

AN ACADEMY OF
UNPREDICTABLE MAGIC

CLASH

SADIE MOSS

CLASH

Academy of Unpredictable Magic #6

SADIE MOSS

Copyright © 2019 by Sadie Moss

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

For More Information:
www.SadieMossAuthor.com



For updates on new releases, promotions, and giveaways, sign up for my [MAILING LIST](#).

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Coming Soon](#)

CHAPTER 1

It's just Agustin and me.

We're standing about ten feet apart from each other, and I can see lightning and flame crackling to life between his fingers.

Hoo boy.

I grit my teeth, reaching out, trying to mirror him properly through the jumble of powers that are coiled inside of him like so many snakes. It's like I'm trying to make my way through a funhouse mirror hall.

Okay. Okay, I can do this.

The lightning whip appears in his left hand, snapping in the air, and I try to duck, but it's as if I'm frozen. I can't move.

Dammit! Why can't I move?

The whip wraps around my arms and torso, burning my skin. Then the burn starts to seep inside of me, like the weird almost-ticklish feeling of being zapped with static electricity, but so much worse. It hurts like a son of a bitch, and I still can't move, and—

I wake up in a sweat.

The sheets are twisted around my legs and chest. I practically rip them off and shove them down to the end of the bed, my lungs heaving, my pajamas sticking to me.

Fuck. Fucking fuck.

I keep having the same nightmare. Every night in my dreams, I find myself facing off with Agustin, trying desperately to beat him, but I can't. The reasons why are different each time. This time, apparently, it was because I was frozen in place like a damn block of granite. And every time I fail and die a horrible death, I go back to the beginning again. The setting

might change—sometimes it’s on a random street, sometimes it’s at Griffin Academy, sometimes it’s even at the bar where I used to work—but it’s always just the two of us, and we’re always facing off, and I always die.

Yippee.

I scrub at my eyes to make sure I’m actually awake, then pinch my arm for good measure. *Ouch.* Okay, so, definitely awake.

On my right, Roman lets out a snore that Asher, also asleep, unconsciously kicks him for. On my other side is Dmitri, and on the far end is Cam, who sleeps like a vampire. No, seriously, sometimes I have to check to make sure he’s really breathing, he lies that still and quiet while he sleeps.

We’ve gotten a room to ourselves since the whole “eighty-five percent of the government being put into a suspended animation coma” thing went down. The Unpredictable holding facility has been rearranged so that couples and friends can sleep together. There aren’t really any beds big enough for two people, never mind five, so we’ve just laid a bunch of mattresses on the floor and made do.

I have to admit, part of it is kind of nice. I had worried the men would have problems sleeping together—you know, bed hogging or blanket stealing or whatever. But it’s been good. Everyone’s totally comfortable with each other. I mean, Asher and Cam will actively cuddle anyone who gets close, and Dmitri hasn’t murdered any of us yet, so I’d call it a win.

Besides, none of us want to really be away from each other. Even in sleep. Not with what’s been going on.

The government—our entire magical community—is crippled. People are terrified. Nobody knows how Agustin managed to put the overwhelming majority of our local and highest government officials into a coma-like stasis, but it sure says a lot about how powerful he is.

Nobody knows what to do. Agustin’s in the wind for now, but it’s only a matter of time until he pops up again. Whether that will be to deliver a list of demands, to claim he’s our new leader, or just to murder indiscriminately, I don’t know. I don’t have a clue what his next move will be or even what he wants, although he did a damn good job of evil-villain-monologuing about how all-powerful he is for like five minutes straight a few days ago.

I know he wants power. He thinks he’s the pinnacle of evolution, the next step in the world order.

He believes that since magic users are more powerful than ordinary humans, humans should bow to us. And that since Unpredictables are the next step up from regular magic users, and his Unpredictable ability is to steal other people's magic, that makes him the most powerful magic user ever and, ergo, he deserves to be wearing a crown on his head.

Typical megalomaniac bullshit.

But what his next step is to actually achieve any of what he says he wants? I don't know. None of us do.

