts her book down and looks up at Emily with surprise. And then anger.

“Oh, so you’re talking to me now?” says Emily. “You think you can be a jerk to me all this time and then just talk to me whenever you want? What’s your problem anyway? Why are you so angry with everyone?”

Agatha does not answer. She simply stares at Emily. And, after a while, she returns to her little black book and neither of them talk for the rest of the three hours, skipping lunch, until their next class. Which is, of course, the same class, as they both discover when they stroll into Whatcom Meadows along with the rest of the herd. The problem, however, is not that they share yet another class that Mistress Livy said they would. The problem is that this
class is the elective. Which means they share an interest in magical creatures.

Whatcom Meadows is nestled lakeside in an eastern crook of the coven grounds. Like the rest of the grounds, this, too, is bewitched with a friendly sky. Moss-covered firs and cottonwoods surround the clearing, including the path from which Emily and Agatha scuttle in, unbeknownst to each other, until they once again find themselves sitting next to each other crisscross on the grass.

Robed members spill into the clearing from various directions. Most of them in earthy browns and greens, some in color. And right in the center of the meadow, a tiny unicorn grazes.

A silver-robed Elder is sprawled out on his back, oblivious to the unicorn grazing by his head on the other side of red. Stringy-white hair gathers in a loose, greasy ponytail above his narrow nape. As he notices the meadow filling with students, he sits up, crisscrossing his legs and beckoning his students to gather around. They form a half-moon around the master.

As they get closer, Emily notices the puffy, faded eyes of the wizard, amplified by the thick glasses hanging precariously from the tip of his narrowed nose. Wrinkles define his pointed features, drooping from him like a loose t-shirt.

“We were all created in the image of the gods…” he begins, his gaze falling on no one, and his voice taking on a dreamlike quality. “Every form. Every race. Each and every human on this planet… Hybrids, they once called us… clay people… not meant for knowing.” He hooks his fingers in the air, punctuating his quote. “No, we couldn’t carry out the gods’ work, if we knew what they knew… They needed us… But to what end?

“Gold! To refine and suspend in the atmosphere of their home. Their people were dying. Their home was dying. Their posterity… their entire existence. They discovered their own evolutionary ancestor on a foreign planet. It had to be, for their own home was known to have crashed into it sometime in cosmic history. This gave the gods an idea…

“An idea…” he repeats in a whisper. And every student body leans forward, straining to hear.

“See, the gods who came here were the heroes of their world. Nobles and
gents who wanted to make a name for themselves and bring glory to their families. They weren’t accustomed to hard labor. And they were tired…”

Silence. Emily can hear the unicorn chewing.

“Opposable-thumbs!” shouts the master suddenly, jarring his audience, effectively slapping the post-lunch sleepy haze off every face staring back at him. “That’s the unique feature they found in this ancestor of theirs. And so, their best scientists added their advanced DNA to the primitive versions of themselves, and voila…a race was born…

“In their image.” He trails off once again, reading the silence with amusement.

“Animals, we were… So, why stop there? It’s certainly not where they started. So far from home. From their own laws of rights and wrongs. Disconnected from their kingdom, and their king. On this mystery world, the scientists of Nibiru had found their playground…”

“Yes, they had created it…”

“The creatures of myth and legend… You know this… deep inside you, you know this. It’s in your psyche. It’s in all of our psyches—our collective consciousness—beyond your ego…”

He’s standing now, gesticulating like a street-corner madman.

Students shuffle in the grass, some, as students did in Master Stein’s, checking their schedules to make sure this is indeed the right lesson. Others smirk behind their hands. Like one guy in a white robe and pink belt who, at the moment, mocks the master to his giggling friend.

“And so…” The master claps his hands, pacing between the seated bodies, unconcerned for personal space. He steps between Emily and Agatha, who, by the surrounding crowd had been pinched so close to each other they’re nearly touching.

“Then, one day, it happened! The gods left. Taking with them all their technology and knowledge and ways of life. And humanity was left to fend for itself. This is what we came up with…” The master offers an infectious smile, gesturing at the surrounding scenery. “I am Council Member Mac Madera. Your friend, if you know how to treat me.” He throws a wink at
pink-belt guy, who blushes.

“Now…we are not in this class to talk about humanity. We’re here for the rest of life on this planet. Now go. Be gone. Read something before we meet again, and I might ask you about it.”

Hands shoot in the air, but he ignores them and shoos his students like he’s herding a flock of sheep.

“I’m sensing a pattern with these masters,” grumbles Agatha as she and Emily head toward the wooded path. They find their way back down the trail to the courtyard, where once more they step into the mouth of the tunnel.

When it becomes clear that Emily has no intention of entertaining a conversation, Agatha grabs her arm.

“Listen.” She clears her throat and, with painful effort, she says, “Earlier…when you said that shit about anger. You might have had a point.”

“Are you saying you want to talk to me now?” says Emily.

Agatha shrugs. But the look on her face drops Emily’s guard at once. Apologizing is a hard thing to do. But she neither accepts nor denies her roommate. Emily simply returns the shrug and starts walking, secretly glad to have the company.

Darkness swallows them, and Emily wishes she would have fished out her wand before entering the tunnel. “Erm…do you have a light? Can’t find my wand.”

Agatha shuffles alongside her.

Fear is a demanding master. So crippling, the power it holds. The pull. That’s exactly the feeling coursing through Emily. She has no control. Fear has her.

When she first traversed the tunnels with her family, she didn’t notice it. But lately, the dark presence cannot be mistaken. And then there’s that feeling that she’s being watched. Followed. Like someone’s waiting for the right moment.

Finally, Agatha’s wand illuminates, casting shadows of creatures everywhere, eyeing the girls as their speed increases. As they walk, shadows slither along the floor and walls. And that heavy presence creeps in, like mist
across a glassy lake. If there were ever a time to wish for Lucian, it’s now. If he were here, he’d carry her through the tunnels and no fear would touch her—or which reminds her...

Fear cannot affect her in the cloak he gave her, her special red cloak magicked by sorcery. Perhaps she could wear it under the heavy robes. She’s sweating just thinking about it and quickly abandons the idea.

“You think he really believes that story?” ponders Agatha. “Master Madera, I mean?”

“About the gods? Who knows? I mean, I knew the gods once ruled, and then left. They were the so-called creators. But that bit about creating us for the purpose of gold? Sounds like a kooky conspiracy theory to me.” But the gods are not the thing on Emily’s mind.

What’s on her mind, she cannot voice because her heart is clogging her throat as the very real feeling that they’re not alone steals into the darkness.

“It can’t all be myth, though, right? The gods, the creatures they created…”

Is Agatha still on that? Emily steals a glance through the shadow at her roommate, still unsure what to think of her. And, at that moment, the floor vibrates.

“Tell me you felt that.” Agatha’s shaky voice betrays her hope.

“Yeah.” Emily’s relieved that she wasn’t the only one. “What was it?”

“Probably another hall turning on some unlucky soul,” says Agatha.

“Another hall?”

“Yeah, one turned on me this morning. Took me to a creepy staircase that only went down.”

“Did you go down?” says Emily.

“It wanted me to. Whispered my name and everything. But, yeah, no way was I going down there. I turned another way and found a short cut.” Agatha’s quiet for a long moment, allowing the sounds to measure the distance between them and whatever else is down here.

“At least it’s not us this time,” says Agatha. “What? You were thinking it,
too…” Her voice trails as her eyes land right on the very thing that Emily has just noticed.

At the other end of the hall, a lone figure emerges from shadow.

Just another member finding his own way through the same darkness, Emily tells herself. And why shouldn’t it be? Here in a heavily guarded coven six hundred feet beneath the planet’s surface, there’s no reason to think anything else could be down here. Not even what Hans said this morning—about the vampire or demon or something lurking around.

It’s just another student finding his way, she repeats in her mind over and over, hoping to convince her gut, which knows quite plainly that what they see at the end of the hall is no student. She glances at Agatha cautiously, not wanting to be the first to admit she’s seeing something, as she can’t officially tell if the figure is on this side or the other, not from this distance.

“Please tell me you see that—erm—I think we have company,” says Agatha, her voice shaky.

“I see it,” confirms Emily, allowing a sigh of relief to escape her lips. “Let’s turn around. Find another way.”

“No,” says Agatha firmly. “We stand our ground. Show’m our weapons. Let them know we’re here to fight.”

Emily turns a slow head toward her roommate. Weapons? Fight? Who is this girl?

“Uh—what weapons?”

But Agatha does not get the chance to answer.

The visitor faces them head-on. And starts walking toward them, in full-on attack mode.

“Uh…” says Emily, shakily. “Not sure this is the time to be tough.”

And then the figure disappears.

“Right. Let’s go.” Emily increases her pace, turning a corner, and, as they both do so, the floor vibrates once more. This time, however, it moves.

They brace themselves, balancing as best they can, darting a glance every which way. No one else seems to be in here. Slowly, the sound of stone
dragging across gravel echoes through the cavern.

They root their feet to the moving floor, their hearts pounding. And, as the corridor slows to a stop, they find themselves staring at a very different figure than what they saw moments ago.
Chapter 8

A Dead Vampire

Hans Streicher puts on a show of surprise and saunters toward Emily and Agatha.

“Oh look,” says Agatha in the same sarcastic tone Emily’s come to acquaint her with. “It’s Superman here to save the day.”

Emily suppresses a laugh.

“Good thing I showed up when I did. You two look like you just saw the Devil,” trills Hans, his grin wide and winning. “Or…a monster…? On the other side, perhaps?” He gives Emily an exaggerated wink. It makes her redden and completely miss Agatha’s sudden scrutiny.

Just behind Hans, another tracker pops out from the tunnel’s shadows. This one’s about a head shorter than Hans with a dark, unkempt mop of hair and a fat, lumpy nose. On the other side of red, his spirit morphs between various ghostly shapes and colors ranging from deep maroon to blood red and on to harmless yellows and blues. Emily can’t even tell if it’s a spirit or shadow.

“Emily, Krantz—Krantz, Emily,” says Hans in an obligatory, bored voice and using his giant serpent staff as a pointer.

“Uh. This is Agatha,” says Emily.

Agatha says nothing but folds her arms expectantly.

After a moment of silence, Hans nudges his friend by the elbow.

Krantz jumps to like he’s just remembered his line in a play. He says proudly, “Have you seen the cap’s latest prize? It’s hanging in the dining hall at this very moment.”

“The cap?”
“Er, Captain.” Krantz throws a thumb at Hans. “Caught this afternoon…”

Emily’s almost afraid to ask. Something tells her Hans’s latest prize isn’t a sight she’ll want to view before dinner. Especially since she skipped lunch. Her stomach growls at the reminder.

“Well? What is it?” says Agatha impatiently.

Krantz opens his mouth to answer, but Hans beats him to it, flashing his pearly whites.

“Since you asked…I was doing my usual rounds above, minding my own business, when I heard a noise. Something wasn’t right in the wood… So, I went deeper in to scope it out. I was in a clearing when out came a vicious beast speeding toward me—”

“Vampire—” Krantz cuts in, in a ghost-story narrator kind of voice, eyes widening and hands flailing. “Caught him with his serpent staff. One point, and the vampire was done!”

Emily gasps. Her heart shoots into her throat, effectively obstructing it from omitting any useful sound.

“It’s true.” Hans rocks from his heels to the balls of his feet and appraises his staff proudly. “He fell like a dead log. I swooped in before he could break the spell and severed his head clean off. I recognized him as the one who’s been lurking around the perimeters since the start of term. He was watching for someone. Probably stalking some innocent girl whose scent he caught on the wind. Happens sometimes, with so many incoming coven members.”

“Who was it?” asks Emily without thinking, earning the narrow eyes of her new roommate. Hans, too, seems to be disturbed by the inquiry.

“Who?” he repeats her question, laughing and nudging his sidekick. But suspicion can’t hide from his thick, check marked brows. “Do you know any vampires?”

She mumbles something incoherent, her mind bent on all the vampires whose heads she’d rather not see separated from their bodies… Lucian, Emmet, Gabriel… Gabriel, who’d climbed a castle wall to rescue her and who’d kissed her nervous lips when she was grimy from having died three days prior. Instinctively, she touches her lips, tears threatening a real attack
right here and now.

Agatha says nothing, keeping a suspicious, narrowed eye on this witch who calls herself Emily.

Hans goes on, oblivious to Emily’s plight. “The head has been cleaned. There’s nothing gor—”

“The head?” Right, he said he’d severed it. Emily snaps up her own head, her eyes widening in shock as she imagines the possibilities. Her voice elevates to the level of her concern and she repeats, “The head? Are you sure he’s…dead?”

“I know it’s hard to believe,” boasts Hans, puffing out his chest in triumph. It reminds her painfully of Gabriel—who’s quite possibly…dead. “Vampires are a challenge—” Another thing Gabriel once told Emily. And Hans goes on with his tale of how, once he’d stunned and decapitated the vampire with his bare hands, he staked its heart with alicorn bone.

“That night-crawler is never coming back, I assure you.”

She’s not listening, for she’s now exiting the mouth of the tunnel and stomping toward the steepled castle. She’s nearly reached the drawbridge when Hans catches up to her.

“You want to see it, do you? Well, I’ll take you right to it.”

Krantz and Agatha trail some yards back.

“It’s true, they’re difficult to kill,” Hans continues. “Only the best can manage it.” He taps a red marble-hilted dagger sheathed in his belt, along which hang several other weapons. Another reminder of Gabriel, who was equally as adamant about killing vampires. Before he became one.

Tables in the dining hall are starting to fill, and the counters populate with its selection of cuisines. A swirl of fragrances from the pizza bar inundates her senses as she enters, inciting yet another growl from her stomach. How she can be hungry at a moment like this, she can’t imagine. Bewitched windows reflect the same emerging twilight sky hanging over the coven. A small crowd huddles at the front of the room.

There are no council members around.

In Emily’s throat, a lump swells to the size of a frog. A small part of her
begs herself to turn around. The part who doesn’t want to see. For once she sees, there will be no unseeing. Reality will be final.

“Well? You can’t stop now.” Hans takes her by the arm. She didn’t even realize she’d stopped walking. “You wanted to see my prize.”

Running to catch up, Krantz cuts in front of them, addressing the small crowd. “Excuse me! Please! Ladies, gentlemen. Make way for the one and only Captain Hans Streicher. Yes, that’s right, the very tracker responsible for this sight you see before you. Make way!”

An amalgam of responses circles the haphazard assembly. They part like a show curtain, ooing and awing as the tracker passes.

“It’s him—”
“The one who slayed the vampire—”
“He killed this monster!”
“He’s so hot!”
“Who’s the girl?”
“He can’t be with her!”

Applause follows them down the aisle.

“Thank you, thank you.” Hans pats the air above his head, his other hand still cradling Emily’s. “All in the line of duty! Now, if you’ll excuse us…” He turns to Emily and, tossing out a grand gesture at the decapitated head, he declares, “That is what victory looks like.”

Emily’s heart stops. Her jaw drops, unhinges, and falls to the floor. There’s no use picking it up because she wouldn’t be able to use it. It seems her bodily functions have stopped working; her body’s been seized, like an engine. And no one in the room seems to exist but her. And the head, which looks as though it could open its eyes at any moment and see her.

Other than the lifelessness, the face hasn’t changed since she saw it last winter.

“Did you…know him?” asks Hans, disgust curling his lips as he chooses this moment to study her face.

It gives her a chill to remember the hair slicked into a ponytail, the silver
chain dangling from his lobe. The devious smirk twisting his crooked lips.

“No,” she lies.

Last time she saw Jace, his voice sounded inside her head when he spoke to her. There was an oiliness to him that put her at unease then. He had helped her escape Lucian’s castle. And it led to her death.

When she was recovering in Lucian’s chambers, she overheard her mentor talking about him:

“Have you spoken with Timmons, My Lord?” asked Emmet.

“Yes—” was her mentor’s drawling reply.

“Then you know—”

“Who Jace works for, yes, I know. I should have figured it out sooner. There were signs…”

“The Devil is cunning, My Lord—”

“The Devil needs her alive,” said Lucian, incensed.

“But—”

“That’ll be all,” said Lucian, dismissively.

Even now, though she’s mulled it over in her mind enough times to be sick of it, Emily can’t decide what it implies. Could it mean, if Jace was lurking the borders of the coven, that the Devil might know where she is? But then she’s reminded of another truth she learned last year. The Devil is Lucian’s father.

“Good thing you got him,” says Emily to Hans, who beams at her compliment. “I mean, he looks…evil.”

Seeing Hans in a new light, she’s not sure what to think of a tracker who can kill a hand of the Devil, if that indeed is who Jace was. Hans mistakes her horror for awe, answering with the puff of his chest and a grin worthy of national recognition.

“Where’s his body?” If it wasn’t done properly, this vampire isn’t dead and merely waits for his body to find his head. She knows at least that much.

“You’re a smart one, aren’t you? How do you know so much about such
vile beasts?”

“Um. My friend was a tracker.”

“I see… Don’t worry,” says Hans, wrapping an arm around her. “As I said, I staked his heart with alicorn bone. This vampire is not coming back. As long as I’m here, you’re safe.” Then he turns to his audience. “You all are. Nothing can penetrate my barriers!”

Another round of applause, and Hans is in his own personal heaven.

She wriggles from his hold. Something else is on her mind, something worse than the Devil finding her. What would Hans do if he were faced with Gabriel…or Lucian? For the first time, she regrets her need to tell the truth, and therefore, the spell she submitted to the coven—the spell to get to the other side of red.

“Emily?” Agatha emerges from the crowd.

“Agatha!” Emily thinks quick. “Where’d you go?”

Agatha flicks her a look that says, who the hell are you to question me? I can go wherever I want!

Emily tries in vain to communicate above her words, jerking a string of nods at the tracker as furtively as she can, pointing behind her spread-out palm, neither of which prove effective. Finally, she grabs Agatha by the arm and drags her toward the door.

“Sorry, Hans, we have to…study—”

She’s sure she hears Krantz’s voice. “She’s not your type, man.” To which the baritone reply comes: “She’s the only witch who can confirm the other side’s existence. Which makes her the best witch here. How is the best not my type?”

Emily’s not even sure she heard it right, this far away and facing the other direction, and of course, Agatha’s violent protests become louder and louder as they approach the door.

But another couple of voices pass her. “What does he even see in her? If she doesn’t want him, I’ll take him.”

“That’s the girl who says the veil of red is a real thing.”
“Ri-dic,” chimes in another, and a chorus of the same follows. “Just wants attention. I heard she was homeschooled.”

Emily pushes through the doors.

“What’s your problem?” Agatha wrenches herself from Emily’s grip, so brutally, in fact, Emily’s arm could be ripped from her socket. A pang of anger shoots through her.

“Ow! Relax. I just had to get out of there. S’not like I really wanted to see you.” Which she only says in anger. “Had to get away from that tracker.”

It seems Agatha does have feelings, however buried they may be. She recoils a little. “Coulda just told me.”

“I was trying to. Sorry.” But Emily doesn’t mean that, either—the sorry part, anyway. Her arm still feels like it’s been detached.

After a moment of collecting herself, during which Agatha regards her with calculating eyes, Emily offers her roommate a half-smile. She’d rather not go back to how it started.

Mages roam the courtyard, coming and going through various openings. Some lounge in the grassy area. A handful sit on the bench around the mermaid. Headmistress Livy observes it all from a high balcony in the admin building, her white robe still as a corpse.

“Let’s start over,” suggests Emily.

“Alright, then.” Agatha speaks as though her words pain her throat. She eyes the entrance to the tunnels, tossing a hand in that direction. “Fine. I think two people in the tunnels is better than one. Less likely to incite…something. I mean, we scared off that first guy, didn’t we?”

“Could have,” says Emily, remembering the first dark figure before running into Hans. “Are you saying you want to walk the tunnels with me?”

Agatha shrugs. “Could be…smart.” It’s not exactly an admission, but it makes Emily feel better anyway.

“The tunnels are…eerie,” agrees Emily, adding quickly, “but nothing’s happened to me like what happened to you.”

It seems Agatha’s had enough heart-to-heart. “C’mon. It’s time for
dinner. I’m starved.”

And the new friends return to the dining hall, both secretly hoping the severed head is gone.

“Let’s go through the side entrance,” suggests Emily, hoping to avoid Hans.

Agatha is cooperative. They cross the short drawbridge over the creek to the main entrance, and sidle over a narrow slate walk around to a smaller, less conspicuous doorway, entering at the end of the buffet line, near the rear.

The crowd is still gathered, though, to the girls’ delight, the mess is being removed.

“Crazy, right?” says Agatha, throwing a nod at the empty pike in front of the stage.

“Yeah,” says Emily, picking up a tray. How she’ll manage to eat now is beyond her. She grabs a slice of taco pizza, then heads for the coffee bar.

“Never had wizard’s coffee,” says Agatha thoughtfully, as though she might decide to try it right now. “Is there a difference?”

“Than what?” asks Emily, slightly ill at ease at the unfamiliar friendliness in Agatha’s tone.

“Never mind.” Agatha rolls her eyes. “What are you doing to your coffee?”

“This? Let’s see… coconut oil, butter, and cinnamon. Wish there was pumpkin—oh, there it is, pumpkin pie spice, which is really just cinnamon and nutmeg and clove and ginger and…” She trails off at the strange look knitting her roommate’s brows together. “What? Haven’t you ever energized your coffee?”

“Uh—no,” Agatha replies firmly, her flat nose crinkled. And she takes her coffee plain, her tray filled with a pile of rice, some strange-looking meat that Emily does not recognize, and kimchi.

“So oo…” says Emily, as they settle at a lone table. “Where are you from?”

“Why?” asks Agatha. And her alarm triggers, calling all defenses to the
battlements.

“Um…Just thought…you know, since we’re going to be living together… we might like to get to know each other.”

Agatha’s guard drops a smidgeon. Her brows are less check-marked, anyway. Her narrowed eyes size Emily up and down, and it’s clear she has questions of her own.

“Filipino,” she finally says, returning to her kimchi.

“Excuse me?” asks Emily.

“You want to know why I don’t look like my mother,” says Agatha in an accusatory tone. “Everyone who meets my mom wants to know the same thing. She’s Swedish. Dad’s Filipino.” She darts her eyes away, as if to conceal anything above the basic facts.

“Oh. I thought you might have been adopted,” admits Emily, deciding it’s best to be honest, even if it’s admitting that she was indeed thinking about it in the first place.

Agatha pauses mid-bite, her face scrunched in what must be surprise. “No,” she finally says. “Never been asked. Not adopted—not that I know of. Used to wish I was, though.” She quickly averts her eyes, as if she said too much.

“Wish I knew who my parents were,” admits Emily.

Agatha stops chewing, her reply coming out muffled. “You’re adopted?”

“I mean, my nan’s a…relative, but I never knew my parents.” She decides it’s best not to inform the girl that her mother is the legendary sorceress Elizabeth Kyteler, who lived when King Arthur made a name for himself fighting magical creatures, hundreds and hundreds of years ago.

There’s a look of guilt on Agatha’s face. It comforts Emily because she was beginning to wonder if this girl was capable of empathy. But her guilt turns quickly into curiosity.

“They died when I was a baby,” explains Emily, sparing Agatha the pain of asking.

Agatha nods, all hostility wiped from her. An awkward silence follows,
and they can almost hear each other’s chewing.

“Where’d you get the scar?” Agatha nods at Emily’s forehead.

Instinctively, Emily reaches for the moon-shaped scar just beneath her hairline in the center of her forehead, thinking only briefly that it is rather a rude question. The scar is light enough it usually goes unnoticed.

“I don’t know,” she says. “I’ve had it my whole life.”

“Oh.” Agatha looks disappointed, like she was expecting a cool story involving monsters and magic. “I grew up here in Bellingham,” she says, answering Emily’s initial question. It makes Emily smile a little.

“You must know the area, then.” Emily’s thinking of the forest above them.

“I know it well enough.” Agatha shrugs. Then something that looks like a conspiratorial half-grin emerges on her lips. To say it’s a grin, though, isn’t quite accurate. Emily’s certain by now Agatha’s lips have never seen a grin. “Enough to know the forest here is…haunted.”

“What makes you think that?”

“The howling…the constant feeling you’re being watched—” Agatha speaks as though Emily should have heard something about the forest. “The disappearances…”

They talk on as the dining hall continues to fill with members, three of whom eventually approach their table. Emily recognizes them from her lessons: the thick, dark girl with the afro, who introduces herself as Marcy; the girl in the form-fitting robe, who introduces herself as Daniella; and a skinny pink-haired guy, who looks as white as an Indian peafowl and as delicate as its feathers. But when he speaks, he’s anything but.

“Saw you drop this at the meadow.” He whips out a wand and hands it to Emily. “By the time I reached it, you’d already gone. I’m Kent, by the way.”

“I was looking for that. Thanks!” Emily stows her wand in a pocket in her robe, supplies them with names, and invites them to sit.

“Emily Hunts?” says Marcy, plopping into her seat like a kid who’s just been given permission to play. “The other side of red girl.”
“Is there anyone who hasn’t heard about that?” Emily’s cheeks burn. “It was just a spell. No big deal.”

“I haven’t,” says Agatha, crossing her arms as if to say she’s waiting for an explanation. “Other than what Hans said…”

“Hans?” says Daniella. “Hans Streicher, the captain of the trackers? Are you going out with him?”

“I saw her with him this morning,” says Kent, as if Emily’s not here. “He was all over her. That man is—”

“Delicious,” interrupts Daniella.

Laughs circle the table.

“You know how many girls want to get in his pants right now?” she adds.

“Someone at this table, for sure,” trills Kent.

Daniella blushes and laughs continue. Emily gets ready to change the subject, but Marcy jumps in first.

“Anywayzzz…The way I heard it…Emily submitted a spell to cross the veil of red, where magical creatures and dead people are supposed to exist.”

Kimchi spills from Agatha’s lips. She looks at Emily. “Is that what Hans meant earlier? You…believe in the other side?”

Emily shrugs. “The coven wanted a spell. It was just…an idea,” she says dismissively.

“Must work, if they accepted it,” says Kent.

“I don’t think anyone’s tried it yet,” says Emily. “Probably got approved for its originality or something. Surprised the captain of the trackers hasn’t tried it, actually.”

“Probably can’t,” says Marcy, popping a grape between her lips. “Student spells are privileged information. It would take a real emergency for the Elders to release something like that.”

It’s the best news Emily’s heard all day. Still, she wonders how everyone knows, if it is indeed privileged information.

After a while, and a lot of questions about the dead, the other side of red,
and Hans, the five of them discover they share the same agenda and common room. Of course, they do. It gives Emily a comfort she hasn’t felt yet since she arrived.

“Every single lesson,” Agatha reiterates for the hundredth time. “Nothing like normal college at all.”

“Girl,” says Marcy, splaying a hand across her plump chest. “You need to get the normal outta your mind. You’re magic now.”
Chapter 9

Manipulation

Next morning, Emily wakes to a pool of drool and Agatha shaking her violently.

“What,” she finally croaks.

“C’mon, we got Manipulation. They’re waiting for us in the common room.”

“Who?”

“Marcy, Daniella, and Kent,” says Agatha in a tone that says Emily should know.

Cool. More people for the tunnels. Half an hour later, they’re at the mermaid statue in the square with the rest of the class waiting for an insight on how to get in.

“It requires manipulation,” says a council member as she approaches from across the square, wand in one hand and sleek black cat in another. “The great thing about manipulation is that very little belief is necessary to master it. It is therefore the easiest branch of magic to master, and usually the first.”

She steps onto the statue bench and faces her class. She’s a short, plump witch who, like the other Elders, wears a silver robe and white hair. Hers is in a wide bun at the back of her head and held together with a flower. She’s a soft chocolate color and wears a smile like a warm blanket. And when she speaks, her island accent comes through like a distant memory about to be completely forgotten.

“I am Mistress Leilani Makamae Kala Jasmine Kameâloha. Howeva, I prefer to be on a first-name basis. A simple Leilani or Lani will do. Some call me Mistress Manipulation.” She strokes her black cat. “And this is Aka. Now. As your agenda says, the class is below the fountains. It only requires a
bit of manipulation to open.”

She pockets her wand and waves a hand at the fountain. The water surrounding the mermaid’s rock parts like the red sea. A door in the shape of a grave opens at the bottom of the fountain. And Mistress Manipulation gestures her class in.

Inside, the cavern is small and dark and very much looks like a forgotten cave one might find in the side of a mountain. Stalactites grow from the ceiling like the sharp teeth of a vampire ready to bite down.

Water drips from the top into a shallow pool, and Emily suspects it’s the distant water she hears from the tunnels. A collection of coins glimmers from the bottom of the pool, snagging the attention of everyone who passes down the natural stone steps.

“Wishes. From the fountain above,” explains the mistress, smiling like a doting mother. “Once you know how manipulation works, you’ll never make a wish again.

“Now,” says the mistress as the students find empty floor between stalagmites on which to stand. No one sits. She steps up onto a natural platform and lets her cat down. “I’ll explain it once. Pay attention because it’s how you’ll get in next time. I cannot hold the door open for you.” Aka sits next to her like an obedient dog.

“Manipulation has nothing to do with manifesting or conjuring or any other branch of magic. It can, howeva, be found in all those tings. It is simply a tool. What you’re doing is manipulating the elements. You’ve all done it at some time or another. Normals do it every day. It’s the magic that goes undetected. If you’ve ever done a simple unlocking spell or turned on the lights, you were manipulating. Even perception uses a bit of it. So! How do you do it?”

Leilani claps her hands like a magician about to perform her first trick. Then she waves a hand at the pool. Water collects in the air to form the image of a face.

“The elements must have in it an eager want—that’s what you create.”

Marcy’s hand shoots into the air and Leilani’s warm smile invites her to speak.
“Erm…how do we do that, exactly? Create a want in…water?”

“Good question. You gotta speak the wata’s language. Appeal to the wata. In manipulation, it’s not about you and what you want; it’s about what the elements want.”

Marcy does not raise her hand again, but the question remains on her face.

At the end of the lesson, students file out in awe, excited, but most of all confused.

“Appeal to the water,” sneers Agatha. “Never heard such nonsense. Can’t you just force it to obey?”

“It’s…different,” says Marcy. “But easier than I thought it’d be.” She whips out her wand and points it at the fountain. The water spouts up like spit from a whale’s blowhole. “Whoa!”

Agatha’s jaw drops. “Lemme try.” She does, and the water rocks a little.

“I can do it,” says Daniella. She points her wand and the mermaid statue winks at them. She and Marcy go back and forth, one-upping each other on their walk back to the common room until finally Marcy blows them all away by making the sasquatch sing and dance like a puppet. And suddenly, the tunnels seem…lighter.

Agatha, however, insists manipulation is stupid and not worth the effort.

And so it goes for some time. Manipulation, magical creatures, and modalitás. Soon, the coven’s blanket spell begins its shift into autumn and students find themselves preparing for Samhain.

“It’s a ritual,” explains Marcy to Agatha one lazy afternoon in the common room. “Witches and wizards all over the world transmute into counterfeit demons to trap the real ones and send them back to hell.”

“I already know mine,” says Emily. It’s the same every year: Number 12 in the *Book of Demons*, the book mages use to identify the demons because no one dare say a demon’s real name, lest they summon the real thing.

“Mages are a suspicious bunch,” grumbles Agatha as the rest of them help her decide on a demon.

Aside from the dying leaves of autumn caused by the coven’s blanket
enchantment, October slips by without much notice. Soon, Samhain décor and event announcements confetti the grounds. Students start coming to lessons in masks and fake blood. And candy can be found everywhere they turn.

One day, Emily and Agatha stumble into the common room, panting from having just run through the tunnels.

The room is occupied by an overflowing handful of mages. Three of whom huddle in a corner whispering animatedly amongst each other. Two ambitious witches hunch over sprawled-out tomes at a table. And one lounges on a cushion on the floor, her head buried in her own book. Emily would recognize the afro spiking out from behind the book anywhere.

“This is just…wrong.” Marcy puts the book down and rolls her eyes at Emily and Agatha, who settle on the floor across from her. She picks up the book again, evidently unable to stop reading whatever it is that’s wrong with it. On the cover, the title reads, *Fifty Shades of Manipulation.*

“Is that required reading?” asks Emily.

“Recommended.” Another eyeroll from Marcy.

“I didn’t know there was a list,” confesses Agatha.

“Me neither,” says Emily. “Where’d you get it?”

“Here, I have one in my room. I’ve read all the books already.” At the flick of her wand, which she drums from the sleeve of her robe, a sheet of parchment appears midair in front of an astonished Emily.

Emily’s jaw drops. “You know *folding*?”

“No,” admits Marcy. “It’s a folding wand.”

“Cool…” says Agatha in awe. “Can I see it?”

“Didn’t know there was such a thing,” says Emily, confused. Charlie would have been all over it if there was.

“There isn’t. My grandad made it for me.” Marcy hands it over to Agatha, who studies it like a specimen in a microscope before flailing it around like a magician on a stage and ultimately pointing it at one of the books on the table. The book disappears and reappears in Agatha’s lap.
“Whoa—”

“What the—” comes from the witch at the table, whose book just disappeared.

With another wave of the folding wand, Agatha returns the book.

“Erm, what is this folding thing, anyway?” asks Agatha, “I keep hearing about it.”

Remembering her roommate has little magical knowledge, Emily explains. “It’s folding space and time so that something or someone can move through it faster, so to speak.”

“Isn’t that sorcery?” asks Agatha.

“It is,” says Marcy. “But the old magi have created magical devices to mirror sorcery—sort of for the everyday witch, if you know what I mean.”

It seems Agatha does not know what Marcy means.

“So…manipulating time and space is super complex,” says Emily. “And way above a witch’s belief level. The old magi enchant products so that we can use their magic.”

“I see,” says Agatha, who does not seem to really see. “Who are the old magi?”

“Generally, mages who’ve had magic in their family for eons,” says Marcy. “Their families have secret grimoires from generations and generations and generations back.”

Agatha nods, making sense of it all. “I dunno about all that manipulation garbage, but this could come in handy,” she tells Marcy, handing the folding wand back to her.

Marcy grins. “It already has.”

“Can’t wait till we can learn folding,” says Emily.

“Yeah,” Marcy agrees, starry-eyed.

But folding is at least another year off, if not two, and usually develops out in the real world depending on the witch or wizard’s skill level. To most, it remains a dream.
It reminds Emily of something she’s been meaning to do. “Excuse me,” she says and tucks into her room, where she digs out her mother’s grimoire from the bottom of her trunk beneath the red cloak, Lucian’s book, and the amulet.

Settling on her bed, she opens the ancient tome to the first page, on which bears the title, *Elizabeth Alice Kyteler’s Book of Shadows*.

“Alice?” Emily mumbles to herself, and she flips through the pages. From what she can tell the book is a collection of spells and musings and findings.

There could be a clue to her father in here… Although, she’s not sure she really wants to know at the moment, not after what Nan told her.

The witch returns to the first spell in the book. It’s a potion, actually. It’s called *Enchantment* and involves a number of alarming ingredients and a disquieting process of extraction in preparation. And since it makes the drinker fall in love with someone he or she does not love, it is a dark spell. Emily moves on, skimming through the ancient ink.

“C’mon, let’s go to dinner,” comes Agatha’s voice. Her head bobs through the doorway, her body following.

Emily tucks the grimoire away and follows her friend out.

When they reach the main tunnel, they find Hans leaning against a square pillar between a badger and mountain lion, his grin stretched ear to ear and his hand casually in a pocket. He runs his other hand through his spiked hair.

Krantz stands at a respectable distance like he’s not sure if he should interrupt.

“Hey,” he says to Agatha, who seems to have backed away for the same reason.

“Hey,” she replies.

“Wanna get a drink?” says Krantz, earning a double-take from an astonished Emily.

Agatha shrugs. “Where?”

“The dining hall, I guess?” says Krantz.

“Sure, why not?”
“Agatha, aren’t we going—”

“Won’t be long.” And she walks off with a very ecstatic Krantz, leaving Emily alone in the tunnels with Hans and his two shadows.

“Looks like it’s just you and me,” says the tracker, not bothering to disguise his delight. He proffers an elbow.

Emily’s interior boils. She wants to strangle Agatha. She does not take Hans’s elbow but walks with him, preferring not to finish out the tunnels alone.

“Tell me, Emily,” he says as they reach the mouth of the tunnel. “How would you like to go out with me?”

Emily chokes on a cough. She opens her mouth, readying herself for a string of reasons why she’ll never entertain such a scenario. But when her gaze catches his, she’s taken aback. She doesn’t want to hurt the guy. It’s not his fault shadows follow him around, is it? He does do a lot of good, doesn’t he?

“Look, Hans. You seem like a nice guy—”

“Why, thank you. I’m told as much…”

“But—I, er…I don’t date, not right now…”

The look on his face is comical. It makes her wonder if he’s ever been declined before.

“I don’t understand,” he says. “You want me to wait?”

“No, don’t wait, please. I—couldn’t ask you to do that. A man like you? You’ll break some pretty girl’s heart.”

“Of course. But, Emily. You’re the lucky one who’s captured mine.”

“You can’t know that, Hans.”

“I know you’re advanced for your level of witchery. I know you know things most witches don’t. I know you submitted the most audacious spell this coven has seen since…well—ever, I think. And if it weren’t for the protection of privileged student information, I’d know your spell by now.”

“How do you know about the spell, then?”
“The Elders are beside themselves. It’s the reason they’ve doubled up on security this year. They’ve long suspected a veil. But your spell is the first proof since… Well, history’s not important.”

“I wonder why no one’s told me.”

“Wouldn’t want you getting a big head, now would they?” He rubs the top of her head like she’s a kid, reminding her of Charlie. Did Hans just insult and compliment her in the same breath?

“That can’t be the reason,” she says, adding playfully, “I’ll thank you for telling me.”

He beams like a kid who’s just been handed a slither pop, a frozen dessert that slithers smoky tendrils out of its package and solidifies the moment one wraps lips around it.

Remembering his way with vampires, she adds, in the most convincing voice she can muster up, “What do I know about those things? I was just trying to impress the council members. Has any of them cast the spell?”

“Not to my knowledge,” he admits, and his expression takes on a troubled look.

“I see,” says Emily. “Well, if you’ll excuse me, I better get Agatha. We have to study.” She walks away without another glance, hoping he’ll take the hint this time.

In the hall, Emily gears up to rip her friend a new one. She spies her roommate at a table with Krantz, laughing and otherwise looking genuinely happy. It’s not a look she sees on Agatha very often.

Emily slumps her shoulders. She’ll do it later and finds her way across the hall and fills a tray of dinner—calamari, crab, and buttered shrimp—and settles into a lone table.

When later comes, however, Emily’s forgotten the offense as Agatha goes on about Krantz during the walk in the tunnels. Until, once again, they come face to face with a dark figure at the end of the hall. This time, it is not Hans.
Chapter 10

Uninvited

The figure vanishes.

“Sorcery,” mutters Emily.

“Which means it can’t be a student,” says Agatha.

And the figure reappears right behind the two witches. Although they don’t know until the hackles on their necks inform them.

“Run!” shouts Emily. They turn around and run right smack into the attacker, who now has Emily and Agatha both by an arm.

Agatha aims her wand at the attacker, ready to duel. Emily wants to hide in a vent like a kitten who’s just been faced with houseguests.

“Em, is that you?”

Emily stops. She knows the voice. She’s heard it all her life. “Ez?”

Esmeralda lowers her cowl and snaps her fingers. The tunnel’s lights fade into the brightness of yellowing warning lights.

Agatha lowers her wand a smidgeon.

Emily throws a bear hug around the woman, tight enough to rival one of Nan’s. “Where have you been? We’ve all been so worried. You haven’t answered any of Nan’s calls or grams—nothing!”

“I know,” says Esmeralda. “No one knows I’m here.”

“No one?” interrupts Agatha. “Didn’t you check in with the headmistress’s offices?”

Esmeralda studies the interrupter, her gaze darting between the two students. “I’m afraid I can’t afford to be seen right now.”

“Then…” Realization comes to Emily as she speaks, thinking of Hans’s
barriers. “How’d you get in here?” She staggers back, taking in the sight of the woman she’s known her entire life, who never before would have let her hair unravel. It seems to be falling apart.

She’s thinner, too, her once strong face sunken and sallow, like it’s seen too many late nights. Which, now that Emily thinks about it, is to be expected. Tears pool at the corners of her eyes. Angrily, Emily swipes them away.

Esmeralda looks at Agatha. “Are you planning to do something with that? It’s not exactly a weapon is it? Unless you’ve mastered manipulation. But, if you have, you wouldn’t need a wand, would you?”

Chagrinned, Agatha stows the wand in a pocket, but not without a little show of attitude.

“Emily,” says Esmeralda. “I had hoped to be able to send you off. I had… business in Egypt…” But she does not look pleased to see Emily. She looks…preoccupied.

And Emily knows exactly why. It was Emily Gabriel was trying to rescue when he met his fate. Esmeralda must blame her, if not consciously, then on some deeper level.

“Listen, Em, I haven’t much time. I’ve come to ask a favor.”

“A favor—of me? Oh...kay.” Unable to imagine what a powerful wizard such as Esmeralda could possibly need from Emily, she reminds Esmeralda that they’re not alone. “Ez, this is my roommate.”

Agatha mumbles her name.

Esmeralda acknowledges her with a nod. Then she scans the walls suspiciously. “Is there a place we can talk privately?”

“We were just headed to our chambers.”

“Tell me where it is. I’ll take us there.”

Emily fishes her map from her pocket and unrolls it. She points at her chambers on the map, exchanging an uneasy glance with Agatha.

“Take her hand,” orders Esmeralda, taking Emily’s in her own. She snaps her fingers. And the three of them vanish.
This is no cantrip of perception. Esmeralda truly removes them from the tunnels and plants them safely behind the locked door of the girls’ diminutive dormitory. Emily’s only known one other who’s capable of such a feat of magic. Lucian did this very same thing on Emily’s birthday last year when he took her through the tunnel of hell.

“Ez…you know…sorcery?”

“I’ve learned some things in my travels, yes.” She lifts her chin in a way that challenges anyone to contradict her next words. “I’m here to get my son back.”

Now Emily understands the nature of this visit, which should be private. No one is supposed to know about the vampire. No one would understand. But she can’t ask Agatha to leave their own room. Somehow, however, it doesn’t seem Esmeralda is too concerned about the other witch in the room. Still, she speaks around the heart of it.

“I have to ask,” says Esmeralda. “Have you seen my son?”

Emily shakes her head.

“I know he’s in the area,” says the sorceress. “Em…the reason I came here tonight.” She studies Agatha for a moment, internally deciding something. “I need to cross the red.”

An intake of breath from the observing witch, who seems to know she should stay very quiet.

“I…can’t,” says Emily, although her thoughts turn to Lucian, who is most likely to be on the other side of red. She settles with a copout. “It’s…too dangerous.”

“I am aware of the dangers,” replies Esmeralda impatiently. “Listen, Em. I’m going over there whether you go or not. I’ve got a spell. I can reverse his…condition.” She pauses, shifting in her cloak, her calculating eye studying Agatha. “Listen…for your placement exam…last year, you submitted a spell…did you not?”

The spell that never should have been shared. How the sorceress knows about it, Emily can’t guess. Esmeralda has been gone practically since the night Gabe was turned. “I did, but—”
“Well then. You can give me the spell. Or you can take me over yourself.”

Emily blanches. And she distinctly hears an intake of breath from her roommate.

The sorceress remains deadpan.

“Oh… says Emily. “Okay…But it’s…dangerous over there.”

Esmeralda smiles, but it does not reach her tired eyes, where desperation and a deep sadness seem to have taken residence.

“Listen, Em. I know the risks. This is my son. I will not stop at something as trivial as danger.”

“But…do you know where to go? The place is crawling with…” Glancing at Agatha, Emily alters her course. “…people like him. Like my uncle. You remember my uncle?”

Uncle Raoul, the biological son of the Devil—part vampire, part demon, and part human. The first and only hybrid of his kind. The demi-demon who sent Emily into hiding when she was an infant.

“As I said, Em. I am aware of the risks.”

“Fine, then you must promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“Promise me you’ll get in touch with Nan. She’s been worried feverishly over you.”

Esmeralda bobs her head and dresses her lips with a gracious smile that does not look like she’s smiling. “Of course. The moment I return.”

Emily finds her journal, the book of a mage that will one day be her own grimoire, like her mother’s. If there’s anything notable in it, she’ll go down in history like her mother. If not, all she’s recorded will be buried with her at her death.

She opens it and Esmeralda siphons the words from the page with one hand.

“One more thing, Em…” Esmeralda rests her palms on Emily’s shoulders, her regard melting Emily’s guilt into oblivion—almost as if a spell flows
through the sorceress’s hands. “I know you blame yourself. It’s not your fault. My son went after you on his own accord. We both know Gabriel’s stubbornness. Just know I don’t blame you.”

And then the sorceress vanishes.

When Emily turns around, she’s confronted with Agatha’s narrowed eyes. “Who are you?”
Chapter 11

*Midnight Snack*

Gabriel was right. He can’t die. The vampire smirks to himself, looking up at the execution hole. From here, all he can see is a square of fire glow. Although *this* isn’t exactly what Gabriel thought he would find when he descended the ladder of the dungeon’s oubliette.