Everyone seems to be looking to me as if I should have answers. Although I've faced off against the guy a few times before, that doesn't mean I can read his mind, but everyone's acting like I should be able to. My classmates who are all still stuck at this holding facility with us whisper about me in hushed voices, and I can hear snatches when I walk by—about how I must know something, or I'll figure it out. *Don't worry everybody! Elliot Sinclair has it covered!*

Not.

Agustin might have somehow turned into my arch-nemesis, through no goddamn fault of my own, I might add, but that doesn't make me particularly special, and it definitely doesn't mean I know how his twisted psyche works or anything.

God, the room feels small and stuffy all of a sudden. I need a damn drink. Or at least a walk.

The sky outside is that weird pre-dawn blue color where everything feels saturated but also not quite real. I slip out of bed, grab a sweater, and walk quietly to the door.

The hallway is empty. Nobody else is awake. We're all kind of sitting ducks here, so there's been a guard rotation set up, but it's only at the perimeter, nothing actually inside the building. We're no longer prisoners here—not that the Circuit would ever admit that we were prisoners in the first place, but hey, if the shoe fits—and you'd think that would mean everyone wants to leave.

And honestly, some of us did want to.

But we know now that Agustin has been killing off Unpredictables and taking their powers for years. That he's been the one targeting our school. Our kind are the only ones with magic strong enough to defeat him, so he's been trying to eliminate us before we could do that.

If we all left, we'd be alone. Sitting ducks for Agustin to take out one by one. It's what he's already been doing with Unpredictables who passed their tests and graduated from Griffin, after all. He's been systematically going after isolated individuals for years.

So maybe we are kind of making ourselves one big target by sticking together and staying in the same place, but I'd rather take that strength in numbers than have us all go it alone, especially when most of us haven't even passed our final exams and gotten licensed to practice magic. Not that the government's really checking up on that sort of thing at the moment, but it's a reminder of how much more we have to learn. A reminder of how weak most of us are compared to Agustin.

And I like to think that despite his power, Agustin wouldn't dare attack an entire massive group of Unpredictables. I don't think he's powerful enough to take on dozens of us at once.

Not yet, anyway.

I keep my footsteps light as I walk down the hallway. I'm not entirely sure where I'm going or what I want to do now that I'm out of bed. I don't have a plan. I just need to move, to do something to distract myself from the nightmares, the worries, the ax hanging over all of our heads.

Footsteps sound behind me, and I turn around to see Dmitri slipping out of the makeshift bedroom, closing the door quietly behind him. His dark hair looks almost black under the overhead lights, and he's got a bit of scruff along his angular jawline. It makes him look dangerous and ruggedly handsome, even though it's probably just a sign of stress.

He's also the lightest sleeper out of all of us. I should've known that no matter how quiet I was, I still would've somehow woken him up.

"Hey," he whispers, walking up to me and gently taking my wrist in his hand. "Nightmares?"

"How'd you guess?" I whisper. "Was it the sweating and jerking upright that gave it away?"

He smirks, and we walk down the hallway together toward the dining area. Nobody's sleeping in that room, so we can talk quietly without worrying about disturbing people.

I'm grateful for Dmitri's presence, even if I don't love the hovering he and the other three men have been doing lately. I wasn't even the one that got most beat up in our fight with Agustin. Roman holds that dubious honor.

It was fucking terrifying, actually. Agustin kidnapped him—okay, only for an hour or so, but still—and he would've killed Roman if the rest of us hadn't found his lair and stopped him. The two of them fought before we arrived, and then we all fought Agustin together. It got pretty hairy, and Roman was in rough shape by the end of it.

But are the guys hovering around him? Making sure he's okay? Making sure he's never alone?

Nope. Instead, they're doing it with me.

It might be because Agustin seems to hate me in particular for foiling all of his schemes against Griffin Academy, the school for Unpredictables like us. But frankly, it's getting on my nerves.

Still, after the nightmare I just had, it's soothing to have Dmitri here with me. Especially since out of all of my boyfriends, the quiet, serious mage is the one who isn't going to do a lot of talking. He's okay to just sit with me.

"The protective wards are still holding," Dmitri says. He doesn't ask me what my nightmare was about, and I'm grateful for that. "Or at least, they were when I was on watch a few hours ago. Everything's still going strong."

Everyone here has worked together to put as many layers of protective wards up around the building as we can. To be honest, I doubt it could really stop Agustin if he's determined to get in, but it's better than nothing, and it's helping everyone else to feel safer. So what's the harm, right?

Dmitri lets go of my wrist as we walk and puts his hand on the small of my back instead, gently guiding me around a corner.

"That's not what's keeping me awake. It's not that I think he's going to burst in here at any moment," I whisper, leaning into his warm, reassuring touch. The scent of cloves tickles my nose as I draw in a deep breath. "It's that I have no clue what the fuck we're supposed to do about him. And the world seems to be looking to us—to me, especially—for answers. But they shouldn't. I didn't do anything particularly special to earn them looking at me like that."

Dmitri wraps his arm around my waist a little tighter, squeezing me gently, then opens the dining room door for me, putting his hand at my elbow to usher me through. "People want to have a hero. They already have a villain, so now they need a champion. That one gritty hero who can stand

up and take charge and save all of us. The Superman. That's how people are seeing you. Because it gives them hope."

"I suppose that makes sense." I wrinkle my nose as we sit down on a bench at one of the long tables. "Can I say something that might make me sound like a horrible person?"

"I don't know if you could say *anything* that would make you sound like a horrible person."

"Aw, thanks."

He shrugs. "Wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it."

I rest my hand on his for a second, giving him a lopsided smile. Then my smile fades as I try to figure out how to articulate what I'm feeling.

"It's just crazy that right now, when everything is in chaos and we're all pretty much terrified for our lives... I'm really happy. Not that I like the situation we're in. Agustin can go fucking die in a volcano or something if you ask me. But I *am* really happy with you guys. I get to have all four of you here with me all the time. And I mean—of course I want space to be myself, and I want you guys to have the space you need. Spending all of our time together can't be good."

Dmitri's dark eyes narrow slightly, and I can see him trying to piece together what I'm getting at from my jumbled words.

I laugh at myself, shaking my head. "Crap. I'm saying this horribly."

He gives me a small smirk but doesn't contradict that assessment. I flip him off.

"The actual world around us feels like it's crumbling," I continue. "But I'm happy because our relationship is amazing. That's what I'm trying to say. And I worry that it makes me sound selfish. How dare I be happy with all this bullshit going down, you know?"

"Well..." Dmitri scoots a little closer to me on the bench. "I'm not Asher." He chuckles. "As you know. But when I was growing up, my dad went out of his way to make me miserable. Not all the time. But when he thought I'd disobeyed him. And in those times... the most radical thing I could do was find a way to stay happy."

He runs his free hand through his hair, his gaze growing a little unfocused as he loses himself in thought.

"I haven't always succeeded. I used to be miserable a lot of the time. Until I went to Griffin and met Asher and Cam. And then you. But the world will try to keep you from being happy. It'll try to get you to be

miserable, to take whatever is in you that's soft and ruin it. Turn you into an asshole."

He flips his hand over under mine so our palms meet, his fingers brushing my wrist.

"Agustin doesn't just want us out of his way. He wants us to suffer. So I think daring to find happiness is a radical thing. It's a beautiful thing. And all of us should be clinging to it. Because it's the things that make us happy that give us reasons to fight. Someone who has everything to lose fights a hell of a lot harder than someone with nothing to lose."

"Well, well, well," I say, teasing a little to cover up my shock. Every time I think I have Dmitri figured out, he surprises me with new layers, new depths to his character that just make me love him more. "That was dangerously close to being profound, sir."

"I have my moments." He chuckles, the corner of his mouth curling up into a soft half-smile.

I can't help myself. I *am* happy, in spite of everything else. I lean in and kiss Dmitri softly, pressing my lips to his like a reassurance.

He kisses me back, his hands coming up to frame my face, and God, I could just sink right into this kiss. I want to live here and never—

Raised voices cut through the air, and we both yank our heads back. *Fuck. Is there a breach? Is Agustin here?*

The bench scrapes against the floor as we stand quickly, and Dmitri puts himself in front of me as we head for the door.