It helped, of course, that Gabriel is still a wizard. He can conjure a manipulation spell in a jiffy. Which is how the gondola found him so easily.

“Unreal…” he mutters. Although he’s known it for some time now, to be down here is a wonder. He’s on the lake, underneath the castle, the entire stronghold floating high above the lake’s surface.

The chill of late autumn sweeps in.

There’s a faint light issuing from every direction in the distance, hints of the thumbnail moon he saw earlier tonight from the bridge. He’s lost his sense of direction, something that usually comes to him naturally.

“Alright, Lucian!” Gabriel shouts at nothing. “Come out! I know you’re here!”

Lucian does not answer. But another sound finds his ears: Animals or creatures scuttling across stone, he decides, looking overhead. Other than the square glow, he can’t see anything beyond the pitch black above. At that moment, the gondola nudges its own oar, stealing Gabriel’s attention.

Not another sound comes, not even movement from above his head. Gabriel is utterly and completely alone.

If Lucian knew where Gabriel was headed right now, he might come out then. He might even try to stop the new vampire. Maybe send Emmet after him. Gabriel scoffs. Emmet would never find him down here. Serves him right for pulling that stunt on the train. It took Gabriel a week to figure out
where he’d landed, then another week to get back to the castle. Emmet was waiting at the gate, his grin as wide as a dump truck.

“To the Bellingham shore,” he orders the gondola, flicking his wrist. Internally, he laughs at his previous ignorance. This is why vampires were always a step ahead of him. He still has his magic. Of course, he does. Why wouldn’t he? It’s not like magic is an inherent gift or something. It was years and years of honing to develop his skill. No one can take that from him.

The gondola immediately embarks on the journey, drifting toward one of the edges of the castle. The scuttling sound returns overhead. An occasional splash here and there, small ones. Still, they’re enough to give the new vampire a shiver, and he tightens Lucian’s cloak around him.

The weak light in the distance brightens somewhat, and he knows he must be getting closer to the fortress’s edge. It’s hard to tell because there are no landmarks or reference points for distance, other than the faded light.

The small, rabbit-shaped island comes into view, and he knows he’s at the front of the castle. Which means he’s headed north, along the longest stretch of the lake.

The enchanted gondola continues, taking the vampire through mist and murk, the only light skewed by clouds hung high above. Its silver light silhouettes the forest on all sides of the lake.

Not a single building dwells on this side of red. On the living side, however, luxury homes and vacation cabins and condos surround the waters.

Finally, the boat turns toward a northern shore.

As he approaches the empty bank—empty on this side; on the living side, it’s the back dock of a lavish beach-front condominium complex—he leaps off the boat effortlessly and walks through the property like he has the right to be here.

He swats at a pair of pixies, and they flutter off in a panic. Some protectors, he thinks sarcastically.

There’s a couple lounging arm-in-arm on a single lawn chair, their legs intertwined with each other’s. Two drunk cupids hover over them. Below, two blue spirit-looking things curl around their ankles. Those are the things
Emily used to think were angels. Though they’re on his side of red, he only ever sees them around living people, as if feeding off them like vampires.

They can’t see Gabriel watching from his side of the veil.

“You are adorable…”

“No, you are…”

“No, you are…”

“No, you are…”

Gabriel wants to hurl.

He’s half tempted to take the lovers here and now just to make them shut up with their stupid happiness. Who in the world are really that…gooey? He shakes off the slimy feeling it gives him. It can’t be real. He doesn’t remember ever being compelled to be so corny.

He suppresses an insistent memory, stifling the image of a girl—the girl…her stringy hair, proud freckles, and her wide, eager eyes, as blue as a midwestern sky.

Pausing, the vampire scrutinizes the couple.

They give him no motivation… Though the fear is there, the couple is not entertaining it at the moment. They smell too…sweet, like a cake made with high-fructose corn syrup. The mere sight of it would give him a headache.

Gabriel prefers his blood the way he imagines every other vampire must, rich and…saturated in fear. Any kind of fear will do. Tonight, he knows where to find just the right kind.

He walks on.

Out of the front gate, the vampire crosses a narrow highway into the forest, where yellow eyes surround him, closing in on him.

He climbs a steep hill, occasionally swatting at a nymph or scaring off a small unicorn, until he reaches a narrow trail and turns in the direction of its incline. The parks up here are cleaner, he notes to himself, remembering the littered, unkempt grounds of Kansas.

A mile or two later—he’s not counting—the young vampire finds what he’s looking for in a clearing deep within the wood, where an unassuming fir
hides just out of the moon’s view, one of many of its kind. No one passing would know what it conceals six hundred feet below ground.

But Gabriel knows, and has known since he first learned Emily would be here. He scoped it out to protect her from those who are like him.

Emily’s here. He knows it, not only because it was her plan all last year. He knows because he can feel her presence. He’s felt her his entire life. That part of him has not changed. Tonight, he’s not here for her. There’s someone else he’s here for. Someone much more tasty…

One so scared of life her blood beckoned him from across the lake and beyond the veil. He pulls the cowl over his head, hiding his eyes as they fill with the red of a parasite’s hunger. He slips through the front tree, easy as witchcraft.

It helps, of course, that he is on the other side of red. No one here can see him, not even the king cobra guarding the entrance. The cobra is cursed to remain on the living side of red.

Only a seer could blow Gabriel’s cover. That would be Emily, the only seer he’s ever heard of. She should be asleep this time of night. If she were to come near him, he’d sniff her out and be gone before she ever knew.

His nose searches the air for the faint scent he’d picked up earlier. Although there are many floating around here that he could go with, he’s looking for the one that calls to him. Like a drug. He craves it, the rush it’ll give him. The salty, metallic flavor that will satisfy his hunger. His mouth salivates in anticipation.

Once he catches the heavy trace, he heads in that direction, across a large courtyard to a tunnel entrance, passing gamboling witches who don’t see him and a couple of spirits and shadows on this side who do see him. They immediately flee his presence, melting into the sidelines like cowards. He’s the one feared on this side.

By the state of things, the coven’s preparing for Samhain. Several witches surround a pit bearing all the makings of a demon trap. A group of witches walk alongside a hovering cage, wands pointed at it in collective effort. Interesting, a cage. Everyone’s Samhain traditions are different, he supposes.

Above the square, several banners hang midair:
Samhain Hosted by The Tavernacle:

Wet Robe Contest – 7pm
At the Fountains
White Robes Only

Demon Counterfeit Contest – 9pm
In The Square
Must be Fully Transmuted to Participate

Samhain Ritual – Midnight
In The Square
Must be Transmuted to Participate

Admission: Free.
Drafts and Brews Provided for Purchase

He can hardly believe it’s already time for Samhain. It doesn’t seem that long ago when he had participated in the same useless ritual. At least he didn’t make an ass out of himself. If they only knew how wrong they are… how wrong they all are…

This is a strange place, even for a coven. There’s something…off about this tunnel he finds himself facing. Good thing he doesn’t have to go much farther, because the girl he’s here for is standing at the mouth of the tunnel, looking right through him at the witches and wizards across the courtyard, the gamboling students huddled around the fire heating individual cauldrons.

She’s kinda cute, he thinks. Not in an Emily way, but more of an innocence lost kind of way. Light, hazel eyes and hair slicked back into a ponytail. Her skin is so pale it’s nearly translucent. She certainly looks the part, he thinks. She knows what happens next. Her heartbeat tells him as it speeds up, seducing him. Whatever her face is saying, she summoned him. Her pumping lifeforce is practically begging for it.

It couldn’t get any easier than this.

“Hello, there…” he says as he crosses the red, lowering his cowl. He
enjoys the progression on her face from discomfort to terror. Power rushes him. He puts a finger to his lips. “Wouldn’t want to alarm anyone, now would we? Someone might get hurt. There’re a lot of young mages around here.”

She nods obediently. It’s too easy. It should be a crime.

It is a crime.

“Tell me, Lilith,” says Gabriel, enjoying the question in her terrified eyes. For he just said her name and they’ve never met. “What’re you afraid of? Them?” He flicks his thumb at the huddle of witches and wizards.

The girl’s too petrified to speak.

Using an emerging canine, he pricks his finger. In a flash, he whips around behind her and snatches her, locking her body in his embrace. It happens in a flash for her. For him, it was a casual stroll as he takes her in, inhaling her intoxicating fragrance.

“Have a taste,” he orders, slipping his bloodied finger between her trembling lips. “It won’t hurt, I promise.” He’s not lying. He remembers the night he was turned.

Her body is fragile in his arms, her mind on the brink of innocence and… perversion.

“Relax.”

Her head falls back against his shoulder, exposing her bare neck, his chosen point of attack. He can’t hold it any longer. He wants her. He needs her. And before another moment can pass, the vampire parts his lips and closes in, his canines piercing her pulsing artery.

Viscous liquid secretes in response, dripping down his teeth and oozing across his tongue in avalanches of warmth. It’s bitter and salty and slightly pewter, and warms his chest like a cup of Alice’s pumpkin steamers.

Delectable, he murmurs in his mind, relishing every drop. And his eyes roll back.

When he’s had his fill, he steps back, and a pang of guilt pricks his gut, subtle, but piercing. Then, just as he’s about to lick his lips, the beautiful moment dies.
Shouts and screams come from behind. He looks up to find the mages chaotically running toward him, slowing on approach as they apparently realize what they’re witnessing.

He was so absorbed in the moment, he didn’t pay them any attention. He probably should have lured the girl to a more private place.

“Hey! What’re you doing!”

“Oh-my-gods! It’s—A VAMPIRE!” bellows a pink-haired witch in a pink robe.

“HELP!” Another witch flails around in circles.

“Hans! Get HANS!” Another barks, apparently unable to decide if he wants to get Hans or stand there and piss himself.

“CAPTAIN!”

“Where are the trackers!”

“NO, BANG THE GONG—THE GONG!” shouts a witch in a shimmering robe and pink belt with somewhat of an air of authority. His hair’s black and swished to the side like it was trampled by the winds of tornado alley. Using the pink-headed guy as a shield, he backs up slowly, darting his eyes every which way so as not to anger the vampire, who simply observes this chaos. Then the witch runs right into a low-hanging tree branch and knocks himself out.

If they only knew a little something about vampires, Gabriel thinks to himself, shaking his head. Then, they’d know they’re not in any danger. Not unless they attack.

The dominating fear at the moment is of the survival variety. Not the deep-seeded survival type, but the fleeting, snobbish kind that only shows its face when summoned by an event worthy of its presence. Like this one. Of all the fears, it is the most alert and useful, and therefore of no use to a vampire. And it’s not very tasty, either. Gabe discovered that following Raoul around.

Raoul doesn’t seem to discriminate between fears. He’ll take whatever crosses his path.
Lights begin to flicker on around them. They’re coming from what appear to be strongholds outside the courtyard walls, behind which mountain peaks soar to heights beyond imagining.

Someone must have heard the shimmering-robed witch because the gong rings from somewhere high above. Gabriel looks up to find a wood-framed stand up on a dark summit, inside of which another witch in a black robe pounds on the gong for his dear life.

They’ve all seen too much.

Gabriel scoops up the dead girl and runs into the tunnel. Halfway down, as the sound of the bell and screams fade, he realizes no one’s following him. Of course, they’re not. No human speed can match a vampire’s. And that’s when it occurs to him. What the heck is he still doing on the living side of red? And, like that, with the dead girl dangling from his arms, he switches back to the other side of red.

He strolls back the way he came, slowing at the scene of his crime. More people surround the tunnel entrance, some of them, he suspects, authority figures. One blonde, spiked-haired male tracker with a silver stud and ginormous serpent-wrapped staff appears. He barks orders at what must be a group of trackers, the thrill of the challenge gleaming in his eyes. It must be the one that was summoned: Hans.

Gabriel scoffs at the naïve tracker. Who has no idea what vampires really are, what they’re really capable of. It makes him almost pity the tracker. Almost.

He turns around to leave the way he came, out the front entrance. But he stops at the sight between him and the serpent-framed tree roots.

It’s the girl he did not want to see.

In the flesh, and just as he remembers: wide, blue eyes, stringy blonde hair, proud freckles plastered all over, and…beautiful in more ways than he can plainly see before him.

He must have been too distracted by the commotion to notice her scent, or feel her presence.

“Gabe?” she asks, eyes widening even more as they journey over him
with increasing horror to the dead girl in his arms, whose head dangles loosely over his forearm.

“Well, if it isn’t the precious little princess,” he hisses. If he hadn’t been a vampire all year, the unctuous tone in his declaration might surprise him. It seems to surprise Emily, whose lips are repelled apart.

Her eyes, however, betray her confusion.

“Don’t you know that’s what they call you? Princess…” he repeats. It’s true. He’s heard it, or overheard it, as no one at the castle, other than Emmet, actually talks to him.

“Who?” she finally manages, however absent the question is, like she’s not really paying attention to his accusation but rather stuck on the monster in front of her.

It tears a hole in his gut. Her expression is a mixture of shock and disgust and…is that pity? Or…could she be hurt? He scoffs. What does she have to be hurt about? She wasn’t turned into a vampire.

He doesn’t need her pity, either. Or anything else from her. He turns his back on his old friend and heads toward the gate.

“What are you…doing?” There’s a plea in her words. She stalks around and cuts him off. Her eyes land on the dead girl. “Is she… Did you…?”

“Don’t worry about it, Princess.” He sneers.

He pushes past her, but not before catching the eye of another girl a few yards away, staring at him. A skinny, sun-tanned girl with dull, dark hair, black eyes, and a flat nose. It takes him a moment to realize she’s most undeniably staring right, straight, directly at him—through the red.

Impossible.

He doesn’t have time to investigate further. The dead girl will wake soon. And it can’t be here.

After a final glance at Emily, he tears himself away and ducks through the clumpy, rooted exit with his winnings.
Emily and Agatha stare at each other amidst the mayhem, each of them knowing the other’s secret.

Hans leads a team of trackers through the tunnels where they last saw the guilty vampire. Council members work the crowd, which must be most of the coven by now, if not all of it. Emily hears and sees none of it. She can’t erase from her mind the image of Gabriel, fresh blood beading down his chin, and Lilith Jones cradled in his arms, dead.

It’s not even the image that pangs her chest, but the distain blazing in Gabriel’s eyes.

Tears threaten an attack. She’s vaguely aware of hands on her arms, shaking her.

“Em! That was him, wasn’t it! Your friend’s son! I heard you call him Gabe.” When Emily doesn’t respond, Agatha says, “C’mon, let’s get out of here,” and leads her by the arm through the chaos to the mouth of the tunnel.

Neither of them addresses the obvious.

“Halt!”

The voice wrenches Emily from her stupor. A tracker, which Emily concludes by his all black attire and belt of weapons, thrusts a black staff across the entrance.

“We’re going to our rooms,” explains Agatha.

“No one goes in or out. Not until the threat has been secured. Captain Hans’s orders.” His gaze remains straight forward.

“Where are we supposed to go?” demands Agatha.

“Members are taking refuge in the dining hall.”
“Refuge?” Agatha sneers. Once they’re out of earshot, she whispers to Emily, “We both know the threat has left the premises.”

Emily opens her mouth to refute, but it’s no use denying the truth. She studies her roommate. It’s clear to Emily now why Agatha was recruited, and then why the two were placed together. Seers are rare.

“Might as well tell me what’s going on,” says Agatha. “I’m going to find out everything anyway. I mean, I suspected you could see—after I learned about your placement spell. Then, when your friend’s mother asked for it, I knew for sure.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

Agatha shrugs.

As they settle into a secluded corner in the dining hall, Emily fills her new friend in on the events of last year. She covers everything, from her mentor, who’d been training her since she was eleven, who stole the knot-shaped locket that Gabriel had spelled to protect her, and who turned out to be a vampire and is now presumed dead after turning Gabriel into one. Only Lucian could have left the knot-shaped amulet on Emily’s window seat—after his death.

Well, it’s almost everything.

She leaves a few things out. Like that Lucian is the First Prince of Hell, and that her mother is the legendary sorceress, Elizabeth, who lived and died centuries ago. That would be too unbelievable for one night, even for a seer.

“Your mentor was a vampire? I thought the things I could see were dark. I’ve never had a vampire come to me. You don’t look the sort—”

“Vampires aren’t what we’ve been led to believe they are,” says Emily irritably. She could do without the twenty questions.

“That…” Agatha begins, treading lightly, sifting through her collection of words purposefully, “…guy we saw. Gabriel…he’s the boy you grew up with? The one who was always protecting you?”

Tears begin to mount, gearing for their onslaught, forcing Emily to turn away from Agatha’s scrutiny.

“I can’t believe it either,” she admits, remembering those sunken eyes, his
sallow cheekbones. The anger pointed directly at her. “If Esmeralda knew…” she trails off, realization drawing in her widening eyes.

“Do you think…she’s seen him yet?” says Agatha cautiously.

“How could she have? I mean, unless…”

“She didn’t survive.” Agatha has a knack for getting to the bottom line.

Emily bolts to her feet. “I have to find out. If it’s not too late. I need my cloak.”

“Which are in our rooms, I’m betting,” says Agatha. “You’re not seriously thinking of going after her, are you? She went to her son, didn’t she? You saw what—what he did to that girl.”

“I have to. Esmeralda’s been my nan’s best friend longer than I’ve been around. She’s family. If anything were to happen to her—” Emily chokes on the very thought.

“You don’t think he’d hurt his own mother, do you?”

“I don’t know what Gabriel’s capable of anymore,” says Emily.

“Well, then, what if he already has?” Agatha’s knack for pointing out what no one wants to admit only invites more tears to Emily’s eyes. “What makes you think he won’t do that to you? You’d be walking to your own death. Pretty stupid, if you ask me. Why don’t you get someone else—”

“No. Way.” Emily blanches, knowing exactly who Agatha means by “someone else”. She imagines a standoff between Hans and Gabriel, the beady eyes of Hans’s basilisk aimed at the new vampire. Emily steels herself.

“I don’t think he’ll hurt me. He’s still Gabriel. Somewhere, deep down, he must be.”

“All right then,” Agatha concedes. “What are you gonna do?”

“I need my cloak,” Emily repeats her earlier declaration.

“I’m guessing the cloak is special or something?”

“It’s enchanted by sorcery, the highest magic known to mortals. As long as I’m wearing it, I’ll be safe, trust me.” Gabriel won’t hurt Emily because he won’t be able to. The truth pits a hole in her stomach.

Agatha gapes in awe. “Magic…I can’t believe I’ve missed it all this
Emily cocks a sideways glance at her friend. “You know, you should meet my friend, Jeb. He’s a normal who’s just now learning magic and I’m told he’s nearly hit wizardry.”

“Wonder if I could do that.” Agatha seems to lose her surroundings and her eyes take on a star-like quality. “A wizard…no one would mess with me then…” Shaking her head out of her reverie, she says, “Can’t you just summon the cloak? I mean, you’ve known magic your whole life.”

“ Summoning is pretty advanced. It requires a lot of manipulation.”

“Right,” grates Agatha. “Manipulation.” And no further explanation is necessary, as neither of them are doing well in the course.

“Okay, then. How’re we gonna get to our chambers? Short of disappearing, I mean. There’s only one way in and out of the tunnels—”

“That’s it… I’ll disappear—” Emily’s thinking she’ll cross the red, but then she remembers. “You’re a seer.”

“We’ve established that.” Agatha furrows her thin brows. “But how are we going to disappear? I don’t know much about magic yet, but from what I’ve gathered so far, disappearing requires some advanced shit.”

“It requires sorcery,” confirms Emily. It does not escape her notice that Agatha slipped in the word “we” when referring to disappearing. “But we don’t need sorcery. We have the other side of red.” At Agatha’s confusion, she asks, “Haven’t you crossed over before?”

“I just found out this summer that the things I see are real. How should I have known I could actually go to them?” At Emily’s regard, Agatha shrugs. “I mean, I didn’t know seeing was even a thing.”

“It’s not,” says Emily. “I thought I was the only one until tonight. C’mon.”

The girls can’t very well disappear in plain view. With the entire coven out, they’ll be sighted for sure.

“I know where there’s a private bathroom.” Agatha leads Emily around the corner from the courtyard entrance. Like several other small buildings, it’s tucked in the shadow of the dining hall. This one happens to be next to a
shack of a building with a crowd of anxious mages toasting wizard’s brew to Hans and his band of trackers. A wooden sign hangs from the rafters, reading: The Tavernacle.

Agatha grips Emily’s arm so hard, Emily wonders if the new witch is afraid she might get left behind.

They scramble past the drunkards, who pay them no mind, and into the bathroom. It’s filled with wooden stalls and hard fixtures. Agatha checks the stalls to be sure they’re alone, kicking each door open like a predator on the relentless hunt for her cowering victim. Her aggressiveness takes Emily aback.

“Uh…Agatha…isn’t this the haunted bathrooms?” Emily had heard someone talking about it earlier this term.

Agatha shrugs as she kicks in another door. “What can any ghost do to us?”

“Depends on the ghost, I think,” says Emily. She looks around. It’s certainly not a place to spend a good deal of time in.

“Clear,” announces Agatha. “Let’s do this. How…do we cross over?”

“It’s simple, really. Only a matter of intent. And belief—that has to be impenetrable. It has to feel…normal to you.”

“Normal?”

“Not like a normal. But natural. Like gravity. You just know it works without question.”

Agatha nods. “Then what?”

“Then we just slip on over.” Emily does so as she says it.

“You’re on the other side. I can tell.” Agatha’s voice is shrill.

“Um…are you talking to me?” A member in an earthy robe, pointed nose, and mouth full of derision had entered the bathroom undetected. She bobs her head around. It’s only now they notice the heavy squeak of the door falling to a close.

“Oh…no, just…erm practicing…a part for a play, yeah…”

Pointed-nose girl seems to be convinced something’s wrong with Agatha.
She shakes her head and slips into a stall.

Agatha closes her eyes tight as Tupperware. She bites her tongue, concentrating like she’s in her own bathroom stall.

“You’re too attached,” says Emily, who’s still on the other side, thinking of a better way. “My mentor brought me over when I first crossed. Maybe I can do that.”

Emily returns to the living, takes hold of Agatha, and crosses once again.

“It worked!” says Agatha, looking around as if it’s all new scenery to her.

A toilet flushes. Pointed-nose emerges from a stall, apparently startled to find herself alone. She stares right through Agatha and Emily at the door, which doesn’t seem to have opened. Clearly unnerved, she skips the sink and eases toward the door, scanning the room on her way out. Then the witch breaks into a run.

The two seers laugh. A pang hits Emily’s stomach, reminding her that none of this should be fun.

They pass the drunks outside the Tavernacle, who are now chanting tribute to their hero, Hans Streicher, the vampire slayer, and return to the courtyard, where the throng continues to frantically hold its breath. Neither of them see the witch in a shimmering robe with a pink belt and dark hair swished to the side like it was flattened by the wind. They don’t see him because he lurks in a shadowed corner.

They don’t see the guy’s shadow slink around his ankles, as he wonders why the girls haven’t come out of the bathroom yet. Nor do they see him surreptitiously slip into the bathroom to scope it out, only to discover that the two witches had to have disappeared. His eyes widen conspiratorially.

“They’re going to be waiting a while,” says Emily, referring to Hans’s drunken fans.

Agatha lets out a half-laugh, but it dies immediately as she’s no doubt anticipating the walk through the tunnel. But with all the trackers swarming the corridors, it doesn’t feel like they’re in the tunnels. Even the beasts seem harmless. The girls scuttle into their chambers and return to the right side of red.
“So, this is the spell you gave that sorceress,” says Agatha. “This is what Hans has been talking about all this time… I never would have thought there was a side to be on. I mean, I thought I was just seeing shit. You know, until I heard about your spell.”

“I should tell you something my mentor once told me,” says Emily. “You know, because you’re a seer.”

“What’s that?”

“’It’s a thin line between this side of red and the other,’” Emily quotes Lucian, remembering his whisper in the night. “’But once you cross it, there’s nothing to protect you.’”

Comprehension wastes no time inflicting Agatha. “They can’t reach you on our side?”

“If you invite them over, they can,” answers Emily.

“How do you do that—invite them over?”

“I think…fear invites them over, or something like that,” says Emily in a small voice. Then, she asks, “You’ve seen…dark things, haven’t you?”

Agatha nods. “Haven’t you? Besides the vampire, I mean.”

“Some, I guess. I was homeschooled, so I wasn’t around enough people—those who attract the shadows.”

Emily observes her friend make the progression from wonder to ah-ha. Agatha bobs her head slowly. “I get what you’re saying. Totally. Every time I see spirits or shadows, they’re following someone around, aren’t they?” Her eyes widen as more realization hits her. “My mother…”

Emily remembers the three shadows that followed Birgitta Nilsson into the dorm room her first day here.

“I don’t think that makes her a bad person. She’s just…fearful, or something. I’ve seen shadows around my family many times. But they don’t tend to stick.”

Agatha breathes, relief making itself plain in her countenance. “My mom’s shadows aren’t always there, either. But usually…” After a moment, she brings it back to the situation at hand. “I should probably go with you.”
“No. I—I mean, I don’t want to drag you into my mess.”

“But I grew up here. I know the forest. I know the trails. Don’t tell me you’re gonna walk the forest alone—at night! Where is this place you’re going to, anyway?” Agatha purses her lips, folds her arms, and lands all her weight on one foot. It reminds Emily of Harper.

“It’s a castle on the lake, sort of.” Emily doesn’t explain, saying, “I need you to cover for me, if you will… Besides, I only have one cloak.” Emily will figure it out as she goes along. She always does.

“Fine,” says the new witch, a little pleased that there’s something she can do. “How long are you gonna be?”

“I don’t know. Until I find Esmeralda, I guess. I mean, I’ll take my phone. It should at least work while I’m in the forest.”

Agatha snorts. “To call who? Phones don’t work down here.”

Emily can’t argue with that. “Do you know divination?”

By the confusion in Agatha’s countenance, Emily has her answer. And so she gives Agatha a quick lesson in the most basic divination.

“If you have no old-magi implements or mirror, water will work. Only problem is, you can’t always catch someone at a mirror or pool of water. Most of the time I divine, I’m leaving a message.” Which is exactly what she hopes to do tonight. But no such luck. They use the bathroom sink, divining to a very ecstatic Charlie and Alice—under the pretense of “just saying hi,” during which they find themselves explaining the nuances of the coven, going on for some time about the lessons and friends they’ve made.

Charlie and Alice must be in the mirror in the foyer. Emily can see the chandelier and a purple cloud that no doubt came from the old wooden wizard announcing Emily’s call. He’s perched on the side, out of her view from this angle.

“How often do you see Hans?” asks Charlie, and then replying to Emily’s nettled “often enough” with “Good. Good. Stick with him, if you need anything. He’s a good guy to have your back.”

Emily, however, can’t see Hans having anyone’s back if it doesn’t involve some kind of glory for him.
“And Samhain?” inquires Alice. “That’s tomorrow. What’s the coven have prepared for the occasion?”

Emily explains the plans, covering all the preparations she and Agatha have done, careful to avoid the fact that, unless she finds Esmeralda tonight, she will not be there for Samhain.

“Very good,” says Nan. “Seeing how we won’t see you on your birthday, I’ll save your gift for Thanksgiving. You…are…still coming for Thanksgiving?” asks Nan, nervously.

“Of course,” replies Emily.

“What about you, Agatha?” says Charlie. “What does your family have planned?”

Agatha seems to have forgotten how to talk.

“Her family’s not meeting until Christmas,” Emily answers for her.

“Well, then. You’re to come here with Emily,” says Nan.

“No, we won’t take no for an answer,” says Charlie when Agatha moves to rebut, and finalizing it with the pounding of his staff.

And, just in case they don’t get to scry on November third, a very red Emily gets showered with an early, and quite animated, birthday song, during the middle of which Harper joins in, panting like she’s just run from upstairs.

Harper does not seem happy to meet Agatha and keeps her greetings short. Finally, goodbyes are shared and Emily severs the connection.

“Surprised you didn’t tell them you’re crossing the red,” Agatha points out the obvious.

“Well, I can’t tell them that. They’d never allow it.” For some reason, although Emily’s an adult, living on her own, it still very much feels like Charlie’s and Nan’s word is law. She’d rather apologize afterward than ask for permission. And even if that weren’t it, she made a promise to Charlie.

But her promise did not include Esmeralda.

Somehow, none of those rationalizations loosen the knot in Emily’s stomach.

But when she thinks of her larger intention, her mind is eased a little. This
has been her secret wish, and now that Agatha knows, Emily’s got someone to cover for her. Lucian must be at the castle—that, she fully intends to confirm.

“Divination can’t work from one side of red to the other. So, it’s only if I run into trouble in the forest. Once I get to the castle, I’ll be safe.”

From her trunk, she fishes out the red cloak Lucian gave her. The material is thick and strong. Yet when she slugs into it, it’s as light as if it floats around her. When she returns to close her trunk, a glint flashes in the light, and her eyes are immediately drawn to the knot amulet that Gabriel once gave her, and Lucian stole.

It could come in handy, she reasons, fastening the necklace around her neck, its blue hue throbbing like a pumping heart. It is supposed to ward off dark creatures.

“Fine, go ahead and walk to your death. I’ll stay here and cover for you,” says Agatha, who’s evidently been watching Emily.

“Thank you,” says Emily. Of course, she does not pick up on the sarcasm in her roommate’s inflection. Wrapped in the red cloak, Emily crosses over and slips out of the room.

The tunnels aren’t so scary when they’re crawling with trackers, even on the eve of Samhain. The lighting is the brightest it’s ever been in here. Must be Hans’s spell. Which helps her fly through without incident. She’ll have to ask Hans what spell he used.

Many have already abandoned the courtyard by the time she flies through it, save for a few curious lookie-loos, half-awake and slumped on the lawn.

Emerging from the unassuming tree in the center of Bellingham, careful not to disturb the cobra, she faces the wood that she walked through with her family just two months ago. And immediately, Emily regrets going alone.

Without the coven’s blanket enchantment, there’s no protection from the elements. The fall air has a bite to it, like the threat of an early winter.

The trees around here are so wide and tall, they serve as a ceiling, keeping moonlight to a minimal stray flicker here and there. It’s so different than the wood she grew up around, a small copse of creaking cottonwoods and maples
and worn, clay paths, all teeming with the vampires of insects: mosquitos, ticks, and chiggers.

Foster, a green-hued fairy who lives in the wood back home in Kansas, once told Emily the trees would talk to her if she could rid her body of fear completely.

She’s no closer to talking to trees now than she was at five years old. In fact, they seem even less available to her. The giant Douglas firs and their moss-covered trunks as wide around as two of the boats she’ll need to cross the river, another fact that now occurs to the witch.

That would have been a good thing to think through. Harper would have a field day with this. She has the walk from here to there to think of the spell she’ll use. Another thing that would have been wise to think through. For summoning anything, let alone a boat magicked by Lucian, requires powers beyond her belief.

She’ll figure something out. Maybe she can pop on over to the other side of red and borrow a boat from one of the lake houses. She can always return it. But then she remembers there’s no crossing over at the castle. Lucian has that part cursed.

Grateful for her cloak, she pulls it snug around her and braves the dark forest. The cloak alerted her to danger before, when the yellow eyes found her at the bank of the Lake Whatcom. It should do the same tonight. Which makes her wonder why it doesn’t when several pairs of yellow eyes appear in the darkness.

But the red cloak gives her a nudge up a narrow path right toward another pair of eyes, this one glowing and silver reflecting back at her.

They move toward her, swiftly followed by a body. An enormous body, caked in matted, wiry fur. As the body advances on Emily, its head slips into a ray of moonlight. And Emily is almost certain she pees her pants.

She screams.

No one can hear her, not even Gabriel, who’s on the other side of the forest.

As he reaches the gondola at the bank, his victim stirs in his arms.
Carrying her is like carrying a light quilt, so light he didn’t bother with vampire speed and used this time to take a leisurely stroll through the wood.

“Relax,” he orders, and his supernatural influence makes it so. “Don’t touch the water.”

“Why?” she asks, narrowing her eyes at the water.

“It’s cursed. A heavy sleep will come over you and you’ll plummet to the floor of the lake and the bottom creatures will feast on your living flesh.”

He drops her in the boat. “Sit.”

She sits, careful to keep her hands away from the ledge of the gondola, and Gabriel takes her across the lake to the execution hole, the hole through which he escaped the castle tonight. The same hole in the floor of the dungeons where prisoners can be forced to leap to their death in the cursed lake below.

With the girl dangling over his shoulder, he climbs the rope ladder to the dungeons, where he drops her. She looks around, but she’s too terrified to really take in the archaic surroundings.

Across the vast round-pillared chamber, a flight of stairs leads up. Between that and the oubliette, through which they just climbed, a jeweled coffin stands erect on a platform right in the middle. He’s studied it to death. It won’t open, and it looks as though it was dug up from the bottom of a slimy lake eons ago.

Abandoning the girl, he heads for the stairs.

Her shouts echo across the cavernous chamber. “What am I supposed to do? Where are you going?”

“Someone will be down to show you what to do.”

“But—wait,” the girl pleads. “I—can’t—” Veins in her neck pop as her body struggles. Red infiltrates her irises, and her incisors cut through her gums like a stake through raw meat. “What’s happening to me?!”

Against his will, Gabriel stops. He turns around, something like what he saw in Emily’s face hits him.

“What’d you do to me?!?” the girl bellows, her face collecting all
the blood in her body.

“Don’t blame me. You’re the one who attracted it,” he says. “You chose fear all your life.”

“I’LL KILL YOU!”

“You might try,” he says, unmoved. Then he kneels in front of her, takes her hand, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. “You’re fine. Relax,” he orders, once more using supernatural influence.

Instantly, she calms, although she has no control over it. Weird. He didn’t think it’d work on a vampire, even an infant one.

“How’d you know my name?” she asks. “Earlier, you called me Lilith.”

He doesn’t answer. He can’t answer. He doesn’t know how he knew. It was only a guess. The name had been floating around in his mind all night.

“You’re…” He clears his throat. “You’re going to be hungry soon. You’ll want some…” He doesn’t finish, turning his head toward a pair of footsteps stealing across the vaulted room.

“Leave her!” the spike-headed vampire orders.

The girl takes one look at the incoming vampire’s massive, brutish frame and turns back to Gabriel, who’s equally as brutish but somehow not as threatening. “I want you. Please. Don’t leave me!”

“Fine. I’ll stay, but you have to listen to Trey.” He rolls his eyes, hardly able to believe he’s going along with this.
Chapter 13

Lennie

No one hears Emily’s scream. A deranged grin stretches the monster’s lips. Its fangs, as dagger-sharp as a vampire’s, point right at Emily. Swinging its hand around, it scoops her into his beastly fist, shaking her as it lifts her entire body into the air.

Her stomach shoots into her mouth just as the beast’s other hand lands on top of her hood, brushing it back. Again, this time on her bare head, running his hand down her head, and she’s forced to look skyward. And again.

Pry as she might, she can’t budge from the monster’s grip. She tries a spell, but it’s no use. She can’t concentrate with all this flailing around. Her mind’s too attached to the preservation of her body.

“Lennie! Put the girl down!”

The beast stops, halting mid-stroke.

“Ah, Roger. I ain’t got no girl,” the beast pleads, thrusting Emily behind his back.

“Don’t be a fool. I can see she’s behind you.”

“I just pet it. So soft…”

“Don’t mind him. He’s harmless.” Roger, who Emily can’t see at the moment, must be talking to her. “Now, Lennie, do as I say. That’s a girl yer holdin’ there. That ain’t no pet. Put her on her feet. Gently now. You don’t want to hurt her like the last one.”

This does not ease Emily; however, she is grateful that Lennie is at least listening to Roger. In a moment, she’s whipped around the beast’s frontside and her feet are reintroduced to the forest floor. She scurries out of reach of Lennie’s long arms, staggering back right into the one she assumes is Roger.
Tightening the cloak at her neck, she flings around to find a softer-looking man about Charlie’s age, with eyes equally as kind, stringy hair combed over an otherwise bald head, and a nose as pudgy as his short frame. At least he looks short next to the wiry beast, yet he’s still slightly taller than Emily.

Lennie starts whining in his own way, sounding like a cross between a lion’s purr and a werewolf’s howl.

“Lennie, hush. You’re scaring the girl. She can’t be yer friend if ye scare her.”

“Friend?” Lennie squats, his giant, egg-shaped head of fur level with hers. She tries not to stagger back, but her heart is in her throat, unbalancing her.

“Tell me your name—friend,” he demands, his great big caterpillar brows check-marked.

“I—I’m Emily.”

“He don’t mean no harm,” Roger assures her a second time. “He likes to pet the animals. He couldn’t tell what you were under that hood. Musta thought you were a cub. There’s a family of grizzlies ‘round here.”

“D-does he play with bears?” Emily imagines the beast cradling a bear like it’s a ragdoll.

“Accidentally killed a brown one couple months ago, trying to pet it. Snapped the poor thing’s neck. Them’re small, anyways.”

Emily swallows.

“Emily is my—friend?” says Lennie, apparently not following the conversation.

Emily nods and almost regrets it as Lennie leaps to his feet and jumps up and down, shaking the ground with each stomp on the soft earth.

“Alright, Lennie,” Roger breaks in, raising his pudgy hands high in the air. “That’s enough. Don’t want no one to know you’re here, do ye?”

“Huh-uh, Roger. No—no one knows we here. Shhh.” Lennie presses a giant finger to his lips. Then he pads over to a maple tree and plucks a branch
from it like it’s a flower in a meadow. Returning to Emily, he hands it to her. Oddly enough, it makes her smile. He’s like a kid—a giant, monstrous kid.

The bramble’s so heavy, it falls to the ground, taking her with it. “Thank you, Lennie,” she says, returning to her feet and dusting herself off. “Maybe you could hold it for me?”

Happy to oblige, Lennie takes the branch of maple leaves, carrying it as easily as if it were a bouquet of flowers.

“She don’t need that, ye big oaf. She can’t carry it. C’mon, Lennie, let’s get ye safe and hidden.”

“Excuse me,” says Emily. “Hidden from what?”

“Why, hunters. Of the magical variety.”

“Trackers.” She’s not asking.

Roger nods his head. “It’s why we’re here,” he explains. “See, Lennie here likes the cooler climate. And it’s easier to hide amongst the evergreens. Lennie can climb, see.”

“But, don’t you know how close you are to a notorious tracker?” she asks, thinking of Hans, who at this moment is on a hunt in the vicinity and in the mood for slaughter. “You’re not from here, are you?” The accent should have told her as much.

“No, Miss. Not exactly here... We originally come from east o’here, and down a little. Went north to Alaska for work on the fishing boats.” He studies Emily a moment, tilting his head in contemplation. “Where about’s are you headed? At this hour, no less?”

“To the lake,” she answers. “Are you familiar with the forest?”

“Oh, yes, very. Been coming through our whole lives. And again now, for the last time.”

“Have you seen anything...strange?”

“Depends on what you mean by strange. If you mean magical, why we’ve seen plenty o’them folks. They don’t bother us none, on account of Lennie’s...er, magical status. I think.”

Or, perhaps his size and obvious monster-ness, Emily wonders. “Magical
“Lennie here’s a sasquatch. Bigfoot, they call him. Although, he ain’t got no magic that I knows of. Up north, they call him the abominable snowman. Or yeti. They don’t mind him much up there. On account of his hard work. Proved himself useful.”

She should have known. Lennie does rather look like a giant, tangled-haired Chewbacca. Like the one in the tunnels. Charlie’s going to shit himself when she tells him.

“You walked all the way from Alaska?” muses Emily. “That’s quite a ways from here. Especially on foot. Too bad you couldn’t use folding. If I had a car, I’d take you the rest of the way—wherever you’re going.”

Roger’s quiet a moment before he answers. “Folding? Yous a witch, ain’t cha?”

“I am.”

“Hot damn, a witch!” he says. “I knew my eyes weren’t foolin me. I saw you walk out of a tree, didn’t I?”

Emily laughs. “Suppose you did.”

“Ha!” he shouts, proving his point to some invisible doubt. “I heard o’folding. I’da liked that. Lennie, though. He mighta got scared. He don’t take too well to nothin he don’t know. That’s when he can get…er dangerous. But, the thought, Miss Emily, why it’s mighty kinda ye. Nah, we’s better off walking. ‘Sides. We’re used to walking, ain’t that right, Lennie?”

“Yep, Rog.”

“That way Lennie stays hidden.” Roger strokes the whiskery stubble on his chin. “You know, if yer going to the lake, you got a walk o’yer own ahead o ye.”

“How far is it from here?”

“Oh, ‘bout a couple miles or so.” The man twists around, gauging the sky. “That way,” he finally says, pointing southeast.

“Ye can walk with us, if ye like. Never know what might be in this here wood, waiting for a pretty young thing like yerself. We’ll take ye all the way
through. No need for the exposure of the road—assuming yer keeping it low? On account of yer cloak,” he explains his assumption.

“If you’re going that way, I’d appreciate tagging along,” answers the witch, earning a nod of approval from Roger. Somehow, she does feel safe in the pair’s company. Even if she weren’t, she has her cloak, which hasn’t yet given her any indication that she’s in danger at the moment. When Lennie had her in his vice grip, the cloak remained limp as a noodle.

“Only wish there was something I could do for you,” she adds, feeling less than adequate.

“No trouble at all, Miss Emily.” He tosses a thumb at the sasquatch. “With him around, ain’t nothin’l’ll bother you. That, I can promise.”

And the three of them trek eastward for a long, long way, following a slightly lesser-beaten path than the one on which Emily trekked with her family. Though she’s surrounded by creeping sounds and scuttlings and the eerie feeling of eyes on her, she’s certain these two will get her where she’s going.

After a while, Emily becomes convinced a number of eyes—several pair to be sure—are the same eyes that she saw when she emerged from the coven gateway. Maybe it’s the way they’re moving, alongside the trio. Whatever it is, whoever these creatures are, there can be no doubt that the eyes are following them.

Lennie, somehow sensing Emily’s anxiety, slows his step to keep pace with her. “Em-a-ly,” he says, childlike. “Lennie keep you safe. Ain’t that right, Rog?”

“Right, you is, Lennie. Just don’t do nothin the girl don’t want.”

“It’s okay,” says Emily. The bigfoot is kind of growing on her.

Her new sasquatch friend scoops her up once more—gently this time—and rests her on one of his shoulders. One hand serves as a backrest. The other takes hold of her ankles, as if a precaution, should she tumble off.

Once again, Emily’s pumping heart is in her throat. She’s never much cared for heights. Still, she’s probably safer here than on the ground. Those pairs of eyes that have been following her can’t reach her up here anyway.
“So, what brings you to Bellingham?” asks Emily conversationally, trying to keep her mind off the distance between her and the ground.

Lennie answers first, excited as a kid with a new puppy. “Yeah, Rog. Teller. Teller ‘bout the land—”

“I will if ye gimme two seconds. See, a friend o’ mine sellin’ us a patch o’ land—S’why we went up to Alaska for work. Them fishin’ boats got us a good amount o savings.”

“Rog, teller what we’s gon do up on that land. Teller!”

“Wouldye shut up long enough to let me speak?”


“See, a guy we knows, he said it’s all a pipe dream—we ain’t gettin no land. Sure can’t wait to call him up when our house’s built. Yep, we’re gonna have a house—with a room for each of us. Lotsa animals. We’ll have a cow for milk. And some hens for eggs. We just gon live off the land in peace. Just me and Lennie. Ain’t no one gon bother us up here, see…”

Roger continues on for at least a mile. Emily tries to imagine this giant sasquatch living inside a house. It’ll have to be huge, like a big barn or a hangar.

After a while, the path comes out to an empty, two-lane highway, and they stop. Across the road, there’s a small beach park between two condo complexes.

“Tell me, Miss. Whatchu want with the lake, anyways?” asks Roger.

Lennie sets Emily on her feet gently. She bows a thank you.

“Do you know about the veil?” she asks.

Roger scratches his head. “Ye mean, like the afterlife n’all that?”

“Not exactly.”


“You know it!” she says to Lennie.
The sasquatch drops himself to his bottom, curls his knees to his chest, and starts rocking back and forth, repeating, “Lost. Can’t. Lost. Can’t. Lost.”

“I don’t believe it,” says Roger. “This is exactly how I found him.”

Emily studies the Yeti.

“I took him with me, see. Showed him how to catch food and find shelter. And he ain’t been this way since. Now, of all times, to return to that. I don’t know what it means.”

“Do you know the veil, Lennie?” asks Emily. “Are you trying to get to the other side?”

Lennie shakes his head, dumbstruck and repeating, “Lost. Can’t. Lost. Can’t…” and so on.

“Don’t worry ‘bout him,” says Roger, although his face carries enough worry for the both of them.

“Is he from the other side of red?” she asks.

“I don’t know nothin’ about no red, but yeah, something like that.”

“I was thinking…” says Emily, coming back to the reason she asked the question in the first place. “The other side…it might be…safer for someone like Lennie.”

“Safer?” repeats Roger.

“I mean, trackers wouldn’t be after him. They don’t cross the red. Or at least they don’t seem to know how. Most people don’t even believe in it.”

“Alright then.” Roger strokes his goatee. “Erm, assumin’ there is this other side. How’s we to get to it?”

“I can help you with that.” Emily proffers a hand.

After a long moment of contemplation, Roger does nothing until Lennie first takes Emily’s hand, swallowing it with his own. Then, it seems Roger doesn’t want to be left behind. Red flashes so swiftly, if they didn’t know it was red, they’d miss it. Roger, in fact, did miss it.

Lennie looks around, apparently recognizing the fairies and nymphs and stillness.
“You’ve been here, haven’t you?” asks Emily.

Lennie nods, a big grin plastered on his wiry face. Roger, however, wears no grin, and instead looks at Emily like she’s just performed a miracle. Which is what magic seems to a normal anyhow.

“There may not be trackers over here, but there are other things…a yellow-eyed beast. But I think they might meet their match with Lennie.”

“True,” says Roger, unconcerned. They’ve run into bears, after all. He looks around in wonderment and curiosity. “I knew there was fairies and things, but…” He trails off. After a good long exploration, Roger finally speaks again. “So, what is it you’re doing over here?”

“I…have to get to a castle in the middle of the lake.”

Roger takes the news well. He’s just crossed the red and can now see fairies and nymphs and other creatures of fairytales. He nods, as though a castle in the middle of the lake is as normal as a sasquatch.

“I’m going to summon a gondola.” It’s not a total lie. She simply omits the part about not knowing exactly how. Besides, she has years of training from Lucian. How hard can it be to summon a thing that’s been magicked and protected by dark sorcery?

Roger nods, again as though summoning a gondola on a lake in the pacific northwest is just another thing to do. “We’ll wait with you, then. No reason to leave you alone out here, even if it is on the safe side.”

“Thank you,” says Emily, who has no interest in being out here alone, cloak or not. Having a bigfoot on her side is a welcome comfort. Just as it is a comfort to know the bigfoot is safe from trackers like Hans. And then, as though they’ve been waiting for the right cue, the yellow eyes she saw earlier emerge from the forest shadows.
Chapter 14

The Enemy

The heartbeat reaches his ears before its owner climbs to the top of Rabbit Island, the island that’s shaped like a rabbit and sits in front of the castle drawbridge. The blood, he smelled miles away from clear across the misty lake. The other fragrance he’d know anywhere.

The woman is shrouded and hooded in a dark cloak. In her wake, a bold moon crouches low over the lake. No one stops her as she storms through the gate and across the flagstone courtyard, although a couple of figures begin to approach, only to cower away.

She will not turn around this time. The determination is in her walk as she crosses the drawbridge and infiltrates the castle grounds. Gabriel dims the light in Lucian’s chamber.

Thanks to his supernatural vision, he can see every detail from here, even beneath the incoming visitor’s hood. He could be in her face in a nanosecond, if need be. But there doesn’t seem to be a need. Nothing issues from her staff. There’s no incantation on her lips. People simply melt off her path. It doesn’t surprise Gabriel, for his mother carries a command that can rival any prince of hell, even Lucian.

As she stalks across the courtyard, she smooths a palm around the scryer at the tip of her sleek white staff. From deep within the marble globe, it speaks to her.

The vampire doesn’t move from the window frame, his glare following Esmeralda all the way across the square. Until her eyes catch his.

She stomps up the portico steps and disappears beneath the cover.

Now that she’s seen him, she’ll cast a tracking spell to locate this room, seeking answers he won’t give her. She’s wasting her time. And risking her
Gabriel returns to his task at hand: searching Lucian’s chambers.

It’s the room in which he’d once come to rescue Emily. As his gaze lands on the charcoaled hole in the back wall, he’s immediately taken back to that night when he stepped through and chased the aged vampire down the torch-lit, narrow passageways to the dungeons, where Gabriel met the fate he lives today.

Nothing’s changed in here since that night. The giant, four-post bed takes center stage. The window overlooks the courtyard, and French doors open to a wide balcony. Of course, nothing’s changed. Lucian died that night. He jumped right through the execution hole and plunged to his death in the cursed lake.

Or so Emmet says. Gabriel was dead on the ground when it happened.

Something catches his eye: a movement in the corner.

But when he looks, it’s just a wardrobe. The door creaks ajar—as though someone just opened it and then fled. He scans the room to find he’s alone. But his keen ears zero in on his mother’s footfalls drawing this way from the bridge.

He opens the wardrobe to find a single garment: a hooded cloak, thick and dark. It looks like the one Lucian wore—the one he was wearing the night he turned Gabriel. Either this is a second cloak, or…

Lucian’s been back to this room.

Once more, Gabriel scans the chamber, almost expecting the First Prince of Hell to jump out of nowhere. When Lucian does not come forth, the vampire shrugs out of Raoul’s leather jacket and slips into the cloak. Lucian will have to find him if he wants his precious cloak back.

It’s surprisingly light for the material. The immediate sense is…one of power. He could get used to this. Perfect timing, too, as his company has just entered the antechamber next door. She doesn’t stay there long and moves into Lucian’s chambers.

She calls his name.

He tightens the cloak around his neck, pulls the cowl over his head, and
tucks away in a shadowed corner. The less she can see of him, the better.

He, however, can see perfectly clear.

“Gabriel?”

Silence. He’s not telling her anything.

“GABRIEL!” shouts Esmeralda, loud enough to alert all the dead in the vicinity.

And, like a kid who’s just been called by his middle name, he slips into the light.

“Gabriel,” she mutters. He knows what’s coming next. The same thing she’s said every time defeat has rendered him momentarily lost. “My favorite boy in the whole universe. My angel.”

“I’m your only boy, Mom,” he says reflexively, almost enjoying the familiar exchange. Almost. But this isn’t one of those moments. This is his permanent reality. “I’m not a child anymore. You shouldn’t’ve come. This is no place for you.” His words push her away, as they’re meant to.

“No,” she agrees. “It is no place for me. But you’re my angel. You always will be. Whatever happens…”

He turns away. If she knew what he’d become, the relief on her face would dissolve into disgust, or worse, disappointment. It’s not something he’s prepared to face today.

Like the proud and strong wizard his mother is, she jets out her chin and circles around to face him.

He gives her a sideways glance, heightening his posture to peer down at his mother.

If she wasn’t angry a moment ago when she discovered him here alone, sunken and lurking in darkness, she’s angry now. In an instant, her eyebrows sharpen into lightning bolts and sparks fly from her fingertips. Although he’s the killer, a shiver rushes down Gabriel’s spine.

The sparks are new. He’s never seen her fingertips produce those before.

“It’s true,” she answers his unspoken question. “In my travels overseas, I’ve learned some things. My skills have…advanced to the level of sorcery.
Which makes me superior to any vampire’s supernatural gifts.” The last word, she spits, as though such gifts should be earned in the way sorcery is earned.

She steps into a sliver of moonlight, illuminating her bronze face. It looks tired and worn, like she hasn’t slept in months. The mother he knew would never have let her hair unravel.

“Overseas?” It’s all he can think to say.

“Egypt,” she answers. “I have contacted the gods.”

“You have…access to the gods? How?”

“There’s time enough to teach you what I’ve learned. For now—”

“Do you mean the Egyptian gods?” The enemy to the Hunts’ matron goddess, who he and his mother have always supported.

“Yes, son. Marduk—”

“The Babylonian god,” corrects Gabriel. “Thought you were in Egypt—”

“They are one and the same. In Egypt, he was the father of the gods. He’s here alone…he taught me some things…like how to reverse vampirism.”

Gabriel’s mouth spills open. “The only cure is alicorn blood, given willingly.”

“It’s simple wizardry, really,” she contradicts. “Powerful, but simple. There’s an old Egyptian spell—a blood spell—created by a god. I believe it was the same god who inflicted vampirism on the human race…Not Marduk, but another…” she trails off, her gaze apparently reading whatever Gabriel’s expressing. “What?”

Gabriel studied the gods at the tracker academy. They were an ancient menace with more technology than they knew what to do with. “Mom, the gods—if you really were in contact with one—they’re not known for giving away their knowledge freely. What does he demand of you?”

His mother shrugs as if it’s no big deal. “He’s returned to find someone. I promised to help him.”

“How can you make—”

“Never mind, son. I have it well in hand. I know sorcery, you’ll recall.”
His mother raises herself to full height and he’s sure the atmosphere around them darkens. Although she’s a head shorter than him, it very much feels like she’s peering down at him. It puts an end to his line of inquiry.

“Is that why you went to Egypt? For the blood spell, I mean.”

“Not entirely. I was looking for your father.” Probably at his expression—which he fears might betray his inner hope—she adds quickly, “I didn’t find him.”

Of course, not. Why would he turn up now of all the times in his life?

Mothers have ways of reading their kids’ minds, no matter how grown the child is. “It’s not because he doesn’t want to. He’s—”

“At war, I know. He’s been at war my entire life. Tell me, Mother, which war has he been fighting for the last twenty-two years? Who does he fight for? Which country would keep him detained for so long? Do you even know if he’s still alive?”

“He lives, my son, that I know for sure. See, it’s a peculiar situation—”

“Even if it were true, he wouldn’t be the man you once knew if he’s been killing all these long years.”

“No, probably not. But, he’s not...affected by death like we are.”

Gabriel’s mouth stops halfway from opening. She speaks of his father like he’s a god or something. Only the gods can escape humanity, however human they were once known to be.

But that’s a stupid idea. It would make Gabriel a...demi-god? An absurd idea.

“I assure you, my son, your father has seen every milestone in your life, and watched proudly.”

“Has he?” The idea of gaining his father’s approval sparks a weird feeling in his chest. It’s not a familiar feeling and makes him uncomfortable and anxious. He wants more of it. And none of it at all.

Without so much as a word, he turns around and storms out of the room through the antechamber, his new cloak billowing in his wake. He slams the double doors open with an effortless push and disappears around the corner.
Esmeralda should have known better than to mention her son’s father. Nevertheless, she wastes no time dwelling on her mistake. It would be unbecoming of a new sorceress to do so.

The cool fall air has a wintery bite to it. It nips at her nose as she follows Gabriel out onto the bridge.

The bright silver moon, full and low, seems so close she could reach out over the stone railing and run a finger across its cratered surface. It would be easier to reach the moon than her own son, who has now stopped walking and turned around to face her a couple of yards ahead.

“You’re too late! Whatever spell you have, it won’t work! Sorceress or not, you can’t help me.” Gabriel turns his back on his mother and continues across the breezeway.

It is very difficult, if not impossible, for a mother in a healthy mind to turn her back on her son. Esmeralda is in no healthy mind, and hasn’t been for some time. And, despite that, she stays planted where she is, speaking in a whisper so soft, Gabriel, vampire that he is, endowed with supernatural hearing, must turn his ears to make out her words.

“You’re right, Son. It won’t work. All across the vast spectrum of the healing arts, throughout each and every distinct branch, there remains but one thing in common.” She feels his undivided attention, even if she can’t see it beneath his cowl.

“It must be your choice,” she says. “It is the only variable in any healing spell.”

As Gabriel turns, the moonlight spills in from between the pillars, gifting Esmeralda with a clear view of his sallow, darkened features. The circles surrounding his eyes are so dark and sunken she can barely make out the green that once shined brighter than stars.

Gabriel pauses, his hands flat on the wide, stone railing. “I—I’m fated to remain here. Stuck. There’s nothing I can do!”
“Gabe—”

“NO! I won’t have your stupid healing. If you insist on staying here, do yourself a favor and lock yourself in the tower. It’s the only safe place in this palace. You don’t want the vermin in the dungeons to know you’re here.” And as he says it, it seems to occur to him. A vampire would already know she’s here.

Without preamble, he throws her over his shoulder and whips through the castle faster than a mountain lion. Next thing she knows, she’s in a circular room she can only surmise is the tower he spoke of.

There’s a giant four-post bed curtained by an elegant sheer blue material. Narrow windows high above filter in the garish moonlight. The two wide wooden doors are opened, one to a balcony and the other closing behind Gabriel as he leaves her alone in the circular room.

“Don’t bother magicking your way out,” he shouts through the heavy door. “The room has been spelled by a sorcerer.”

“Of course,” she grates to herself. “Lucian.”

But her son forgets, she too commands the power of sorcery.

* * *

Gabriel can’t believe it. He flinches, halting halfway through his wide stride. At the other end of the bridge, his mother manifests out of thin air. And she looks angry.

“How—”

“I told you, son. I know sorcery. Learned from a god older than your precious prince of hell, older than sorcery itself.”

He says nothing, feeling an unsettling sensation in his gut as he begins to see his mother in a new light. She might just know more than he does. And maybe even more than the First Prince of Hell, although that is quite unlikely. Six months of study under a god is hardly a substitute for centuries of practice.
“Listen, Gabriel. If you don’t want the cure, fine. But you don’t have to hide away. No one knows about your…accident. No one who would do you harm. You can easily pick up—”

“Where I left off? You think I can track vampires now?”

“A career change wouldn’t be a bad idea,” she suggests. But he can hear the doubt seeping through.

“No, Mom. You can’t convince me. I—I’ve done too much—” He averts his gaze. “You have no idea what I’ve done.”

“Enlighten me.” Her voice is no longer comforting but commanding, willing his mind to obey. Softening her voice, she adds, “Tell me so I can understand.”

A cool breeze stirs the stubble along his jaw. He lowers his cowl and allows his mother a good long look. This ought to scare her off. But he doesn’t see scorn in her countenance, or the disappointment he had feared. What he sees is worse.

Compassion, undeserved, is much worse.

Or pity. He can’t tell the difference. Instantly, his chest heats to a boiling point and plummets into his bowels, where guilt wraps it up and spits it back at his mother.

“Fine. But you won’t like what you hear.” He doesn’t need her pity.

“My darling son. Nothing you do could ever scare me away.” This time there’s comfort in her intonation, inciting his body to relax, to trust her. How is she doing that?

“Not here,” he says, sighing. The last thing he wants is anyone in this place to know his struggles. He leads his mother into the west wing, through Lucian’s antechamber, then his office, and into the room where she first found him, where he was headed before she escaped the tower.

Once the door’s closed, he explains. “No one ever comes into Lucian’s chambers. And not even vampires can hear behind these walls.”

“Lucian’s?” She looks around as if for the first time, her brow arched in marked curiosity. Then it seems she remembers why they’re here. “Well, we’re here. Tell me, son.”
Without warning, his confession explodes like a cinder-cone volcanic eruption.

“I’ve killed, alright! Violently. Without remorse. Without a care! I’ve stolen lives. Taken the last breaths of the innocent! Is that what you want to hear?”

Esmeralda listens as patiently as only a mother can.

Gabriel draws a long breath, his speech quiet at first, then increasing in intensity as he goes on.

“I’ve ripped heads from their necks. I’ve felt their flesh tear in my hands. Listened with pleasure as I tore apart sinews like pulling on string cheese. I’ve stopped beating hearts in my hand—heaved heavy blades right through their center. I’ve heard the cries of innocent victims—seen the pleas in their eyes as life drifted from them. Their life that I stole!”

Gabriel drops to his knees, the burden too heavy. And he sobs. “I can’t go on…I shouldn’t. I don’t deserve—”

“But I thought…” There’s a shake in his mother’s voice. He was right. She can’t take it. He keeps his gaze down. “You kill…them? I thought… Don’t you turn them?”

Shaking his head, he eases his gaze up to meet hers. “You don’t understand, Mother. Don’t you see?” In an instant, he swoops up so that his scowl stops inches from her startled face, his lips curled to reveal his dagger-sharp incisors.

“I’m not talking about the living. They don’t die. I did these things when I was alive. It’s vampires I’ve done these things to. And monsters and all manner of magical creatures! Over and over and over, I’ve killed and killed and killed—and I loved it! I celebrated their torturous deaths. And I was celebrated for my murders! I did this to me! It’s my fault.”

Tears pool in Esmeralda’s eyes. She brushes a stray sandy lock from her son’s forehead. “My son. I think you are confusing blame with responsibility. The good thing is your intellect knows. Now, if we can bring awareness to your soul, you will be free.”

He pauses, jerking away to study her like she’s just spoken Greek. Must
be some sort of sorcery she speaks of. Gabriel is no sorcerer, and he doesn’t have the patience to figure out her stupid riddle.

“No, Mother. You’re not hearing me. All that time I’ve killed. I was wrong. Vampires are not the enemy! You are!”

And he shovels his mother over his shoulder, as easy as if she were a bag of cat food. And, once more, he breezes through the castle, this time instead of going up to the tower, he follows the serpentine stairwell to the dungeons, where the execution hole waits for its next victim.
Chapter 15

Training

Gabriel dangles his legs over the edge of the execution hole, his mind bent on his mother. There’s a weight in his gut, forcing his mind to acknowledge that he might regret his actions. But it’s too late. The damage is done.

The glow of firelight surrounds him, though there is no fire visible from his vantage point. The fire is behind the wall across the expanse of the dungeons.

“The bottom-creature—” Emmet’s voice comes from Gabe’s other side. “It’s no mere lake serpent, as you know. Once a human prince, it was cursed by a goddess and transformed into a being even worse than the dragon beneath Mt. Baker.”

Gabriel grins darkly, his gaze stuck on the pit of black. “What? You think I’d jump?”

Some distance below, a small glow floats over the black waters. The gondola. A piece of hope in the vast lake of death. Right where he left it.

Emmet shrugs, dropping himself next to Gabriel, dangling his own legs off the ledge.

“Leave me.” This has been a regular place to be found for some time. Gabriel doesn’t even smell the brimstone anymore, or hear the cries from around the fire-lit wall across the chamber.

“What’s the deal with the cursed lake, anyway?”

“Security.” When Gabriel looks up, Emmet adds, “Keeps his prisoners from running. And protects him from his enemies.”

“Bet he has plenty of those.” Gabriel sneers.

“The brilliant thing about the curse is that no one can cross the red while
over the lake. There’s no escape.”

Gabriel wonders who the Prince of Hell would want to keep locked up in the palace… “The people in here…?”

“They are free to come and go. They stay because they choose to serve the prince.”

Gabriel shakes his head, unable to understand a world in which anyone would want to serve Lucian.

“What’s the deal with you?” Emmet interrupts Gabriel’s thoughts.

“Lucian had to have landed on the gondola,” says Gabriel, having mulled it over in his mind countless times.

Emmet seems to find Gabriel’s puzzle humorous. “Be careful, one might mistake you for… wanting the prince’s return.”

“Stop calling him that! He’s just Lucian, vampire. Nothing more. And anyway, tell me where he is, because I know he lives! Even if the gondola weren’t there, the cursed lake can’t kill a vampire, can it?” Gabriel tilts over himself, peering over the edge, as if he wants to test out his theory.

“Careful, boy,” hisses Emmet, and for a moment he sounds exactly like the so-called prince. “You wouldn’t want to find out you’re wrong.”

“Might as well. What else am I doing here?”

“Have it your way.” Emmet leans back to perch on his outstretched palms, like a sunbather sitting at the edge of a pool. “Besides, I was alive that night. There can be no doubt that he landed in the water.”

Gabriel suppresses the urge to rip that smug expression off the other vampire’s sallow face. “Whatever. I know he lives.”

“Alright, assuming Lucian survived. Where is he, then? Why would he leave his own palace?” But Emmet does not meet Gabriel’s eyes.

“Who knows the mind of such evil?”

“Seems your mind is the only one bent on evil,” retorts Emmet. “Vengeance. Self-pity. Fear.”

Gabriel sneers. What does this guy want? Why does he keep showing up? Is he keeping tabs on Gabriel for his so-called prince?
“Lucian isn’t merely your prince. He’s your sire. A sire is not so easy to walk away from.”

*Lucian*… Gabriel sneers inwardly, although he’s not good at concealing it and it comes out in a growl, low and guttural.

“Watch your thoughts, padawan.” At the look on Gabriel’s face, Emmet adds, “What? I did my research. I gotta know, though: why *Star Wars*? It was way before our time. And mine.”

Gabriel shrugs. His mom once told him it was his father’s favorite. “The closest to reality,” he told her. But Gabriel isn’t sharing all that with this guy. He does give Emmet something, though. “It’s all I wanted to play. I had every lightsaber.”

Emmet chuckles under his breath. Gabriel doesn’t look, but he can feel the movement next to him. Across the chamber, the fire cackles, its glowing shadows dancing on the dungeon walls.

“What do they do in there?”

Emmet sits up and follows his gaze toward the opening, through which the actual fire burns unseen from them.

“Training,” he finally answers.

“Like the training Raoul gave me?” Gabriel remembers that curly-headed brute of a vampire’s so-called *rules of the game*, as he’d called it.

“Whatever Raoul taught you, I wouldn’t call training.” Emmet jerks a nod toward the wall. “You’d be more accurate to call what they’re doing graduate training.”

Gabriel’s intrigued. Still, his question comes out in a smirk. “For what?”

Emmet shrugs. “Confrontation, you might say, or maybe just life on this side,” is the vague reply. It’s clear the seasoned vampire has no intention of elaborating.

Gabriel throws a hand at the gods. “Why can’t anyone here give me a straight answer? I’m stuck here, aren’t I? I’m going to find out eventually.”

“I told you on the train. No one will tell you how this world works. You must figure it out for yourself if you want to live a life worth living.”
“What would be worth living for on this side?” When Emmet responds with nothing more than a look of disappointment, Gabriel selects another question. “Why, then, won’t anyone tell me?”

“Good question.” Emmet sighs. “If I had to guess, I’d say it’s because no one really knows. Even those who seem to figure it out. They still don’t know what they’re doing, do they?”

It’s too slippery an idea for Gabriel’s rational mind to get a good grip. “What’s this confrontation they’re preparing for? Who’s getting trained? Who’s doing the training?”

“Hold on, Cowboy. You don’t even know what you’re asking. You can get the answer for yourself…” The vampire gestures another nod toward the “training.” “Everyone here goes through training one time or another.”

Gabriel shakes his head in utter frustration.

“Suit yourself,” says Emmet.

Then the new vampire throws on a grin and a fire in his eyes. “Don’t mind if I do.”

He stands, turns to face Emmet, and very much enjoys the horror creasing his companion’s forehead. Then, he steps backward off the ledge and plunges toward the cursed lake.
Chapter 16

The Vampire

Emily was wrong about the yellow eyes that have been following her. They’re not several of them. But one creature, much closer to her than she thought they were, whose body comes with twice the number of legs as the real yellow-eyed beast.

A spider as tall as her seems to have Emily locked in her silky stare.

Roger has lost all color. Lennie leaps onto a boulder, the look of an elephant who’s seen a mouse distorting his face.

This isn’t the first giant spider Emily’s ever encountered. There are plenty of those in Kansas, which tend to come in an ugly furry brown with dark beady eyes and scurry away at the sight of her.

This one’s the most beautiful spider Emily’s ever seen, painted in a sleek and bold cobalt and marked by a yellow diamond on her back. It stands as brazen in the middle of the forest floor as if it owned that patch of earth and anyone who wants to cross must pay her in blood.

“Good evening, Miss Emily,” says the spider in a female voice so elegant and regal Emily feels she ought to bow or curtsy or something.

“We’ve been wondering when you’d walk through the fir tree.”

“Me?” asks Emily. The spider must be mistaking Emily for her mother. The witch staggers back a step, nearly tripping over a rock rolling from beneath her heel.

“Lennie!” shouts Roger. “The girl! Get the girl!”

“Spider, Rog. Spider!”

“I’m not going to hurt Emily,” says the spider. “Not unless…well, not now, anyway.”
Emily swallows. *She has her cloak. She has her cloak*...she repeats over and over in her mind. “Erm, h-how do you know my name?”

“It’s not your real name, to be sure. That name, everyone past the red knows. No, I heard Emily uttered recently.” The spider tilts her head. “You don’t recognize me. No, I suppose you wouldn’t. You were a bit unconscious when we met. I’m Galadriel, named after the elf whom my family served. And I continue her work in the new world.”

Galadriel’s majestic voice seems to ease and command at the same time. Probably for her victims, like a vampire’s supernatural influence. Emily, of course, has no idea about any elves. She’s never seen one.

“You are the daughter of the Sorceress, Elizabeth the First,” Galadriel continues. “Savior to the creatures who dwell on the other side of red.”

Emily cocks her head. “Savior?” That’s one she’s never heard before.

“It’s what they call her.” The spider closes in on Emily, who’s reminded of something she once heard about spiders: the brighter their color, the more poisonous their venom. Secretly, she prays to the gods she’s wrong about that; however, her prayer’s nullified by her imagination, which can’t help but wonder what a spider of such size could accomplish with her venom.

“Do not be frightened.” So soothing is the spider’s voice...like silky chocolate melting on her tongue. It almost lulls Emily into a dreamy sleep...If she weren’t standing and on her way to...where *was* she going? “You’ve nothing to fear. At the moment—”

“But the yellow eyes.”

“Yellow eyes?” The spider seems genuinely confused. “Oh, you mean the shifters. They come to you in innocent form, and then, when they have you nice and relaxed, they show you their true form. Yet another form of supernatural deception. Yes, you’re familiar with them, aren’t you?”

The beasts who attacked Emily last year first appeared in the form of large puppies, so cute and cuddly they couldn’t have been beasts. Her guard had completely crumbled to the ground by the time the beasts showed their true form. At least Galadriel shows no pretense. It gives Emily a small and strange comfort.
“How do you know?” she asks.

“Why, I was there, when you were revived. Come. Let’s take you to The Guardian.”

But Emily does not move, shifting a look up at the spider.

“It’s no use avoiding it. Nothing survives this forest without The Guardian’s permission. It was your mother who officiated his appointment. You want to go to the castle, do you not?”

The castle. Esmeralda. The image of Gabriel’s bloodied lips and the dead girl in his arms flashes in Emily’s mind. She steps in line with the spider, careful not to get too close. This eight-legged creature not only knows her mother but supports her. She must be good, right?

“When we learned you were here,” explains the giant arachnid, “I was tasked with watching the coven entrance. We thought you might try to return to the castle. When I saw the sorceress come and go, I knew you’d be quick to follow. If you’re anything like your mother.” A smile comes with the words—not one Emily can see, but she can hear it in the arachnid’s speech. “Now, come along.”

Suddenly, Lennie is not so frightened. He jumps from his boulder and lands right in front of Emily, blocking her from the spider. Then comes Roger.

“You won’t be taking the girl anywhere without us.”

“Very well,” says the spider, unmoved. “Best be off, then. It won’t do to lurk in one spot in these woods. I have relatives here.”

“Who’s The Guardian?” asks Emily.

The spider sighs. “Let us walk, and I’ll tell you on the way.” And the spider sets off back up the inclining path from which they came. Without warning, Emily is lifted from behind and landed on Lennie’s shoulder.

“I suppose it shouldn’t surprise me that you don’t know,” says Galadriel. “As I’ve told you, Marcel is the guardian of this land, appointed by your mother some time ago. The two worked closely together.”

“What did they work on?”
“Why, the cause, of course.”

“The cause?”

“You don’t know much, do you?” There’s no smile in this question. “For centuries we all thought you were dead. Now that you’ve returned, the talk is abundant, spreading from sea to sea. It’s a miracle—the daughter of Elizabeth has returned. It’s as if you’ve risen from the dead.”

“But I haven’t.”

“Technically,” the spider corrects, “You have. Almost one year ago, right in the meadow I take you to now.”

“But that’s not what you meant,” protests Emily.

“No. Tell me, what do you know about your mother?”

Emily doesn’t have to think long. There isn’t much she knows; the spider was right about that. “Just that she made an enemy of the Devil. And she split the worlds with the veil of red. Oh, and Lucian…” She trails off, still unable to believe that he could have been responsible for her mother’s death.

“Ah, yes, the Devil,” says the spider in a hiss. “Folks around here know him by many names. Let’s see, there’s Master of Fear, Lord of the Living, the Devil, as you called him. It doesn’t matter what you call the Great Demon. He commands all who fear. Your mother tried to rise against him—Ah, here we are.”

The path opens to a small meadow lit by a bright blue moon. In the center, a magnificent creature the size of a Clydesdale, with the body of a stallion and the wings of an angel, grazes.

Lennie sets Emily on her feet. He moves toward the alicorn.

“That one ain’t for petting,” says Roger, and Lennie slinks back, chagrined.

Emily’s seen this alicorn once before, from the bridge on the castle.

“Marcel.” The spider gives him a gracious bow. “I present to you Miss Aliyah Catherine Kyteler. Although, I think she prefers Emily.”

Emily stops mid-step. For a moment, she wonders if the spider has brought the wrong girl here. But it makes too much sense. Of course, it
makes sense. Everyone knows the hollow in Topeka, Kansas was named for the sorceress. She’s never heard her real name before tonight. Lucian was going to tell her once.

Marcel drops his head at Emily’s feet. When he speaks, his voice comes through in thought form surrounding them.

*Marcel, at your service, My Lady.*

Because she doesn’t know what else to do, she returns the courtesy with the drop of her own head. Roger and Lennie follow in kind.

*I understand you are headed to the castle.*

“Yes. I fear my friend might be in danger.”

*The only way there is to cross the cursed lake. I will escort you safely to the castle. But I require something in return.*

“Thank you, but—”

*The gondola will not come to you. You can be sure of that. The Prince of Hell would never have allowed it to be summoned from the banks. Even if you could perform wizardry.*

Emily nods, thinking there’s no use arguing with an alicorn who seems to know exactly what her half-baked plans were. She wonders how he plans to get her to the castle, and concludes it must be sorcery. Which would be a lot faster than any boat on the water. “What is it you want from me?”

*When the day comes, you must stand up for the cause. You must assume your mother’s place, as she intended.*

“How do you know it’s what my mother intended?”

*We were there when you were born. It was quite the event.*

“This…cause. It’s what my mom fought for?” Hundreds of years ago, she reminds herself.

Marcel gives her a nod. *It’s what she started.*

It would seem a pretty steep promise for something as small as crossing the lake. But it was centuries ago. These creatures remind her of the passengers on the lost train who wander around oblivious to the present reality. They have no idea the cause does not exist anymore.
“What am I promising, exactly?”

*Why, that you will join the cause when the time is right.*

“Right…”

*You will finish what your mother started.*

Of course, she thinks, what else? And, knowing full well there is no cause or she would have heard of it by now—that, and there’s no other way to cross the lake—she finally says, “I promise.”

*Very good, my princess. By the laws of magic, your word is binding.* The great Marcel bends his knees.

Emily swallows, a sudden chill in her chest at how official this binding sounds. She turns to Roger and Lennie.

“Go on,” says Roger. “He’s safe enough. You’ve got yer friend to get to. Lennie and me’ll be alright—thanks to you crossin’ us over.”

It suddenly dawns on her. All blood drains from her. “You mean to fly across the lake?”

*Naturally, says the alicorn, how else?*

Emily swallows. It’s too late to back out now, and it is the only way. “Thank you for all your help,” she tells Roger and Lennie. Then she clambers onto the magnificent beast, whose flesh is the smoothest thing she’s ever felt against her fingertips. Her cloak fans across his back, and she settles her legs on either side of the alicorn, imagining she must look like a tiny leprechaun atop this giant of a creature.

*Take hold of my mane,* he orders. *And don’t let go.*

She balls two fists of his silvery hair and holds on tight. As the beast stands, butterflies flit to her chest. With him standing on the ground, she’s quite high up. She’d hate to tumble off at this height, let alone up in the air. Giving Roger and Lennie a farewell nod, she braces herself for flight.

The alicorn dips, then spreads his wings in a grand gesture. In a single swipe, they’re airborne, lifting higher and higher at a speed so fast Emily fears she might slide right off the back of the beast. She clutches the mane.

They soar through the highest tips of the fir trees and burst through the
forest’s ceiling like a dragon freed from its crater.

The wind billows at her ears, her hair and cloak protesting against its force. The air up here is unforgiving, its icy bite frosting her ears.

As they emerge from the thick of the trees, Marcel steers to the left, away from the purple twilight and into the star-speckled midnight black. Wings extended, he glides toward the north end of the lake where he takes a dip in elevation, soaring Emily’s stomach into her throat, and he thrusts his wings in wide, elegant strokes, rising up and up and up until the only thing keeping Emily’s grip is the cold freezing her hands around the alicorn’s mane.

She flattens herself along his neck, terrified she might rip out his hair and have nothing left to cling to. Her stomach hovers somewhere between her chest and her throat.

The night hue is blue. Although autumn surrounds the lake, there’s a taste of winter on her tongue. And, this high in the air, it stings her ears and nose.

As they glide toward the center, the mist allows an occasional glimpse of the lake. The water is glass, reflecting back to them their own images.

Marcel circles to the south. And there, straight ahead in the center of the lake’s lower half, out of the creeping mist, rises the soaring battlements of Lucian’s citadel.

Though the mist and fog obscure the foundation, Emily knows there is no foundation. The castle floats mid-air by black magic, her mentor once told her. The eastern tower is the tallest, ascending into the night sky. Lucian’s chamber window to the west of the bridge commands her eye. If he’s here, he can already see her coming.

But that’s not her immediate concern.

Below, something resembling a serpent breaks through the glass, the scaly back of a creature. It’s long enough to make its presence known as it slithers back down to the depths of the lake, like an eel.

Emily tightens her grip, which is now around the alicorn’s neck.

As she and Marcel skate along the air, the castle grows closer by the nanosecond. The flickers in the windows increase in luster. There’s movement on the battlements, helmed heads stepping into position. The
fortress knows she’s coming.

As they approach the tiny rabbit-shaped island harboring the stronghold’s drawbridge, Marcel dips into a dive, his nose pointed at the island, his wings extended in an elegant glide.

Emily’s stomach returns to her throat, giving her a taste of bile at the back of her tongue. She couldn’t be happier when Marcel lands, bending his knee for her to dismount.

*If ever you find yourself in need, I am at your service. For you are the daughter of the great Elizabeth the First. The creatures of this side are in her debt, and therefore in yours. To summon me, simply say my name while reaching out in your mind.*

Not knowing what to say to that, and having no intention whatsoever of summoning him, she bows and says, respectfully, “Thank you, Marcel.” And she watches him disappear into the night air before turning her attention to the gates.

From the landing, it’s a small hike down natural steps of the island, but finally she arrives at the drawbridge, which lay open like a crocodile waiting for its next meal to traipse across its tongue.

The palace seems different than before… A low mist hangs around the fortress. The wind sighs, carrying the faint reminder of the mermaid’s hum. But no song comes, as it once had.

The courtyard’s empty other than the guards peering down from the walls and a dead girl standing in the middle near a framed maple tree, a single rose twisting between her thumb and forefinger.

Emily knows this girl, who’s near the same age as her. The girl looks exactly the same as before, blonde hair cut sharp at her chin, deep, dark circles surrounding her eyes.

“Oh, hi. I’m Emily—”

“I know who you are,” says the dead girl, giddily. “We met, remember?”

Emily hesitates. “I didn’t think we exchanged names last time.”

“There isn’t a being on this side of red who doesn’t know who you are.”
Emily clears her throat politely. “I didn’t get your name....”

The girl curtseys. “I’m Sarah Michelle. My brother is Patrick Prior.” She nods toward the tattooed, pierced redhead glaring daggers at them from across the square.

It gives Emily a start. She hadn’t noticed him when she came in. Looking around, she wonders who else might be hiding in the shadows. No one, as far as she can tell.

It takes Emily a second glance to get a decent visual of Patrick. The black V-neck and shredded jeans blending in make it difficult. He could pass himself for a tracker. But something tells Emily this guy was no tracker before he crossed over.

“He’s not your real brother,” says Emily, remembering their first meeting, during which a vampire had thought Sarah Michelle was Patrick’s girlfriend. And Patrick, to Lucian’s amusement, threatened to kill Lucian.

Sarah Michelle’s countenance brightens and she stands slightly taller. “No. No, he’s not my real brother.”

“Where is everyone?” asks Emily.

“Samhain.”

“But, that’s tomorrow.”

The girl shrugs like she can’t understand what the big deal is about Samhain, anyway.

By this time tomorrow, witches and wizards and sorcerers and warlocks and all manner of magical folk around the world will be chanting the Samhain chant, sending would-be demons back to hell.

“The vampires like to watch the spectacle,” explains Sarah Michelle.

“I’m looking for someone—”

“The Egyptian sorceress? Lord Gabriel’s mother?”

Emily chokes on her own saliva. Lord Gabriel? “You’ve seen Esmeralda? Can you tell me where she is?”

The girl shakes her head slowly. There’s warning in her eyes. “I warned her, but she wouldn’t listen.”
“Where is she?”

Again, Sarah Michelle shakes her head.

“How about Lucian? Do you know where I can find him?”

Sarah Michelle’s eyes widen. And, no matter how many times Emily repeats her inquiries, which is at least four if she’s counting, the same empty answer comes.

Eventually, following Emily’s eye to the rose, Sarah Michelle shoves the dying flower at her. “Last one from the palace gardens.”

Emily accepts the flower with a forced curl of her lips and leaves the girl. There’s no use getting anything out of her. Yet, as she crosses the square, she wonders what the girl meant by *I warned her, but she wouldn’t listen*.

Halfway to the castle entrance, she forgets all about it. The heavy thuds of boots hitting pavement stop her—slowly, measuredly, and unmistakably coming toward her.

It’s not Lucian.

Emily knows it before she turns around. She can feel it, and her eyes only confirm. Even if the cloak is one Lucian would wear, his outline is too tall and broad and impatient to belong to the First Prince of Hell.

“Gabriel?” It has to be. And her mind returns to Lilith, dead in Gabriel’s arms.

“What’re you doing here?” It sounds as though he’s speaking through locked teeth. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Why not?” she squeaks against her will.

“Where’d you get this? Stealing now, are you?” He yanks the rose from her grasp, throws it on the ground, and smothers it with his boot like he’s putting out a cigarette.

Emily seeks out Sarah Michelle for reassurance—that Gabriel’s nuts—but the girl is nowhere to be seen. And the red-headed vampire continues to glare from his corner of the square.

“Gabe—” She stops herself at the disgust contorting her old friend’s face. For he has just noticed something even worse than the rose.
“How’d you get this?” He lifts the amulet from her chest, studying it like it’s a wonder. With a smirk, he says, “Not much use, after all, was it.” He drops it, and the amulet lands against her chest with a thud.

Emily’s tongue is paralyzed.

“I knew it,” says Gabriel, scanning the place as though expecting to find Lucian. Then, circling Emily like a vulture on decaying roadkill, he lowers the cowl slowly and comes to a stop right in front of her. His eyes reflect in the moonlight an ochre color, outlined in red so deep it could be mistaken for blood. His glare returns to the amulet.

“Has he come to you?”

“No.”

“Don’t lie to me!” he demands. “Where else would you get this?”

“He hasn’t,” she says. “He left it on my window seat, shortly after…after it all happened.”

Gabriel studies her for a long moment before speaking again.

“If he wants you to have it, he can come to me!” And he yanks it from Emily’s neck so hard she’s sure it breaks skin.

“Ow!” She presses on the burn around her neck.

Gabriel closes his fist around the amulet.

If the scowl on his face is meant to frighten her, it’s working, especially with those daggers for fangs. In fact, it’s going above and beyond its purpose and taking her all the way to feeling naked and vulnerable. But she dares not communicate that to her face and instead holds up a high chin and resentful frown.

“Here,” he says. And, with a canine, he pricks his own finger and serves her a bead of his blood. At her terror, he adds, “You can’t be turned by my blood alone. I’d have to drink yours for it to take effect. Take it; it’s healing.”

Hesitantly, and only because she knows he’ll shove it down her throat if she doesn’t, Emily takes his finger between her lips, almost gagging at the horrible salty, metallic flavor. If this is his idea of an apology, she does not accept.
Instantly, the burn across her neck evaporates.

“Emily…” he whispers. It’s not a comforting whisper but the whisper of a predator sniffing out its victim. And he slices a circle around her once more, his bloodied finger falling from her lip and trailing down her neck. The amulet in his other hand disappears somewhere in the folds of his cloak. His next whisper comes from behind, so close, his breath warms her nape with its eerie chill.

“There’s fear in you. I can…smell it.”

Of that, she has no doubt. Emmet once mentioned something about vampires being attracted to fear. It was last winter, here in this castle on the bridge leading to the west wing—her reminiscence is cut short. What happens next comes from behind, and so unexpectedly she’d have been knocked over if Gabriel didn’t take her firmly in his grasp.

One arm wraps around her, pressing her firmly against his chest, his other hand smooths down her curves, as he inhales the scent he just spoke of: her fear.

Then, as suddenly as the events turned, he lifts her from the ground and speeds across the courtyard, up the steps, into and through the castle. It all happens so fast, she has no time to collect her bearings, or fight it.

Gabriel sets her down in a vacant, square room, bricked together by the same tired stone that makes up this castle. It’s empty, save for the garish light spilling in from the mullioned window.

“Where are we?” she demands, though confidence avoids every word.

“It is an interesting room…” he says with amusement.

Emily rolls her eyes and folds her arms. “Where’s your mo—”

But she doesn’t get to finish because Gabriel chooses this moment to rush her once more. He pinions her against the cold stone wall, burying his lips in her neck.

“What do you have any idea how many eyes were on you in the courtyard?”

She closes her own eyes, unable to deny the rush flooding through her, inundating her with a feeling so light and airy she could be on a cloud in the middle of a wide, blue sky. And, though she’s afraid—terrified—her body
melts into his embrace. As though it wants this.

The thought sobers her. She opens her eyes to find there is no blue sky. She’s still in a dark room in a murky castle, held captive by a blood-thirsty Gabriel.

He pulls back, but she doesn’t look up at him, and he trails his nose up the side of her neck, to her ear and she swears she feels a slight nibble—his soft, tremulous lips at her ear. His breath goosepimples a velvety blanket over her.

“Emily…” he says lasciviously. Although smooth, there’s urgency in his tone. His hold tightens, almost to the point of pain. “You smell… mouthwatering.”

Somehow, that’s not what she thought he would say.

Her eyes widen, her mind alerting her to what’s happening. Then, something really does happen—something she might have anticipated, if she weren’t so intoxicated by Gabriel’s presence, by his attention, by his touch…

It’s at her nape—a prick at first. Then a pain, sharp and searing.

It reminds her of another night—the night she was killed by the yellow-eyed beasts that dwell in the forest. Tonight is different, though.

She screams.

The vampire that was once her friend recoils, his breathing hard and heavy. He staggers backward, his ochre eyes widening with shock.

“What’d you do that for!” shouts the witch. She presses a trembling hand to her neck.

She looks at her blood-stained hand in the moonlight and returns it to her nape, unable—unwilling—to believe the veracity of what this would mean. She looks up at Gabriel, who returns the regard, equally as confused and terrified.

Her heart pounds. She wants to cry. “Gabe. What have you done to me?”
Gabriel and Emily stare at each other, neither knowing what to do next.

“Let me see,” he orders, turning her around so that her nape faces the moonlight. “Nothing. It’s gone. Completely healed.”

This does not ease her.

“It’s my blood,” he says. “Vampire blood heals. It doesn’t mean you’ve been turned, though,” he adds with uncertainty.

“Why’d you do it?” she demands, her imagination conjuring all manner of dark images, most of which include Emily with fangs, blood beading down her chin. She shudders.

Gabriel ignores her, and instead broods at the window.

“You drank my blood! With yours in my system! That’s how it works, isn’t it? You said——” She stops herself. It’s not the only explanation for her supernatural healing.

It’s something she’s wondered since the night she died last year, when Lucian fed her the silvery blood of an alicorn to restore her life. She decides Gabriel doesn’t need to know all that.

“What else can you expect from me?” he says. “I’m a vampire. I do vampire things now.” He flails his hands, halfheartedly mimicking a monster.

“You’re Gabriel!” she retorts. “You’re not——”

“Not what? A blood-sucker? I don’t kill the fearful and turn the innocent” —he hooks quotation marks in the air with his gloved fingers— “into this? Newsflash, Em,” —he gestures wildly at himself— “vampire! It’s what vampires do!” He turns his back on her, looking out the window at nothing, restraining every muscle in his body from impulse. “Whatever,” he finally
says, dismissing her with a wave. “Like I said. You shouldn’t have come here. You don’t belong here.”

Emily studies the beast that Gabriel has become, so different, yet, he is still the same, stubborn Gabriel from her youth. The one who teased her and watched her like a hawk, always protecting her. The same Gabriel who slept outside her door, guarding her from intruders. Who forged and spelled the amulet to keep her safe from the enemy. He must be, somewhere in there. He was concerned. He didn’t want to hurt her.

“No do you have to drink blood?” Her trembling voice is softer now.

He raises his head, his tawny eyes pointed at her. The moon angles in just enough to expose Gabriel’s sallow features. His answer comes out in a hiss, his lips parting into a crooked leer, and his eyes as evil as a demon’s.

“It is my duty, you might say.”

It’s Emily’s turn to curl her lips, but hers do so in disgust. “Duty,” she sneers. “I don’t believe that, not for one second.”

“Believe it, little human. Because it’s true. Now, we better get you to the dungeons, if you’re going to be—”

“Where’s your mother?”

Gabriel parts his mouth, ready to spew his orders, but eventually settles on quiet, realizing something for the first time tonight.

“She’s why you’re here, isn’t she?” he finally says.

“She came to me at the coven. She’s worried about you, Gabe. After I saw you, I was—”

“You thought I’d hurt my own mother?” His own hurt riddles his voice.