The voices are louder in the hallway, not enough for me to make out what's being said, but enough to tell me this doesn't sound like some kind of attack. It sounds like an argument.

I follow the noise, Dmitri with me, until we reach a meeting room a few doors down and push the door open.

Yeah, it's definitely not Agustin.

It's Tamlin and Brodie.

And they both look spitting mad.

CHAPTER 2

Tamlin and Brodie hardly notice as Dmitri and I enter. They're too busy getting up in each other's faces.

They're practically nose-to-nose, Tamlin up on her high heels so that she's only about an inch shorter than Brodie when normally he'd have about three or four on her, and they're snapping and snarling back and forth like starving alley cats.

Huh. Okay. Not what I expected to find at six-thirty in the morning, but I can work with this more easily than a surprise attack from Agustin.

Tamlin, as usual, manages to be dressed impeccably with her hair and makeup on point even though the rest of the world full of normal people are all asleep and have been for some time. Brodie looks like he never actually went to bed, wearing jeans and a soft gray t-shirt with a plaid button-up shirt over it—all of which look rumpled and worn, as if he's been tugging at his clothes in irritation. It's kind of a hilarious contrast to Tamlin's heels and soft pink skirt and chic blouse top. She looks like she stepped out of a magazine, and Brodie looks like he hasn't seen the sun in ten years.

Of course, what they're arguing about isn't hilarious at all.

"You're putting your head in the sand," Tamlin snaps as we enter. "Jesus, I know working for the Circuit can really turn someone's mind into mush, but I didn't realize you were so goddamn stuck on following antiquated rules that frankly no longer apply to our situation! What the hell is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" Brodie scoffs. "What's wrong with *you*? You want pure anarchy? You want people losing their minds even more than

they already have? Like it or not, Josephine, rules are there to help people feel safe!”

I think, if I were to guess, this relates to the big meeting we all had yesterday. Or, rather, what the few Circuit officials who are left here and the Griffin staff had yesterday. I was invited, but most of my classmates weren't. I really hope none of them resent me for that.

Everyone's torn over what to do about the government and Agustin. Our government is basically nonexistent right now, and some people—like Brodie—want to preserve what order still exists. They want us to try to preserve our government, to running as closely as possible to the way it was before Agustin took out all those officials. People like Brodie trust the system, or at least believe in it enough to want to change things from the inside instead of what I tend to do, which is revolt and demand we bring back the guillotine.

Tamlin obviously doesn't agree with Brodie on that though. She must feel the way most other Unpredictables do: betrayed.

Sure enough...

“Our *government* put us in here,” she hisses. “They stuck us in this facility—they are not on our side! They never have been! We can't depend on them to fix this or to protect us. The fact that it's taken them so long to even deal with this problem just shows how little they've cared! They only care now because it's affecting them! After what they've done to us, why should we trust them to protect us? There's barely anyone left in the government, nobody to uphold the law that you care so much about, so we can't sit around twiddling our thumbs and waiting for the cavalry to arrive! There is no cavalry! *We're* the cavalry! We need to protect ourselves. We need to act and stop wasting time!”

Holy shit. This might be about more than just the “what do we do now” question.

Look, I know that two people having an intense interaction doesn't automatically imply there's some kind of underlying sexual tension. But I've seen plenty of arguments in my time, and I've also seen plenty of interactions between men and women, and right now? Tamlin and Brodie are practically chest-to-chest, eyeing each other up and down as they both breathe heavily, and honestly, they look like they're torn between strangling each other and screwing each other's brains out.

For once, Tamlin is flushed, her cheeks red, her eyes glittering. I've never seen her actually flustered like this. I've seen her get mad a few times, but even that had an element of control to it. At the moment though, she's completely lost her cool, and frankly, it's hilarious.

Not that I think someone getting upset is hilarious. But it's just written all over Tamlin's face how out of sorts Brodie is making her, and I bet if I called her on it, she wouldn't even realize it was true—or she'd try to deny it.