“I don’t know what to think anymore, Gabe. You haven’t kept in touch with anyone. And the one time you do show up, there’s a—” She chokes on her words, and the image of Lilith’s body limp in his arms surfaces again in her mind. Now it seems she’s fated to do the same.

Instead, without preamble, without a second glance, the vampire pulls the hood over his head and leaves the room.

Emily’s jaw falls. But she doesn’t call after him. Esmeralda can reverse
vampirism. The sorceress said so.

She’ll try the tower first, remembering all too well her own imprisonment when she was here last. But first, she needs to figure out where she is.

It’s a long trek up wide, serpentine staircases and down stretched corridors, each adorned in relics and effigies and portraits from various places and points in history. And every sculpted and painted eye following her. Once she reaches a hall resembling ancient Egypt, she knows she’s near the tower entrance.

Anticipating Gabriel’s enchanted security on the door, she does not go that way.

Instead, Emily turns around and finds the bathroom she used the last time she was here. Which Lucian had constructed for her benefit.

It’s the same as before, polished granite countertops, serpent fixtures. Scorpions pattern across the floor and walls, but for the surface of what looks like a knobless door, where jeweled scarabs scuttle around the rim. Her old-magi drying brush hangs on the wall. The only thing missing is the frock Lucian had insisted she wear during her time on this side of red.

She presses the door open to find darkness as black as hell’s tunnels.

Illuminating her wand, she pushes through the stale halls. The stenches of brimstone and moisture attack her nose. Last time she roamed these damp passageways, she was chasing Gabriel and Lucian to the dungeons, trying to prevent what has come to pass. She blinks back the memory and heads in the opposite direction until the passage snakes up a long and steep staircase. It must be the one, because the tower is the tallest place in the fortress.

By the time she reaches the top, her legs are rubber. Taking a moment to catch her breath, she massages the stitch in her side before barreling through the door and into the familiar circular room.

When she finally enters, a waft of autumn air refreshes her. She finds Esmeralda slumped in front of the fireplace, a handful of dying embers glowing beneath an empty cauldron. Emily’s heart soars with relief.

“Em! How—”

“I was prisoner here, remember?” Emily immediately regrets the reminder
and falls to the floor next to Esmeralda like a limp noodle, eager to get off her legs.

It wasn’t long ago that Lucian had locked her in this very room, in the name of her own safety. It’s the safest room in the palace, Lucian told her. Safe, not from a fire, but from the dark inhabitants of the castle, and safe from escape.

“Right. Why did you come here?”

“I-I saw Gabe,” explains Emily, taken aback. She’d thought Esmeralda would be happy to see Emily. “Are you okay? Have you seen him yet?”

“I’m fine. Yes, my son is…still adjusting…”

“I thought—you mentioned… a way to reverse…his condition?”

Esmeralda purses her lips. “It’s a healing spell. Gabriel wants no part of it. He’s set on punishing himself.”

The sorceress’s words hang between them, ensuing a silence thicker than the mist swirling around the palace. Whatever Emily really wants to say about Gabriel, she can’t. His mother won’t hear any of it.

“Do you have to be fully turned?” asks Emily. “To benefit from the spell, I mean.”

At this question, Esmeralda flicks her narrowed eye away from the fire and up at Emily. And, though her eyes are almond slits, Emily can feel them rove over her entire body, searching, scrutinizing.

“Why do you ask?” the sorceress finally says.

Instinctively, Emily touches her wound, or what would be her wound if it hadn’t healed.

“Did he bite you?” asks the sorceress, although it’s clear she already knows the answer.

“Did you have his blood?”

“Yes…” answers Emily, uncomfortably.

“Did he drink yours?”

“Yes.”
“All of it? Did you die?”

“Er, no,” says Emily. “Not yet…”

“Then you’re not in danger of turning. For you to turn, a vampire must drain you completely of all your vital fluid and your heart must stop.”

Emily remembers the night Gabriel was turned. It’s exactly what happened to him. Relief hits her like a brick. She relaxes on the floor against the bedframe.

“See? Nothing to worry about.” Gabriel’s leaning against the doorframe, casual as an old friend. Emily hadn’t even heard the door open. Through his confidence, Emily can detect his relief.

“You didn’t know how it worked?” she asks.

“Nobody explains those parts, do they?” he says derisively. “You’re just expected to know. Makes sense, though…I thought it was because I couldn’t stop. But now I know, it’s necessary to finish it…”

“My son,” says Esmeralda, but Gabriel’s not done.

“At first I wondered how you got past me. I heard you…I smelled you…but you weren’t there; I know you weren’t. And then it occurred to me…” He drops his lids halfway and when he speaks, there’s no question in his inflection. “There’s a tunnel entrance in here, isn’t there. I knew it,” he adds to himself.

“You forget, Gabriel,” sneers Emily. “I know this castle better than you.”

“You shouldn’t be here,” he says.

“I’m not going anywhere until I—”

Gabriel laughs. It’s not a chortle or a chuckle but a laugh so dark Lucian would be proud. He strides into the fire’s glow. His lips inch up two sharp canines. And yet, despite his sallow face and newly pale complexion, the image of him still takes her breath away. He’s…beautiful. She averts her gaze before her expression has the chance to betray her true thoughts.

“C’mmon, Em. Who do you think you are? There’s nothing you can do for my mother. You don’t belong here and you know it,” he repeats, sounding quite like a soundbite on endless loop. “Just go.”
Emily pulls herself to her feet and to her full height. “You want a prisoner, don’t you? I’m here to take Ez’s place.”

“Em—” says Esmeralda, but she’s cut off by Gabriel.

“Why should I want you?”

Silence rings loud and clear in the circular room. Emily, whose mouth is open with her tongue loaded before Gabriel’s question is done, can’t speak, and her rebuttal dies a painful death in the pit of her stomach. She closes her mouth and blinks back the stupid, useless tears. Gabriel’s question simply stings too much.

Esmeralda uses the silence to pull herself to her feet—slowly, like a mother with a headache from hearing too much fighting amongst her kids. “No one’s taking my place. I’m staying.”

“See? There’s nothing you can do.” And with that, Gabriel turns around and locks the door behind him.

Emily doesn’t bother shouting after him. Gabriel knows of the other door.

“What are you really doing here?” Esmeralda repeats her first question. She sounds tired.

Emily’s taken aback for a moment and eventually stammers out a string of mutterings that come to nothing coherent. Why is she really here? Part of it was Esmeralda, yes. But she’d be lying to herself if she denied the part of her that’s here for Lucian. In fact, she has already admitted this to herself.

“D—did Gabe really lock you in here?”

This gets a laugh. But the humor dies, and the sorceress becomes more solemn than ever.

“I’m no prisoner,” adds Esmeralda. “I stay for my son. He won’t admit it, but he needs me. And I will be here when he realizes it.”

Emily nods like she understands, though she doesn’t understand it any more than a sasquatch understands boundaries.

“Esmeralda…” There are different kinds of prisons, Emily wants to say. And there are a number of facts she’d like to point out, like that Gabriel wants his own mother locked up. Somehow, the witch knows Esmeralda
won’t appreciate the veracity.

“I don’t expect you to understand,” says the sorceress. “Not until you have kids of your own. Stay here with me tonight. Tomorrow, I will take you back to the coven.”

“I can’t leave you, Ez.”

“Please,” scoffs the sorceress, as though it’s absurd that Emily should think she has any value to offer someone like Esmeralda.

“Fine,” says Emily through her teeth. “But there’s something I have to do.”

“What?” asks Esmeralda.

“It’s okay,” says Emily. “You have your reasons for being here. I have mine.”

“Alright, then. How long do you need?”

How long does it take to find a missing person? In a castle full of vampires and monsters and dead beings. On the other side of red? Emily shrugs, appreciating that Esmeralda doesn’t ask further. Nan would never let it go.

The woman answers for her. “One day, then. Tomorrow, I’m taking you back.”

Maybe it’s the long trek through the forest, of riding the alicorn or traipsing through the castle, or perhaps it’s all that combined, but Emily is suddenly exhausted. And there on the area rug on the hard floor in front of a dying fire, she tumbles into a deep sleep.

When she wakes, it’s the next morning and Gabriel’s towering over her, his arms folded. It reminds Emily of last year when he slept outside her door to keep her safe from vampires.

“Still here?” he says, even though he didn’t leave the tower all night.

“What do you want,” she demands. As she stretches to her feet, Esmeralda comes in from the balcony, looking as refreshed as someone who’d slept in her own bed on the right side of red.

“Gabe, I told you not to wake her.”
“Somebody has to. She needs to leave.” Then he bends his face to Emily’s and glares directly into her eyes. “Get out!”

The anger in his eyes makes her recoil. He’s never looked at her with… hate before.

Swallowing the hurt, she steels herself. “Fine. I’m going.” With an inflated chest, she stalks around him and exits the room, allowing a small amount of satisfaction to come… For she’s not leaving yet. She’s not leaving until she’s found her mentor.

She’s halfway down the tower’s serpentine stairs when Gabriel’s call reaches her. He’s still in the room with his mother.

“DON’T THINK I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU’RE UP TO! STAY AWAY FROM THE WEST WING. THERE’S NOTHING THERE FOR YOU! JUST GO!”

It’s enough to stop her foot from landing on the next step, and she almost trips over herself. He couldn’t know what’s in her mind, could he? He must be guessing. Of course, he is. Gabriel wants to know where Lucian is as much as she does. He has to. Maybe he’s discovered something in the west wing.

It puts a kick in Emily’s step, and she barrels down the stairs out the tower, down the hall, and the next hall, and the next, each one taking her into another passage of time and another place on the planet, stories told in armors and art and effigies. All of them watching her. There’s no order to the halls. One might wonder if Lucian built this palace to skip through time on his terms.

And on that thought, the witch pushes through the big double doors that open to the bridge, where fall’s crisp air attacks her nose. She pulls the cowl over her head and snuggles into the cloak. Fall is cooler up here than in Kansas, where it’s usually still warm enough to be outdoors without a jacket.

She speeds across the bridge, ignoring the scenery of the surrounding castle and distant evergreens. Through another handful of corridors and an antechamber, she finally arrives at Lucian’s office chambers, where she’s instantly transported back to another time: the day she escaped the castle.

Lucian was standing at the scryer in front of the window with one of his
brutish vampires, contemplating, strategizing. At the opposite end of the room, in a velvet sitting area at a second fireplace, Jace spoke to her inside her head. Jace, the vampire who was beheaded by Hans.

Nothing in the room seems to have changed. Not even a speck of dust has come to haunt the place. It’s as if Lucian never left. And at that moment, the hackles on her neck stand at attention, like soldiers in battle formation. Someone’s in this room with her…

Movement comes from the direction of the front door: the billowing of fabric. Just as she used to hear when Lucian was in her own room. She whips around.

“Thought I told you to go home.” Gabriel’s in the doorframe, erect and ready to pick a fight. His head bends forward, his murky greens cut the space between them.

Emily, who’s still recovering from his rejection, shifts all her weight to one foot and lets out a huff of hot air.

“I’m not going anywhere. Not until I find out where Lucian is.”

“Then I’m going to have to kill you.” He says it so nonchalantly, like it’s just another day in the life.

Normally, she’d write off such a threat as idle—only meant to scare her into submission. But, after the events of last night, she’s not sure which to believe and which to doubt. An icy chill ripples up her nape and goosepimples down her arms. It gives her a violent shudder. She turns her back on him and sweeps through the back door into Lucian’s bedchambers. Gabriel follows.

Like his office chambers, Lucian’s room looks as it did the night Emily woke in the bed from her death. The thought flits her eyes to the bed.

Gabriel clears his throat, as if to remind her he’s still here.

“Time’s up,” he says. “I’m taking you back.”

Her eyes betray her, stealing their own glance at his massive frame, the frame equipped for killing. Her body cowers.

“You won’t hurt me.”
“No? Who are you to me, anyway? Maybe I won’t kill you. How would you like to be THIS forever!” He throws his face into filtered moonlight, gesturing wildly at his faded self, and bearing his pearly daggers. “This time, I won’t stop.”

“I told you. I’m not leaving,” says Emily, weakly at first, though her confidence increases with her anger. “I have as much a right to know where Lucian is as you do!”

“You’ll be here a while, then.” He swivels around, throws a hand at the window and scryer and all around the room.

A green light zips around the room. The drapes draw to a close. The scryer’s glow vanishes. And Gabriel storms out, his new cloak flapping wildly at his boots. The door locks behind him. Another green light outlines the doorframe and then dissolves.

Fuming, Emily waves a hand at the walls. A doorway materializes in the midst of stone and mortar. She escapes into the tunnel, the tip of her wand lighting the way. She takes the first turn leading her back to Lucian’s antechamber.

The door materializes at another wave of her hand. She steps out of the tunnel. And right into Gabriel, who’s arms are crossed and lids fly at half-mast.

“Lemme guess. There’s one of those secret tunnel doors in there.”

“There is,” says Emily coolly.

Gabriel cocks his head.

“Just because you had to blast your way through the one in his bedchamber doesn’t mean it isn’t there. You saw Lucian go through it.”

“That wasn’t a door, that was—”

A laugh comes from behind Gabriel, and the two opponents turn to find Emmet lurking in a dark corner.

“So, the great Lord Gabriel survived the cursed lake. Why am I not surprised?”

It takes Gabriel a moment to realize the other vampire is referring to the
little prank Gabriel played when he jumped into the execution hole. Of course, he survived. Gabriel is a wizard, fully capable of summoning a gondola, especially one meant for transporting vampires beneath the stronghold.

“What gave it away,” says Gabriel, mirroring Emmet’s sarcasm.

But Emmet has moved on. “Making a mess of things, are we?” he taunts, easing into a ray of faded light raining down from a set of high, narrow windows. “Padawan?”

“Don’t ruin Star Wars for me.” Gabriel keeps his eyes fixed on Emily, and, ever so subtly, almost imperceptibly, inches to the side. Until his massive physique completely blocks Emily from Emmet’s line of vision.

Emmet, who’s not as dumb as Gabriel would like him to be, simply laughs. Then peers around Gabriel’s back at Emily.

“I think he’s afraid I might take you for myself. It is good to see you—again, Em,” he says with a double mocking emphasis on again. “How’s coven life? Are you learning much?”

“Very,” says Emily, undecided if she should be angry with Emmet or not. The night Lucian disappeared, so too did Emmet. “Where’ve you been?”

“Here,” he answers, as if it should be a given. His vague reply reminds her of Lucian.

Gabriel has the look of a dog caught between a new chew toy and a bone he wants to bury.

“You’ve been working for Lucian, haven’t you?” says Emily.

Emmet arches a brow in question. “Don’t tell me you too believe he’s returned?”

“You think Lucian came back?” she asks Gabriel. Of course, he does.

“No,” he answers curtly. “Because he never left.” And he gives them both an extreme look of displeasure. “Now, get out of here. I won’t have you this close to—”

“To what?” Emily interrupts, her confidence recovering rapidly. “Vampires? Don’t pretend you care, Gabe! You’re the one who’s locked
yourself away! Who’s…*killing* innocent people.”

Evidently, she went too far. It all happens so fast. One minute she’s standing up to him. Next minute, her neck’s pinioned against the wall, her feet dangling and her airflow diminishing by the ever-darkening nanosecond.

“You know nothing, *girl!*” he growls. “Go back to your precious coven! You won’t see me again, I promise!” But Gabriel does not let her down, and she catches his eyes, which are the color of the slimy lake that surrounds the castle. His breathing shallows, pushing out short, warm breaths that smell of pewter and salt. And his hungry gaze drinks her in…

His lips part and inch in the general direction of hers. And she finds her own lips mirror his, pulled toward him like a magnet. He’s so close to Emily, his dagger-like incisors brush her lips, giving him yet another taste of her. And then…

“Ahem,” comes from the corner.

Right, Emmet. He’s still here. Grinning like a child on a playground with a secret too big to hold on to. Like he’ll burst if he doesn’t find someone to tell.

Gabriel’s not laughing. He drops Emily, and she slumps to her feet, trying to collect her breaths into a regular pattern that generally remain undetected by her conscious awareness.

“Get. Out.” Though Gabriel’s voice comes out quiet, it’s so sharp his words pierce through to her heart. And there’s that look again—that loathing that darkens his eyes and edges his jawline into a rigid and cold scowl. “You won’t see me again, I promise.”

Her body threatens to sob if she dares one more look at him. She’s so confused, she doesn’t know if she’s angry or if she wants to jump into his arms.

It can’t be the latter. She won’t give him the satisfaction. Not now, not ever. She’d rather be turned.

She waits until she’s around the corner to let the crying pour out of her, releasing the built-up tension. And out it comes, in fits of violent heaves and sobs. Until she’s stopped. This time by the dead girl.
Somewhere in the middle of a corridor, halfway to the foyer from the west wing, Sarah Michelle parks herself right in front of Emily’s next step.

Emily steps aside. Sarah Michelle follows, mirroring Emily. Then again the other way, and soon they’re in a dance, which Sarah Michelle seems to find quite entertaining. Emily does not find one bit of it fun or entertaining.

Sarah Michelle leans in to whisper. “She’s been to the dungeons.” The girl proffers a generous smile.

It takes Emily a moment to realize the dead girl’s talking about Esmeralda, finally answering Emily’s questions from last night. The sorceress didn’t mention anything about the dungeons.

“I’m not here for Esmeralda anymore.”

“Why don’t you stay with us? It would be fun!” A child-like grin spreads across Sarah Michelle’s face, and she leans in, her grin wild and childlike. “I’ll take you to the dungeons! And You’ll know what the sorceress knows!”

“Erm…thanks, but I have to go—” Emily does not wait for herself to finish, instead sidling around Sarah Michelle and, ignoring the glares from passersby, she forces her way through the labyrinth of corridors, out the great big front doors and through the courtyard.

Then, tightening the red cloak around her, Emily leaves the castle. Alone.

She’s at the bank of Rabbit Island about to step into the gondola when Esmeralda appears from thin air.

“I told you I’d take you back. You’re not going through that forest alone. Never should have to begin with.” Without waiting for an answer or a protest, the sorceress takes hold of Emily’s arm and the surrounding lake and silence is replaced with Emily’s dormitory.

Agatha’s reading her little black book on her bed, her feet in the air. Emily and Esmeralda appear in the doorway on the other side of red.

Agatha jumps to her feet, startled, and stares right at the two.

“Another seer…?” Esmeralda looks at Emily for explanation.

Emily shrugs and crosses the red. “Guess there’s more of us.”

The sorceress accepts the news, says her goodbyes, and warns Emily not
to return to the castle. Then, she disappears.


Emily doesn’t want to explain any of it. What’s she going to say? Esmeralda didn’t need her help, and Gabriel doesn’t want her. And Lucian…

Disheartened, Emily shrugs out of the cloak and stuffs it in her trunk.

“Where’s your necklace?” Agatha points at Emily’s bare neck. “The blue glowing one? I saw you put it on before you left.”

“Don’t ask,” says Emily in a tone that makes it clear she’s not talking right now.

Agatha takes it better than expected and returns to her bed and book for a moment, allowing Emily to freshen up in the bathroom and plop onto her own bed.

“Least you made it for Samhain,” says Agatha.

“I’m not going,” says Emily.


“Just don’t wanna go. I’ll tell you later. I promise. Right now, I just wanna sleep.”

Agatha searches Emily’s expression for the promise and eventually seems to get it.

“Fine,” she says. “I’ll hold you to it.”

“Join the club,” says Emily, remembering other promises she’s made. To Charlie. And Marcel. And she spins into a deep sleep full of dream. When she wakes, Samhain is over.
Chapter 18

The Center

Not for the first time, Jeb Farmer finds himself on the lowest available level of Kyteler’s Hollow staring out at the hovering island across the chasm. He stands in front of a pink and white umbrellaed cart, which is in front of a frizzy-white haired cream-maker in a pink and white pinstriped apron, tall top hat, and a grin so wide and chilling, it should not be allowed at this depth of the hollow. He stirs a mixture in a frosty bowl, his gaze fixed intently on the aspiring wizard.

Strange place for a vender like this, Jeb thinks, not for the first time. He came here before, to the near-abandoned level so far below the happenings and goings of the bustling hollow.

Trying to feel like the wizard he’s becoming, Jeb is swathed in the color of a shimmering goldfish, from his satin-tied velvet top hat to his matching waistcoat and jacket and pointed boots. Everything he wears is new, all except the old necklace tucked secretly behind his shirt, bearing the name he’s read more times than he can count.

He’s not quite a wizard, still in the stage of pretending. “Make-believe is the beginning of believing,” Charlie’s always saying. He wasn’t surprised to see Jeb show up in his velvets and satins before he’s earned the right.

“Ho-ho!” Charlie said, slapping the apprentice on the back. “You make a sharp wizard!”

Since then, Jeb’s picked up his own staff. One he’d picked out at a wizarding tool store on the top level. It’s long and sleek and, of course, another shade of goldfish, and topped with a white scrying marble the size of a baseball inside the mouth of a lion’s golden head. He has not had real use for it yet, although he has practiced it to death.
Yet, somehow, despite his rising status and improving skill, despite the fact that witches and wizards down here now acknowledge his existence—he’s even run into old Amadeus Newton Plutarch Parker the Third, the classic-looking wizard who introduced himself at Samhain last year. “Ami” for short, the wizard permitted—despite all that, Jeb’s still not feeling the sense of belonging he thought he would feel by now.

Today, he’s not here to research. He’s not here to meet with Charlie. Or practice any kind of magic. Today, he’s come for the island.

The Center, as it’s called in the hollow. “The center that sees all,” a tracker told him one day, trying to scare him into being a model citizen. But it’s true. There’s no place in the hollow unseen by the island.

Enfolded within the clotted roots and clumps of clay there’s a door. He and Charlie have passed by it a few times on the way to the Den, which is right behind him. Charlie does not seem to see the door. Jeb asked him once what it was, and all Charlie could do was laugh, as though Jeb was pranking the wizard. Nonetheless, Jeb is drawn to it.

It’s a rather unassuming wooden door, as ordinary as a humid day in Kansas, with cast-iron fittings and an inviting glow seeping through its aged cracks.

With each rotation, the door passes by, and each time, Jeb’s intrigue increases. Like a charm cast upon him. He wants to get close to it, read the inscription above it. His curiosity burns to know what’s behind that door.

“You see something there, don’t you?”

Amadeus Newton Plutarch Parker the Third, the classic-looking wizard Jeb had just been thinking about, sidles up next to him.

The old wizard looks the same as any other day in his long white beard, round, shiny head, bowled by the same shade of white that hangs from his chin. This time, he wears a pointed wizard hat and a midnight-purple, star-speckled robe. It’s rare that Jeb sees a wizard dressed in robes. But when he does, it’s usually an older, more experienced wizard.

“Ami,” he greets warmly. He can’t help it. Ami is the kind of mage who draws out the best sides of people. As Charlie once said, “Parker’s a good guy with a fair conscience, one you want on your side in a pinch.”
“I knew you were a bright one the moment we met,” says Ami in his old voice. “I must admit, I did not expect to see you down here so soon. Enjoying your mentorship, I trust? And where is this mentor of yours, anyway? Haven’t seen you two apart since you and I met.”

“Charlie’s working.”

“Ah. Got a little freedom and this is what you do with it.” The wizard strokes his beard thoughtfully. Then he gestures at the island. “Tell me, young Master Jeb, what do you see out there?”

“Just a door. There.” Jeb points at the door, skimming across the expanse by the island. But when he peers over at the wizard, it’s clear to Jeb he’s the only one seeing it. Confusion crinkles his forehead.

“It was set up that way,” the old wizard explains. “Elizabeth set up a test. When one is ready for it, they will see.”

“A test? Like the entrance to Kyteler’s Hallow?” asks Jeb. “If you see the entrance, you’re ready for the knowledge within…” He remembers his own test with Charlie.

“Sort of. But this test is a little more…well, more.” Ami’s beard lifts at the corners and a gleam twinkles his gray eyes, as though remembering his own test fondly.

But Jeb does not like the prospect of another test. Just how many would there be? “Have you taken a test in there?”

The wizard laughs. “I’m still taking it. Although, I wouldn’t call it a test so much as a journey. Or trial, rather.” The bearded wizard is quiet for a long moment, leaving Jeb to believe the conversation has ended. Then, his words come, slow and pensive. “Nah. I’d call it an ordeal. Yes. That sounds about right. An ordeal…now that’s hitting the nail on the head.” Ami laughs, turning to face Jeb. “Fear. We all have. Every one of us is plagued with a different kind. For it comes from experience. ‘Course, you can’t have it if you’re not meant to overcome it.”

“What do you mean?” asks Jeb, disconcerted, thinking of a number of things he’d rather not have experienced. “Are you saying our journeys are all mapped out before we even begin?”
Another laugh from the old wizard. This one’s more of a chuckle, tired and raspy. “No, my dear boy. I’m saying you’re facing this doorway for a reason. It’s your choice, don’t you agree?”

“Sure.”

“And your heart is curious—expansive, yes?”

Jeb thinks a moment, waiting for the truth. “Yes.”

“Well, then. Seems to me, you’ve got to find out what’s waiting for you.”

Jeb shakes his head in utter confusion. He was only curious about a door. Now it’s a whole ordeal.

Ami pats Jeb on the back. “In time, my boy. You have plenty of that, trust me.”

“How do you get there?” Jeb nods at the vast island suspended high above the endless deep below.

“Ah, that I can tell you with a fair amount of certainty.” This seems to please the wizard, giving Jeb the impression that the old man has been disappointed in his rather hollow answers up to this point. “A bridge. One of your own conjuring. And that’s the way back, too. We must make our own bridge to the other side. Every bridge is different, you see.”

Jeb stares at the wizard, blank-faced. Our own bridge? Conjuring? To conjure something from nothing, let alone a structure of massive size with the strength to carry his weight for the length of the vast chasm—it would take magic far beyond his skillset. It’ll be years before Jeb has that kind of power, if ever. His shoulders slump in defeat.

But the wizard gives him a wink, his gray eyes twinkling like the night sky. “Not losing hope so soon, are you? Don’t you know by now, once you find the desire within you, that’s the half of it? Your desire is the key to your destiny, young master. The other half is simply a matter of fulfilling your destiny.”

Without preamble, the wizard casts out his staff like a shore fisherman. From its tip spouts a bridge in the likeness of the Golden Gate bridge, increasing in size the farther out it goes. It latches on to a root—a root that Jeb’s certain reached out to catch the bridge.
Another wink from Ami, and the old man leaps onto his breezeway and starts walking, his bridge dissolving behind him as he goes.
Chapter 19

The Devil

For three days, Emily does not talk about her experience on the other side of red. Instead, she sinks herself deep into her mother’s grimoire. She’s on her bed reading a rather alarming spell when she first feels the burn of someone watching her.

It’s strange. Many of the spells in the ancient book of shadows seem useful, and too simple to be believable. Like the one she discovered earlier this morning. *Deception*, her mother titled it at the top of the page in rich red ink that shimmers in the light. It requires no ingredients, although a wand can be used if belief is too far out of reach. Emily, however, had no trouble believing this charm. As far as she could tell, it was a privacy enchantment, and for that reason she filed it away in a cabinet of useful things to know, deep inside her mind.

The spell she’s reading at the moment is nothing like that one. It’s not one she’ll be filing away in her own book of spells. Still, though she’s read this spell before, somehow she can’t pry her eyes from it. For a life-enhancing spell, there’s a real darkness to it. Maybe it’s the ingredients—what could the snake venom be for, in a spell for creating life?

Agatha lounges on her bunk, flipping through that little black book of hers, occasionally testing out a simple charm with the flick of her wrist or her knobby wand. Neither of them sees their visitor observing through the window.

Even when Emily looks, she doesn’t see. There’s nothing there, not on this side or the other. Nothing but a glow, or a glint. Still, it’s enough to give her concern.

“What?” Agatha follows Emily’s gaze out the window.
“Do you… get the feeling we’re being watched?”

“Always.” Agatha shrugs, as if to say, such is the life of a seer. And she returns to her little black book.

“Right,” mumbles Emily. “It just bothers me that we can’t see what’s watching us…”

Now this piques the other girl’s interest. “How do you know there is something, then?”

Emily shrugs. “I… feel it, don’t you?”

“I think you’re paranoid.” Agatha sits up and faces Emily. “It’s not like we’re in the forest.”

“Alright, then,” says Emily, sitting up herself. “How about seeing with your eyes closed? Can you do that?”

Agatha looks at her like she just admitted to hearing voices in her head. “Uh, no.”

“Right, me neither,” Emily lies.

“Listen, Em, it’s been three days. You’re all reclusive and morose. Are you going to tell me what happened over there or what?”

Emily pretends to read. But when her eyes land on the method of extraction—which requires packaging up the essence of a couple’s act of love (as her mother put it!)—she’s horrified by the very image—gross! She darts away only to find Agatha’s pursed lips aimed right at her.

The witch is perched at the edge of her bed, her combat boots planted on the floor in a power stance, her arms folded, and the look on her face reminds Emily of Harper. Those two would probably get along. They’re a lot alike.

“Fine.” Emily closes the oversized tome. On a deep inhale, she spills it all to Agatha—all the events and happenings of the other side of red, from her trek across the forest with Roger and Lennie to her encounter with Galadriel and Marcel, and then on to the castle. Even her mother’s identity, she doesn’t hold back this time. What’s it matter, anyway, if Agatha knows? If her new friend went around telling everyone that Emily’s the daughter of a legendary sorceress, no one would believe her. So, Emily spills everything, saving only a few details for her secret stash of memories. Like Gabriel’s hatred toward
her. And all her confusing bodily reactions to him.

Agatha’s every emotion distorts and contorts her brown face. At times, she jumps up and paces the room, processing the information in a string of excited musings. By the time the narrative comes around to Emily’s flight with Marcel, Agatha’s all shades of excitement and she can hardly stand on two feet at once.

“I don’t believe it!” she exclaims in complete and utter belief. “An alicorn. You flew on the back of an alicorn! I’ve never even seen one and I know I want to ride it. I knew I should’ve gone!”

“Growing up in Bellingham, you’ve never seen an alicorn? I mean, Marcel lives here. There’s bound to be others around.”

Agatha’s defenses sound the alarm. “We can’t all have mentors who take us to the other side.”

“I—I was just curious. I didn’t mean—” Never mind. She starts to open the grimoire when Agatha seems to get over the offense.

“Anywaaaayys…” she says, drawing it out until she’s satisfied she’s reclaimed all of Emily’s attention and the book is closed once again.

“What kinds of things have you seen?” asks Emily, genuinely curious.

Agatha shrugs the kind of shrug one does when what they’re about to say is no big deal. “Mostly those spirit thingies…and the darker, shadowy ones.”

“Spirits and shadows,” offers Emily, shrugging. “For simplicity.”

Agatha nods. “A leprechaun lives in my garden. And a few fairies. I’ve seen the sasquatch. But, now that I know, I don’t think he was on the other side.” She rattles on, her tone becoming more and more bored, and Emily gets the impression her friend would much rather know what Emily’s seen. “I’ve seen demons and—oh, yeah, I saw the Devil. Once.” She shudders.

It takes a long moment for Emily to formulate the right question to ask.

“How do you know it was the Devil?”

Another no-big-deal shrug. “He told me. Yeah. He’s not one I’d ever want to see again.”

“What’s he look like?”
Agatha thinks about it really hard. “Honestly, Em, I got the impression he can look any way he chooses. Or any way that brings out fear in a person. But when I saw him, he had a long, pointed face that looked like it had been soaked in a lavender dye. And he wore a cloak like Dracula—with his collar stiff up to his ears…”

“Dracula?” Emily can’t hide the disbelief from her delivery and makes no attempt to.

Another shrug, but this one says I don’t care if you don’t believe me; I saw what I saw.

And Emily believes.

“What was he doing?”

“He was just watching me. Like he wanted to know something.”

“When he told you who he was…was it because you asked him, or did he volunteer the information?”

“What is this, an interrogation? Am I under arrest?”

“I need to know.”

“Well, I got this really weird feeling…and I thought he might be someone really…er, dark, or evil like the Devil…so I asked him. He just said yes. I believed him.”

Emily’s eyes widen. “Imagine if you hadn’t asked! He could have made you believe anything.” At Agatha’s confusion, Emily explains. “If you ask the Devil to reveal his identity, he must tell you. He has no choice. It’s part of the curse.”

Silence settles in the room as they both ponder all the implications this way and that. And Emily wonders just who Agatha is, why the Devil would be interested in her.

“When did you see him?” she asks.

Agatha looks at her hands. “My first day here. In the tunnels. When they moved and took me to the stairs.”

The hackles raise on Emily’s neck. Instinctively, she darts a glance out the window.
“Did he say anything else to you?”

Agatha nods. “Said he was looking for someone, but that I was welcome to come along. I said no thanks, of course.”

Emily swallows. The Devil has found her.

After a long silence, Agatha settles back to the edge of her bed. “Anyways. Tell me the rest. How’d you get home?”

And neither of them mentions the Devil again.

Agatha will have to wait to hear the rest of Emily’s story because at that moment, the door bursts open.

“You guys comin’?” says Daniella, leaning into the room through the doorway and holding herself up by the knob. Giant hoop earrings sway forward around her cheeks. And her chest is in danger of spilling from her robe, which is leopard print and way too small for her curves, stretched over the rest of her like a rubber band about to bust.

“Where?” asks Emily.

“The Tavernacle!” says Daniella impatiently.

“Oh, yeah,” says Agatha, turning to Emily. “Just tell me later.”

“Tell her what?” Kent pops his head in, the expression of an eager neighborhood gossip plastered on his smooth face.

“Nothing—”

“It’s about Hans, isn’t it?” he assumes. “Well…he’ll be at the tavernacle, trust me.”

“I still can’t believe you have an alicorn at your beck and call,” says Agatha under her breath as they follow Kent and Daniella to the common room, where Marcy’s waiting.

“He’s not at my beck and call,” whispers Emily.

“Said he’d come to you anytime you need. For your mother.” Agatha shakes her head. “I’d call that your beck and call. I can’t imagine having a mother like that.”

“Like what?”
“Well, older than the middle ages, for one. And then, there’s the… influence, I guess? I mean, why do all these creatures worship her? Savior, they called her? That’s crazy.”

“She’s a legend,” mutters Emily. Even though savior doesn’t show up anywhere in the legends. She wonders what else isn’t in the legends. If only Lucian were here. He promised to tell her everything. Including her true name. Aliyah Catherine Kyteler.

“Found them,” Daniella announces, jarring Marcy from her bored and half-hearted manipulation spell, which is a table and four chairs marching around the room. Manipulation comes way too easy for that witch, Emily thinks to herself. Everything comes way too easy for her. “Let’s go.”

The tunnels aren’t near as frightening with a group of five. Emily wouldn’t mind walking in the group every time.

“So, where’s this Tavernacle?” asks Emily to no one in particular just as they reach the mouth of the tunnel.

“It’s across from the haunted bathrooms,” says Daniella, walking backward to answer the question. Then she turns around. As she says it, the small crowd at the shack of a building gets their attention.

“Oh,” says Emily, remembering the drunken odes to Hans the night she and Agatha crossed the red. She might have known.

“Weird name for it,” muses Marcy. “Sounds kinda like Tabernacle. Isn’t that like a place for worship or something? Think that was intentional?”

But no one seems to care.

Inside, the shack still looks like a shack, shabby and worn enough to be on an unpaved king’s road somewhere between Westeros and Winterfell. It’s not just the tavern, but the old-world dresses of the barmaids and the tableware. In fact, if it weren’t for the robes of coven members, they might think they’ve just walked into an epic fantasy. The place could easily be one of those inns that caters to travelers of long journeys. When Emily remarks it so, Marcy wraps a thick arm around her and says, “Well, we are all sort of on a journey, aren’t we?”

The clamor of the surrounding robed socialites drowns out their hollow
footsteps on the planked floor, as the five of them make their way to the bar. Emily catches tidbits of conversation, the general talk hovering around the events of Samhain, most of it pointed at the wet robe contest. She doesn’t hear much on the transmutation, or the ritual.

No one pays them any attention, except a barmaid who, curiously enough, looks as though she might own and operate her own brothel. She’s older than most of the clientele in here and seems to have applied her aqua eyeshadow and bright rouge under dim lighting. She takes their orders and gets to work behind the bar.

“So, anyways,” says Marcy once they have drinks in hand and the five of them fill in the stools around the only empty pub table left. “Where were you on Samhain?”

Emily fishes Agatha’s face for a sign—anything that would indicate what Agatha might have told people for why she was gone. When nothing comes, Emily takes a good, long swig from her smoky draft of mushroom cider. Passionfruit and natural carbonation splash across her tongue. Midnight purple smoke spills over the mug and surrounds Emily’s face.

“Fine. Don’t tell us,” says Daniella, snooting her chin high in the air and glancing over her shoulder as if to say *See if we care?* But the snoot gets wiped clean off her perfect, symmetrical features when her nonchalance meets the regard of a witch across the room. And with the coy bat of her eyes and the pucker of her lips, her spell is cast.

“Ohmygods,” mumbles Kent into his tankard, gulping large and wide like a god of mirth and wine who’s tired of being told he can’t play. “Can it get any easier for her?”

Marcy laughs.

“Do people really do that?” asks Agatha, staring at Daniella in horror.

“Evidently,” says Emily, who’s equally disturbed.

“You missed it,” says Marcy, slapping a hand down on the table to get everyone’s attention. “Guess who won the wet robe contest.”

Judging by the red that’s just colored Daniella’s cheek, Emily only needs one guess.
“There weren’t that many contestants,” says Daniella in a whiny pout, just simpery enough to draw out her accent. She coils a lock of bleached gold over her shoulder, stroking it like a security blanket.

“It’s those boobs! They’re so big!”

“Marcy!” Kent slaps her on the back, laughing.

“I cannot help it if I was endowed with such…fulness,” says Daniella.

“What about the guys?” asks Emily. “Who won? Wait, don’t tell me—” She looks around for Hans.

“Hans didn’t enter,” says Agatha. “It was some other guy—cute, but too soft for me.”

“Ohmygods!” says Kent, again. This time, however, it is not a mumble. This time he slinks low and hides his face behind his tankard.

“What?” asks Marcy, following Kent’s not-so-furtive glance to a witch in a shimmering robe, pink belt and dark hair swished to the side like it was flattened by the wind. His chest is puffed out in an air of authority. He seems to be looking around for someone.

“Don’t let him see me,” says Kent.

“You know him?” probes Emily.

“Yeah, spit it out. What’s the big deal?” says Agatha impatiently, earning her a few winces from around the table. “What?” she asks, “He’s got our attention now.”

And it seems, she’s right, as the other three nod at Kent expectantly.

“That guy over there? He’s…sort of…my ex…”

A great, collective “Ahhh…” circles the table, and everyone goes back to their drinks.

“He cannot see me,” repeats Kent desperately.

“What happened?” asks Marcy.

“We’ll just say I don’t feel like being humiliated right now.”

Collectively, the table looks back at the shimmering-robed witch, who seems to have found the one he was looking for. And it’s not anyone Emily
wants to see right now. Kent’s ex discusses something with Hans at the bar. When their glance turns toward Emily’s table, she and her friends look at their hands, and otherwise try to come off as if they’re too preoccupied to notice anyone at the bar.

“Oh, that reminds me!” announces Agatha. And she jumps up and flags down a barmaid, who hurries over. Agatha shouts a stage whisper in the lady’s ear and the lady saunters off, happy as a hooker in a whorehouse. Then she turns on Emily, with a big shit-eating grin plastered on her face.

Emily narrows her eyes at Agatha. But before she can ask, the barmaid returns with a slice of apple pie staked with a flaming candle.

And a red-faced Emily is once again doused with a loud and colorful Happy Birthday song. Who knew her roommate would remember her birthday?

Kent, whose singing tapers off, suddenly has the look of someone who’d like to slink through the cracks in the floorboards. Emily knows the feeling.

Unfortunately for him and Emily both, the birthday song has brought all of the attention in the room to this table, as the entire bar joins in, stomping and cheering and toasting. And Hans uses this excuse to approach Emily.

“Thanks,” says Emily sarcastically once the song is over and the rest of the tavern returns to their gossiping and merriment.

“You’re welcome,” says Agatha proudly.

“Well, what do we have here!” Hans Streicher strides up to their table, Krantz in tow. Kent’s ex lurks behind, observing like a detective collecting every minute detail of the scene.

“Hey, Agatha,” says Krantz awkwardly.

“Hey.”

Just as Emily takes a sip of mushroom cider, Hans takes her hand and plants a lingering kiss on her knuckles. “Happy birthday. Now, where is this…boyfriend of yours? What kind of boyfriend would abandoned you on your birthday?”

Cider flies from Emily’s mouth all on its own accord, plastering Hans from the waist down. Did he say…boyfriend? She looks at Agatha, who
gives her a sheepish grin. Then back at Hans, whose look of disgust is almost worth it. If she weren’t so humiliated at the moment.

“Sorry! I—I wasn’t—I didn’t—”

Hans plants a grin on his face, a fat, slimy, salesy grin that stretches his cheeks near to his ears.

“No worries.” He says this as if to everyone else in the tavern—most of whom seem to be tuned in to their conversation like it’s the evening news. Including shimmering-robed witch, who drops an occasional smirk Kent’s way and soaks in the attraction like it’s his favorite soap opera.

Hans’s words are playful, but his inflection takes on a much more sinister tone. “No worries at all, Emily…Hunts. Maybe I’ll let you make it up to me sometime.”

And he walks off, every eye around the table stuck to his perfect form as it glides across the room into the open arms of a gaggle of giggling girls.

“Your boyfriend must be hot,” says Daniella, “To say no to that.”

“Must be nice,” says Kent wistfully. He sighs. “Two hot guys after you… I can’t even get one guy to keep his interest in me…”

“You don’t want that,” says Emily. “Trust me.”

Daniella fans herself. “I beg to differ.”

“S’true,” says Agatha, “Her boyfriend’s sizzling.” She dabs a finger on her tongue and touches her ass, making the sizzling sound. “I saw him. That night the vampire was here.”

Everyone laughs but Emily, who drops her jaw instead. It’s a little too close to the truth for her comfort.

But Hans’s antics steal her attention. He’s now at the bar, his head sunk low in feigned defeat. A girl on either side of him each pat his back consolingly, occasionally darting a triumphant glance in Emily’s direction.

“He’s been like that all week,” explains Marcy. “Overheard him in the Square complaining.”

“Because he couldn’t find the vampire?” asks Emily. Then, catching herself, she adds hastily, “Uh, I’m assuming he didn’t. I mean, why else
would he have reason to—"

“No,” says Agatha, sloshing her cider on the table. “Because a certain someone is already taken.”

“What?” Emily recoils, skimming Agatha’s face for answers.

Agatha shrugs, as if to say she had no choice. “He wouldn’t leave me alone until I gave him an answer—one he would believe,” she adds when Emily purses her lips. “He seemed to think you were with your boyfriend so I just went with it.” She leans in to whisper. “It was either that or tell him the truth.”

Marcy’s nodding firmly behind her sloshing mushroom cider. “I was with her. He wasn’t gonna let up.”

“Ag told Hans you and your boyfriend are really close. You grew up together.” Kent pops a handful of nuts in his mouth. “I was there, too,” he explains through a mouthful, probably at the surprise on Emily’s face. “I didn’t believe it. I mean, it sounded like Ag was making it all up…”

Ag? Emily was only gone one day and they already have nicknames? What else has she missed out on? “At least Hans won’t pursue me anymore.”

“I wouldn’t count on that,” says Marcy. “I knew him when we were younger. He’s pretty ruthless when he wants something.”

The rest of the night pays tribute to Samhain, lessons, and drunken chants. At the end, the five of them stumble through the tunnels to their rooms, where they each pass out in their own beds.
The next day is easier. And harder.

Easier because Hans is nowhere to be seen. Harder because it’s just Agatha and Emily in the tunnels between lessons.

“C’mon.” Agatha tucks her black book under her pillow. “We got Magical Creatures in fifteen minutes.”

“Right.” Emily folds her mom’s spell book and drops it into her trunk, locking the trunk with the wave of her hand.

They shrug into their robes—Agatha into her usual black one and Emily into a red one—and they brave the tunnels. They’ve been lucky lately, navigating the shifting tunnels without incident. Today, they’re not so lucky.

Halfway down the first hall, Emily gets the feeling they’re being followed and makes the mistake of voicing her fear.

“Surprise—surprise,” says Agatha sarcastically. “One of these days someone really will be watching.”

Emily shoves a dirty look at her new friend. “You always have to be so… mean?”

At this, Agatha seems to lose her wit, and her effort to find it is trumped by a simple swallow.

“I was just…nevermind,” she mumbles quickly under her breath. And for a time, they walk in silence.

Well, not complete silence…there’s still the trickle of the water in the distance, the grumbling and creaking of the tunnels, and the occasional groan. It all gives Emily the chills.

But maybe Agatha’s right. Every time Emily was afraid someone was
coming for her, it had been someone she knows—Esmeralda, Hans… There hasn’t been any real danger in here.

Not until this moment right now.

Just as the girls turn the first corner, a hiss reaches their ears.

Agatha stops, cocking her head at Emily. “You hear that?”

“Yes,” whispers Emily, scanning the darkness. Nothing but shadow and petrified creatures reflects back to her. Darkness swallows them, and they see nothing more.