Personally? I think it's a good thing. It takes a lot to smash through that calm demeanor of hers, and any guy who might have a chance at being with her has to be good at that. He has to be able to get through the ironclad armor she's got wrapped around her tighter than her designer clothes and get to the heart of who Tamlin actually is.

And although I don't know Brodie that well, he seems like a good guy. He's been a stand-up guy so far, helping us out, sticking his neck out for us, and he's been really kind and supportive the last few days. I think he's the sort of guy that's a good mix of gentle and principled. Which would complement Tamlin's personality well.

I glance at Dmitri, who's got a small smirk on his face. I know he's thinking the same thing I am—the two of us used to be exactly like that.

Hell, we still are sometimes. We're both stubborn people with strong opinions.

Dmitri's expression shows clear amusement, and I have to bite back a grin as I refocus on Tamlin and Brodie.

"And what exactly are you going to do?" the tall mage demands. "You have a good plan in place? You know what we need to do? What we could possibly do against this guy? Because from where I'm standing, we don't even know enough to be able to combat him. And we have to think about our image, even now—if we go rogue, even if it's to go against him, people will only use it against us later. We have to show that we're not the crazy Unpredictables everyone says we are."

"And if we stand around and do nothing, they'll remember that too, but they'll see it as us not helping and us not stopping him—not even trying—and they'll claim we supported Agustin all along!"

"Sounds like a catch twenty-two to me," Dmitri interjects in a wry drawl.

Brodie and Tamlin both jump a little, startled, and seem to realize that they're basically pressed up against each other. They each take a step back, their faces going even redder—this time from embarrassment.

Turning away slightly, I hide my smile behind my hand as a small chuckle escapes my lips.

I know, I know, I shouldn't laugh. I was a real pain in the ass about my feelings for the four men who are now my boyfriends, and I probably annoyed everyone around me with how back and forth I was. I was scared to let my guard down, scared to be vulnerable, scared to open up to people who could hurt me like my dad, or be taken away from me like my mom.

But I'm so much better now, and honestly, I can't deny that it's pretty damn funny to watch two people realize they were standing so close they could've started making out at any second—and that maybe they wanted to do just that.

"Did we wake you?" Tamlin says, slipping immediately into her big-sister-professor mode. "I'm sorry. We got—I was carried away. I'm sorry."

"No, you're fine. We were already awake." I shrug. "You guys aren't sure what to do next either, huh?"

Tamlin shakes her head, wrapping her arms around herself. Brodie sighs and runs a hand through his hair, making the strands stick up at odd angles.

"We don't know where Agustin is or what his next plan of attack might be," he tells us with a sigh. "It makes it impossible to figure out how to stop him, you know? Of course we want to stop him—nobody here is arguing against that. But you can't fight an infection if you don't know where the virus is."

"So we're stuck," Tamlin says. "We're stuck just sitting around like idiots until he makes another move, and when he does—"

An alarm starts blaring.

All four of us snap to attention, and panic crashes through my body like a tidal wave.

Oh, fuck.

CHAPTER 3

I can hear rushing feet, pounding on the floor, and yelling. It sounds like most people were still asleep, and the alarm woke them up.

We all look at each other for a split second, then turn and rush for the common area. If something's wrong, that's where we've all agreed to meet up. Safety in numbers and all that. Plus, it's a good place to make a final stand, if that's what ends up happening. Plenty of choke points to trap Agustin and whatever insane threat he's dreamed up this time. Hopefully it's not more demons.

I fucking hate demons, for the record.

We burst into the common area to find chaos, but I can't quite tell what the source is. Everyone is rushing around, yelling, and people are on their phones and tablets. It's impossible to make out what's happening.

Someone grabs my arm, and I yelp in surprise, only to turn and see that it's Kendal. The two of us got off on the wrong foot when I first started at Griffin, but in the years since then, we've actually become good friends. She's usually pretty reserved and soft-spoken, but right now her voice is too loud, her auburn hair is sticking up on one side, and her eyes have an almost manic glint.

"There you are!" she blurts. "Thank God. Did you see?"

"See what?" I have no clue what she's talking about.