There’s a low grating sound, like fine sandpaper on pavement, and it’s getting closer to them. It reminds Emily of the tunnels to hell that Lucian carried her through, when the knuckle draggers tried to feed on her fear.

Is this the same? Must she face her fear? It’s worth a shot. What else is she going to do?

And when she does, the tunnel light flashes its yellow warning. Then it goes out.

Slowly, a faint glow spreads over the darkness, over shadows and pillars. And then…

“Em…” come’s Agatha’s plea, quiet and trembling with terror. “Don’t. Turn. Around.”

Naturally, Emily does exactly that. And immediately wishes she hadn’t.

Because she finds herself face to face with the beady black eyes of a serpent tasting her scent in the air. The sight causes her to completely miss the rest of him: his body coiled beneath him—most of his body. What’s not coiled is a pair of bat-like wings. And it’s so much larger than the one that had been against the wall, which, incidentally, is no longer there.

“Aren’t those supposed to be statues?” whispers Emily.

“Run!” shouts Agatha, taking off toward the exit before Emily can respond. Apparently, her weapons of map and wand are useless against giant serpents.

Emily’s fast on her heel, and as they flee the mouth of the tunnels, they both run right smack into Headmistress Livy.
When they turn around, the serpent is nowhere to be seen, swallowed by the pitch black of the tunnels.

Emily’s chest pounds so hard she’s sure everyone out here in The Square can see it.

“Ah, to what do I owe this unexpected run-in?” Livy graces them with a twinkle from her eye and a wide smile—the kind of smile that says she knows their secret.

At once, the girls regurgitate the scene from which they fled, so hurriedly and breathily one would have to pay close attention to get any of it at all.

Livy has the look of someone who’s just been told by a six-year-old that Santa is on his way here tonight to pick them all up and fly them around the globe.

“Is that so?” She sets an arm across her small chest and a finger at her chin, tapping it in contemplation.

“You two haven’t had any mushroom cider today, have you?”

“Erm…” Emily’s taken aback.

“No,” says Agatha in a manner that suggests she could if she wanted to.

“Alright then,” says Livy. “Did the serpent have wings?”

The two witches exchange glances. Emily answers first. “It was hard to see past its fangs.”

“Yeah,” agrees Agatha. “His face and tongue. And sharp teeth.”

Livy strokes her smooth, narrow chin, her thin lips tugging at the corners. “By the size you describe, it could be a basilisk. Although, it’s not likely you wouldn’t notice the wings. I wouldn’t think, anyway. Basilisks are the kings of the serpents. They tend to get noticed in the whole. You might have conjured any ole serpent. Interesting, that you’ve both managed it together. It’s usually an individual thing. Still, no one’s managed the serpent in a while.”

“Conjured?” Agatha questions and gives Emily a look that says, do you believe this lady?

“Like, on purpose?” adds Emily.
“We didn’t do anything,” says Agatha, wearing her frustration right out there on her sleeve. “It just slithered up to us—are n’t those animals…” she looks to Emily for the right word.

“Petrified?” suggests Emily.

“Yeah, like, not real?” agrees Agatha, punctuating her own definition with a firm nod.

“Sure, I suppose,” Livy responds vaguely. She studies her students. “What do you know about serpents?”

Agatha looks as though she’d rather explode than answer such a question at such a time as this. “You mean other than they infect you with poison when they bite? That thing is venomous…isn’t it? It could strangle us both without any effort at all. Can’t you—kill it? Or get rid of it? It’s more dangerous than that vampire that was here—” She stops herself, darting a glance at Emily, who does her best to look unaffected by the comment.

Livy bobs her head in acknowledgement.

“And you, Emily? What would you do with the serpent?”

“I’d rather not see it, if it’s all the same to you. I mean, do the animals have to be in there, anyway? They’re so creepy…always watching us.”

“I see,” is Livy’s reply. “And the vampire? Would you rather see him?”

“No,” says Emily through her teeth, and it’s true.

“Hmm…it’s the same thing the last one saw…she disappeared a few days later,” says Livy in an absent, dreamy sort of way. She taps her chin thoughtfully, then snaps out of her reverie and looks at the two girls as if noticing them for the first time today. “Very interesting. I’ll have to look into it. Meantime, try not to think of the tunnels as passageways but more like…reflections.” At that, Livy gives the girls a gracious smile full of thought and curiosity.

“Well, then. Wouldn’t want you to miss a lesson. They’re so valuable in life, don’t you think?” Without waiting for an answer, the headmistress continues into the tunnel as if there was never an interruption. As if there isn’t a colossal slithering serpent in there.

“It’s like she doesn’t even care!” says Agatha indignantly after the
headmistress disappears down the tunnel. “Like she doesn’t even take us seriously!”

“You think the serpent’s still in there?” says Emily.

“Can’t be, if she’s walking through it, right?” replies the other witch. Then, after a moment of thought, she asks, “What’d you mean when you said always watching us, anyway? The animals?”

“Doesn’t it seem like it?” replies Emily on a sideways glance.

“Uh—no,” says Agatha with an air of someone who’s just been told pigs grow wings when they fly.

No, of course not, Emily thinks to herself sarcastically. Why ever would a seer have reason to feel she’s been watched? “I suppose that basilisk didn’t come to life, then?”

Agatha says nothing, shrugging the disturbing thought away.

In silence, they head toward the Whatcom Underground Meadows, taking the route through the forest. It’s not until they reach the opening to the clearing that Agatha voices what she’s been thinking.

“I think I get what the mistress means by reflections.”

“What?”

“Haven’t you noticed the walls are so shiny we can see ourselves?”

No, Emily has not noticed. Somehow that doesn’t seem as significant as the life-size replicas of predators lining the corridors like guard dogs waiting for their masters’ okay to sic their prey.

Instinctively, Emily glances around, her little heart hoping her fear is really nothing to fear. That the one following her is the one she’s looking for. If Lucian were here, she truly would have nothing to fear.

Aside from the serpent in the tunnels, the next two weeks pass just about the same. The only change comes in the form of the coven’s artificial autumn weather’s slow death. Although the coven likes to mirror the look of the seasons, the temperatures, though cool, remain unchanging, as even as an underground cave.

For this reason, on Thanksgiving weekend, when Emily and Agatha
emerge from the cobra-framed Douglas fir tree in jeans and light sweaters, they’re quite shocked at the sudden cold that greets them.

“Shoulda worn my jacket,” complains Emily. “It’s packed away in my bag.”

“Mine, too.”

The girls follow the herd of students descending the steep slope to the small cave where Emily left her Subaru WRX, parked between a Jeep and a MINI Cooper. They plop their bags in the back seat, hop in, and crank up the heat, shivering until it’s warm enough to stop. Emily taps a glowing blue button on the dash and the world outside the windows closes in on them like a book turning a page.

Agatha screams and ducks under her arms. She cowers over and cradles her head as if to save herself from a head-on collision with a semi-truck. “GO! Go-go-go!” she demands, as if any car could outrun the world coming at you. “C’mon! What—”

Emily laughs, and Agatha takes notice. Aside from the laughter, Emily is not moving.

“You should see the look on your face!” says Emily.

Agatha shoves her.

It’s not a hard shove, but a blow just the same.

“You know what’s happening,” says Agatha in a tone that is very much as accusatory as Emily’s laughter is demeaning, and all of the new witch’s fear transmutes into a straight face.

“It’s just folding,” says Emily.

“That’s what folding is? Folding time and space? Like literally…it’s folding…” The next time Agatha peeks, the view outside is one of a great big old-world home with columns to rival the Greek cathedrals and a single willow tree in the center of an over-stretched lawn.
Chapter 21

Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is nothing like it used to be. There are no kids chasing each other around. No family due at turkey time. No wizarding games on the tube. No Esmeralda. And no Gabe.

Even the pixies seem…less playful than usual.

Sedrick, the old wooden wizard perched in the turret hanging in the foyer, of course, is the same as ever, his purple plume of smoke issuing from his staff as he announces Emily and Agatha’s arrival.

The rest of the house has been temporarily covered in dying autumn colors and sprinkled with a light dust of magic, courtesy of Charlie’s advanced wizardry. Which translates to hovering objects and extra hands for Nan. Literally. Charlie conjured hands from the thought-flow to follow Nan around.

“Took a month to get the hands into physical form,” he explained to Emily earlier. It’s his way of contributing to the running of the household. He’s not exactly handy in any normal way, even if he was born a normal.

Nan does better than her best. Overjoyed with Emily’s visit, Alice has the entire cat counter in the dining room covered in a heap of things she’s been saving for Emily. Max is not pleased to find his old-magi refillable food bowl buried under a pile of striped V-necks that Emily has no intention of wearing.

“Just a few things I’ve been collecting while you were gone,” explains Alice to a rather surprised Emily, an awkward Agatha, and slightly disturbed Harper and Charlie, who seem to think they should have noticed a pile this big developing. “It adds up when you’re not here to give them to you as I acquire them. Plus, your birthday gift’s somewhere in there.” And she starts digging for the only package wrapped and ribboned in color.
Charlie grumbles something incoherently under his breath, but it goes unnoticed as he stalks from the room.

“Amadeus Newton Plutarch Parker the Third,” announces Sedrick, and Charlie opens the door.

“Ami!” Charlie thrusts out a hearty handshake and invites in the wizard.

Although most of the family won’t be here this year, there are a few friends whose own families are off in other worlds, living other lives. Those friends will be dining with the Hunts and Abernathys.

Ami, as usual, is donned, not in the fashionable stripes and velvets but in more of a classic style of wizarding fashion: old-world robes and pointed, wizard hat. He follows Charlie into the drawing room, showering him with questions about the young apprentice, Jeb.

“The boy is a natural,” boasts Charlie in a manner that suggests Jeb’s success has more to do with Charlie’s mentorship than the boy’s own hard work.

Upstairs in Emily’s room, Harper eyes Agatha, and Agatha makes a show of ignoring Harper. And Emily’s black and white cat, Murphy, supervises like a nanny in a nursery. Emily can’t understand why her friends don’t like each other, but it’d be cool if they could just get over it. There are other things to worry about.

“You’ve gotta tell them,” harps Harper in her shouty whisper, as though the walls might be listening. “If they find out from someone else—or worse! If something happens. You can’t—”

“Look who’s talking!” says Emily. “Have you even told your dad about your—”

“I will—on my time.” Harper shoots a glare at Agatha, who seems to find it all amusing, and reclines against the window, allowing the willow tree outside to steal her attention.

“Then don’t tell me—”

“That’s different, Em. And you know it.” Harper crosses her arms.

Yes, she knows. Still…Emily has her reasons, too. Like the fact that Charlie and Nan will not be pleased that Emily crossed the red and returned
to the castle where the horrible incident of last winter happened.

By the time the girls return to the drawing room, it’s filled with guests mingling over mushroom cider and pumpkin steamers, courtesy of Charlie’s bar at the back of the room. Emily introduces Agatha to Ami, who almost seems frightened of the girl, and a pair of Gabriel’s friends who couldn’t stay away from Nan’s cooking and Charlie’s brew, even though their friend is not here.

“Steve and Fen,” Emily introduces the blonde and brunette respectively. Aside from the hair, they look alike, both blocky and professionally athletic and voices like bricks. They’re both witches and have no real plans to progress much further, preferring to pour all their professionalism into sports medicine for normals. A noble living.

“Any word on Gabe?” inquires Fen.

No one knows what happened to Gabriel, and on the off chance that he should one day return, Charlie thought it best to preserve the former tracker’s reputation with one harmless lie. So, the story floating around is that Gabriel has been called away to duty indefinitely. It’s a good lie, a useful lie, the kind that doesn’t require any additional lying.

“No one knows when he’ll be back,” says Harper. “Even he doesn’t know.”

“Off saving the world, one beast at a time,” chimes in an old jolly fellow, raising a glass to Gabriel the hero.

And Emily continues her introductions: a handful of older, white-haired and pruny witches from old-magi families, a couple of normals from Harper’s school, and several divorced friends of Alice’s whose young kids are with the ex this time around. Lastly, Jeb arrives.

Although Emily saw him only two months ago, before she left for Bellingham, it seems like years have passed between them. He’s older in ways she can’t quite put a finger on. He’s less eager and more serious and contemplative. It also seems he’s bought into the wizarding fashion. Jeb’s choice of velvet and stripes are colors of rust and burnt orange and covers him from his top hat to his pointed, suede shoes.

When the boy’s eyes land on Agatha, his attention knows no one else, and
the rest of the pre-party mingling he spends on her. Then Sedrick announces dinner and the crowd is ushered into the dining room where everyone is wafted with the fragrances of gravy, pumpkin, and spices.

The oversized dining table is covered to the edges with plates and silverware and serving platters. Charlie’s enchanted hands scoot chairs out for the guests, who each accept once they’ve refilled their old-world chalices (preserved by sorcery and passed down from Hunts to Hunts over the centuries). Today’s mushroom cider spews thick vapors, starting the color of pumpkin and rolling into other autumn colors; although, when it reaches the brown, it resembles a nasty puke color rather than the natural foliage of fall. A warning, perhaps, if one were to drink too much.

Dinner is a typical Midwestern turkey feast with all the colorful and fermented trimmings a simple witch and all her helping hands can think of. Those hands, at the moment, bustle around the room, carrying in trays, unfolding and flapping napkins on laps, and otherwise serving the guests in a Charlie-approved manner. Each time a pair gets too close to Nan, however, she shoos it away like any another Kansas insect.

Over dinner, guests bounce from conversation to conversation, and no one takes center stage as Gabe would have done. His absence does leave quite a void that Emily was not prepared to notice. No one else seems to notice the absence, or even remember who Gabe is, for that matter—not that it should mean anything to Emily. What they do seem to remember is last year’s Samhain. The table talk is buzzing with comparisons between this year’s dull and boring Samhain and last year’s, when Emily’s mentor showed up—as the vampire self he is—and ripped her knot-shaped amulet from her neck just as he vanished before everyone’s eyes.

Occasionally, a sly glance darts her way, but nothing too malicious. She doesn’t let it bother her, her interest too taken with this blossoming—romance, could it be?—between Agatha and Jeb, neither of whom seem to notice that anyone else at the table exists. In any event, Emily can’t wait to interrogate her roommate on the issue.

After dinner, the party migrates to the drawing room, where the mingling and merriment continue. Occasionally someone sits at the piano and plays a
fun tune. And when enough time without a player has passed, Charlie enchants the piano to play a string of Disney medleys; however, his spell allowed for too much autonomy and the piano sets its mind to play an entirely different tune, causing guests to yawn and stretch from drowsiness, and some even get cranky. Finally, Charlie cuts off the piano and assigns the task to a pair of his helping hands. Instantly, the room wakes up and the party resumes.

Harper must have had some of Charlie’s mushroom cider because she suddenly seems to be rid of her inhibitions and publicly displays her secret with one of the friends she brought to the party, Chasity. Charlie studies her for quite some time before he finally pulls her around the corner and down the hall into his office.

Emily can’t help herself and follows as surreptitiously as she can.

Charlie’s office, though bright and open and airy, is as cluttered with experiments and inventions and contraptions as one who knows him might expect. Father and daughter both look out the wide window as they speak to each other. Neither of them seems to notice Emily’s head in the door.

“Girls? You, er…sure?” Charlie questions Harper. Calculation preoccupies his countenance. He strokes his thin goatee. He’s no doubt putting the pieces together just as Emily had done when Harper confided in her earlier this summer.

The clues were always there. Emily herself remembers every conversation about boys she and Harper ever had. In fact, they weren’t conversations. It was always Emily doing all the talking and Harper shying away from the topic altogether.

Then there’s Harper’s prom. That was no friend she went with. It was a girlfriend. A secret girlfriend. And last year at Samhain, Emily distinctly remembers Harper’s awkwardness when they saw the black widow demon counterpart—a beautiful, full-figured woman in the complete nude. At the very sight of her, Harper had walked right into a wall.

Emily laughs at the memory, earning her the attention of father and daughter. She clears her throat.

Charlie returns to his only child, evidently swallowing the news. He
sighs, the twitch in his lips betraying a subtle disappointment. “Guess this means no grandchildren, then.”

“Not necessarily.” Harper grins an infectious smile that Charlie can’t help but fall for. “There are other ways, Dad. You of all people should know that. You’re the only person I know with real violet eyes.” She cups his cheeks and taps her thumbs at his temples.

He grins. It was a genetic spell, one he invented himself.

“Well then, I’ll hold you to it,” he says, wrapping an arm around her. “I’ve no doubt your spell will be spectacular. Listen. I know this was hard for you to tell me. Next time you have big news, don’t wait until your third cup of brew. You’ll always be my girl.” With his other arm, he pulls Emily into the hug. “That goes for you too, Em.”

A slight bit of guilt rears into the back of her throat, taking the shape and unlucky flavor of lies and broken promises. She still has the matter of breaking the news to Charlie that she’s seen Gabriel, and what he’s become. How could she possibly do that now?

The rest of the holiday weekend goes by without much notice, aside from the spite between Emily’s two friends. Soon Nan and Charlie are waving them off on the front porch, and, in Emily’s Subaru, Agatha’s gawking once again at the surrounding time and space folding around them all the way back to the coven’s secret parking cave at the bottom of the steep hill.
Chapter 22

Deception

At the coven, courses and life resume. Although, as finals approach—which aren’t quite like normal finals but seem to bear the same urgency and preparation—nights at the Tavernacle are replaced by cramming, practicing, and all-nighters in study halls and libraries. Chemical aids from old-magi families exchange hands in dark corners. Aids designed to keep one’s brain functioning at optimal level with minimal sleep. And one day, after their manipulation final, Agatha and Emily find a surprise on Emily’s bed.

They stop in the doorway and don’t even bother asking how the sorceress got in here on her own. At first, Esmeralda doesn’t speak, or even look up. She just sits there in her black cloak, as solemn as a grieving mother.

Emily has no idea what to say, or do, and does nothing for a long while. Agatha, however, barrels into the room and plops on her bed.

“How’s Gabe?” asks Emily, finally closing the door.

Esmeralda lowers her head. When she looks up, Emily gets a better look at the sorceress, whose eyes are bloodshot and puffy, like she’s been crying for days.

“I’m failing,” she mutters. “There’s nothing I can do.”

Agatha, alerted to the emotion in the room, quietly slips back the way she and Emily came, her eyes on everything but Esmeralda.

“I’ve come to warn you,” says Esmeralda at last. “If Gabriel comes back here, if you see him, do not go to him.” Erecting her posture and pointing her chin at Emily, she says, “I’ve discovered…something…erm, a source. I shouldn’t be long. Then I will be able to help my son.”

“What source?” says Emily, trying to follow. “What’s going on?”
But Esmeralda shakes her head.

“You’re not…giving up, are you?” asks Emily.

“Never,” the woman answers with conviction, her eyes brightening with determination. “But Gabriel is not…stable right now. I can’t let anything happen—not until I return. When I return, I’ll make it right again. Everything will be okay. You’ll see.”

“He made it perfectly clear that he wants me to stay far away. So you have nothing to worry about.”

“Right, well, I know my Gabriel,” says the sorceress. “He’s loved you since you could walk. He might, in his deranged state…come back for you…I mean, he doesn’t want to hurt you. But…he’s not himself. Do not go to him. Promise me.”

Emily’s not convinced, remembering painfully how much Gabriel wants to hurt her. She cups her neck. “I promise. Where are you going?” she asks.

“There’s something I have to do—for my son. When I return, everything will be right as rain. I know it will.” There’s desperation in her voice, and a little…madness.

“What should I do if I see him?” mumbles Emily.

Esmeralda takes Emily’s eyes in hers. “Run.”

Then, the sorceress disappears into thin air, leaving Emily to work it all out in her mind.

“I’m going with you,” says Agatha, entering the room. And Emily gets an image of Agatha’s ear pressed up against the door.

“Were you eavesdropping?”

“I’m going this time,” repeats Agatha in a manner that says there will be no discussion on it.

“Who says I’m going anywhere?” says Emily. “You heard Esmeralda. She doesn’t want me to go.”

“I know you’re gonna go. You can’t not go now,” says Agatha.

“No, I’m not. Gabriel…he doesn’t want me there.”
“Fine, but when you change your mind, I’m going.” And the discussion is over.

Later, before the coven sun has ended the day, the Tavernacle is more crowded than ever as members celebrate the ensuing reprieve from studying.

At their table, Marcy goes on about the manipulation final, wanting to know everyone’s answer to the third examination, in which students were required to manipulate a ceramic cat into coming to them when they call it. Daniella looks around at all the same faces in the tavern, bored. She’s not in her usual form-fitting robe. Her figure’s hidden in an oversized cloak as ordinary as its moss color. And Kent contemplates dying his hair an aqua color for winter.

“I’m thinking it needs a pop,” he says, gesticulating the pop with his hands. “What do you think?”

“I like it the way it is,” says Marcy.

“Yeah, pop it,” says Daniella.


“Sure,” says Kent. “But black is your answer for everything.”

Emily, however, is not thinking of Kent’s hair. Emily can’t get out of her mind what Esmeralda was so concerned about. What had changed since Emily fled the castle? Does Esmeralda know her son so well that she can predict his next move?

“What do you mean you’re staying here for Christmas?” Emily hears Marcy saying.

“What? Who’s staying here?”

“I am,” says Agatha in a tone that sounds more like, what’s it to you?

“Why?” asks Emily.

Agatha shrugs. “Something came up for my mom. She has to be out of town.”

“Oh,” sighs everyone around the table, and a sadness weighs down on them.

“Why don’t you come with me?” says Emily.
“What? No, not for Christmas. That’s too…personal.”
“Jeb’ll be there,” says Emily, effectively earning the intrigue of the rest of the table.
“Who’s Jeb?” says Marcy.
“Yeah…tell us about…Jeb,” says Daniella, taking a sip from her chalice.
Agatha folds her arms confrontationally. “I don’t know who you mean.”
“C’mon, Ag,” says Emily. “You guys couldn’t be parted with a knife at Thanksgiving dinner.”
“Oooo…” chimes in the other three.
Agatha’s face turns a bright maroon color and it very much seems to Emily that the witch might sink between the floorboards.
“There is. No. Jeb,” says Agatha through a locked jaw and teeth that don’t move.
“Fine,” says Emily. “I’m staying with you.”
Agatha opens her mouth to rebut, but Marcy speaks first.
“Me, too.”
“We’ll have the whole place practically to ourselves,” says Kent, conspiratorially. “I’m staying, too.”
“I’m in,” says Daniella. And that’s the end of it.

The rest of the night is dedicated to celebrating. The next day, the four of them nurse headaches and sleep into evening. By dinner, Emily works up the nerve to cancel Christmas.

As a witch, Emily does not yet have a scryer of her own. This is not something that can be said in a message, so she doesn’t even bother with divining. And since she’s six hundred feet below ground and there are no towers that would aid the use of cell phones—which is tucked away in her trunk with her grimoire and Lucian’s book, anyway—she must use a public scryer. And there just so happens to be one in the dining hall.

Agatha follows her. Emily does not argue with the other witch, as going to the dining hall consists of a trip through the tunnels, a journey she has no
desire to attempt on her own, not after the serpent fiasco. And so, they traipse through the common room and out the tunnels.

“So…what, exactly, is…wrong with your friend?”

“Oh, the usual. He’s addicted to blood and has a bad habit of killing people. That, and he hates me.”

“Hates you?”

“I didn’t tell you that part. He…wasn’t happy to see me.”

“Oh.” There’s no surprise in Agatha’s surprise. “That explains why you were all bummed.” She sighs. “I dunno…but, I wouldn’t think someone who’s been turned would be up for visits from old friends.”

“Yeah…” says Emily absently.

And the two walk in silence down the dark tunnel corridor, only the distant sound of dripping water to let them know they’re not in here alone. Furtively, Emily takes inventory down the hall of animals. None are missing. And the two witches escape the tunnels and eventually find themselves in the loud and bustling dining hall.

There’s a row of scryers along a wall off to the left side of the stage, each one a marble the size of a basketball suspended in the center of wooden frames. The marbles seem to rotate.

Using the privacy spell she plucked from her mother’s grimoire and filed away for such a time as this—the one called deception—Emily surrounds the two of them with a web of silence and blindness. It’s a simple enough spell, which means there’s no need for a wand. Not for Emily, anyway.

“How do you know it’s working?” Agatha points out the obvious once again.

“I don’t,” says Emily. “You can let me know.”

“Alright, then,” says the other, sarcastically. “What’s supposed to happen?”

“Instead of our conversation, people who pass by should hear what they want to hear, and they’ll see what they want to see. It’s pretty brilliant, actually. All it requires is basic perception and a little influence.” Both of
which Lucian has been honing in her since she was eleven.

“Oh, right, basic…” Agatha skims the bustling dining hall. Cliques of witches and wizards fan the vaulted room. Daniella and Marcy walk through a buffet line. Hans must be on duty, because he’s standing guard at the other end of the stage, his shadows slithering around his ankles on the other side of red. Also on the other side, fairies chase each other between tables, a couple of cupids hover surreptitiously over a flirtatious huddle of mages, and a vampire—or some dark being—observes from a dark corner.

The ethereal being Emily saw in her window drifts high above and, though it’s on this side of red, no one notices it.

Emily hovers a hand over the public scryer, her mind bent on her family. Charlie’s the first to pick it up.

His image appears within the globe, his arm stretched out before him, holding the staff through which he peers.

“Em, good of you to call! BABE!” he calls to Alice, who’s somewhere off-globe.

A moment later, Nan pops her head into view, followed by her blue and white striped housedress, matching stockings, and pointed blue shoes. She’s holding a cupid arrow in one hand and, in the other, a hollow bone of some poor animal filled with a slimy, green ingredient. Above her, a pleasant spirit lounges in the air.

“My darling, Emily! Oh, hullo there, Agatha. And how might you be?”

“Uh, good, Mrs. Hunts.”

Then Emily says, “I’m calling because I have news.”

“Oh?” Nan turns her smile up to the level of a bright morning sun. It pains Emily to see it, for she is getting ready to break Nan’s heart.

Charlie waits patiently, his awareness more acute than Nan’s.

“I…I’m going to have to skip Christmas this time.”

Nan reacts first. “This time? Em, it’s your first Christmas away from us. Why? Surely, you don’t—”

“I’d like to come home, Nan, but—”
“Then do, simple as that.” Tears pool at the bottom of Nan’s lids and her bottom lip quivers.

“Nan—”

“Let’s hear her out, dear.” Charlie pats Nan on the back and points an austere glare at Emily. “I’m sure there’s good reason not to see her family on the most important holiday of the year.”

Agatha takes this time to slink out of the globe’s view, motioning to Emily that she’ll—just be—waiting—over—there. And she pretends to stand guard, making sure that no one can hear or see what’s really happening behind the spell of deception.

“I’m going to stay here with my friends.”

Nan rebuts with an expression of extreme hurt.

Charlie’s more understanding. “I see. Naturally. You’ve just got your freedom, and you want to hang with your friends. What about their families?”

“They…” Emily looks at Agatha, whose head is hung and ears burn red with embarrassment. Her hands are hidden beneath her robes, probably shoved deep into her jeans pockets. She kicks at something that’s not there. “They just wanted to stay,” says Emily.

Nan has nothing further to say.

“Charlie,” says Emily. “There’s something else…”

He looks up at her expectantly.

“I um…I saw Gabe.”

“You’ve seen him? Is he…how is he…?”

Emily tells them everything—Esmeralda’s visit, Gabriel’s attack, Emily’s trip to the castle…and so on.

Nan’s speechless at first, not knowing which to address first. Which isn’t the troubling thing. It’s the disappointment in Charlie’s violet eyes that pains Emily most. He holds the look of a kid who was picked last to be on the team.

“Couldn’t have told us at Thanksgiving?” he says.
Finally, Nan decides to get mad. “Absolutely not. In no way are you going to stay there now—not with Gabe—oh poor Gabe, he must be—oh no, not with what he’s doing now—and him lurking around—after what he did! You’re to stay away from him. And Ez…she’s heartbroken, I know. Why hasn’t she—Em, I’m astounded that you crossed over in the first place—and after what you saw. He could’ve—” she gasps. “Without consulting us. Your judgment, Em—”

“I knew you’d say no—” interrupts Emily.

“Exactly.” Nan leaves the scryer’s view and returns a moment later, the cupid arrow and hollow bone that were in her hands replaced with a tissue and a box of tissues.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to agree with Nan,” says Charlie firmly. The hurt and disappointment seem to have taken root in his throat and choose to express themselves through his check-marked brows and cloudy eyes; it’s enough to make Emily wince. “You made a promise to me.”

“And I’m keeping my promise right now. I’m telling you, aren’t I?” But she can’t meet his eyes. Telling the truth is too hard. “Listen. I’m an adult now, remember? You can’t tell me what to do anymore.”

“You’re barely eighteen,” insists Nan.

“Nineteen,” rebuts Emily, weakly. “Last month.” Give or take a few hundred years, she thinks darkly to herself.

“You’re coming home,” says Nan, plunking her folded arms just under her bosoms.

And a long silence ensues. A silence so loud, Agatha can hear it from her corner of the sphere.

When Alice speaks again, her lips quiver. “Did you say Ez has been in Egypt all this time? I wonder what’s there for her. Why would she keep that from me?”

“Nan, you know what she’s going through. She wasn’t thinking clearly. She doesn’t look herself. I mean, she’s…tired, I think. Anyway, she said she’d call you the moment she returns.”

“I see.” Nan nods her head, but the hurt does not leave her eyes. And
Emily wonders if Esmeralda’s call will do anything to improve the damage that has already been done.

“I don’t want to hear that you’ve gone back to that place. Not without me, you hear?” Charlie stomps his staff like a gavel. He’s made his ruling. The effect is nauseating as Emily’s viewing them through the small scryer at the tip of his staff, making the scene in the Hunts’s living room bounce and vibrate.

After a lengthy and teary goodbye during which no one agrees on anything, Emily casts off the privacy spell and, turning to leave, she walks right into an elated and ecstatic Hans.

Arms crossed, legs spread in a power stance designed to communicate that he’s in charge here, Hans looks down on Emily and stretches his cheeks into a wide, greasy grin. The slimy grin of a magician with a trick up his sleeve.

“Did I hear you correctly?” he intones, wrapping a consoling arm around Emily, and ushers her toward the door at the other end of the hall. “Did you and your boyfriend just break up?”

Emily coughs and can’t seem to stop.

“Er, you okay?” Hans pats her on the back.

Her breath hitches. She pushes through the crowded room, past a pasta bar, the aroma of herbs and sauces wafting at her. She doesn’t even know if Agatha’s with her until she glances over to find the amusement plastered on her friend’s face. Agatha doesn’t even have to say it. Her look says it all: Emily’s mother had been right to name the spell *deception.*

Hans pushes the front door open and gestures the girls outside, his grin ever-widening.

“You’re upset. I understand. Breakups can be hard. Even if they are for the best. I mean, he didn’t even come to your birthday. Allow me to escort you to your rooms.”

Hans does not take no for an answer, no matter how many variations of protests sputter from Emily’s mouth. Besides, with the serpent incident still fresh, she’s not too upset to have a strong and renowned tracker in the tunnels
with them.

His assistance, however, does not come without his own interests seeping through in his not-so-furtive comments here and there. Comments about crossing the red. By the end of the night, Emily’s convinced that Hans is afraid she might cross the red, and that he might miss it. Come to think of it, he seems to suspect she has already.

He does not leave their common room until well past the end of the night. And no one but Emily seems to want him to. Even Agatha encourages his tales of battles and carnage, almost as much as Hans enjoys the rapt attention of every female in the chamber.

Finally, Emily and Agatha slog to their room, where they plop on their beds and drift immediately into a long-awaited sleep.

But Emily doesn’t sleep for long.

It’s three in the morning when the sudden feeling she’s being watched wakes her. She jolts up, scanning the room.

“Lucian?” she whispers.

Just a dream, she tells herself, wishing she was wrong.
Gabriel’s not one to break promises, but this one, he had no intention of keeping in the first place.

“You know what Lucian said to me when I was turned?”

Gabriel ignores Emmet.

“He said, ‘beware the unloved.’”

Gabriel flicks him a look that says, what’s that supposed to mean?

“They said,” Emmet continues, undisturbed, “’For I am he.’”

“Well, that explains a lot,” retorts Gabriel. “No wonder he’s a prince of hell. He was made for the part.”

“You’re missing the point, dumbass.”

Gabriel blinks. Then, he gives Emmet a wide bow and a sarcastic grin.

“Never mind,” says Emmet irritably. “That kind of wisdom will fly right over your head. You couldn’t handle the truth.”

“Oh, I can handle the truth just fine. You’re just not speaking it! What do you want?”

“From you? Nothing. It’s what you want—what you need.”

“What?” says Gabriel.

“Training.”

“Training?” Gabriel studies the older vampire.

The guy is deadpan.

“I already told you, I don’t need training from anyone, least of all from you.” And Gabriel storms out of the dungeons.
Immediately, he forgets Emmet as a smidgeon of awareness stakes its claim over his gut. *Vampires aren’t the enemy, you are!* he told his mother. How does the truth always manage to come out in heated fits of anger? Gabriel ignores it. His awareness ignores it, for he himself would rather not see that he does indeed know the truth. He’d rather be right.

But for a moment, he allows himself to miss his mom, and wish he hadn’t been so hard on her. Maybe then she wouldn’t have left.

He climbs the serpentine steps, the stench of brimstone weakening as he ascends. Storming through the castle, he crosses the bridge to the west wing and slams himself in Lucian’s chambers.

“I know you’re here! Enough hiding! Come out and face me!”
Nothing.
“LUCIAN!”
Nothing.
“COWARD!”
Still nothing.
But he can *feel* the presence of his sire…
He can feel the old vampire’s derision.
He’s done waiting. He’s got a promise to break. And he leaves the castle.

* * *

The dining hall buzzes with the celebrations and merriment of end-of-term. It’s decked in greens and reds, lighted trees, and candles. Snow falls outside the windows. And high above, a group of wooden elves have been enchanted to sing Christmas carols.

Emily and Agatha eat dinner alone at a rear table, pretending to be completely oblivious to Hans and his hawk eyes. Yesterday and today he has been on their tail, still under the impression that they just might cross the red.

Then, Kent’s ex-boyfriend saunters up to the front of the stage and
whispers into Hans’s ear.

They both cast a glance in the girls’ direction.

“I don’t believe it,” says Agatha. “They’re talking about us. Why is he so interested in what we do? It’s almost like he suspects something.”

“Like us crossing the red?” says Emily bitterly, voicing what they’ve already come to realize. “I dunno, but we gotta get him off our tail if we’re going to have any fun over winter break.”

“Alright,” says Agatha in a tone that suggests no fun can ever happen here. She finishes chewing a bite of noodle-less lasagna and rice, then leans in close until Emily follows, her own mouth full of shredded pork and cheese. “I’ll distract Hans. You get your cloak. And we’ll meet at the gates. Midnight.”

To get her cloak means a trip through the tunnels. Alone. But—“Meet at the gates for what?”

“C’mon, Em. You know you want to go over there. You haven’t stopped thinking of Gabe since his mom came back. You’re worried.”

“And? You heard Esmeralda. She said stay away from him.”

“Since when do you let people tell you what to do?”

Chewing and thinking, Emily nods. “Why midnight?” she asks.

Agatha shrugs, enjoying this a little too much. “Sounded cool.”

Finally, Emily puts her fork down, saying, “Could work. But what if Esmeralda’s right? What if Gabe isn’t…stable.”

Agatha shrugs. “She’s a paranoid mother—you know, one of those moms who coddles their kids? What do they call it? Helicopter moms?”

“Uh—Esmeralda’s not a helicopter mom,” says Emily, knowing the woman well enough to know that much. She was way too austere a mom for that.

“Whatever,” says Agatha. “Fine, if you don’t want to know about Gabe, then don’t. He’s your friend, not mine.”

“No, I do,” says Emily, startling herself with the truth. She sighs. “Midnight, then…”
Agatha grins. “And I’m going with you. End of story. Besides, if what Esmeralda says is true, you’re going to need help.”

There’s no talking her out of it. Emily can see that as plainly as she can see Hans squinting to read their lips from across the room.

“How’re you gonna—”

“Distract Hans?” interrupts Agatha. “Easy. What does Hans like to talk about more than anything else?”

“Himself,” they say in unison, and laugh.

“Promise,” says Agatha before they separate. “You won’t leave without me.”

“Of course, not,” promises Emily. “How could I now?”

Moments later, armed with her wand and the map, Emily braves the tunnels alone for the first time since before she and Agatha were friends. Taking a breath, she wills the serpent from her memory and steps into the mouth of the tunnels. Darkness swallows her whole.

Instantly, something’s wrong.

It’s not visible, but it is undeniable.

Someone is watching her. Someone’s always watching her. She’s hoping it’s not the serpent. Or worse, the Devil, who’s here for someone, as Agatha told her.

Picking up the pace and ignoring all the signals in her body—the raised hackles, anchoring stomach, and pounding chest—she walks on, proud and strong and fast. Really fast.

Her wand lighting the way, she focuses on the distant drips of water, which only reminds her of the vastness of this cavern and its endless corridors that she has not yet even seen. There could be someone in any one of them. Of course, there are. There are always people in the tunnels. Why, then, does she never see any unless they’re walking with her?

Okay, so focusing on the water doesn’t work.

She tries the passing animals. No, no, that won’t do. It only reminds her of the serpent come to life and its tawny eyes, slippery tongue, and sharp
fangs. When she looks, she notices his usual place is empty.

Emily walks faster.

Then, she hears the footsteps coming from behind, slow and heavy thuds echoing through the hall. It reminds her of Gabriel. Until it increases its swiftness.

She should have grabbed her cloak this morning. She knew it; her gut had told her to, and she didn’t listen to herself. At least, by the footfalls, she knows it can’t be the serpent, or basilisk.

There’s no need to jump to conclusions. No need to fear. It could be anybody. She’s not the only member in this coven. It could be her wild imagination running rampant again. Emily is fully capable of being a rational witch, she thinks to herself, huffing her chest. Taking a page out of her roommate’s book, the rational witch shows her weapons to the darkness.

Wand in one hand and rolled-up map in the other, she flails them high above her head. But it only makes her pursuer laugh.

And she spins around on the spot.

The figure does not stop, moving toward her like a predator chasing its prey.

She squints down the corridor like it should shed light through the dark. But she can’t see anything more than a handful of feet in front of her wand’s light. And the shadow coming toward her, growing by the second. It’s broad and towering and…

She knows this figure.

“Hans?”

“Who else?” comes the amused baritone. “What were you going to do with those? Flail me to death?”

She tucks the map away and keeps the wand out for light.

Somehow, she’s actually happy to hear his voice, though she dares not put that message on her face.

Hans snaps his fingers and the warning lights blare. “You shouldn’t be in here alone, not after the basilisk incident. You know you can always ask me.
I won’t let any harm come to you.”

“What are you doing here?” she asks. “I thought you were—”

“Distracted?” he interrupts, giving her a pointed purse of his lips before curling them into a devious grin as he steps into the sphere of her wand’s glow.

“Er, sorry,” she offers, halfway meaning it. “Where’s Agatha?”

“Still waiting outside the men’s restroom, I expect. Thought I’d never get you alone, actually. With her always hanging around you. She’s like a fly on manure.”

“Interesting analogy,” Emily replies curtly. “You don’t have to insult my friend.”

“Apologies,” says Hans without any apology whatsoever in his tone. “Miss…Emily Hunts…how can I make you see…Listen. I’m only watching you out of concern for you. If you only knew how lucky you are…”

“Hans,” she says, knowing full well where this is going. “I appreciate your interest. It’s flattering, really—”

“Oh, well, thank you—”

“You could have any number of girls. Beautiful girls swoon over you every day.”

“True.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I’m constantly fighting them off. You’re the lucky girl I want to be with.”

“I just don’t think I’m your type.”

“Nonsense, I don’t have a type. What’s your hurry? Term’s over. We have all winter break to get to know each other. You can tell me about the other side of red…You’re not going anywhere, are you?”

“I—I have family,” says Emily, truthfully. She certainly does have a family. But Hans wears the look of someone who already knows. She backs away. “Sorry, Hans.”

“I see,” says Hans, taking the rejection better than she expected. Or so it seems at the moment. “It’s natural for a girl to be intimidated by my…well,” He sweeps a grand gesture at himself. “Happens all the time.”
He slides a hand into his pocket and flexes his arm, drawing her eyes to the veins in his bicep. “Let’s…talk about something else.” And, by the glow in his eyes, Emily surmises he already has a topic in mind. One guess says she knows exactly what he’ll say next.

“Tell me about your spell, crossing the red. How does it work?”

“Haven’t you seen it?” she asks.

“How can I? Student submission spells are strictly confidential. But you can tell me all about it.”

Although she already knew this, a wave of relief washes over Emily. She had thought Hans would have found a way to get his hands on the spell. But that’s exactly what he’s trying to do now. Which means he has no other way of getting it.

“You’re the Mistress of the Other Side, Emily. Keeper of the crossing. You hold the key to the kingdom of creatures. We could even call you a princess to the other realm—” He interrupts himself with a laugh.


“But there’s a flaw in your spell,” he says. “For it to work, there must actually be another side. Most don’t believe, you see—”

She nods. “You got me. I made it all up.”

Hans gives her a grin worthy of a mad scientist who’s just come across the secret to the universe. “Good thing I believe. I’ve expected its existence for a while. So, when you came along…well, it only confirmed my theory.”

“Why do you want to go to the other side?” she asks him.

“To get all the monsters, of course. Imagine what a hero I’d be if I stopped all vampires ever.”

“You want the world to be safe…?”

A pause, as Hans seems to ponder this, twirling his staff in his hand contemplatively. “Yes, yes, of course, exactly that.” He flashes a winning grin that belongs on the face of a politician. “Imagine, Emily, if I were there when the serpent attacked you…”

This gives Emily pause. It’s the second time he’s mentioned the basilisk.
But, this time, the way he says it makes her wonder…

“How did you know about the serpent?”

“Why, everyone knows, of course.”

But everyone does not know. If they did, she’d have heard it by now—from Marcy or Kent or Daniella. None of them would be able to keep the rumor from her. No one was there. No one but—

“Did Mistress Livy tell you?”

He raspberries the air and leans on his ginormous staff. “She would never divulge student information, privileged or not. No, I saw it myself. I was—” and he stammers all over himself like a child caught playing with something he was told not to touch.

“It was you,” she says. “You manipulated the serpent to come after us.” Which would explain why it didn’t chase her out of the tunnel.

As though he can’t help himself, he straightens his belt and says, “Manipulation is powerful. Not everyone can master it like I have.”

“Why did you do that?”

“C’mon, it was just a little fun. Besides, you needed to know the dangers of walking alone—”

Emily does not stay to hear the rest. She’s halfway down the tunnel when Hans catches up to her. He takes her firmly by the arm. And a streak of fear shoots through her.

“Listen, Emily. How ‘bout you do the spell and let me worry about that other stuff. Tracker stuff. You wouldn’t understand.”

And suddenly, she’s inspired to speak the truth. “You don’t really want me. You couldn’t care less about me. You just want what I can do for you.”

He’s taken aback. He drops her arm and assesses the witch. “It’s what we can do for each other. That’s love, am I right?”

And though it’s a rhetorical question, she answers it with pursed lips. “No. It’s not what love is. Love is…” She stretches her mind. It’s not something she’s ever pondered before. At least she knows what it’s not. “Well, it’s not about transactions.”
Hans laughs. “Transactions are in every relationship…” And he moves in a little closer, stepping right into her personal space.

She staggers back. “Hans. I—”

He laughs darkly, interrupting her. “What kind of pansy do you take me for? You acknowledged it yourself: I can have any girl I want. Why should I have to chase one?”

Her jaw drops at his admission, which is a little too audacious, even for him. She always knew he was thinking it, but to say it like that…

With each of his steps, she takes a step backward until the cold reflective wall of the tunnel meets her back, right between a mountain lion and a grizzly bear. And something she’d once learned about grizzlies sparks in her memory. It’s the kind of animal whose aggression increases when you stand up to it. It will not stop until it knows you’re dead.

Hans perches his staff so close to her, she can almost feel the serpent’s beady eyes on her. He runs a finger down her cheek, much like Gabriel did. But the feeling she gets is not the same. Nothing about Hans’s touch makes her want more. Especially with those intense eyes journeying over her head as he gently coils a strand of her defiant hair to the side.

“Listen, Emily,” he says, keeping his voice taut, his patience running thin. And red flashes from his serpent’s eyes. “I’ll get to the other side of red with or without your cooperation.”

She recognizes a threat when she hears one, and she’s reminded of something Gabriel taught her—in the gazebo in the center of the four-acre field back home, a long time ago. She’s about to use a cantrip of perception to distract Hans so she can bolt. But the moment is taken from her when something happens that changes the situation completely.

It starts with a flash of movement in the dark—just beyond the light. Hans follows her stare. But he doesn’t see anything. For what she sees is on the other side of red. It gives her an idea. She could cross over right now, but whoever that hooded creature is would have her. And Hans would have his confirmation. Or worse, he might attach to her and cross the red himself.

She slips from under his arm, moving toward the dark figure, if only to get a better look. On this side, it can’t get her. Even if it’s the Devil. He’s tall
and shrouded and still as a gargoyle.