Dean Hardwick, the man in charge of Griffin Academy—at least, before the school's de facto closure—stands up on a table. "Everyone!" he yells, and he's using some kind of charm on his voice, making it boom like he has a microphone in front of him. "Please, settle down, stay calm and quiet!"

Another one of my teachers, Professor Macombe, passes a laptop up to Hardwick. There are runes on the laptop case, signifying it has some kind of enchantment on it, and they glow brightly. Then the image on the screen of the laptop is projected onto the wall like we're in a movie theater.

Huh. That's a neat trick.

Kendal's clutching my arm tightly, fearfully, as we watch the magical news report.

It's...

It's not good.

In our world, we have television channels and all that, the same as non-magical users. You can usually only access them by going onto certain websites where you have the right password or whatever. But it's nationwide, and we all tune in just like people tune in to CNN.

But today, in the live video feed projected onto the wall, it's not one of the usual news anchors. It's just Agustin.

His face fills the screen, and I want to punch him so badly that my damn hand is shaking. I didn't think I was capable of hatred until I met Agustin. I would happily toss him into a burning building and then roast marshmallows over the flames.

It's not exactly the most heroic or noble sentiment, but then again, I never asked to be a hero.

Agustin's eerily bland features stretch into a smile in the image on the wall. He looks so pleased with himself that he could make Caesar seem modest.

That's not the most concerning thing though.

It's what's around him.

The brown-haired mage is currently sitting at the head of the High Table. The High Circuit is sort of our version of congress or parliament. We have representatives from different areas of the country, and they all have an equal share and vote on major issues.

The High Circuit is our most powerful government entity, and it's generally made up of extremely powerful magic users. There's no law anywhere that says you have to be a powerful mage in order to be on the High Circuit, but it sure feels like that's the unwritten rule. I can't remember the last time we had someone at the High Table who was only so-so at magic. They're all badass when it comes to magical skill, even if their

personalities can sometimes make you roll your eyes so hard you're in danger of straining something.

The High Table is literally the name of the table where they all sit for their meetings. Usually the most senior member of the High Circuit will sit at the head of the table, but right now, that's where Agustin's sitting, and that's not the worst of it. All around him are bodies.

Dead bodies.

A few people are sitting in other chairs, their faces relaxed and expressionless, and I recognize something in their bearing—it's the same thing I saw in that demon bird, and in the mage on top of the tower that Agustin organized to attack Griffin.

They're all being mind controlled.

Well, we already knew Agustin has some kind of mind control powers, so it's not exactly a surprise.

But it is terrifying.

I'm just so damn glad he didn't get ahold of Asher's mind manipulation powers. Ash has the strongest mind reading and mind control abilities of anyone I know. I can't even imagine what Agustin could do with that—possibly control people without them even realizing they're being influenced, letting them think they're fine and it's all their own choice and they've got free will.

I shudder at the thought, shoving the idea out of my mind as if lingering on it too long will make it come true somehow.

Alongside the mind-controlled mages, there are *a lot* of empty seats. And on the floor, on the table, all around—there are bodies. They look like they fought, and bravely at that. There are burn marks, water marks, all kinds of bruises and scars on their bodies.

Holy shit.

“The feed was showing him just walking in there and—and killing everyone who tried to fight,” Kendal whispers, her hand still wrapped around my arm like a vise. “Someone pulled the alarm here so we could all see it, I think? It was—it was—”

She breaks off, shaking her head as her lower lips trembles.

I feel another presence at my side, and I look over to see Roman, Cam, and Asher draw up next to me. Roman silently passes me his phone, and when I glance at the screen, I realize it's a clip of the footage of Agustin as he entered the High Circuit's main building.

He's wiping the floor with the people who try to come at him. He's throwing magic around like it's nothing, like it's not even a thought, like the people risking their lives to try to stop him are just annoying flies he can squash with a flick of his finger.

I've never seen anyone wield magic like this. Hell, I didn't know it was even possible to wield magic like this.

Roman turns off his screen with a press of a button and puts his phone away, and I'm glad for it. I couldn't stomach seeing much more of that—innocent people dying, screaming and scared and in pain, trying to defend themselves and fight back when they didn't stand a chance.