It could be Lucian, as still as it stands. Her heart skips, and immediately dies. Somehow, she knows it’s not Lucian.

A grin stretches Hans’s cheeks, dark and grimacing. The kind of grin that belongs on an enchanted clown at a haunted carnival, after hours when the toys come out to play.

Their visitor seems to take that as cue to cross the red. Right in Hans’s line of vision. Emily gasps involuntarily.

Hans staggers back, startled by the sudden intruder a mere handful of steps away and facing him confrontationally. His head bobs from Emily to the visitor and back.

“You saw that, didn’t you, on the other side of red? I was right!” There’s excitement in his voice. He finally gets the proof he’s been looking for. And now he has the best tracking tool ever: Emily. He returns to the prowler.

“Need something?” says Hans, readying his fighting stance, his hand already on his weapon of choice.

“Just the girl,” growls the voice, so low and raspy Emily can’t recognize any voice in the sound at all.

Then, the figure charges forward into Hans’s face. Lowering the hood, he reveals an angry pair of red eyes, curled lips, and teeth like daggers pointed right at the tracker’s jugular.

“You—” says Hans. “You were here that night—before Samhain.”

Emily gasps. It’s all she’s capable of at the moment. Which is enough to get the tracker’s attention.

“You know this—this vampire?”

“I knew him once,” she stammers. “Before—”

Hans nods. He understands. “I’ve seen it before, vampires stalking people from their old lives.” And he turns on Gabriel. “Not this time.” Hans surreptitiously reaches for the blade in his tracker belt.

But Gabriel shakes his head like he’s warning a kid not to misbehave.

Hans narrows his eyes as though his initial recognition wasn’t thorough
enough. “Wait—I know you, too—from before. You were a tracker—we—”

But the vampire’s too fast. He grabs Emily, flings her over his shoulder, and crosses the red.
Chapter 24

Kidnapped

Hans flails around in the dark tunnel, shouting in their faces. Gabriel and Emily, who are on the other side of red, have not moved.

“Come back here, COWARD! I know you can hear me! Emily! It’s okay! I’ll save you!”

Gabriel laughs a dark and cackling laugh. “Now, he wants to save you.”

“What are you doing?” demands Emily.

“My job,” is his short reply. He shakes his head. “How does trouble always seem to find you?” And he walks away from Hans, ignoring a protesting upside-down Emily pounding her fists on his back.

“Put me down! Gabe! GABE! I don’t need your help!”

“Could’ve fooled me. Besides, who said I’m here to help you?”

This shuts her up, and she does nothing but hang, her head collecting all the blood from her body as she recalls Esmeralda’s warning. Until Gabriel drops her on her own bed. “Now, where’s that red cloak of yours?”

She doesn’t move, crossing her arms. “How’d you know where my room is?”

“Fine, I’ll tear apart the room and take it. When your roommate returns, she’ll think there was a struggle and probably come looking for you. Alone. Through the forest—”

“I’ll get it!” Emily relents. In a huff, she fishes the cloak from her trunk and throws it at her captor. “What are you doing?”

“I’m taking you to the castle.” He gives her a grin so menacing chills crawl out of it and inch down her spine.
“You can’t just come in here and kidnap me!”

“Except that I can.”

He throws her over his shoulder, ignoring her struggle, and jumps through the window—right through the glass. Outside the window on this side, it’s not the cliffs and water scene provided by the coven’s blanket spell but a hollow space leading to a long climb of natural stairs that twist and wind through the earth. Gabriel speeds up the climb easy as a summer breeze until at last they’re in a shaft, the earth’s surface some distance above.

Gabriel leaps up and lands on the rim of the shaft. He drops Emily on the frozen forest floor.

Winter burns her eyes and ears. Snow falls just as the enchanted snow had outside the hall’s windows. She shivers.

“How’d you do that?” she demands.

He grins. “Magic.”

She crosses her arms in a huff. “Why are you doing this?”

Ignoring her, he has a few rules of his own, starting with, “Stay away from that guy. He’s been following you.”

Emily narrows her eyes at her kidnapper. “How do you know he’s been following me?”

“Because I’ve been following him.”

“You’ve been following him following me? You mean you’ve been following me!”

Gabriel shrugs. “Say it however it makes you feel good, Em. Just stay away from that pansy. He’s bad news.”

“Why? What’d you care?”

“Because! I won’t let him have you. I won’t let anything happen to you. Ever. Period.” He rips at his hair, reminding her of the Gabriel she used to know. His candor is unexpected, as is the tremble in his voice. It takes her back a moment.

“Put this on.” He throws the cloak at her, returning the ice to his tonality.
She doesn’t bother arguing this time, shrugging into it with as much animosity as she can muster. Besides, she reasons to herself, it will keep her safe in the woods, and warm. She and Agatha were going through there anyway, she continues her internal reasoning. Gabriel hasn’t won. He’s only made it easier for her.

And harder.

Agatha will think Emily broke her promise. Everyone will think she left them, and she’ll return without any friends.

“My friends,” she says, but he cuts her off.

“Will have to miss you.” And, without preamble, he heaves her over his shoulder once more and jets through the forest in about the time it takes one to stroll down a short cul-de-sac. Feeling whiplashed and dizzy, she’s in no condition to voice her displeasure. He sets her down inside a gondola resting halfway up on a shallow beach.

The seat is crimson velvet, the lantern a soft glow. The oar stirs. She knows this boat. It’s the same one in which she escaped the castle last year. Now she returns, once again against her will.

“Sit,” he orders. And again, she doesn’t bother arguing. His strength is too much for her resistance. He turns to the oar. “To the castle.”

Her heart and her shoulders sink to her stomach as she’s reminded of her promise to Agatha, who’s probably thinking Emily’s abandoned her.

“Oh, don’t be so sulky,” says Gabriel derisively. “You were going to come see me anyway. I’m only making it easy for you.”

“How would you know?” But she already knows how. “It was you all this time! You’ve been following me!”

He raises his hands in mock surrender. “It’s a good thing, though, because so was Streicher.”

She looks at her hands, disappointment tightening her throat.

“Ah,” he says, “You were hoping it was…him.”

He doesn’t have to say Lucian’s name for her to know who he’s talking about. “And what’s so wrong with him? He taught me everything I know. He
protected me.”

Gabriel does not answer, his expression enigmatic.

“Thought you didn’t want to see me,” she says.

Again, he does not respond.

She sighs, taking in the still lake. It’s clear tonight, its surface reflecting the glow of the silvery moon. Ripples reach them from a distance, reminding her of the serpent-like creature she saw the night she flew over the lake. It chills her to be this close to the surface.

A hum comes across the waters.

But no song follows. And Emily wonders if the mermaids still mourn their prince.

If Gabriel’s not going to talk, then she will. That’s something he has no control over. She’ll talk until he can’t stand it, beginning with Charlie and Nan and…

“You know, Charlie’s beside himself with agony—if only he could hear from you. And your mom—she’s been all over the world for you, searching…for something, or someone…”

She goes on as he ignores her. Until her plan blows up in her face.

Gabriel steps to her side of the boat, shifting the balance unfavorably. He leans into her face, much like he did to Hans, incisors pointed at her, his lips curled and eyes as hungry as a savage beast.

“Sleep,” he orders, no doubt supernaturally, for Emily has no say in the matter. Her eyes become lead weights. Black takes her consciousness.

When she wakes, she’s lying in a familiar, four-post bed. A great window opens to the same silver moon she saw from the lake. To the right, a doorway opens to a wide balcony. And Gabriel perches at the foot of the bed, reminding her of the time she woke from death. That night it was Lucian who perched in that spot, waiting for her to wake.

She pulls herself up.

“Stay,” he orders.

“Since when are you so bossy?” Besides always? Before, at least he knew
his limits.

“Since there’s nothing you can do about it.” He grins.

“I see you’re feeling better.”

He shrugs. “How much do you know about this Hans character, anyway?”

A smirk struggles on her lips. “Why, are you jealous?”

“No.” He averts his gaze.

She sighs. “He’s the captain of the trackers for the coven. I hear he’s good. He…” She swallows. “He staked a vampire’s head in the dining hall at the beginning of term.” She narrows her eyes at him. “How do you know him?”

Gabriel nods, keeping his gaze averted. “We attended rivaling academies. Once a year, a tournament is held. Academies across the country compete against each other in a hunt. I’ve gone up against Hans before. He plays dirty.”

“Yeah, well, he’s a lot like you.”

Hurt flits across his dark lashes, clouding his eyes, which she notices no longer harbor the red she saw earlier.

“I wasn’t that bad,” he says disconcertedly. “Was I?”

“No. Maybe not,” Emily concedes. There’s a dark side to Hans that Gabriel never had before. “But you were pretty bad.”

Silence falls between them. Seeing Gabriel like this makes her wonder what Esmeralda was so worried about. She allows the room to take her attention, wondering what clues to Lucian’s whereabouts might be in here.

“Come here often?” she asks. “To Lucian’s chambers?”

He shrugs. “Sometimes. Bound to be a clue here.”

“Have you found anything?”

“Just this.” He straightens the cloak draped over him. At Emily’s confusion, he explains. “I swear it’s the same one Lucian wore the night he disappeared.”

“You know,” she says on a sideways glance. “If I didn’t know you any
better, I’d say you want to see him again?”

He shrugs. “Only to kill him again.”

Just then, a silvery reflection catches her eye. It comes from a corner on the floor, near the drapes. She springs from the bed, putting Gabriel on full alert. He’s at her side faster than nerves on a first kiss.

“Chillax!” she says, exasperated. “Lucian gave me this last time I was here. In all the excitement that night, I left it here.”

“What is it?” he asks, staring at the silvery thread in her hand, so light and airy it has the appearance of floating.

“Lucian called it a ribbon of time, or something like that. String of time, maybe…thread of time? My mom made it. Powerful magic. Just don’t know what it does.”

“Your mom? Oh…right. She was… But how would Lucian have it?”

“I never did get to find out,” she admits. “He was going to tell me when you guys showed up.”

“Oh.” He slumps under the weight of his mistakes. The guilt in his countenance chips at her heart. She wonders what other burdens he’s been carrying all this time.

“But I know he killed my mother.”

He furrows his brows. “You’re sure?”

“That’s what he told me. Why? Have you learned something?”

He shakes his head. “No. Extracting information around here is like getting a pixie to stand still.” There’s a shred of resentment in his tone. “I don’t get it, Em. How could you be loyal to someone who killed your mother?”

Emily’s been wondering that same thing. “I…dunno. But I didn’t ever know her. I’ve known him since I was eleven. It doesn’t seem right…that he would kill her.”

Gabriel seems to accept the answer. He leans into her gaze for a second time tonight. “Sleep,” he orders once more, and black shrouds her before she can protest.
When she wakes, she hasn’t moved, but Emmet sits in Gabriel’s place, and Gabriel is nowhere to be seen.

She sits up, happy to see the familiar sallow face. His eyes remind her of Lucian’s ancient blues. “Where’s Gabe?”

He hesitates. “He was…thirsty…”

She swallows, remembering the dead girl dangling from Gabriel’s arms the first night she saw him, and it all comes crashing back down. All this talk has been so nice, she completely forgot who Gabriel’s become.

“Does he have to?”

Emmet lifts from the bed and pads over to the window. “It is the natural order of things.” Then, he turns around and tucks his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket. “Sarah Michelle thought you might be hungry yourself. She insisted you have some dinner.”

“Did she?” Emily’s stomach won’t let her deny it. “But—” She looks at the foot of the bed for the tray he used to bring.

“This time, there’s no need for you to stay locked up. We’ll dine in the dining room.”

“What about Gabriel?”

“The good news is, I don’t answer to him.” Emmet gives the witch a beautiful, blueberry wink.

But Emily can’t think of food right now. She’s just been kidnapped, by the very vampire who Esmeralda warned her to stay away from. And who she and Agatha were going to cross the red for. Agatha’s probably worried sick, wondering what’s happened to Emily.

But Emily’s wrong about that. Agatha is not worried. She’s…pissed.

At this very moment, she’s at the Tavernacle with their mutual friends complaining about Emily’s selfishness for leaving without her.

“I mean, she promised.” Agatha downs the rest of her draft. She does not mention her and Emily’s plan to leave together.

“I know, right?” consoles Kent. “I mean, if she didn’t want to be here with us, all she had to do was say it. S’not like we needed her anyways…” he
looks into his stein with a sad face.

“Not cool,” says Daniella, pouting.

Marcy says nothing, her mind calculating the scenario as Emily follows Emmet out of Lucian’s chambers.

They trek the halls through various places and times in history, some of which Emily’s never been through before. One hall, for instance, belongs to a native warrior tribe, whose gruesome war prizes display proudly along the walls. Another corridor hangs a portrait of a proud Hawaiian lady. Next to it, the same woman sits in a barred cell, defeat plastered over her hopeless face. Finally, Emily and her vampire escort arrive in yet another part of the palace in which she’s never been.

The dining room belongs to early England. There’s even a hint of the long-ago lost Roman influence hanging on the walls.

Emmet seats her at the end of a long, wooden table and disappears behind a swinging door clasped by creaking cast-iron fittings. As it swings back, another body slips through. One Emily’s seen before. One that should be dead.

But the girl looks more alive than she did in life. Her coloring isn’t as pale, anyway. And her hair that was once slicked back seems to have earned its bounce.

“Lilith?”

“What of it?” And there it is—the thing that hasn’t changed, her winning personality.

Emily slumps in her chair but quickly rekindles when Sarah Michelle enters from the archway, her irritable brother, who’s not really her brother, in watchful tow.

He stops short at the sight of Emily, and then Lilith. At least he’s no happier than Emily to see the morose witch. Or vampire.

Lilith storms out through the swinging door like she’s going to tattle on someone.

“Don’t you two get along?” asks Emily, unconcerned for the redhead’s fangs creeping between his lips.
“What’s it to you?” he seethes as though she’s some major inconvenience. “With a winning personality like yours, I don’t see how you don’t.”

Sarah Michelle slaps her brother on his back. “Patrick. You can’t talk to her like that. You know who she is.”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t.” He sneers, dropping into the high-back chair directly opposite the long table from Emily. “Does no good if she doesn’t know herself. She has no idea who she is.”

Emily crosses her arms. “Why don’t you tell me, then, if you know so much?”

“Sure, I’ll tell you.” He leans forward, lowering his head so that he must look up to peer at her, his expression one that belongs on a hunter who’s spotted his target. “As soon as the prince returns.” He leans back again, then, as a sardonic afterthought, he adds, “Or when dragons grow hearts. Whichever comes first.”

The door swings open and in walks Emmet, silver tray of a covered dish in hands, and a frilly apron around his waist. It is a surprising sight. Emily has to do a double-take to make sure she’s seeing it correctly. Lilith sidles up to him, silent and morose as ever. She wears no apron and carries nothing but the chip on her shoulder. Emmet stops to notice the tension between Emily and Patrick.

“I have a question for you, Miss Emily.” He sets the tray on the table and wipes his hands on the apron.

“What’s that?” asks Emily, cautiously.

“You mentioned that tracker Hans killed a vampire?”

Emily feels the weight of her jaw drop. “How—”

“Do you really need to ask? You’re familiar with a vampire’s supernatural hearing? There are only a handful of rooms in which you can have a private conversation—enchanted rooms.”

“I would think Lucian’s room would be one of those,” says Emily, reasonably. “I mean, he is the prince.”

“It is. I was in the room when you were talking to Gabriel.”
Emily throws her hands at the air. “What was the point of all that?”
“Tell me,” he says. “Who was the vampire that the tracker killed?”
“It was the one who was working for Lucian. Jace.”
Emmet’s breath hitches. He’s silent for a while. “Guess the tracker’s not completely useless,” he finally mutters.

“Why?”

“Jace was a trusted member of the cause once…then he came to work for Lucian, evidently as a double-agent.”

“The cause?” she asks, trying to ignore the stab in her stomach as she remembers the promise she made to Marcel. “I thought that was a long time ago. It’s not still…a thing, is it?”

“What, the cause? It’s a thing now as ever it was. I promise you that.”

Emily swallows nothing but air and makes a mental note not to ever call on the alicorn again.

“And what might the cause be?” she inquires with an air of having done nothing so stupid as making a promise she’ll never be able to keep.

Emmet narrows his eyes. “Why…?”

She opens her mouth to answer but thinks better of it. “Curious,” she finally says.

“Alright, I’ll tell you what I know, which isn’t much. Your mother rose against the Devil and his demons, including Lucian, who belongs to the Devil. And, well, a lot of people…and creatures…supported her—that was the cause.”

“That’s it? Sooo…it’s rising against the Devil?”

“That’s how I understand it, yes.”

“And some still support her today?”

“More than some, I’m sure. Oh, there is one more thing I know for sure,” he adds, confirming what Lucian had already told her. “The Devil wants you.”

She already knew that. Somehow, though, it seems more final to hear it
from someone else.


Is that why Lucian protects her? she wonders.

Emmet removes the lid on one of the serving platters revealing a slab of steak, bloodied and completely raw. It looks as though it was torn from its carcass using teeth. From which kind of carcass, she cannot tell, only that it can’t possibly be beef.

“Er, sorry,” says Emmet in response to the disgust on her face. “I forgot about the chef’s…er, specialty.” Which explains why the meals he brought her last year came from town.

“I’m not hungry,” she says.
There’s only one way to get to the island: a self-conjured bridge. That much, Ami told him. But Jeb’s also done some research of his own.

The bridge will not appear until it is desired and summoned by a wizard with a power way beyond his current capability. It is then connected to the intended destination, and, as the center continues to rotate, the bridge extends itself until the mage has crossed it. The entire thing depends on the person’s ability to maintain connection with the island and, thus, access is not available to beginners.

But Jeb is not a beginner. He’s nearly a wizard now. Who’s to say he can’t do it? And, to prove it to himself and the world, he will do just that. He will cross the chasm on his own bridge.

The cream-maker, who’s standing at his trolley parked at the edge of a dock, smiles widely, proffering a cone to Jeb. Politely declining, Jeb takes a seat on a bench under a candy-striped light pole.

The cream-maker searches for another customer while Jeb waits for the familiar window to make its rounds. He’s seen it so many times on his visits to the Den, he can’t miss it. It’s a short window to the right of a wooden door, as unassuming as a rabbit hole.

Surrounding it, exposed roots frame the door, looking as though they’ve been ripped violently from the ground. Perhaps that’s why Charlie seems to miss it every time Jeb points to it instead of what Ami said, that it was designed that way. But the light emanating from the window is bright.

Several yards away, a distinguished wizard casts her own overpass. The woman’s bridge comes out as a stone wall topped with her path, solid and sturdy, and so imposing it could be the great wall of China. After tossing a
wink at Jeb, who must have his mouth gaping open, she crosses with ease and grace, her path closing behind her.

Next time he looks at the island, the door rounds the corner. Jeb stands and walks to the dock hanging over the otherwise fenced cliff. Below is nothing but black and mist. Here goes, he tells himself, and, pointing his scepter at his destination, he mutters the words he has, until now, only read in a book.

As above, so below

Bridge the two until I know:

How the mind can let it go

From the lion’s head at the tip of his staff, the scryer transmutes into a simple rope coiled in the mouth of the lion. The lion spits it out. The rope shoots clear across the chasm and lands just above his intended doorway. Jeb looks around, slightly embarrassed at his meager attempt. None of the sporadic stragglers take notice. Only the cream-maker seems to be interested, his wiry mustache twisting into an awkward grin. Cautiously, Jeb grips the wobbly rope and crosses the chasm like he’s crossing monkey bars at the playground, swinging from one arm to the other.

Immediately, he questions his decision. It was irrational, impulsive. Wrong. He’s sure he hears a smirk from the cream-maker. As Jeb shunts himself along, he wonders if this is anything like the entrance to Kyteler’s Hollow, if he can change his own bridge.

As Jeb approaches the wooden door, panting and feeling quite like rubber, it reveals nothing but light. He takes his time, spending a great deal of it recovering from the journey, until at last, he gets up and faces the door. Above, words mark the entry:

It’s not what you see,

but what you choose not to see
Jeb’s gut lurches, as if to warn him: once he’s in, there’s no going back. He knows this somehow.

And he ducks through the door.

Inside is not what he expected to see.

It’s too vast to be in the small island, and wide, and full of what look to be minerals and crystals. Crystals and gems of various shapes and sizes and colors surround him. Jutting on the walls. Growing from the ceiling. Embed into the floor. The floor itself is entirely one crystal reflecting back to him the awe on his face as he walks across it.

“Hello there, young Master.”

The voice jars him and he turns around to find it belongs to a short old witch with silver hair spiraling in every direction and raggedy clothes that seem to belong on a servant—in the middle ages. Instead of a wand, she clutches a short, bedraggled broomstick.

Jeb’s done enough reading to know broomsticks are a thing of the past. In the Den, he had discovered one book about witches who carry broomsticks today. Those are the witches of a very old practice, possibly even older than the druids. They’re practically wizards. The only difference is they concentrate all their power in one area of expertise, which makes them more powerful than wizards.

The witch broadens her mouth into a holey smile. Two wiry hairs curl out of an oversized mole on her chin.

“Uh—” says Jeb. “I saw your light and—”

She interrupts him with a nod. “You were drawn to it,” she finishes in an encouraging and raspy voice, probably because Jeb was taking too long to find the words.

“Erm…yes. I’m Jeb.”

“Grace.” She gives him a courteous bow of her head. “I’ve been expecting you, Jeb.”

“Me?” he wonders out loud. “Did you see me out the window?” But as he asks the question, he notices that the short window he’s been seeing is nowhere. In fact, there are no windows in this cavern.
“The crystals sometimes reveal the comings and goings of things.”

“What else do they show you?” asks Jeb, unable to help himself. He’s always been a curious one.

“An excellent question,” says Grace, smiling more broadly. “I’d wager you’ll be able to tell me soon enough.”

“Do…you know?” asks Jeb politely.

She gestures at one in front of Jeb.

It’s a milky quartz crystal. From within it, Jeb looks back at himself smiling. The real Jeb, however, who’s standing outside the crystal, is not smiling.

His reflection gives himself a wink. Which gives him a start. Instinctively, he turns to the witch, wondering if she’s playing a trick. Some sort of magical chicanery. But the witch is not there.

Scanning the dark cavern, he finds himself alone with his reflection staring back from all around him.

Returning to the crystal, he notices the boy in the gem is no longer him, not as he is today. It’s been years since he’s been the boy that’s staring back at him. Six years, in fact, an eternity ago, it seems, as it would to any seventeen-year-old waking up from childhood.

The boy in the mirror is dressed in normal clothes: jeans and a raggedy t-shirt. And he’s smiling the smile of a kid expecting Christmas morning. Jeb can’t help but love that about himself. He doesn’t even have to initiate the love. Rather, it simply emanates from his chest, light and airy and cool like a fall breeze sweeping away the summer heat.

The Jeb in the crystal does something with his hands and a small handheld mirror manifests in his palm. Now Jeb’s confused. What’s the purpose of all this? He looks around until he settles on an amethyst, inside of which a Jeb of nine or so stares back at him.

The sight brings him back to a time he’d rather forget about. In fact, it’s hard to believe the boy in the crystal was once him. He’s wearing a tattered t-shirt and ripped pants two sizes too big for his skinny frame. They’re ripped in various places, though not for stylish reasons. His face is dirty, and there’s
a bruise around his left eye.

Jeb reaches for his eye instinctively, remembering the scrap with his schoolmate. A shiver inches up his spine and there’s a sharp, heavy feeling in his gut, just above his navel. Suddenly the warm and heavy sense of shame and helplessness washes over him. It weighs into his stomach, heavy like a lead weight. He turns away only to find another crystal demanding his attention.

It’s him once more. Even younger than the last. He must be four or so. This time, he does not remember what brought him to such a state.

The four-year-old Jeb is covered in filth, wearing clothes that look as though they could be infested with fleas. His hair is matted into an overgrown afro too large for his head. There’s a sadness in the boy’s eyes that have nothing to do with his sobs.

Yet, there’s also a glow around him. The glow intrigues Jeb.

Like before, an overwhelming feeling smothers him. Instead of shame, however, he feels afraid, like all the safety left in the world had just been ripped from beneath his feet in one single swoop.

Behind the boy, a family that’s not his eats in front of a television.

Jeb looks away from the crystal only to be caught by a square ruby on the wall reflecting back to him a version of himself even younger than the four-year-old.

A version he’s never seen, yet he knows it to be him.

Slowly, he makes his way over there.

Inside the ruby, trash and debris litter the stained concrete floor of an abandoned building. Outside the cracked window, a blizzard howls. And tucked next to a stripped beam, a newborn baby on a piece of cardboard stares at a bright, fiery angel, as massive as a sasquatch.

The baby’s not crying or in any way afraid. He’s just alone. Abandoned. It guts him.

Jeb’s read about these angels. They’re of the seraphim. Upon sight, one cannot tell if it is one of the light or one of the darker angels who had fallen. This one, however, must be of the light, as it seems to keep the baby calm.
Tears pool at the bottom of Jeb’s eyes, and there’s a feeling in his stomach. It starts low, then intensifies with each new second. An emotion he doesn’t know, yet it’s familiar somehow: unloved. It seems to be waking from a long hibernation. Like a dragon who’s discovered a thief amongst its stash.

The feeling is too intense.

Once more, Jeb turns away, this time turning right into the old witch.

She looks at him benevolently, and Jeb can feel her compassion exposing the anger that’s just been dug up. The anger he hasn’t looked at since the Farmers took him in as their own.

“Running won’t make it disappear,” says the witch. “Nor will any number of conscious spells. It remains in you still.”

Jeb turns away from Grace. The fear he thought he’d overcome attacks him. It’s monstrous and relentless and so…heavy. He can’t lift it off himself.

He bolts for the door.

Outside, his bridge is gone. Briefly, he considers walking across the vacant air, knowing full well what would happen.

Feeling unworthy of his wizard staff, he casts a half-hearted line across the abyss.

It’s not an overpass to get anywhere but to survive what he must.

Another rope. Two ropes, actually. And steps hanging from them. The steps are made of rotting wood and look as though they wouldn’t hold a fly, let alone a full-grown wizard. He’s half-surprised there are any at all. In fact, he might mistake this one for being an improvement to the last, if he wasn’t so sure about his inadequacies. But he also doesn’t care and breaks into a run, wishing he could forget the things that have rooted in his heart.

Who is he, anyway, to think someone like him can go all the way to sorcery? Or wizardry, for that matter? He’s probably not even a witch. Who is he to think he could be anyone but what he’s been?

A nobody, that’s who. A normal whose own parents could find no value in keeping him. Why, then, should anyone else?
As he plants his feet safely on the dock, he spots the cream-maker a few yards away, with the same grin plastered on his face and a cone in his hand.

Suddenly, ice cream sounds good. It’s just the thing to make Jeb forget. And he accepts the cone.
Emily finds Gabriel in the empty room where he had carried her the night she first came to see him. *It is an interesting room,* he said that night. Looking around, she couldn’t disagree with him more.

“You should get out more,” says Emily.

“Think it’s funny, do you?” retorts Gabriel, giving Emily a good gauge of his mood.

She sighs, understanding now why Esmeralda wanted her to stay away. Again, Emily wonders what was so important that could peel Esmeralda away from the most important thing in her life.

“Leave me,” says Gabriel.

“No,” says Emily simply. He’ll never hurt her. After what he said outside her dormitory window, she has no doubt.

“Look at me!” grates Gabriel, shoving his face in Emily’s.

She wrenches back but can only go so far with the wall behind her. His curled lips reveal the new canines, sharp and wet with hunger. She can’t look at them, turning to his eyes instead and almost regretting it. His eyes are green and as violent as a hurricane, but in them, behind the anger, the Gabriel she once knew is there, even if he doesn’t want to be.

“Look at me!” he repeats. “I’m the monster I’ve been trained to hate!”

“Gabe…” she tries, but he’s already turned away toward the window.

“You know what I realized?” he mutters. “It was all in me already. This… monster.”

“Gabe. Life isn’t about staying the same—”

“Isn’t it?” he snaps, turning back to her. She doesn’t like the look he gives
her. It’s as though he’s noticing for the first time that dinner has been laid before him. “My instinct is to kill those who fear… It’s what you’re feeling now.”

She doesn’t bother answering.

“That’s always been your nature, Gabriel. You’re a sentinel. A hunter. You protect. You track. And you kill.” She can’t hide the quiver in her voice. “It’s what you were born—”

“To hunt beasts like me? That’s what I’ve been born to do?” A low growl escapes him. It’s guttural and fierce and curls his lips. His next words are a whisper. Emily almost doesn’t hear them. “It’s not what I was born for. I know exactly what I was born for.”

Emily crosses her arms and shifts all her weight to one foot. “What’s that?”

“Never mind.” He turns away.

“Gabriel, please.”

“Please, what? Don’t turn away? Don’t kill you? It’s in me. An instinct so natural, it would be unnatural to control it…”

“No. What’s natural is to be free from that control. You’re no killer, Gabe.”

He laughs. A malicious and evil laugh that belongs behind a green flashlight at a campfire. “A moment ago, you said killing is in my nature. So, which is it, oh wise Emily, daughter of the great sorceress?” He spits out the words like an insult. “Princess of the other side of red—”

“I only meant that you protect us from predators. You’re not a murderer. And now you have…more skills, that’s all.”

“Ah, I see.” A dangerous calm shades his features. “So it’s okay to kill as long as it’s protecting someone. Sure, that makes sense. It justifies all those murders I committed before!”

By now, Emily’s so incensed, she has to force herself to breathe. “Oh, get over yourself, Gabriel! You think you’re the only vampire in existence that didn’t deserve to be turned?”
“That’s just it, isn’t it? I did deserve it.”

“ARRG! Ohmygods, you’re pathetic! This isn’t a romance! Brooding isn’t attractive at all in real life! Go wallow in your pity. Rot there, for all I care! Maybe your new vampire apprentice will validate your stupid excuses. I’ve got better things to do!” And she storms off, not bothering to look back.

She doesn’t care that she’s just told off a vampire. She doesn’t care that she might have angered him, that he can end her life here and now. She doesn’t care that she’s lost her friend. That last part, she repeats in her mind all the way to Lucian’s chambers, until she’s almost convinced.

Pausing in the anteroom where one door opens to Lucian’s office chamber and the door across it leads somewhere she does not know.

Above the door, a group of words gather in the form of old English—too old for her to make out quickly. But then they begin to move, like Lucian’s book did for her last year, arranging the letters into a readable phrase:

*Time and Space Collapsed...All Sensory Stripped...*

That’s it. That’s all it says. It doesn’t complete the sentence. Perhaps the end of it is on the other side of the door.

She opens it and eases inside.

Then the door closes behind her. On its own.

It takes her a moment to register what just happened.

It’s just an ordinary, unimpressive room. An old room, but plain as any other. And, like the room she just left, it’s empty. Except for the vampire standing at the window.

Gabriel turns around, his grin wide and greedy.

“I see you found the folding room. Told you this is a special room.”

Emily pirouettes on the spot and storms through the door from whence she came.

* * *
That stupid witch makes him want to draw blood. Gabriel does not follow Emily. It’s what she wants, he tells himself. To be pursued like a princess. He won’t give her the satisfaction. She’s wrong, and she needs to know it.

He storms down the hall in the opposite direction, and, before he knows it, he’s in some bathroom he’s never been in before.

It looks almost modern, with fixtures and faucets and showers. The fixtures take the shape of snakes and jeweled scarabs scuttling all over the walls. And, next to one of the sinks, a very modern old-magi hairdryer hangs on the wall. He’s about to leave when his peripheral catches movement across the room.

His body responds first, whirling into defense. He doesn’t attack, not yet. There’s no scent of blood—in this room. Then he realizes. It’s no one. Just a mirror reflecting back at him a sight he’d rather not see.

A pair of sunken eyes stare back at him. No, not eyes. The color he can’t even see beneath the deep shade of red circling his irises. It’s like there’s something behind them…possessing them. A monster. His chest clenches the truth. It knows it before he does. This is how the world sees him.

As his consciousness catches on to this body’s awareness, his stomach gets heavier and heavier, so much so that his chest starts to sink, as though a rope connects the two. It weighs on him. The truth is too much…

Check-marking his thick brows, he means to glare himself into composure. It doesn’t work, and he loses the battle against his reflection. Doubling over, bile at the back of his throat, the fearless vampire hurls into the sink, chunks of red and brown smearing the smooth surface.

He curls his lips. Pointed canines grow in response, ready to attack. How does anger make him hungry every time? Doesn’t matter. He doesn’t care. Forgetting his vampire strength, he hurls a fist at the gods-forsaken mirror.

It, and the stone behind it, shatter, forcing him to step back, where he sinks to the floor and buckles over. The tears come gushing like a raging river, as though they’ve waited all this time for the dam to crumble.

His vision is so blurred with tears, he doesn’t see the shoes on the floor
until he wipes his face. His gaze follows the red cloak to find a familiar blue-eyed, round-faced girl peering down at him, blank-faced. Either she’s the bravest girl he’s ever met, or she’s stupid, because he can’t detect an ounce of survival fear as she squats next to him.

“What are you doing?” he demands. “Get out.”

Emily kneels in front of him and lifts his chin, much the same as he’s done to her many times. “I’m not afraid of you, Gabriel.”

“I know,” he says, his voice resentful. For a long moment, he studies her, wondering if she has a death wish. “You should be. There’s a demon inside me.”

Emily takes his hands in hers. It’s a strange comfort, warm and too touching for him to receive. And looking up into his eyes, she says, “Some say demons are fallen angels.”

Gabriel sneers. “Still believe in angels, after all this? I’ve been over here long enough to know there’s no such thing.”

She doesn’t argue. “I’ve never seen one, either,” she says. “Besides the angelic spirit-thing that comes around the coven—one who’s managed to pierce the veil. But it can’t be an angel. Even the one I thought was an angel tutoring me all my life turned out to be a vampire sired by the Devil himself.” She looks at her hands, and Gabriel knows the feeling.

He squeezes her hands lightly. “That is not your fault.”

“But I think you know what I mean,” she says. “You’re the one who kidnapped me. Still want me to leave?”

“You should.”

“Why?”

He folds a strand of hair behind her ear, lingering long enough to notice a shift in her countenance. Then he pulls it to his nose and inhales like a wine connoisseur, his eyes rolling back as his nose trails down Emily’s neckline. And he whispers against her nape, his canines grazing her pimpling flesh.

“Because you’re too…intoxicating. If you stay, you’ll become like me.”
Chapter 27

The Legends

As winter break comes to a close, Emily spends more and more time with Gabriel, who hasn’t had a breakdown since the one in the bathroom. In fact, he’s been almost his old self. Almost. But she supposes some changes are permanent.

Presently, she and Emmet pace across the bridge to the west wing when she notices Gabriel in the snow-blanketed courtyard below. She can’t quite make out what he’s doing. Until it’s too late.

Something round and white and cold arrives in front of her face, pausing like a hovercraft just long enough for her to realize what it is. Then it crashes into her face, knocking her from her feet.

Emmet laughs.

Snow ices down her neck, shivering her entire body.

Pulling herself to her feet, her eye locates Gabriel in the courtyard below. And now, he is the old Gabriel.

From the parapet, using her wand she fishes from her cloak, she scoops up her own snow and, in the air, it pats itself into a nice, tight globe. At this moment, she’s thinking how grateful she is for her manipulation class. Using the elements, she pushes it from the bridge to the center of the courtyard, where it hovers above Gabriel’s head. It seems he’s entertaining her, almost daring her to try it. Then, with the wave of her wand, the snowball drops smack onto his head. He shivers, shaking the coldness from his own cloak.

She laughs, catching a glimpse of Emmet’s face that seems to say, *There’s one way to surprise a vampire.*

Then, as unexpectedly as the first snowball hit her face, Gabriel appears on the balustrade, his feet firmly planted on the stone railing, his hand
wrapped around the snaked beam as he leans in close to her. Suddenly, perhaps by the smug look on his face, she realizes her jaw is hanging.

Emmet clears his throat, reminding them he’s here. When they look, he gives them a look that says, Really? We’re doing this now? Then he turns around and stalks off, disappearing through the double doors at the end of the breezeway.

Gabriel and Emily look at each other and laugh. Until it becomes abundantly clear that they’re completely alone. Gabriel’s still on the ledge, semi-hanging, leaning toward her, his arm snaked around the beam. When she looks again, she’s surprised to see he’s closed the gap between them. It reminds her of another time, and another place…

It was fall, and they were in the gazebo of the Hunts’s field. Gabriel had been training her to defend herself against vampires. Then, too, he’d come close enough to touch her lips with his, his arms wrapped tightly around her. Like last time, this kiss does not happen. But, this time, it’s not because of fear.

They did kiss once. But Emily doesn’t like to remember that one, as it was awkward and she smelled of death, and three days without a shower.

Presently, Emily wants it as much as Gabriel seems to. His lips inch toward hers, evoking all manner of bodily responses in her. Goosepimples erupt all over, and it has nothing to do with the snow inside her cloak.

As if instinctively, Gabriel runs his hands up and down her arms to warm her.

“Cold?”

She nods, catching his penetrating gaze, wondering if this is a trick of his vampire influence. Or if it… It could be real, right? The cells in her body, which seem to be more intelligent than her mind, know.

His proximity does more than that, in fact. It warms and chills her at the same time. Her face is frozen in position, her lips longing for his. But, once more, Gabriel does not follow through. Something else claims his attention.

“Where’d you get that? I thought—” Gabriel’s jaw tightens. He stares at the amulet around her neck.
“A little trick I learned from my mother’s grimoire. It’s called The Boomerang Spell. Took me right to your little hiding place,” she says smugly. It was yesterday, in fact, when Gabriel was out…eating, or something. She found it in Lucian’s chambers trying to open a locked cabinet in the corner. It did not open. It didn’t matter, though, because the amulet was not in there. It was tucked above on a shelf behind some other ancient relic of Lucian’s.

“A location spell?” he asks.

“Sort of, I guess it returns things to their rightful owner.”

“Yabet, that was mine, so technically—”

“You gave it to me,” she interrupts, her grin all-knowing and playful. “Which makes it mine. It must be so because the spell recognized my ownership of it.”

Gabriel rolls his eyes spiritedly and a comfortable quiet settles between them. Until Emily voices a question that’s been on her mind.

“Do you think he’s…in trouble somewhere?”

Gabriel studies her. In a voice that says it’s painful to admit, he says, “What could possibly detain someone like the First Prince of Hell?”

“Then why do you think he hasn’t shown up?”

“Em, have you thought that maybe…he doesn’t want to return? Maybe he likes it, wherever he is?”

Emily looks down. No. She hasn’t thought to that. And she won’t now.

“You’ve given up looking for him, then?”

He doesn’t answer, suddenly lifting his head, a playful grin dimpling his cheeks. “Wanna see something neat?”

“Uh…sure…?”

He proffers an elbow, and all the playfulness of the day returns to his bright, emerald eyes.

He leads Emily to the west wing, her hand in his, the entire walk there. It’s an unexpected comfort to her, sparking memories, not of their childhood, but of training out in the gazebo.
They arrive at a set of double doors and he gestures her in.

Immediately her jaw drops.

Floor-to-ceiling shelving wraps the circular room in dark, rich woods and intricate carvings. Mullioned windows light the chamber with natural grayness. And books cram into every inch of shelving.

“It’s a library,” she says, stating the obvious. How could Lucian have kept this from her? After how many books he’s given her, probably from this very room.

Gabriel says nothing, evidently pleased with Emily’s reaction.

“I could spend days in here,” she mutters, taking the path to the right up a couple of steps, her fingers trailing rows of spines, breaking to wrap around a ladder and return to her trail. These aren’t the kinds of books she’d find in a normal bookstore. Cased in leather and other ancient material, these books smell sweet, like almonds and vanilla.

“You’d get lost,” says Gabriel, regarding her from the center of the room where it’s sunken into a sitting area. Two heavy wooden tables lay across the entrances. Chesterfield sofas and chairs enclose the cozy space. There are no lamps. But bulky, cast-iron chandeliers offer candlelight to the late-night reader.

“Here, Em,” he says, tugging her attention away from the books. “You’re in the medical section. Over here—” He points to his left across a bridge to the exterior wall. “This is every legend that’s ever been captured in ink.”

Emily follows his gesture, taking in the expansive space, which curves around to an inlet. The sections, she finds, are very clearly divided by coves, each marked by effigies.

“How do you know?” she asks.

Gabriel shrugs, as if it’s nothing worth telling. “Emmet gave me a tour.”

Emily pads across the bridge. The books over here are quite different than the medical tomes. Most are worn, and many don’t even have binding but rather scroll into tied rolls of parchment. And there’s a humming of some sort over here, like whispers of fairytales and secrets. Something occurs to her.

“This is why you brought me here, isn’t it? Why you took me from the
“coven?”

Another shrug from Gabriel, his hands tucked casually in his pockets. “Thought you might be curious…you know.”

Curious of her father, he means.

“You think he’s in here?” She scans the rows and rows of legends.

“If your…mother is. Chances are, he would be, too, right? I mean, she was a legendary sorceress, he was probably a god or something even greater, whatever that would be.”

But her nan’s voice sounds in her ear. *I always wanted a baby, see... You could say, you were my miracle.*

“Nan thinks I might not have a father at all,” she says. And, at his confusion, she tells him of the spell in her mother’s grimoire that Alice had cast to produce a baby. “Nan thinks my mom used that spell to have me. Why else would it be in her grimoire?”

“Nah,” says Gabriel, dismissing the whole thing. “Doesn’t seem right. And if it is, you might find it in here.”

He’s right. The truth could be in here somewhere, perhaps whispering to her... Her body answers first, stubborn tears welling in her eyes. She turns around to face Gabriel, who looks rather uncomfortable.

Without warning, Emily jumps into his arms, wrapping her legs and arms around his steel body. A moment later, she feels his embrace around her back, and he breathes in her scent, his hungry lips sweeping up her neck.

Then, something occurs to her.

“What about your father,” she says, withdrawing. “Have you tried to find him?”

Gabriel sets her on her feet.

“Nah.”

“Why not?” she asks.

“S’not the same, is it? Your father’s dead. Mine left. Why should I go looking for someone who didn’t want me in the first place?”
Chapter 28

A Gift

Next day, Gabriel finds Emily scrunched on the floor in the legends section, various tomes and scrolls fanned around her, and a wide book sprawled open on her lap. She’s so consumed with the story, she hardly notices her own. And she remains oblivious of the company she’s just gained, who’s leaning against a towering shelf, casually admiring her adorable frame.

It’s a book that literally fell into her hands as she was reaching for another. She’s been reading it since, for she knows the character in this story. And she’s just about to find out what happens to this poor maiden when the book is snatched from her lap.

“What’cha readin’?”

“Gabe! I was just getting to the end! Give it back!” She grasps for it, but it’s no use. Gabriel’s too tall and fast.

“Gretchen?” he says, arching a brow at the title. “Did you get distracted?”

“It’s about a maiden and a prince who get the blessing of a goddess—”

“Oh, if it’s involving a goddess, I can tell you how it ends,” he interrupts. “There’s a curse and humanity suffers. And then the gods and goddesses celebrate in their clouds with all the sacrifices and offerings from the people.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Oh yeah?” he goads. “Tell me one instance in which one of them helped out a human when there was nothing in it for them?”

She says nothing and jumps for the book that he dangles high in the air.

“That’s what I thought. C’mon, let’s eat.”

They leave the library for the dining room, where Emily’s served eggs benedict, courtesy of Emmet, who went into town and ordered takeout from a
local diner. Exactly how he ordered it, he does not say, but something tells Emily it’s more in the vein of the way vampires order things. He’s been doing that since she wouldn’t eat from the dead chef’s menu. If she’s not mistaken, he did the same thing last year, when she was locked in the tower.

Gabriel’s served a fresh slab of raw meat from the chef. He devours it like a monster. If Emily wasn’t used to it by now, and starving, she’d lose her appetite.

“So,” says Gabriel, wiping the crimson streaks from his lips on his sleeve. “You find anything in there?”

She shakes her head.

“There’s just too many to go through. And I haven’t even found anything on my mother, let alone my father. But…in the legends, there’s never any mention of a love interest of Elizabeth’s, anyway.” There’s always the spell that Harper’s working on, she consoles herself.

Gabriel seems to ponder this.

“I have to return to the coven,” she tells him after a few moments of silence.

He nods as though he was expecting the announcement sooner or later. He does seem to be doing better since she first arrived. More willing to live, anyway. Esmeralda will be happy to see him like this.

“I’ll take you back,” he says. “There’s something I want you to take with you.”

“What?”

“After breakfast.” He slurps the crimson juices from his plate and gives her a bloody smile. “Warm, my favorite kind.”

Emily finally loses her appetite.

“It’s…erm, leftovers,” he explains, as though his explanation makes it all better.

“Come.” He takes her hand and leads her to Lucian’s chambers, where he gives her a handled mirror jeweled in ruby scarabs and a sapphire scorpion.

“It’s Lucian’s,” he admits, as though defeated. “It allows you to
communicate across the red.”

“This would have been handy first time I came,” she says, remembering her lesson to Agatha on divination. She studies the mirror. Other than the design, it seems no more than an ordinary mirror.