Up on the main screen that Hardwick's projecting, Agustin is smirking like the cat that ate the cream.

"Good morning, everyone," he purrs. "Sorry to wake you so early. I'm sure most of you are quite startled by this turn of events."

Have I mentioned I really want to punch this guy? Because I do. Repeatedly.

"I'm sure many of you are wondering what's going on." Agustin sits up a little straighter in the large chair at the head of the table. "You're scared, concerned, worried. Like little sheep."

"At least he didn't say lemmings?" Cam murmurs, but I can tell by the tone of his voice that even though he's trying to joke like he normally does, he can't muster up an ounce of humor right now.

"You don't have to worry anymore though," Agustin continues. "Everything is taken care of. There will be no more violence. No more strife. So long as you all understand that there's a new world order in place. And that order is me. I'm in charge."

He holds up a hand. "Now, I'm sure you're all quite frightened right now. Wondering what that means for you. Don't worry—this will not be a hostile takeover unless you make it that way. Everything can be peaceful. I *want* it to be peaceful. I have no interest in ruining your lives or hurting you. Certainly not killing you. There is no reason for bloodshed."

I sense there's a huge "but" coming at the end all of this, and sure enough...

"Of course, how peaceful this is will be entirely up to you. If you resist, I will have to make a show of force." The bland-faced man shrugs. "But it doesn't need to come to that. Under my rule, everything will continue on as

it was before. Of course, there will be more regulations on things like enchantments, charms, and potions—for everyone’s safety.”

My brows draw together. *For safety?*

He’s making it sound like getting a charm that could blow up a building is as easy as walking into a store and laying down a wad of cash. It’s not. That stuff is already highly regulated—Johnson’s insane collection of charms probably took him years to accumulate, and the fact that he got his hands on them at all speaks to how highly connected he was. In our magical community, you can’t just get whatever damn enchantment or charm you want for no reason. So what is he talking about?

“Rationing charms, enchantments, and potions will begin effective immediately,” Agustin says. “A list of items deemed too dangerous to be permitted will be released in short order, and anyone in possession of such objects will be required to turn them in.”

“He’s trying to weaken us,” Roman says quietly, his voice a low growl that rumbles in his chest. “He’s making sure regular magic users can’t enhance their abilities through potions or something else.”

Shit. That makes sense. He can’t have anyone threatening his power or his rule.

“Oh! And one more thing.” Agustin’s affable smile turns just a hair more vicious. “Many of you have been crying out for a long time about the blight of Unpredictables on our society. For too long, your voices have been ignored and talked over. No more. Do not fear, my good citizens. I have heard your concerns, even if the High Circuit didn’t.”

Burning anger surges through me, and it takes all my willpower not to run up and beat my fists against the wall where Agustin’s head appears. *Heard their concerns? He’s been stoking anti-Unpredictable sentiment for years.*

“Nobody will be in danger unless Unpredictables refuse to turn themselves in. If you possess such magic, you are hereby obliged to come forward and register yourself. Otherwise...” He clucks his tongue like we’re naughty children. “I will have to send my government officials after you. And nobody wants that.”

“Officials?” My jaw is clenched so tightly it’s hard to speak. “More like minions.”

I have no doubt that whoever he sends after us will be mind-controlled like the demon bird and the mages were. Or just people evil enough to

actually support this insane man's agenda.

“Do the right thing,” Agustin says, his voice gentle and sincere. “Turn yourselves in. Declare yourselves. And then the rest of the magical world, the good, law-abiding citizens of our society, can go on living their lives just as they were before. I promise nothing but peace.”

With that, the video cuts out.

CHAPTER 4

The room falls into stunned silence. I don't think anyone knows what to do or say or even where to begin.

My stomach drops to the floor. I think I might be sick.

This isn't the end. It ain't over until the fat lady sings, right? We haven't rolled over and declared defeat yet. But it's hard not to feel like Agustin holds all the cards here.