“Works like divination,” he further explains. “I—I figured you didn’t want me following you. This way, if you’re ever in danger, you can contact me. I have the other one. Promise you will?”

She studies him, holding the mirror. It’s heavy in her hand. “Do you mean for me to carry this around?”

“Check this,” he says, flashing his pearly whites, giving her the feeling he was waiting for the question so he could show off his wizardry. And he waves a hand over it. It shrinks to the size of a cell phone.

“Nice,” she admits. “What spell is that?”

“It’s simple manipulation—only, you use laws of creation.” When she replies with a question on her face, he further explains. “Select the existing thought…you know the drill.”

“Ah, I see. I never thought of using creation with manipulation…it makes sense.”

“Then I’d say you’re ready for wizardry.”

She smiles and slips the miniature mirror into a pocket.

“So…are you gonna promise me? If not, I’ll have to follow you.” Though he’s teasing, she wouldn’t put it past him.

“I promise.” This one, she knows she can keep.
Chapter 29

Sacrifices

Esmeralda does not have time to play games. She’s headed for the administration building when she finds Emily’s friend—Agatha, was it?—in the courtyard lounging under a maple tree reading a little black book. The girl doesn’t seem startled to see Esmeralda; however, there is an uneasy shiftiness to her that the sorceress can’t pinpoint.

“Hey there…Agatha? Have you seen Emily?”

Agatha replies with nothing more than the tilt of her head.

Esmeralda’s never been good at reading people. The expression Agatha gives her could mean a number of things: either the girl doesn’t care, doesn’t want to help, or she believes Esmeralda should very well know where Emily is.

Esmeralda goes on to explain. “I just came from your room…”

Agatha opens her mouth like she’s going to speak, but she doesn’t. She closes her little black book and tucks it into her robe, looking up at Esmeralda, who trailed off.

The sorceress presses, desperation riddling her voice. “Is she around? I couldn’t find her in your room.”

“Probably on the other side,” grates Agatha and, through lips so tight they’re turning white, she adds, “She was supposed to wait for me. But she just left.”

“You mean to the castle? I was just there. Emily was not at the castle. I would have known.” Suddenly it’s very hot down here. Esmeralda tugs on her collar. She looks around nervously, wondering if the vampire she followed here has anything to do with Emily’s disappearance. It’s the reason she came back: to hide Emily away from the one who’s been stalking her.
The girl’s color has left her. “Em’s…not at the castle? The one in the middle of the lake?”

“Do you know of any other castles around here?”

“Where’d she go then?” It seems Agatha is not expecting an answer but working something else out in her own mind. “She’s been gone two weeks!”

“Two weeks!” repeats Esmeralda in horror.

“She left at the start of break.” Agatha’s eyes widen in horror.

“Did I hear you correctly?” Hans pops his head between the two. “Are you looking for Emily Hunts—I’m assuming that’s the only Emily Agatha hangs around with? And what’s this about a castle in the middle of the lake?”

Agatha drops her lids to half-mast and introduces Esmeralda to Hans in a manner that says she’d much rather be reading her little black book.

“I am looking for Emily,” says Esmeralda. “Do you know where I can find her?”

“Hans Streicher here. Captain of the tracker team.” The wizard twirls his monstrous staff between his fingers and thumb, eyeing the sorceress expectantly. “And you are, madam?”

“Esmeralda.”

“Just—Esmeralda?”

She gives him a nod. “Esmeralda the First,” she says when he seems even more intrigued by her silence.

“A sorceress?” Hans’s grin turns Cheshire.

“I am Emily’s…aunt,” she lies. But it’s close enough.

“Don’t panic,” he says, patting the air between them. “I’ve been on her trail for two weeks now,” says Hans.

Esmeralda gasps. “Why? What’s happened?”

“I’m afraid she was taken. By a vampire.”

Heads turn and passersby slow down and start to pool around Hans, Esmeralda, and Agatha. Did he say vampire? Again?

Agatha springs to her feet. Panic flares her flat nose. “Taken? As in
"kidnapped? Why didn’t you tell me?"

Hans cocks his head as though he’s viewing an anomaly. “Tracker information is privileged.”

“Emily’s my friend! I thought she went—” she stops herself. “Er, home! All this time she’s been…taken?”

“Do you know who the vampire was?” demands Esmeralda.

Hans strokes his cleft chin and studies the sorceress with narrowed eyes. “Emily asked the same question once. Tell me, does your family associate with vampires?”

Gasps and murmurs snake through the gathering assembly, which has grown to the size of two half rings around them. Now the crowd itself attracts the curious. Noticing the spectacle, Krantz saunters up in support of his captain, punctuating everything Hans says with a nod or a look of *I-told-you-so*.

Hans enjoys the attention and adjusts his antics to accommodate his audience.

Sensing the suspicion in his voice, Esmeralda treads lightly. “There was one who attacked my son—but my son got away,” she adds quickly.

“Ah, of course! An aggrieved mother. Naturally, you would want your revenge. I completely understand what you’re going through.” He wraps a bold arm around the woman and turns to face his audience, where another ring of viewers have collected. “But even a sorceress is no match for a vampire. Best leave it up to the professionals.

Esmeralda decides not to correct him, thinking it’s better that he doesn’t know how powerful she is.

“Forgive me if I’m wrong—I’m not usually—” he goes on, “but I think we might both have been robbed by the same vampire.” He bites his knuckle and feigns a sob. “This would be his second offense. I was there that night it happened.”

“Second offense?” says Esmeralda.

“Yes. He was here just before Samhain—killed a witch and took her dead body, to do gods only know what to.”
“OHMYGODS!” Kent bursts from the crowd and throws himself at Agatha, who shoves him off of her. “Emily could be DEAD! Or...(gasp) turned!”

Daniella and Marcy step through the swelling throng. Daniella looks like she might cry, her hand across her mouth. Marcy says nothing, her eyes fearful and calculating.

“Well, who was it? Who took Emily?” demands Agatha.


Ignoring his accusation, she keeps the tables on him. “Why didn’t you go after her! You’re a tracker, aren’t you!” Then something seems to occur to her and she stops herself and relaxes. “Wait. Are you sure it was the same vampire?”

“Of course, I’m sure. I never forget a face. And how could any tracker stop him, let alone the best? He took her to...*that* side.” Hans’s own admission turns his face red. “All my trackers are on full alert for the vampire in question. He seems to have a taste for witches at this coven.”

“Doesn’t matter,” says Kent, blanched-faced. “She’s already dead...”

“Now, now!” Hans makes a show of comforting the boy with his big arm wrapped around Kent’s slender body.

Krantz adds his gesticulations of agreement.

“We don’t know that for sure,” says Hans. “There’s a chance he won’t hurt her. It seemed he knew her. From his previous life. I’ve seen it many times. There’s a chance I could still save her. If I could get to the other side, somehow...”

Esmeralda, who’s been quietly observing the turn of events, decides to keep her lips pursed shut. For she knows now which vampire took Emily. Which is not the one she wants this tracker to find.

“Now...Esmeralda the First. If my ears serve me correctly, and they usually do, you mentioned...you were on the other side? If you would be so kind to take us over, I will end the vampire and bring the girl back safe from harm.”
Agatha scoffs.

“I can’t,” says Esmeralda without remorse. Her jaw clenches.

“You can’t,” repeats the tracker, all smile wiped from his face. “You wouldn’t leave an innocent girl in the hands of a monster, would you?”

Esmeralda erects her frame and very much appears to be looking down at the tracker who’s at least a head taller than her. For a long moment, they’re in a stand-off. Until Hans turns to Agatha, whose expression offers no help whatsoever.

Then, suddenly, he throws a finger at the sorceress and addresses the assembly.

“This woman just came from the other side of red!” he shouts desperately. “She’s been consorting with illegal monsters and beasts! And the vampire who savagely kidnapped my sweet, innocent little Emily!”

Gasps and murmurs circle the antsy throng, and they turn their angry eye on the sorceress.

“Yes, it’s true,” Hans continues. “Do not be alarmed. You’re among a renowned tracker…me, of course. I will not let any harm come to you.” He returns his glare to Esmeralda, and Krantz follows. “I’ll ask this one time. For your sake, I hope you answer correctly. How do we cross the red?”

“I can’t tell you,” she sneers. “And even if I could, you’d never be able to crack it. See, that’s the beauty of the curse of the veil. Pride like yours can’t penetrate it, not from this side or the other. The only way for someone like you to cross is in death.”

Evidently attacking a man with such pride is not the best course of defense. His face shades to the color of a turnip. He lowers his head, eyes aimed at her like a bull’s. And, through his teeth, he sneers, “Is that your final answer, sorceress?”

“I’ve done nothing—” she retorts, but it’s no use. The mob is angry. She doesn’t dare apply her magic here, lest she make her fate worse. She’ll wait it out. But it’s the wrong choice. And now it’s too late.

“By the power vested in me,” seethes Hans, his red face darkening by the syllable. “Until the beasts of the other side can be apprehended, I declare
Esmeralda—er, what *is* your last name?”

“Don’t think I’ll be sharing that with you,” she says, tight-lipped and seething herself.

“Alright, then. It’s your funeral. I hereby declare Esmeralda the First a threat to the coven. Seize her!”

Now would be a good time to vanish. She casts the spell; she’s *been* casting the spell. She tries crossing the red. But it’s no use. She’s still as visible as she ever was. Something’s holding her down.

It’s strong and as heavy as an anchor. She searches the surroundings for the source of the binding, but doesn’t have to look far. The smirk scrunching Hans’s features and the basilisk-coiled scepter pointed at her says all she needs to know.

“Don’t you think I would have the best tools?” he says. “Old-magi weapons for catching higher magic, weapons enchanted by sorcerers long before you were a thought in time. My wizardry may not be able to influence your sorcery, but who needs that with all these powerful tools? You can’t get out of this, sorceress.”

Angry agreements circle the crowd.

Krantz claps his hands high above his head. “You heard the captain! Take her!”

Two muscled trackers take Esmeralda by the arms.

“Fine! Take me if you want! Without me, you’ll never get to the other side of red.”

Hans grins—a grin that says he has an ace up his sleeve and he’s about to use it to rake in all her losings.

“See…” he says. “There’s the small matter of accessing a student’s privileged information. But seeing how the student in question is the one in harm, the Elders won’t be able to refuse. Not as long as I can demonstrate definitive evidence of the assailant’s whereabouts. It’s the only reason my request has not yet been granted.” His grin widens. His eyes sparkle like a flame on the open waters. And he leans in so close, the mint on his breath assaults the sorceress’s face.
“Thanks to you, Esmeralda the First, we know exactly where the vampire is hiding out—the castle! I will have my spell! In there!” he orders. Ignoring the protests of Emily’s friends, Hans points to a cage sitting in the devil’s pit in the center of the square.

Convenient, thinks Esmeralda sardonically. The cage must have been left out from Samhain. The brutish trackers drag her to the cage and throw her in, locking it with wizard staffs they pull and extend from their belts.

“Take it backstage and cover it up,” orders Hans, following the trackers into the steepled hall and ignoring the protests of Emily’s roommate. Which makes it easy for Agatha to slink out of sight unnoticed.

“Er… should we curse the lock?” says one brute, scratching his block head, once they’ve hovered the crate onto the stage and behind the curtain.

“Yes, dummy, we enchant it,” says the other. A tawny light flashes from his scepter, surrounding the cage. “And one for sound, too. Don’t want her calling to those creature friends of hers to come rescue her.”

The other laughs. “Oh, right, right. Good thinking.” Another light surrounds the cage.

Esmeralda hangs her head. “Idiots, the creatures are on the other side of red. You did nothing.”

“We see you talking, but we can’t hear you,” sings one of the brutes. He shakes open a tarp that he plucked from a corner and drapes it over the cage. “Now no one will see you, neither.”

“Lookie here, lady,” says the other through the tarp. “Don’t go pullin’ none of your sorcery stunts. If you behave, you’ll be out before you know it.”

Esmeralda shakes her head and settles onto the floor of the trap. Nothing they do matters to her. The only thing that matters is getting to Gabriel before the trackers do. From here, it will require more creative planning.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the stage’s curtain, Hans gets to work.

And Emily stalks in at just the wrong time.

The hall is bustling with an air of frantic urgency. The holiday greens and reds have been removed since she was last in here before Christmas, replaced by wintery blues and whites. Out the windows, enchanted snow falls.
Hans is center-stage, gathering names from a crowd of eager witches and would-be trackers fighting each other to be next in queue. Krantz attempts to secure order, but no line takes shape. Emily pauses in the doorway in frantic search for Agatha. She must be worried sick about Emily. But there’s obviously something going on here. Hans is up to something.

Using the mirror Gabriel gave her, she divines to him to make sure he’s far away from here. He doesn’t answer, but she can see he’s on the lake, on the other side of red. Relieved, Emily’s about to turn around and look for Agatha elsewhere when her name is called from across the hall. It’s deep and resounding and can only belong to Hans.

Every head in the auditorium turns.

“Hans,” she grates under her breath, their encounter in the tunnels still a fresh memory.

Reluctant to leave the stage, he waves her over, and the sea of onlookers parts for her. What can it hurt? she thinks to herself. If anything, she can find out where her friend is and what Hans is up to now. By the looks of it, he hasn’t forgotten the encounter in the tunnels, either.

Ignoring the sneers, the witch treads down the aisle to the stage, where she climbs the steps and brings herself face to face with Hans Streicher, who is every bit as intimidating as he claims to be.

“How’d you get away from that vampire? He took you, I saw it. What’d he do to you? You’re not—”

“Do I look like a vampire?” She rolls her eyes and redirects. “What’s going on here?”

“We can’t just stand by and let that vampire come in here and take any girl he chooses. First it was…er…”

“Lilith Jones?”

“Right, Jones, that was it, then you. Who knows who’s next? Am I right?” He pauses long enough to allow for the shouts of hear-hears from the assembly, which only serves to demonstrate his strong backing. Triumph sparkles in his eyes. “We’re going after the beast.”

“What, now? Don’t you need to plan and—”
“Plan? Action’s what we need. Can’t get anywhere without action! Now that you’re here, we can bypass the Elders and all their red tape. You can cross us over right now.”

“You can’t just go storming over there! You’ll lead all these people to their death. They’ll see you coming a mile away!” She stops suddenly, rethinking her argument. And, changing her tune, she says, “That is…if it were real, they would. But nobody believes in the other side of red—”

“Do you mean, if the castle were real?”

Emily’s chest thumps.

At her widening eyes, Hans gives her the grin of a madman who’s just been given the key to the city. “Didn’t think I’d know about the castle, did you? I know where it is, too: in the middle of the lake.” He stops suddenly, and studies Emily suspiciously.

“What is that you’re playing with. I saw you speak into when you walked in here.”

It had completely escaped her that the mirror was still in her hand. “Nothing.” She hides the mirror behind her back. A stupid thing to do because Hans only has to snap his fingers and his brutes are at her sides. A moment later, it’s plucked from her hand and proffered to the tracker, who studies it.

“Reveal,” he orders. His eyes widen. Then he flashes the mirror for all to see. There inside is Lucian’s home soaring out of the mist. And right there plain as day, Gabriel crosses the drawbridge looking very much like the vampire he is, with his red eyes, and fangs protruding from his lips. He looks hungry. “Is this real enough for you?”

The mob thunders, whipping out staffs and wands and other instruments.

“A vampire!” someone calls out.

“It’s our duty,” shouts another voice among the many. “We must protect the coven!”

“Hear-hear!” shouts yet another.

“Stake the vamp!”
Emily waits for the thunder to settle before asking her next question.

“And how do you plan to cross over? Last I heard, you couldn’t.”

Once again, Hans turns a dark shade of red and his eyes cloud over.

“Oh, but I think you’ll help us… Good thing you’re only a witch—I have more influence over you.” He snaps his fingers.

And, just as the thick hands of two brutes land on her shoulders, Hans curls a palm over the basilisk’s head at the tip of its staff. The serpent’s eyes flash red, its head comes alive, and its tongue tastes her scent on the air. Hans casts his spell:

“By my command,
without delay,
make this witch
do as I say!”

“Wait! Hans! Making someone do something against their will—that’s dark magic!”

“Ladies and gentlemen, do not listen to the ramblings of this scared little girl. Who knows what vampire influence she’s under! We all know it’s the trackers who must make these sacrifices—for the greater good!”

Agreements burst from the army.

Hans turns to Emily. “Sometimes we must force one’s will for the benefit of the greater good. We can’t have you interfering in our mission, can we?” he shouts to his trackers, whose agreements come in the form of one unified and thunderous roar.

“It’s lucky you arrived when you did. I was prepared to petition the elders for your privileged information. They won’t give it up now, not if you’re here safe and sound. But, who better to take us over than the princess of red herself?”

More cheers follow. Emily’s never regretted her need to tell the truth more than this moment. Hans points the staff at her. The red light falls upon
her like a laser beam, and engulfs her in a slimy, chilled sensation. And against every fiber of her bones, she obeys.

“Join hands,” she tells the army, trancelike.

The trackers look to Hans, who nods his approval. And the whole of the army clasps hands, Krantz between Hans and the rest of the lot, and Hans taking Emily’s hand.

And they cross the red.

Immediately, as they can plainly see they’ve crossed, they let go of each other, dazed and taking in the new sights. Pixies and fairies flit high above. A few spirits and shadows flutter about. Dark beings lurk in the corners. And there’s a…stillness that rings of a penetrating silence.

“Lock her up! We’ll need her to get back.”

“Er, where, cap?” asks Krantz, scratching his head.

“The cage! The Cage!”

“But isn’t that—on the other side?”

“Oh, right. Have a seat,” he says to Emily. From the mouth of Hans’s staff, a rope issues and ties itself around Emily’s wrists, and then her feet, causing her to fall on her bottom with a hard pang. “Toss her backstage.”

Krantz hesitates a moment, and a look of confusion glosses his plump features. Finally, he snaps his fingers and the two brick thugs follow Hans’s orders. Although they handle her more gently than he suggests, setting her next to some kind of crate covered by a tarp. She recognizes the base of it as the cage from Samhain. She scoots over to it and is about to peek through the opening when she hears Hans’s order.

“To the castle!”

The army’s vociferous roar follows and then their chant: “Stake the vamp! Stake the vamp! Stake the vamp…”
Chapter 30

Pain

Jeb has not been able to shake his experience, and Charlie has taken notice. Which is why he’s excused Jeb to roam the lower level of the Hollow.

But he’s stopped roaming an hour ago and now finds himself on the dock, facing the Center once more.

There’s more to see in there. That much he is certain of.

His insides are in knots. Guilt has been eating at him since he left the cavern of crystals. Reminders of things he’s done, of who he is, invade his mind. The pain he’s caused, the pain he’s experienced himself. The hate and condemnation he’s dished out at those who had hurt him.

He casts his bridge to the island. From the lion’s mouth, issues a rickety old rope with planks tied into them. Cautiously, he crosses, leaving a curious cream-maker to stare from the candied-striped stand. It would almost seem that the cream-maker is surprised to see Jeb return—if Jeb were paying any attention.

The cavern is just as the young wizard left it; dark, windowless, and filled with oversized crystals and gems. Frankincense and lavender permeate the air, soothing him almost instantly. And the old witch is…different.

If he didn’t know any better, he’d think she went backward in age.

“Welcome back,” says Grace. Her smile is different, too. All her teeth are in there.

Jeb looks around for the crystal he’d seen last time, the one with the seraph. But he can’t find it. Instead, another grabs his attention. A small square one framed in by the crystal’s cleavage like a window pane.

The image inside brings him to his knees. His stomach keels over,
somersaulting violently. He can’t handle it.

Inside, like the one before with the seraph, the baby’s alone on the filthy floor of a condemned building. But there is no seraph, and the baby is restless. The feelings of abandonment, rejection, and of being unloved floats to the surface where it catches his chest and sinks into his stomach. Tears stream his face. Why did he bother coming back here?

Just then, a hand lands on his shoulder. He looks up to find the witch smiling down at him. Somehow it eases the pain.

“It’s not your fault, dear,” she says. “However, there is more to the story.”

“What?”

“See for yourself.” The old witch seems to reverse a decade in age right before his eyes. Her sagging skin tightens. The creases around her eyes lessen their depth. And color fills in her eyes—the color of a calming sea breeze. “To go where you’re going, you must stop pointing to where you’ve been.”

“But I thought I just did.”

“You carry it around, even now as we speak. That much is as plain as the confidence that eludes you. You’ve gone as far as you can go with it. To advance from here, you can’t take it with you. You must transcend.”

The young wizard doesn’t need her to explain. Some part of him, the steady part that resides beneath the pain, the part that’s always there, resonates with her words.

He looks back at the baby, this time feeling joy and gratitude pierce through from underneath it all.

He stands up. The witch is no longer at his side but walking back between a row of gems. He continues, ambling through a short hall of quartz, the silence ringing loud in his ears. He’s no longer looking for his old self. But he finds himself anyway.

This time, he’s eleven. This was a good time for him. A time of new beginnings. A new home and family. New friends. Gratitude rises once again. He turns and continues. But in the next mirror, it is not himself that he sees but someone else. Someone he last saw when he was nine, one he saw amongst a family last time he was in this cave.
A middle-aged man in a gray suit with pale-white skin stretched loosely around a bony frame. He’s hunched and gives the younger Jeb a look of disgust. Jeb closes his eyes, but the man’s crooked, hooked nose and crooked teeth are etched in his memory.

The very memory of the guy bobs to the surface of Jeb’s mind, emotions he’s suppressed every day since that day coming through. He feels separate and alone. Not good enough to be alive. Anger grabs Jeb’s throat. He clutches his stomach. He wants to...hurt the guy. His body wants to hurt him. And so, he does.

With all his force, the wizard slams a fist into the crystal. It breaks his skin, and possibly some bone. Sharp, searing pain shoots up his arm, and he falls to his knees, sobbing. He doesn’t care about the pain. He wants the pain. No punch would do his memory justice anyway, Jeb tells himself, cradling his throbbing fist. He wants the man to suffer. He wants the world to see behind the man’s mask.

“There-there, Jebadean Amos,” the witch says, startling Jeb from his anger. He can feel her behind him.

Suddenly, a warm wave of shame washes over him, and he lowers his head.

“There’s darkness in all of us. How else are we to seek the light? Let it rise up in you. It only wants to pass through.”

He looks up at the witch, trying to work out what she said. Another thought occurs to him. “How’d you know my whole name? I only told you __”

“I know who you are, Jebadean. Even if you don’t know yourself yet. Every witch who’s ever prophesied has seen you coming for ages. Now, let me take care of these knuckles of yours.”

The witch wraps a bony hand around his. A tingling sensation whips through him, like a rush of energy, cool and euphoric, and gone in a second. He bends and flexes his fingers, as good as new.

When he looks up again, he finds Grace is no longer older than him. She’s beautiful, her skin glowing, her hair shiny and flowing. More than her surface, she emanates beauty.
The next time he sees the abandoned building in the crystal, the entire scene unfolds.

A young woman struggles alone in labor. Her brown eyes and square face mirrors Jeb’s. Her youth is so striking, he can’t get over it. She can’t be more than early adolescence. Her newborn pushes out onto a piece of cardboard on the floor, the infant wet and slippery and unnaturally quiet.

His mother’s pain and memories overload his senses. And then…there it is. She scoops up the fragile infant and Jeb feels her love for him. It’s so strong, even his rational mind can’t deny it.

“You deserve better,” she tells the newborn.

She wraps the baby in a rough and tattered blanket that looks as though it might have been dug up from a dumpster and lays the newborn on the floor. Then, she gathers her strength and returns her legs to her pants.

Behind her, a large, fiery seraph looks over the two of them. She doesn’t seem to see it. Yet, it touches the mother on the forehead. Then it kneels on the floor at the newborn’s head, its billowing heat apparently warming the baby. The mother, who seems to have been affected by the touch, wipes the streams of tears, heaves to her feet, and walks out, leaving the baby on the lone sliver of cardboard alone with the seraph.

The anger he thought he’d just let go of returns, just below his navel. The same anger he felt before as a child—the anger he’s since buried beneath layers of shame and seeking the approval of the authority in his life. It’s hot and heavy and too strong for him, weighing him down like a lead blanket.

Instead of fighting it this time, instead of reacting to it, blowing up at the world around him, Jeb allows the pain to pass through his body. The heavy, stabbing sensation blisters his stomach, and burns holes through the lining. He wants to buckle over and clutch it, cling to it like an old friend. But he doesn’t.

He spreads his arms and leans back, as if to say, Do what you will; I will not give in!

Whoever’s listening answers his command.

The next time he opens his eyes, Jeb finds someone else entering the
abandoned building in the crystal. A tall and stout man, darker than himself, pointing a weapon around like he’s expecting an ambush.

The man stops short of Jeb’s baby head. “I don’t believe it! She was telling the truth! I’ll kill the mother-fucker who did this to her!” He picks up the baby, tucks it into his coat, keeping it tight to his chest, and walks into the blizzard.

Next thing Jeb sees is the same man carrying his newborn-self down an aisle in what appears to be a church. The man sets him down on a step at the front, tears dripping from his large face. Within the baby’s blanket, the man tucks a necklace—the necklace Jeb has both loved and hated his whole life.

“Sorry, man. She wanted you to have a chance. Can’t take you where I’m goin’. Can’t turn you in, proper, neither. You understand.” Then the man leaves in a flash and the entire image dissolves, leaving the crystal empty, reflecting the cavern in which Jeb stands.

Jeb rips the chain from his neck, holding it in his hand.

*Jebadean Amos*, it says on the flat piece of tin hanging from the chain.

Jeb falls to his knees, unable to stop the flood this time. His instinct is to resist. He wants to bury it underneath the superficial happiness. It is the thing he likes about himself—that despite his beginnings, he’s managed to keep his semblance of happiness. Like there’s some other force here with him. Helping him. At the moment, however, his disposition is not helping him.

Why are these thoughts attacking him like this?

The answer comes immediately. And now he sees.

Jeb was not unloved. He’s only chosen to feel that way. He chose *not* to see that he was indeed loved.

Twice.

It was love that spared his life. It was love that placed him in the care of strangers. It was what led him to who he is now.

The epiphany pours wisdom from the center of the universe into his soul. Spreading his arms, he closes his eyes and leans back, as though receiving a pillar of light. The entire chamber fills with this brightness.
Gratitude returns to his heart. For how far he’s come. For where his experiences have led him—to a family who does care for him. To good friends. To who he is now, nearly a wizard at seventeen.

Then he collapses on the floor and reverts to a fetal position.
Chapter 31

_A Tragic and Unnecessary Death_

Emily doesn’t have time for the cage.

Once the trackers are out of earshot, she magics herself out of the rope, grateful that Hans continuously underestimates her abilities as a witch. Without the mirror, however, she can’t warn Gabriel. She must get to the castle before the trackers do.

Urgently, she fumbles through the curtains and runs off the stage and out the front door of the halls, just missing Agatha, who enters through the side doors with Livy Inishtar in urgent tow.

They find Esmeralda backstage, sitting patiently under the tarp at the bottom of the devil’s trap. Using her white staff, Livy spells it open and unbinds the sorceress, who thanks them as she vanishes.

Emily narrowly escapes being seen by the rear of the tracker’s line as they file through the coven’s main gate.

She decides on the route Gabriel took when he kidnapped her, through the window in her room. Which means a trip through the tunnels. Knowing the source of the basilisk, the tunnels don’t seem as frightening today. She buzzes through without delay.

She has no idea if this way is the longer or shorter route. All she knows is that it’s a different course than the one taken by the trackers. Tightening the red cloak around her neck, Emily steals through the window and up the natural steps. Unlike Gabriel, she can only hike, which is hard and arduous and takes so long, she fears the trackers will find the castle before she even gets out of the ground.

She doesn’t have to go too far into the forest to know which way the trackers went. As she finds her way around to the lesser-known path where
she once saw the eyes of the spider Galadriel, she stumbles upon evidence of the tracker’s passage.

There, in a small clearing, surrounded by blackberry brambles and fairies and spiders, lies the giant, wiry and still body of Lennie, the sasquatch.

Roger’s hunched over him, sobbing.

It takes Emily a moment to realize what she’s seeing.

“ Came through with a tracking party,” he says. “All o’them lit up like the fourth of July. Lennie didn’t stand no chance against the platoon of armed killers. What’s he done to them anyways? Nothin’. He ain’t done a gotdam thing!” And he throws nothing at the air, so hard and so fast, Emily’s sure his arms will knock over the wind.

“It’s all my fault,” she mutters, chest in her stomach. Her breath hitches. “I thought it’d be safe on this side. If I hadn’t brought you two over here…”

“Ye can’t blame yerself for somebody else’s murder,” says Roger. “Them trackers did this to him! That one they call Hans commanded it! A dark fellow he is! He told them they could have Lennie, but they had to save the vampire for him.”

“Did—” Emily begins cautiously. She rests a gentle hand on Roger’s shoulder. “When Lennie…passed…did a blue light come for him?”

Roger looks up at her, his eyes widening with awareness. “I saw it. Bright and blue and pulsing like a heartbeat. Then it just…vanished.”

“It vanished?” He must be alive, then, she thinks. But then why is his body still dead? Is it because it happened on this side of red? Remembering the blue orb the night Lucian disappeared, and though she’s not entirely sure, she says, “I think it means no one can hurt him anymore.”

Roger nods and wipes his tears. “Yeah, suppose yer right. Don’t mean it won’t hurt me, though, or anyone else still living.”

“No,” agrees Emily. “That’s the worst part of death, I think.”

“Yer, uh, goin to that castle them trackers were hollerin on about, aintcha?”

“I have to. I have to warn Gabriel.”
“Gabriel—he the vampire them trackers went after?” asks Roger cautiously. “That who you were goin to see the night we met?”

Emily nods, hoping his acceptance for sasquatches extends to other forms.

Roger gives her a solemn nod. “I’ll go with ye, get you there in one piece. Something tells me this vampire ain’t no more a monster than Lennie was. If you wouldn’t mind helpin me bury my friend here.”

“Of course.” And, remembering her manipulation practice, she claws at the air. Immediately, the top layer of earth starts to separate, slowly. So slowly, Emily loses patience and digs in her cloak for her wand. She points it at the ground, appealing to its desire to be reunited with matter. Immediately a hole appears in the shape of a grave and the size of Lennie, and its pile of dirt next to it.

“Magic is mostly about belief,” she explains to a confused Roger, a little embarrassed at her lack thereof. “The reason for my wand.”

“Does that mean…anyone can do it?”

Emily nods her head. “Magic is for everybody. It’s what my mom believed.”

Soon, Lennie’s body is in the grave and blanked by a mound of earth. Using her wand once more, Emily plucks a branch from a tree and lays it across the grave. Roger kneels and mumbles a handful of heartfelt words for his friend. Then he sobbs quietly into his hat.
Chapter 32

*The Devil’s Son*

By the time Emily and Roger arrive, Hans and his team have piled onto Rabbit Island. It seems the trackers haven’t been able to breach the entrance yet. Roger and Emily take the gondola beneath the castle and climb the rope ladder to the dungeons, where Timmons is waiting in anticipation of their arrival.

Though he’s just as hooked-nosed and clammy green as usual, Timmons is slightly friendlier than he has been. At a head shorter than Emily, his bulbous and protruding eyes still remind her of a toad.

“How’d you know we were coming?” asks Emily.

“Uh, Emily,” says Roger, gawking at the surroundings. “My bet’s on the mighty powerful magic they got goin in here. Might be best not to question it.”

Toadman allows a slight curl at the corner of his wide, paper-thin lips.

Emily leaves Roger with Timmons, who’s very interested in learning all about what’s happened to Lennie, and gives his word that no harm will come to anyone who’s not an enemy to the prince. Timmons questions Roger without tact, but Roger doesn’t seem to mind; rather, it seems he’ll talk to anyone if it’ll get him closer to justice.

Emily pulls the hood over her head and starts in the direction of Lucian’s office. Gabriel, of course, sees her coming in Lucian’s scryer, and cuts her off on the second-floor landing, in a dark corner near the stone balustrade that overlooks both the foyer below and the courtyard through a great window.

He steps into a ray of moonlight where the landing turns into a balcony overlooking the foyer. He can hear Emily’s heart quicken as she gets a good look at him. It would normally be music to his ears to hear such a fearful
heartbeat. But knowing what this fear is for, he can’t stand it.

He knows exactly what she sees. It’s the same image he saw in the mirror earlier: eyes sunken, pallid face, and clammy skin.

“What happened?” she asks him. “I wasn’t gone that long.”

When he speaks, it’s through anger. Two of his front teeth grow in.

“Raoul’s here,” he grates. “He knew you were coming. I could smell you miles away.” He closes the gap between them. She should not have come back—at such a time as this. “He’s come for you. It was the last thing he told me before he left. That he’d be back to collect what belongs to his father.” He scoffs. “Somehow, he knew you’d come here.”

“Then why didn’t he just take me out in the forest, then?”

“Who knows with that guy. My bet’s on the alicorn. From what I hear, even a demi-demon like Raoul is no match for Marcel, who descended from angelic realms—the real angelic realms.”

Emily swallows.

“What?” he asks.

“I—” She hesitates. “Nothing.”

“Tell me,” he orders, in no mood for guessing. And he applies a little vampire pressure.

“I made him a promise. Marcel, I mean.”

“What kind of promise?”

Emily’s heart is distracting him. But she doesn’t move. Gabriel circles her, inhaling the scent of her fear like it’s a fine wine, aged just for him. “I could taste your scent on the air before you entered the room,” he says softly at her ear, his breath goosepimpling her entire body. Her hairs stand in static protest. He can see each and every one of them. Retreating, he clears his throat. Turning toward the window, he speaks softly, as if only to himself.

“It’s about the cause, isn’t it?”

“You know about the cause?” she asks.

“Course I do. Can’t live on this side and not at least hear about it. Just…
not sure exactly what it is…” But that’s not what’s consuming him right now. He turns to Emily, unable—unwilling—to fight it any longer. “You need to leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere unless it’s with you.”

“Of course, you’re not. Why should I expect you to cooperate now of all times? Hans is at the door. Raoul’s here. I don’t want you in the middle of this.”

“That’s not all of it,” she says.

How does she know? He turns away and takes in a long breath. “It’s an… urge. I need to have…a taste. I hate it…” he trails off, lowering his head.

“But…I was just here. You seemed fine…”

“I thought I could manage it,” he admits. He shakes his head. “You’re too…intoxicating…”

“Let me get this straight…a vampire who lives on human blood…hates to drink? But isn’t that the best part of being a vampire? My brother would say so.”

Gabriel whips around, angry with himself. He should have heard Raoul coming. How could he let his cravings get the better of him like this?

“I knew it,” Gabriel grates through growing incisors. “How’d you get in here—?”

“Don’t be surprised.” Raoul steps from the shadows. “I was invited once, if you recall.”

Raoul’s the same: rigid, black locks, blue eyes as sharp as ice. No leather jacket, though. Gabriel has that. Raoul has found something new: a black trench coat, the collar up against his thick neck.

“Nice coat,” sneers Gabriel.

“More pockets.” Raoul holds the jacket open and bears his pearly whites.

“Uncle?” Emily inquires feebly, although she should know by now he’s not her uncle. But what do you call an uncle who’s not your uncle anymore? Gabriel wonders.

Raoul’s lips curl in amusement. “You still haven’t figured it out yet? Still
looking for answers in all the wrong places. No one’s going to tell you.”

“Then why don’t you tell me, Raoul?” she demands. “Where’s Lucian?”

“Far away from here, I can assure you. Now that his enemy knows of this place, my brother would not be foolish enough to show his face around here. So, I come in his stead.” His grin steers clear of his eyes.

Gabriel can only imagine what kind of enemy Lucian would be afraid to face. The younger vampire fixes his ochre glare intently on Raoul.

“So, he is alive,” he says, not really asking.

“That all depends on your definition of alive, but I suppose he is, yes…we all are to some extent.” Raoul’s blue eyes are piercing, so much like Lucian’s yet nothing at all…

“Although…” he continues, his gaze returning to Emily. “I have to wonder—why do you want him back? Everything you’ve heard is true. My father sent Lucian to rid the world of the nuisance your mother had become. But my brother failed. Elizabeth had already cast the veil. He couldn’t kill her after that. How, then, would we get the veil reversed and reclaim our freedom?”

“So…he didn’t kill her?” asks Emily, and there’s a hint of hope in her question. Gabriel detects it behind the fear.

“I didn’t say that,” says Raoul. “Make no mistake. Lucian is the only one who could have killed your mother. And for that reason alone, the Devil is not pleased.”

“But, why?”

“I told you, it’s simple. It was she who cast the spell, and the only one who could undo it. Believe me, Father tried forcing the most powerful sorcerers and sorceresses in the world. You can imagine how angry he was—with Lucian. My brother’s been trying ever since to get back into his good graces.” This seems to please Raoul, and Gabriel gets the feeling there’s a long history of sibling rivalry between the two brothers. “Ah, but Lucian underestimates our father. The Devil is always one step ahead.”

Raoul takes a surreptitious step toward the blue-eyed witch.

“But as luck would have it,” he says, “—Lucian has always been the
lucky one—the sorceress had a daughter. And it was a blood spell Elizabeth
had cast…”

“But she had a sister and a brother,” says Emily. “Why the need for her
baby?”

“Had to be her own offspring. Don’t ask me why. I’m only here to make
use of it. Think about it. All that work my brother’s put into you, honing you,
bending you to his will…readying you…you, the daughter of the sorceress he
killed? Just what do you think it was all for, Miss Kyteler?”

“Hold up.” Gabriel’s confused. He studies Emily for a moment before it
finally hits him. Elizabeth Kyteler. Of course! “Where’d Hunts come from?”
he blurts out.

Raoul gives his answer to Emily. “Hunts is the reason it took so long to
find you. Why don’t you come with me,” he says, and his countenance melts
into candy, sweet enough to fall for, “as you were meant to? It is the work of
your mother that’s led you to me.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you!” Gabriel jumps in front of Emily
protectively, baring his sharp canines, and Emily’s sure she hears a growl
issue from his gut. “Emily, don’t trust him. He’s a demon, remember?
Deception and charm are his way. The whole thing is probably a lie!”

“Oh, and what would a brand-new vampire like yourself know about an
ancient demi-demon?” sneers Raoul. It’s the most emotion Emily’s ever seen
from Raoul, but it’s enough to cast just the right amount of doubt. “You do
know you’re on my side, don’t you? There’s no escaping your fate. Might as
well make good use of it.”

“And Lucian?” asks Emily.

“He and I may have our differences, but make no mistake, Lucian is my
father’s son. He’s been working for the Devil longer than I’ve been in
existence.”

Gabriel scoffs, then resorts to old questions. “And what do you want with
Emily? Why have you hidden her all these years—just to take her now?”

“What I want with Emily, the world needs. And a lot of use that would
have been from a baby. She had to grow up and into her powers. Your weak
little mind couldn’t handle the magnitude of the role Emily is meant to fulfill. But make no mistake, you will not stop it. It is her destiny.”

If Emily didn’t look scared a moment ago, she does now. And if he’s honest with himself, Gabriel would have to admit that he’s scared, too. Even he can’t save her from something as permanent as destiny. Or the cause, for that matter.

At that moment, Gabriel catches what happens through the window: Captain Hans finally breaches the drawbridge. It slams down with a thunderous crash, turning the heads of everyone in this room. And Hans and his crew ease across onto the castle grounds.

“Not much for security these days, are you?” says Raoul cuttingly.

Crouched like a soldier invading enemy camp, scepter in one hand, and the mirror he must have taken from Emily in the other, Streicher slinks into the square, his entourage in faithful tow. Gabriel sneers. The fool has no idea how to use that mirror.

The trackers probe across the courtyard of vampires and creatures and dead people, their disbelieving eyes scanning the castle inhabitants. And each of these inhabitants slink back into the shadows until none can be seen.

Hans barks his orders.

“Why doesn’t anyone stop them?” Gabriel demands of no one.

“Have you ordered them to?” replies Raoul.

Gabriel mutters something inaudibly.

“I’m willing to bet,” says Raoul dryly, “everyone in the castle has been ordered to let the trackers pass. It’s what I would have done. Get them all together in a room, then have your feast…I like where your head is, Lord Gabriel.”

As if what Raoul says is right, the vampires and dead people allow the army to pass. As if they know something the invading trackers do not. Like the fact that the Devil’s own son waits inside.

“It’s a good thing you’re trained,” says Emmet sarcastically, waltzing onto the balcony like it’s a normal day in hell. “Oh, wait, you’re not trained. You elected not to be prepared for the greatest turning point in your life.”
Lilith follows close behind, silent as a serpent and earning a sneer from Emily. Emmet lounges against the doorway, unconcerned for the demi-demon a breath’s skip away from him. It makes Gabriel wonder what kind of power Emmet can wield, if he’s not afraid of the biological son of the Devil.

Lilith pads to the railing to peer out the window. Reading the situation below, she announces, “There must be fifty of them.”

Gabriel sneers. “Don’t tell me this is what the training is for—confrontation with a tracker?”

“Uh…hello…?” Emmet throws a wild gesture at Raoul, who seems amused by the exchange.

But Gabriel’s worked with Raoul before. He’s studied the demon, and he knows his ways.

“Oh, my dear, arrogant newbie.” Emmet sighs dramatically. “You haven’t learned much, have you? No. No one can tell you what you’re training for. Even slowfoot here has no idea what we’re talking about.”

Raoul returns the insult with a glare and seems to be adding Emmet to his radar.

Gabriel throws his hands at the air, saying, “Oh, and that clears everything all up!” He rolls his eyes out the window back to Hans, who’s nearly at the front steps and out of view from this vantage point, his infantry fanned out like a flock of geese.

Emmet says, “What the great prince of hell wants with the likes of you, I can’t imagine.”

This tiny admission awakens the former tracker, and Emily, it seems.

“You know where he is,” they say in unison.

Emmet shrugs.

Of course, the doors aren’t locked, which allows Hans to skulk right in—to his death. Gabriel tucks into shadow against the wall, stuffing Emily behind him. Emmet and Lilith follow his lead and slink back into their own shadows. He peers over the balustrade.

No one notices Raoul disappear.
Down in the foyer, the tracker motions to his entourage to hang back outside. Gabriel knows the signal.

The vampire bides his time, observing over the stone railing as the victim slinks across the foyer. Gabriel simply observes, noting the tracker’s habits and idiosyncrasies, committing them to memory. Anticipating each move.

“I know you’re in here, Beast. Don’t be a coward! Come out and face me like a man!” Hans pauses at the edge of the staircase, his gaze set upward, pinching through the darkness toward the second-level landing. He sends his entourage in pairs in different directions. Gabriel can see every bit of it from the shadow on the second level.

Emmet and Lilith lean against the wall, observing the spectacle passively, waiting to see it all play out.

Gabriel’s frame is so massive, Emily has to crane her neck out to get any kind of view.

“Beast? A bit harsh, isn’t it? It’s not like I’m an animal. I mean, I’ve still got a thinking brain. Opposable thumbs, and other human parts…” Gabriel’s taken aback by his own, slithery voice, which sounds too much like… Lucian’s. It sends a shiver up his spine.

Emily struggles behind him.

“Tell me, then, does your heart still beat?” Hans looks around, apparently searching for the source of Gabriel’s voice. He’s stalling, trying to distract Gabriel. Gabriel knows this tactic. “That’s what I thought. There’s no human in vampire.”

One year ago, Gabriel asserted the same thing. He looks down at the tracker, who’s now snaking up the serpentine stairs. The guy looks—what’s the word for it?—Gabriel shakes his head. Surely, he wasn’t as bad as Hans, he tries to convince himself.

“Have it your way. Come and get me…if you can. Beware, you will leave this place a different person than you are now.”

The arrogant tracker pauses, probably trying to work out Gabriel’s threat. The vampire’s not surprised when Hans doesn’t figure it out and continues to the top step.
“Emily was right. You are both arrogant and audacious. But I already knew that. Your reputation exceeds you.”

“Not a bright one, are you, Beast? I do believe you mean *precedes*?”

“No, it exceeds you.” Gabriel jets over the railing and lands behind the tracker, slick as a serpent and swift as a cheetah. “I’m not impressed, actually. Now, turn around, before you get yourself and all your men killed.”

Hans turns around.

“Boo,” says Gabriel, enjoying the surprise in the tracker’s eyes as they calculate the situation.

The vampire returns to Emily, relieving Emmet, who had taken the cue to guard her while Gabriel had stepped away.

Hans’s face fills with a dark shade of maroon, reminding Gabriel of the devilish creature that operates the Lost Train. The tracker darts his head in every direction.

“Over here,” says Gabriel.

Hans reaches the landing. “Why hide? Come and face your fate, monster!”

“Suit yourself.”

In a nanosecond, the vampire speeds across the landing and stops right in front of Hans once again. This time, Gabriel’s canines cut through his gums, his lips curling in hunger.

All color drains from the tracker’s face. Hans flings the dagger around wildly and blindly. But he’s too slow. Gabriel’s clear at the other end of the landing again, Emily stuffed behind him once more.

“Gabriel, let me go!”

“Emily? Is that you!” shouts Hans, squinting through the shadow. “How’d you—Don’t worry. I’m coming!”

Gabriel waves a hand at the chandelier and its light swells into a soft glow, stretching into all corners of the space.

*Where’s Raoul*, Emily mouths to Gabriel, who shrugs. She scans the place frantically, which Hans mistakes for fear.
“Emily.” Hans turns to Gabriel. “You knew her once. You do not want to hurt her. Let her go. Let this be just between you and me.”

“Why the concern, Streicher, not good for the image to bring the damsel back dead?”

“My, have the tables turned,” Emmet chimes, stealing Hans’s attention, who seems not to have noticed the second vampire, or the third, until this moment.

The tracker blanches. “You’re the girl from the coven. Jones, is it?”

“Lilith Jones,” she confirms with a sneer.

“So you’ve been turned.” He’s on the defense now, on constant alert between Gabriel, Emmet, and Lilith. He surreptitiously backs toward the stairs.

“Tell me, Captain,” says Gabriel. “Do you know why trackers don’t know the secrets of vampires?”

“I suppose you’re going to educate me on the matter.” Hans’s voice is booming but shaky.

“It’s simple. What vampire is going to share his secrets with someone who only means to kill him? Or her,” Gabriel adds for Lilith’s benefit. “Vampires are the real trackers. Think about it. They’ve got the strength. The speed. Supernatural influence. And none of that’s necessary. Easiest way to get our victims…give you a sense of security…get you nice and comfortable. Let you believe the distance between you and me is keeping you safe…” Gabriel pauses, allowing the threat to sink in.

All confidence has abandoned Hans.

“If a tracker gets ahold of a vampire’s secrets,” says Gabriel. “Well, as you know, no tracker has lived to tell the tale…”

“Then why are you telling me…” But it seems to dawn on the tracker as he says it.

“Yesss…” says Gabriel, curling his lips, his canines emerging once more. He can feel the throbbing in his gums, like the end of toothaches when it’s reached the nerves and begins to go numb. “Not as dumb as you look, are
you, tracker… See, vampires are attracted to fear. And, well, your hatred… where do you think that comes from?”

Hans swivels right and left, desperate for a sign.

“Gabe, no,” Emily pleads.

“Well, well…I appreciate your help, but I’ll take it from here,” booms Raoul, who at this moment materializes behind Hans. Blood streaks down his chin and stains his teeth. He grins at Gabriel, who now sees the bodies lying on the floor down below.

Hans’s eyes widen as he realizes he’s sandwiched between two vampires. He looks as though he might piss his pants. His team of brave trackers do not come for him. They can’t, now that Raoul has had his feast. Four against one is hardly fair.

Raoul grabs the tracker by the throat. He bites, and drinks.

He’s so fast even Gabriel doesn’t register until it’s too late.

As if on cue, lightning flashes outside, brightening the space. Raoul’s lips are curled and dripping with fresh blood, his canines soaked in crimson. A moment later, the moon escapes the black cloud cover.

Unexpected guilt strikes Gabriel’s heart, and he realizes: he wasn’t going to attack Hans. He truly was just toying with him. Maybe he would have taken the tracker to safety somewhere. With new resolve, he advances on Raoul, who flings him off like a fly.

Raoul drops Hans. He rears on Gabriel, who’s backed himself into a corner.

Emmet does nothing but watch with growing concern.

Lilith advances but Emmet stops her with one hand.

All Emily can do is watch in horror. For her, it must be happening too fast to even register. Her horror doesn’t seem to reach her face until after it’s over.

“What can you do to me?” Gabriel spits at Raoul. “I’m already a vampire. It’s not like you can kill me.”

“What makes you think I can’t kill you? All it takes is a small puncture,
the pierce of your heart. The only way out is to crawl to me and beg for my mercy. Which I humbly accept...in exchange for, say, an eternity of your servitude. And the girl.” He waits for an answer and, when none comes, he says, “Suit yourself.”

Then, as quickly the devil’s son claimed Hans, he jabs a fist at Gabriel’s throat, clenches his grip around him, and lifts him off the ground. Gabriel’s eyes but out with terror and he grasps for air. Raoul curls his lips, allowing his canines to grow in once more, then he points a fingernail at Gabriel’s heart.

Both Emmet and Lilith rush in, only to be shunted across the landing by the demi-demon. They hit the wall, cracking it, and slide to the floor. They try again, and again, to no avail. Each time, Raoul is ten steps ahead of them.

“I can do this all night,” says Raoul, warning the other vampires. He returns his attention to Gabriel, who’s still grasping for air. “Where were we? Oh, yes, you wanted to die.” His fingernail extends into a needle, and pierces Gabriel in the chest. Slowly.

It burns to the bone. He can hear his flesh tear as the incision widens and Raoul’s hand digs into the wound. Gabriel screams and writhes in agony. Pain shoots everywhere until he can no longer tell from where it comes. And then Raoul drops him.

Gabriel lands on the floor with a thud, shuddering violently from sudden chills. Instantly, arms wrap him like a warm blanket. Emily. It takes him a moment, and a lot of effort, to see what’s happening.

Raoul’s gone somehow, shunted to the other side of the room. He can’t see what caused it. All his concentration is on his pain. His body numbs. There’s a weight on his chest, like a steel beam anchors it down. Hydration denies him. His mouth dries, and a chill ices over his body. And it seems as though time has slowed to a standstill.

Hans is on the floor between death and newborn vampire and doesn’t so much as move throughout the commotion. A shadowed figure fights off Raoul with some measure of success. Emmet and Lilith observe in awe and horror. And Emily sobs on her knees.

Gabriel’s rescuer distraction him from the pain. But it is short-lived. When
the figure speaks, Gabriel’s insides boil. He knows this voice. He knows it better than he knows his own soul.

“Lucian,” he mutters, choking on his gurgling blood. I knew it. Lucian is alive. A shred of hope floats to his chest. Then he remembers that he wants to kill Lucian.

The time away hasn’t changed Lucian at all. Still as young as a new adult, the prince of hell wears the same lazy look on his face, and his hair slicked back like a raven’s tail. On the back of his hand, a sigil of a scorpion glows in the same cool blue as his eyes. It’s different than Raoul’s crow sigil, which glows of fiery molten beneath his skin.

There’s something different about Lucian, too. But Gabriel’s in too much pain to make an assessment. He buckles over.

“The boy belongs to me now,” hisses Lucian in that lazy drawl of his. “I am his sire. Surely, you haven’t forgotten how it works. How are you here uninvited, Brother.”

“You will recall I was here a year ago,” replies Raoul, standing up and brushing himself off as if this has all been a minor inconvenience—and now he best be on his way.

“Tell me, how’s your trusted servant who you planted in my palace? Jace.” When Raoul answers with nothing more than a grunt, Lucian says, “So you’ve heard. Come now, Malakai. I didn’t kill him. I only led him to the tracker who did.”

“Now, it’s your turn,” says Raoul.

“Not today.” Lucian snaps his fingers. In an instant, the room fills with an army of creatures of the night, all appearing from thin air. Vampires and ogres and dwarfs and…there are even a few fairies flitting around. The Devil’s beast is no match for such numbers.

Raoul does not move, apparently assessing the change in his circumstance.

Too weak to move, Gabriel forces his focus on his surroundings. He must know what’s happening. He will not die until he knows. If anything, it helps to keep his attention off the pain and numbness spreading throughout him. A
distant sound meets his ears, the patter of small steps climbing the staircase. And the pumping heart belonging to the footsteps. The swishing of her circulating blood.

He darts his eyes to the top of the stairs, but no body follows the footsteps, and he wonders who just snuck in here.

“Tell you what. You can have the boy. I’ll take the girl and be on my way.” Raoul steps toward Emily, but he’s attacked from the side.

He grabs the attacker by the neck. When he looks up at her, he’s almost surprised to see Lilith staring down at him in horror, clawing at his iron grip. He gives her a welcoming grin. Then he rips out her heart and eats it.

“NO!” shouts Emily.

Raoul drops the body and wipes his mouth of the blood.

Lucian steps in front of Gabriel and Emily. “They’re both mine, now.” He snaps once more. Collectively, the surrounding army takes a step toward Raoul.

Raoul raises his hands in surrender. “Fine. I’ll take the tracker. He’s belonged to me since he was six—”

But at that moment, they’re interrupted, and Raoul does not take the tracker anywhere.

The window shatters. Not by itself. But something large and dark hurls through the glass, crumbling it to the foyer below.

Emily throws herself over Gabriel protectively, but he can’t feel her. Others cover their own heads. Lucian and Raoul do not move.

Whatever was flung through the window flies over the opening to the second-floor balcony, its massive wings extended to aid its landing on the balustrade like a giant bird. But it’s not a bird.

It’s a man—a physical, human man. With wings.

The winged man is swathed in a bright, green hue, from his eyes to his suit. In his arms, he cradles a striking, sun-kissed woman with chocolate almond-shaped eyes and a bounty of black silk flowing from her head.

“Mom?” mutters Gabriel, but it turns up in a gargle as he chokes on his
own blood. He loses control of his head, and it slumps forward. Emily looks up, stunned. Gabriel strains to see.

The stranger retracts his wings and steps off the railing to the floor, easy as if he were a man. Gabriel’s mother leaps from the man’s arms, her gaze darting from Lucian to Gabriel to Raoul, back to Lucian, shock and horror increasing with each one.

“He did it,” says Lucian, pointing at Raoul like a kid trying to get out of trouble.

A

“Well, as entertaining as this might be,” says Raoul, whose widened eyes pointed at the winged man announce his fear. “Believe me, Father will hear about this. Fraternizing with his sort.” He flicks a thumb in the winged man’s direction. Then, the demon grabs Hans and Lilith and the three of them vanish.

The sight seems to sink in, and terror contorts Esmeralda’s countenance.

“My son! What’s happened to him?” she demands. She drops to her knees and cradles his head.

“Mom?” Gabriel starts to convulse.

Emily’s eyes widen in horror, and she squeezes him harder. “What’s happening to him? He’s can’t be…dying…? He’s a vampire… he can’t…” She lowers her head. “You can’t leave me, Gabe. Not again—I won’t lose you a second time…”

Behind her, the winged man in green looks around at the stunned faces.

“Sorry about the window, there,” the man tells the crowd. “I saw you from back there” —he points up at the sky— “It’s been a while—physical form—it’s quite limiting… It didn’t look so…solid—the window…” he trails off as no one seems to be responding.

“You’ve been…hanging around my dorm,” says Emily. “You’re an… angel. A real angel.”

The angel nods, gifting her with a breathtaking smile, issuing with it an energy so powerful and light, even Gabriel can feel it. And for a moment, the vampire forgets he’s dying.
“Emily, yes, I was trying to reach you,” says the angel. “It took some time to conjure the elements, having been so long, as according to your record of time…” His eyes land on Gabriel as he trails off. He kneels on the other side of the dying vampire, behind Esmeralda.

“Gabriel, my son,” says Esmeralda, brushing his matted hair back. Tears stream down her cheeks. “I want you to meet your father.”

Gabriel’s face manages to blanch even more than his loss of blood has done. He can no longer see and uses his ears to stay connected to life. And then his hearing goes, and he dies.
Esmeralda and Emily sob over Gabriel. The angel stares down at his dead son.

“He can’t die, can he?” asks Emily desperately, her hands shaking over his head. “If he’s a vampire?” She looks to both Lucian and Esmeralda for an answer.

Lucian shakes his head.

“Well, then, I suppose we should try again?” says the angel.

All heads turn to the angel. Esmeralda looks up at him, tears guttering her cheeks, disgust and anger fighting for occupancy in her delicate features. And when she speaks, it’s through lips so tight, they’re turning blue. “Try what again?”

“For another. I’ve made a promise to an ascended master. We must conjure a hero for the girl.”

“Gabriel is your son!” screams the sorceress, causing everyone in the vicinity to wince. “DO SOMETHING! Fix him!”

A look of epiphany brightens the angel’s face. “Suppose that could work, too. As long as the boy hasn’t chosen otherwise.” He grins a grin so bright, one would think the sun came out here inside the gloomy palace. But before he can do anything, something happens to Gabriel.

He levitates high into the air. A swirl of white surrounds him as he wakes up and the hole in his chest mends on its own. When he’s whole again, he’s planted on his feet, as alive as he was when Emily first arrived.

Everyone looks around for the source of magic, but no one finds Livy Inishtar lurking in a distant hall around the corner with her unused staff in
one hand and a finger pointed at the vampire. Even Lucian does not see her, although no vampire can deny someone is there.

Esmeralda squeezes her son, and Emily follows. After a teary reunion, Gabriel looks up at the angel curiously. There can be no mistaking that the guy resembles Gabriel.

“I am Archangel Gabriel,” says the angel to his son. “I have been away at war.”

Gabriel searches the surrounding vampires and creatures, each of whom seem equally as surprised at the news. With the exception of Lucian, who looks as bored as a kid in church. No one else speaks.

Of all the questions swarming through his head, only one makes it to Gabriel’s lips. “Erm, what does that make me?”

The archangel seems to contemplate the question. “Young Gabriel, I think the very need for you to label yourself makes you…human.” He smiles like a student who’s just supplied the teacher with the right answer.

“Oh, for Elizabeth’s sake!” says Esmeralda impatiently. “Gabe, my son, you’re my angel. You always have been. I guess technically, you’d be a demi-angel. But angels are ethereal, and you’re physical, so…”

“There’s no need for all of that,” says Archangel Gabriel.

“The boy needs his identity,” says Lucian in his bored, drawling voice. “We all know that comes from the father. Mothers provide the confidence. Which explains the imbalance of confidence and utter confusion in this boy.”

But nobody heard a word of it because Lucian’s very utterance only brought their attention to the fact that the great prince of hell has returned, and is still in the room.

Emily looks up at him, an amalgam of emotions playing musical chairs around her face—surprise, confusion, anger, relief…and so on.

But even that is forgotten the moment the archangel speaks again.

“I have a gift for you, Son.” And the angel taps Gabriel on the forehead.

A green hue just like the archangel’s outlines the vampire’s body. Gabriel’s lifted into the air once again, his limbs stretched outright, like he’s
“It won’t do to be afraid,” says the angel, adding, “Relax and accept who you are.”

As Gabriel relaxes, he feels a strange sensation at the center of his spine, as though he’s defecating through his back. It’s both painful and relieving. The back of his shirt rips open, and his cloak is shunted to the floor, and something dark and gooey forces through, swelling and extending into two magnificent wings, each the length of his body and twice the width of his girth.

Like his hue, and his father’s hue, the wings are green and so dark they could be black. Composed of millions of velvety feathers, the wings are so large, they surround his entire body, encasing him like a shell. Immediately, he finds he has full control of them, like any other extremity, and he parts the wings to look over at his mom fearfully.

The pride and strength in her eyes instantly comfort him.

“Told you, you were my angel,” she says.

Gabriel responds with a look of disbelief and a little disgust. As if the wings don’t give it away, he says, “You meant it, literally?”

Emily’s jaw is on the floor. Gabriel can only guess what she must be thinking: How can he be an angel? There’s nothing angel-like about him.

“Angels are hard to see,” she mutters, like it’s something she’s been forced to memorize but only now understands.

“Give yourself time to recover,” says the archangel. “It can take a lot from a person, even a vampire, to come back from death and then grow wings. You’ll need time before you do anything too physical.”

“Brava! Brava! You’ve officially ruined your son’s life.” Lucian claps his hands, stealing the attention in the room and once again reminding everyone that he is still here. And that his minions close them in on the balcony. He addresses the archangel first. “Leave it to an angel to give your kid too much power before he’s earned it! The boy’ll kill himself!”

Esmeralda eases to her feet, effectively stealing Lucian’s attention. She faces the prince of hell like she means to duel.

Esmeralda answers with pinched brows and green electricity spouting from her palm.

“What’s going on?” demands Gabriel, as all eyes watch with extreme caution. “Have you two met?”

“Oh yes, we’ve met.” And Esmeralda launches into the tale of the night she met Lucian.

Lucian doesn’t need the reminder. He remembers the encounter as clear as the scorpion branded into his hand…

* * *

When it comes to the protection and safety of a child, most mothers do not know when to stop. As advanced as Emmet claims the woman has become, Esmeralda is no exception to motherhood. Tonight, Lucian has no patience for it.

She’s running up the staircase. Earlier, he saw her approach when she was a dot clear at the other end of the lake. Now, her hurried patters round a corner not far from the west wing, cross the bridge, and dash up the hall toward his chamber. She bursts through the doors and halts mid-step, as if sensing something amiss.

Before she can see him, Lucian returns the contraption he’s here for to a cabinet in the corner. It’s just as well, for he couldn’t find the other thing he’d been looking for. He slips into a dark corner, blending against the drapes of his chamber and standing still as a hungry dragon. Her head turns in that direction, but, apparently, she sees nothing.

She must have cast a spell to know where to look. Impressive, he admits to himself, considering the multitude of security enchantments and curses this fortress has in place.

Her hair is disheveled, her green dress and striped stockings holed like she’s just run through a thicket of thorny brambles. She wears the look of desperation on her like a coat of armor. Killing her will be too easy…
“Gabriel?” she asks no one, scanning Lucian’s chamber, her glances returning to her wizard scryer. Lucian was right, it was a spell that brought her here. “Gabriel?” she asks louder, exploring around the room.

The sound of her pumping heart and its sumptuous aromas arouses his hunger. He inhales. The melody is…glorious. But, the wizard’s too old, he reminds himself, even if she doesn’t look it. And too… skilled. Lucian would hate to waste the work one’s put in to such talent. Yet, she is too much a liability in his plans for Gabriel.

The thrumming calls to him—thump, thump, thump-thump—he could whisk himself from the shadows and sink his teeth into her artery right now. There’s nothing she could do about it.

“Gabriel!” Her shout reels Lucian from his reverie. “My angel,” comes in a whisper, as Esmeralda investigates the balcony, searching every nook and cranny, over the ledge and on the roof.

“Gabe, I—I’m sorry—about earlier. I shouldn’t have—” She stops herself and comes to full alert.

Quietly, surreptitiously, greedily, Lucian eases from the darkness and into the garish firelight, where he waits for Esmeralda to turn around.

“It’s a little late for that,” he says, his inching grin letting her know that he was here before, listening in the entire time she was with her son.

She doesn’t look as terrified as she should.

It’s enough to give him the slightest pause. For the blood of fear is the only flavor he can swallow.

“Where’s my son!?” she demands, stopped cold, her eyes deadlocked on Lucian.

“Somewhere moping about the grounds, no doubt,” Lucian replies irritably. He does not like it when his thoughts are interrupted.

She checks her scryer, confusion fusing her brows together. She’s not afraid of him, he admits to himself. The only fear in her is of losing her son—which is fear enough, to be sure. Still, many a mother has lost a child. One gets over it, he reasons, pushing the useless empathy from his mind.

“You haven’t…done anything with him? More than you already have…”
“Don’t you have any other questions? Like why haven’t I killed you yet.”

She narrows her eyes in resolute anger. It fuels Lucian, for the root of all anger is fear. His favorite meal.

“Fine!” she says. Her words are more desperate now, as the fear re-awakens. The strength he saw in her earlier is no longer visible. “Someone’s looking for you.”

Lucian arches a brow in question.

“A god…and he won’t stop until he finds you.”

“And you know this…how?”

“I have my ways,” she says. “He’s asked me to find you.”

Now the story is too ridiculous to believe. He doesn’t bother replying.

“Believe it,” she says. “I’ve shown him exactly where you are. And he’s here now.”

Anger flares from deep within, strong enough to make him…hungry. In response, his incisors grow in.

“What’d you do to turn a god after you?”

“Never you mind, witch!” And he lunges for her.

She skips back, too swift for her own kind. It catches him off guard.

“Sorceress, actually,” she says, standing in triumph at the balcony doorway.

“Oh? A sorceress with a wizard staff?” says Lucian. “Don’t you believe in yourself?”

She jets out the door and leaps onto a parapet. And then, she steps off.

Lucian darts to the edge to find she’s nowhere to be seen.

“Up here, vampire,” she says, taunting him. “If you can get me, I might let you live.”

In all his years as a vampire, he’s never met an adversary like this—not even a tracker—so audacious. It rends his insides and boils him to no end.

He finds her on a parapet to the south of the tower. As he steps in that
direction, rain starts to pelt the roof. He pulls the hood over his head to see better. When he reaches the sorceress, Esmeralda vanishes.

First, he listens for her, but she is not within his ears’ reach. He can’t smell her, either.

Eyes wide with anger, Lucian tears himself around and starts for the scryer in his chambers. He’ll find her. And he’ll end the woman.

He’s not going to end the woman, of course. He merely wants to teach her a lesson.

But he doesn’t get so far as a step when her scent returns.

And the sleet starts in.

He staves it off and studies the landscape of the rooftop, and his vampire eyes zero in on a figure perched on a distant spire. She’s near the tower, on the other side of the castle. And she thinks she’s hiding…

Easily, Lucian intends that location, and in a moment he’s two feet from her. But there’s something terribly wrong.

Esmeralda is not there.

He searches the rooftop, straining to see through the hail and mist. Weather is the most inconvenient thing. It loves to defy him. Even on this side of red. But it doesn’t matter, for in that moment, the back of his head is delivered a blow so effective, it knocks him off balance.

For a moment.

He whips around to find Esmeralda clear on the other side of the pitch, her staff gone. Her hands are raised like a practiced sorcerer’s, a green hue as brilliant as a polished emerald gem slithering around her, consuming her. She seems to be gathering that light, wielding it into her hands, where she pads it into a sphere as if it were a snowball.

Lucian rubs his head, incanting an easy healing spell. The minor discomfort disappears.

“Impressive. Not many on the planet can sneak up on a vampire. You must have worked hard on that skill. If only you’d instilled such work ethic in your son. He’d be a bit further in his wizardry by now.”
“Stay away from my son,” demands Esmeralda, anger seething from her mad teeth. And it seems the storm clouds darken at her command.

Impossible. Lucian has not seen a sorceress this advanced since…

“You know I can’t do that.” He drops his lids to half-mast, remaining poised and regal as the prince of hell he is. He won’t let some batty sorcerer rattle him.

Until alicorn bone materializes in the woman’s hand. The small, lethal dagger is clear as day, from its sharp, four-sided star-shaped blade to its ivory hilt. It’s the same one Gabriel used to stake Lucian last year. The one that had fallen to the bottom of the cursed lake below the castle. But—

Lucian cackles. “You can’t kill me with that, not now… I have been given alicorn blood—willingly.”

The news does not seem to faze her. She grins a grin so evil it would impress Lucian under any other circumstance. And he might have recruited her.

As it is, however, he’s starting to think Esmeralda’s dagger is a special one. For it to be as special as she seems to think it is, a god would have had to have forged it. It’s enough of a doubt to make him stop and calculate his next several moves.

“Your skills are impressive,” he admits once again. “However, I will not be reporting to any god anytime soon. The next time you come for me, I will kill you.”

And he vanishes in a thick poof of gray.

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Gabriel’s confused.

“But—there’s a god looking for Lucian?” he asks. “Lucian, the First Prince of Hell?”

“I told you, Son,” says Esmeralda, exasperated. “There is a god who wants him brought in—alive. And I promised—”
“That’s what you promised the god?” Gabriel rips at his hair. “To bring in the oldest and most powerful vampire alive?”

“After what he did to you, it was my pleasure.”

“Mom—”

“Why? Is that why you’ve been hiding?” Emily interrupts. She looks up at Lucian. “Why does a god want you?”

“I have not been hiding,” says Lucian irritably.

“No, he wasn’t hiding,” says Esmeralda. “He’s been stalking Emily. Who knows what he’s done to get the attention of a god? Probably his centuries of evil deeds. I can only imagine the punishment that would fit his crimes.”

Lucian’s calculating glare remains dangerously fixed on the sorceress. “You know nothing about what you speak. Now…I’m warning you. Stay out of business you do not understand.”

Once again, Esmeralda readies her attack. Sparks of green electricity spout from her palms.

Green, like Gabriel’s hue, he thinks to himself, and his father’s hue. Which reminds him. He swivels around to find his father observing the entire exchange with nothing more or less than awe.

“To be human…” says the angel, “I mean, fully, would be…an honor.”

Esmeralda advances.

But Lucian is too fast and too strong for her. He returns the gesture, then swoops in and lifts her by the throat.

“I warned you…” He staves off Gabriel with a mere flick of the wrist.

Gabriel’s strength has not yet returned. Calling on his reserves, he thinks fast what to do. But not fast enough—or thorough enough. He charges at the vampire. It’s a fool’s errand. Still too weak, and out of breath, he barely makes it halfway before he collapses.

“Gabriel!” shouts Emily. “Ez, Lucian, please!”

“Try it again, and I will fulfill my promise to you.” Lucian sets the sorceress down.
But it’s too late. Mad with anger, Esmeralda attacks once more, another advanced spell. A sphere of red shoots from her outstretched palms, inside of which a fire burns brighter and brighter by the nanosecond until it explodes into a giant ball of pure white. But once again, she’s too slow for the ageless vampire prince of hell.

He advances, this time piercing her chest with his hand and tearing her heart out. In one fell swoop. “I’ve warned you, witch.” He holds the pumping heart high above his head.

“Sorceress,” corrects Esmeralda as life leaves her eyes. She falls to the floor in a pile of body.

All blood drains from Gabriel.

He screams. “MOOOOM!” Suddenly, the strength that alluded him earlier comes full force. He scoops up her lifeless body. Tears streaming his face, he turns to the so-called angel. “DO SOMETHING!”

Archangel Gabriel tilts his head in contemplation. Then, as he did with Gabriel, he taps Esmeralda on the forehead. Nothing happens.

Gabriel’s eyes widen.

“I’ll KILL YOU!” he shouts at the ceiling. But it’s clear he means for that to be directed at Lucian.

“Haven’t you learned anything? You cannot kill me any more than I killed your mother. There is no death, boy!”

“That doesn’t mean she had to die!” Gabriel rips at his hair. His chest begins to heave as he grasps for breaths that are harder and harder to come by. The vast cavern slowly deflates its oxygen, closing in on him like a crushed can. “Mom…”

“I did not kill her,” Lucian repeats, shrugging like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “She just died,” he explains, oblivious to the pain he’s caused.

Gabriel roars in agony, his insides torn from him. He tears at his disheveled hair, looking around, unable to focus on any one thing, searching his mind for the last thing he said to his mother. Is this where she’d gone when she left? The reason she traipsed around the globe, sought out the gods,
and learned sorcery? All for him?

His heart plummets, and his body follows. He doesn’t feel the skin break on his knees as they chafe the red carpet. And his new wings fall around him like a shell.

No, he shakes his head. He won’t believe it. He won’t buy into a reality without his mother. She’s a sorceress. She’s greater than death. Sorcerers are ascended masters.

Anguish and agony take hold of his throat, setting up camp there as if to say they know better. He tries to swallow, but he can’t. His throat is dry. Forever is too long without his mother.

He kneels next to her inert body, his hands trembling around her face. Why isn’t his father doing anything?

As if hearing Gabriel’s question, the archangel touches Esmeralda’s forehead once more. “Interesting,” he says.

“INTERESTING?” shouts the distraught vampire. He cradles his mother’s head, rocking her, his tears falling perfectly onto her closed lids. “That’s it? Can’t you save her?”

“It’s her choice,” says the angel, pointing at the hole in her chest. “See?”

“See what? You’re an angel. Just fix her!”

“Enough!” orders Lucian. “It’s time you learned for once, boy!” The first prince of hell swoops in and takes Gabriel in his vice grip. And the two of them vanish, Esmeralda’s body landing in the angel’s arms.
Chapter 34

A Spell to Remember

Harper’s done all the research. She’s painstakingly organized every detail, scrutinized every step in the plan, and memorized each and every syllable she must utter to pull this off.

Now it’s time for action.

The ingredients are sprawled out over Alice’s altar, in the order in which Harper will need them. Alice’s spell room is best for this sort of thing, always has been. It has all the magic books one might need in a quick hurry of a spell-gone-wrong, all crammed into shelves lining every inch of every wall. The fireplace can hold multiple cauldrons. Harper’s favorite thing about this room is its size. The smallest room in the Hunts’s great big manor, the room has a feeling of comfortable privacy.

Funny, Harper thinks to herself as she dollops the first pinch of ground dragon bone, a hundred years aged, into a soapstone dish, Emily hates how small this room is, always preferring to spread out and breathe, as she’s complained to Harper on many occasions.

Outside, winter howls and whips its blue dust at the small window.

The witch busies herself preparing the ingredients, calculating each and every detail in her mind, analyzing her collection of mental data for the millionth time. She might have missed something. This spell can’t go wrong, for it would be another year before she could cast it. And there’s no way she’ll ever be able to find hundred-year-old dragon bone again.

Besides, she needs it for the Bellingham placement exam. Killing two birds with one stone is her idea of efficiency.

Despite all the preparation, as she looks at all her work, doubt sinks its ugly talons into her progress.
What if it doesn’t work? What could she be missing? Is she certain she has everything? If Emily were here, they’d be in the hall of records by now. How does Emily just do what she sets out to do without much thought or preparation? She doesn’t study half as much as Harper does, yet Harper never feels ready. There’s never enough to know. There’s always something that could go wrong. Emily doesn’t seem to ever care about the risk. She just… goes for it.

Harper inhales the frankincense aroma issuing from the candle on the altar. It’s not a requirement, but she’s read so much about it, she thought it best to have it.

And when she thinks about her last conversation with Emily about Emily’s father, how down she sounded, Harper has found her motivation. And so, she casts the spell for the supernatural hall of records…
Chapter 35

Spinning Wheel

Lucian returns without Gabriel. There’s no light out in the courtyard but for the sporadic lightning bolts striking from the storm clouds. Icy rain attacks from the north. Newborn vampires across the flagstone start to wake. Ignoring the bowing heads and greetings of Master and My Prince, he storms into the palace.

Inside is as he left it: dreary and medieval. Paying no heed to Emmet, who was discussing something private in the corner with Timmons, the First Prince of Hell stalks straight to Emily, who’s crying over Esmeralda’s body. Everyone else has gone. She looks up at him immediately.

“She’s dead.”

“She is not dead,” says Lucian impatiently. Although, he’s half surprised the body is still here. “There is no death. Unless…did you see a blue orb?”

“No, but I saw my friend earlier—who died on this side of red. The trackers killed him. And he can’t be found anywhere. If Esmeralda’s not dead, why hasn’t she returned?”

“Hush now, child. Leave her in peace. Emmet,” he orders, snapping a finger and pointing at Esmeralda. Then, he snaps his fingers again, and he and Emily disappear and reappear in his private chambers.

“Wh—” he begins, but he’s cut off when Emily jumps into his arms.

“I knew you were alive. All this time. Where’ve you been? Why have you let me believe you were dead?”

Evidently, she’s forgotten he’s just killed her friend, he thinks to himself, which means his supernatural influence is working like a charm. Naturally, it’s working… And he forgets that she has not seen him all this time, even though he has seen her nearly every day.
“Emily. It was not my wish.”

Slowly, beginning with a pat on her back, his arms make their way around her. Her hair smells like lavender and innocence. He squeezes, savoring her hold, as he knows her affection will be lost in a moment.

Which reminds him why he’s brought her here. He withdraws.

“I have something for you.” Padding to a corner, he unlocks a dusty cupboard.

“Lucian? Don’t you have anything to say—”

“Shh, girl,” he orders, and from the cupboard he retrieves an old wooden contraption that Emily doesn’t seem to recognize. The contraption he’d stuffed in there when Esmeralda had interrupted him.

“That’s all you have to say to me? After all this time—I had no idea where you were. What happened to you. If you were even alive.”

“Ah, but you knew I was alive,” he repeats her previous declaration.

“Yeah, but—”

“Now, hush!”

“Hush?” Red colors the girl’s freckled cheeks. He lets her speak. “That’s it? You promised to tell me everything! Is that why you didn’t return?”

“No. There were…things to take care of before I could return.”

“What are you doing?” She looks at the contraption in his hand, folding her arms much like he remembers her eleven-year-old self had done many times. It amuses him. Briefly.

“Is that a…spinning wheel?”

He nods. “A gift. For you.”

She looks up at him questioningly. Her wide, blue eyes as curious as the day he first saw her in the garden eight short years ago.

“Remember. The night…that last night…what did I tell you to do?”

“Remember…” comes her vacant answer, her gaze caught by the spinning wheel in his hands. “Lucian,” says Emily absently. “Why did you ask if I saw the blue orb with Esmeralda?”
“Only the blue orb can take a soul off this plane. In all my years here, I’ve only seen it happen once. If you didn’t see it, I believe she hasn’t left.”

“But the blue orb came for you—”

“And I did not follow it.” Using her distraction, he takes this moment to cast the spell he came here for. Roving a bare hand over the spindle—the hand with the once molten scorpion-shaped sigil now turned to ice blue—he mutters the incantation. The effects are immediate. Emily backs up, much like she did the night at hell’s gate.

A hue the color of fire issues from the spindle, engulfing it like a cloak.

“Remember the last thing I said to you—before the dungeons, the night I died—”

“But you didn’t die,” she protests.

He responds with a mere look, one she should know by now.

“You said you’ll tell me everything.” Her body involuntarily moves toward the wheel, closer to Lucian. “What are you doing?” she asks again.

It’s working. She’s mesmerized. She can’t look away.

“An old spell,” he answers in a low, hypnotic hiss. “I learned it from an old friend…a sorceress who used it on a princess once. Quite effectively.” He pauses, remembering his friend. “She got the short end of that deal. A misunderstood soul… Still, fantastic accounts have been written about her.”

Emily nods as if this makes perfect sense. And it may one day. But now, she is merely under his influence. So easily…

“Do not fear, child,” he orders.

“But Lucian. I am afraid.” Her voice is trance-like, her words reciting the truth her conscious mind could never acknowledge.

“I know,” he says, heavily. “You might say, it is your destiny to face the thing you fear the most. Tell me, child, what is your greatest fear?”

She does not answer. The spinning wheel has her under its spell.

“I have not broken my promise to you,” he says. “You will learn the truth, all of it…Now, touch your finger to the spindle.”
She tilts her head in hesitation, her big, blue eyes hooked on the prize.

“Do not give in to the fear. But simply face it. There is a purpose for everything you go through. I’ll make a pact with you.”

“A pact?” Her vacant stare remains on the spindle. It’s calling her. He can see it in her yearning. The spell is flawless.

“Yesss… A covenant, you might call it.” He designs his voice to soothe, to influence. “My promise to you, and yours to me.”

“Promise…” she repeats, her words a murmur. “The spell has her. It’s no contest.

“I promise—” But he does not finish, for Emily has obeyed the command and touched the tip of her finger to the spindle.

He catches her as she falls, cradling her against his cool chest as he’s done before.

A silvery reflection catches his periphery from the floor: The thread of time. Emily must have had it all this time. It explains why he couldn’t find it that night he met Esmeralda in his chamber. This night couldn’t get any easier, he thinks, snapping his fingers. The thread shoots into his hand.

He carries Emily out of the room, where Emmet is waiting. Of course, he would wait out here. Always the loyal servant, this one. But as the boy’s eyes land on the unconscious Emily, his jaw drops.

“My Prince! Wha—”

“Not now, Emmet. Wait for me here. When I return, I will tell you what you need to know.” Lucian does not give the kid another look and carries Emily through the hall, turning down the corridor toward the bridge. And he traipses through the castle toward the eastern tower, ignoring the stares and gawks from his subjects, the very responses he intended to generate by carrying Emily through the castle.

In the tower, he tucks the unconscious witch into her blue curtained bed, looping the thread of time around both of her wrists, as if to bind them.

Perching at the edge of the bed, he simply observes her peaceful slumber. There’s no way she’ll wake. Not without his permission.
Jeb shivers in a fetal position on the cold floor. Sweat beads from his temples like a leaky faucet. It’s hard to breathe. He closes his eyes and draws in a long breath, reaching from his perineum and carrying it to the tip of his head. As he does so, he stretches to his feet and exhales. His entire body relaxes. When he opens his eyes, he’s startled at what he sees.

There in the crystal before him stands a young and dashing mocha-skinned gentleman in slightly disheveled wizarding attire—a velvet button-up jacket, slacks, and matching top hat, all in various shades of orange and rust.

He straightens his collar and wipes down the wrinkles, swabbing sweat from his forehead. He can’t push his smile away.

It’s time to go. He knows this, somehow. He does not so much as glance back. For what’s behind him, though it all fills his heart to the brim with gratitude, is not where he chooses to be. He knows exactly where he’s going. And yet, he has no idea how he’ll get there, so he begins with one step, and then the next.

Jeb saunters out the door to the narrow ledge and casts his bridge. This time, a magnificent, towering overpass spews from lion’s mouth. It’s strong and secure, and made of a type of polished stone one might find in a cathedral.

At the other end of the bridge, the cream-maker watches him saunter across, awe plastered on his face. He proffers the usual cone to Jeb, who graciously declines, saying, “There’ll be no need for ice cream today, thank you.”

Smiling, he turns around to find a slender blonde lady in a white, flowing gown waiting patiently. She stretches out a hand and a smile across her face.
“Hello there, Jebadean. I’m Livy Inishtar. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“I know.” He returns her smile with a brighter one, affecting hers with his presence.

He falls into step with her up the spiral breezeway.

“But first, I have some news,” she says. “About your friend, Emily. I believe you are the only one who can help her.”
This Can’t Be How it Ends

When Jeb arrives in the tower on the other side of red, four people are already here—a blue-haired guy and three girls—standing around a large, curtained bed. Their heads are down, their hands folded. He looks at none of them, and no one looks up when he comes to Emily’s side.

Moments later, another set of footfalls pad into the room, and a panting Harper rushes to Emily’s other side. On her knees, she sobs over her friend.

“It’s all my fault,” she wails. “I did the spell, Em—the one we planned. I didn’t think it’d be like this.”

“What spell?” asks Jeb.

“This wasn’t you,” says Charlie, scuttling into the room, followed by Alice, who says nothing and immediately perches on the bed, taking Emily’s hands in hers, too distraught to notice the shimmering thread of time binding Emily’s wrists.

“It was that fool of a mentor of hers,” Alice finally says, using the back of Emily’s hand to wipe her tears. Notice the thread for the first time, she looks to Charlie for an answer. But he offers no recognition. And the faces around her mirror her own confusion.


Nods bob around the room.

Charlie shakes his head. “A tragic loss to the tracker community. He was a good man.”

More bobs and grunts of agreements. Agatha, however, does not nod her head.

“How’d you cross over?” Jeb asks Charlie curiously.
“I could ask you the same thing, Son,” comes his initial reply. He eyes Jeb’s staff proudly. It seems the wizard might already know the answer. It doesn’t seem to surprise him that Jeb is here anyway. And so he follows up with his real answer. “Tracked down that dead witch that calls herself Emily’s aunt. Catherine.”

“You never did tell me where you found her,” says Harper, who’s sitting up on the other side of Emily, the streams on her cheeks dried and staining.

“Found her in Scotland—sulking like a two-year-old—”

“I was not sulking!” says a mouth plopping right into the middle of the air next to the head of Emily’s bed. It’s soon followed by two brown eyes, a nose, ears, a head of dark waves, and then a body clad in a flowing red gown. The dead witch folds her arms in a huff, sitting cross-legged midair.

“I was merely getting over the cruelty of my own niece and her complete and utter—” Her eyes land on the niece in question. A great, deafening wail erupts from the dead witch, so piercing it could have come from a demon. “No! He’s done it! He’s taken her! Just as we feared!”

Shoving Harper aside, Catherine throws herself over Emily’s sleeping body. “Oh, my sweet niece. What has he done to you? I knew it; I knew it would come to this!” Catherine’s blathering turns into incoherent sobs, loud and agonizing. No one else says a word. “Aliyah…oh sweet, little Aliyah… I never should have left you with those people. I should’ve kept you hidden away forever. Now look what’s come of you…under a spell no one can break. Oh, what has he done to you?”

“Who?” demands Alice, who happens to be one of “those people” the witch is referring to.

“Lucian, the First Prince of Hell,” says Catherine, ignoring the gasps around the room. “Who else? He’s the only one who could have done this.” Catherine takes Emily’s hands from Alice and flails them around, lifting Emily’s pricked finger for all in the room to see.

“Lucian’s hands are all over this mess! Look. LOOK! See? If you look hard enough, you’ll find a spinning wheel somewhere nearby. I know the spell. I know who invented the spell. The one Lucian mentored ages ago—the dark sorceress he turned that witch into! Like he means to do for our
Aliyah! Don’t you see? It’s been his plan all along!”

Catherine calms herself, absently stroking Emily’s hand, lulling her voice to a lifeless whisper… “The prick of a finger…the tall tower…the sleeping princess…”

“We found the spinning wheel,” says Kent, his voice shaky.

Catherine sobs even louder, earning Kent a couple of dirty looks, to which he mouths sorry as loud as he can.

“I—I can’t believe it all. What kind of world…” Marcy trails off, covering her mouth. It’s clear the world she refers to has nothing to do with the other side and everything to do with the people on the other side.

“Hey,” says Jeb to Agatha, ignoring the dead witch’s drama. Something happens when she looks up at him. Recognition flits in those chocolate eyes and he gets stuck on them for a long moment. There’s a pain in them, a pain that goes deeper than the recent events, deeper than anyone’s grief in this room. It’s familiar to him. He wants to siphon it all away with a single touch. But he can’t do that. He’s not there yet. And all he can feel is immense sadness.

Sullen, half-hearted introductions circle the room—Marcy, Daniella, and Kent, then Charlie, Harper, and Alice. And Jeb.

“How could I have let this happen?” says Charlie, beside himself with grief. “First Gabe, now—” He stops himself, looking up at Jeb, as if he too will be ruined because of Charlie’s influence.

“You can’t blame yourself—there’s no way to be responsible for someone else. They have their own choices to make.”

“Jeb’s right,” says Alice, patting a consoling hand on Charlie. “And Emily’s not gone, she’s just—there has to be—”

“THERE IS NO WAY!” shouts Catherine, who, up to this point, has been sobbing uncontrollably in Emily’s silk pillow. “This is Lucian’s doing! Are you surprised? I mean, really! He’s been after her since she was a baby. Why do you think we hid her for so long?” She turns her attention to Emily. “I know this spell. The only thing that can wake her is true love’s kiss.”

Silence.
Then a laugh.

It’s not a loud laugh, but it definitely can’t be mistaken for anything but a laugh. It’s unfortunate that the witch who laughed doesn’t know Catherine or she would have known that she does not like to be laughed at. The dead witch is getting ready to let her know in just the most witchy way she can when Daniella, oblivious, attacks her with a question.

“Do you mean to tell us a prince has to fight through a dark land of thorns to rescue a princess—” she hooks quotation marks in the air with her fingers — “in the tallest tower and kiss her. And this kiss will wake her, make her fall in love with him and they’ll live happily ever after? I mean, c’mon, this isn’t a fairytale.”

“Who’s the prince?” adds Marcy. “And anyway, what land is this dark and thorny place? Emily’s not even a princess… is she?” The last question, she adds with uncertainty as she searches the surrounding faces, fidgeting with her folding want.

“You didn’t tell her, did you?” says Jeb.

Charlie looks at his hands.

“What you discovered in the den,” adds Jeb, clarifying for the benefit of the others.

“Tell who what?” asks Alice. “What did you discover?”

“Who Emily’s father is,” says Jeb, earning the shock of everyone here, with the exception of the dead witch, who, oblivious to the weight that’s just been added to the room, chooses this moment to bring the conversation back.

“I don’t know about any dark land,” says Catherine indignantly, ignoring Jeb, like what he said is common knowledge. Like it doesn’t matter who Emily’s father was. “You’re making that up. All I know is if the kiss doesn’t happen, Emily will sleep forever.”

“I think you’re misinterpreting the spell,” says Jeb. And all eyes return to him. He remains deadpan. Somehow, what the witch says doesn’t seem right.

Catherine opens her mouth to shout, but Charlie cuts her off. He gives him a strange look, like he’s becoming aware of the change in Jeb but can’t identify it.
“Jeb might be right,” he says. “Maybe there’s something we can do. I’ll need to see the spinning wheel. Maybe I can reverse engineer the spell… figure it out…”

“I’d like to see you try.” The voice ices the room. Jeb knows it, for he’s heard this drawling voice before.

All the attention in the room move to the doorway, where a calm and collected blue-eyed vampire perches against the frame, casual as a Sunday afternoon on the living side of red. Of course, he’s not on the living side of red. No one here is.

No one moves.


“He’s… indisposed,” comes Lucian’s lazy drawl. “Now, if you’d be so kind as to give us a moment…”

“Give you a moment!” retorts the dead witch angrily. And she charges at Lucian, who flings her off like an annoying pest.

Catherine disappears from view. It seems as though Lucian shunted the witch right into another dimension.

“Who’s next?”

“If you think we’re leaving Emily alone with you—” says Alice, but she doesn’t get to finish her threat.

“I won’t hurt your precious human,” says Lucian, bored. Then, because he has no patience for the interruption, he snaps his fingers and every waking person but him vanishes from the room.

Finally alone, Lucian perches at the foot of Emily’s bed.

“I’ll take it from here.” The voice comes from the doorway, but Lucian doesn’t look. He doesn’t need to. He’s been expecting the visitor.

He keeps his solemn eyes fixed on Emily.

“Hello, Father.”

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