I feel awful for the people who tried to stop him in that office. They never stood a chance, but by God, they fucking tried. And they paid the ultimate price for it. I hate that I wasn't there. Oh, sure, I don't have even the first clue what I could've done to stop him, but at least I could've done my best instead of sitting here helpless. I feel like somehow I should've instinctively known he would go after the High Circuit, that he'd be bold enough to just waltz in and try to take it over, and that he'd be powerful enough to actually succeed.

Everyone looks frozen, almost dazed. Even Roman, the kind of guy who always has a plan, looks just as lost as I feel.

Then Cam moves.

I jump a little, startled. I didn't expect Cam to leap into the action—he's more of a stand back and snark kind of guy, and I thought we'd see Dmitri storm off or something first. But Cam's pulling out his phone and shouldering his way through the crowd to get to Brodie.

"Hey, I need your help." He hands the lanky man his phone. "I've got a video on here, and we need to upload it to the internet as fast as possible."

My stomach crawls off the floor and back into my body, twisting into knots as a small glimmer of hope flares inside me.

Oh, fuck yes. Cam recorded Agustin's giant rant about how regular magic users are pathetic weaklings, about how he's the next step in the evolutionary chain, and how he's going to rule everyone—through violence, not peace.

If we can get that up onto the internet and can get the magical community to see it, that'll nip Agustin's whole "I'm on your side and only dislike Unpredictables" act right in the bud. He wants to get rid of Unpredictables for just one reason: we're the only people who have a chance at taking him down. He's Unpredictable himself. He's not looking out for the best interests of the magical community.

At least Johnson actually believes all that fanatical bullshit he spouts. Agustin just wants to fan the flames of bigotry so that he can get Unpredictables out of his way, leaving nobody powerful enough to contest his rule.

It's diabolical—and unfortunately, it also seems to be working.

Brodie takes the phone from Cam, chewing on his lip as he watches the video play. It only seems to take him a few seconds to realize that this is a big deal. His eyebrows shoot up, and he nods quickly.

"Yeah. I'll do what I can."

"Agustin will shut it down," Asher says. "Or he'll have his minions do it. Like with pirated films on YouTube."

"But they can't shut down all the pirated films from all the sources," Kendal says, stepping up to our little group from where she's been hovering nearby. Her blue eyes are wide, her face so pale that her freckles stand out starkly against her skin, but her voice is steady as she turns to Cam. "Can you send that video to all of us? That way we can all upload it from all of our computers and phones."

Holy shit, that's a good idea.

"Everyone get your electronics!" I yell. "Bring them in here!"

"Like we're conducting a fire drill, please, people," Hardwick calls. He's still up on the table, but I think he overheard our conversation. At least, enough to throw his support behind whatever we're about to do. "In an orderly fashion, no shoving, walk normally, don't rush!"

"I'm not sure about this." Brodie shifts his weight from foot to foot, still holding Cam's phone. "It could accomplish nothing and just bring Agustin down on us. Plus, with the geo-tracking as we upload, he'll know exactly where we are—"

“I’m sure he knows already,” Tamlin interjects.

She steps up, coming close enough that she has to tilt her head to meet Brodie’s gaze. She takes the phone from him and holds it in front of his face, like she’s trying to make him truly see it.

“What are you going to say you did, Brodie, when the time comes and they ask you? Are you going to say that you sat around waiting for official channels, that held back and did nothing out of fear of doing the wrong thing? Or are you going to say that you fought? That it might not have been the best way or the right way, but that you made a *choice*, that you stood up and did something to try to stop this?”

She puts the phone back into his hand, curling his fingers around it and wrapping her own hands around his closed fist. “There are more of us than there are of him. The world needs to know the truth so that the world can rise up. How can we expect people to do the right thing if they’re misinformed?”

Brodie’s looking at her with two spots of color high up on his cheeks, his eyes a little wide, like Tamlin’s possibly the craziest and best thing he’s ever seen in his life.

I don’t think he even realizes that’s the expression he’s wearing.

“You can upload this,” Tamlin says, her voice soft, meant only for him. “Or I will. I’ll storm the damn gates if I have to. We’re not letting him win. And if there’s even a chance that this will help, no matter how small, then I say we take it. Wars can be won and lost by public opinion.”

Brodie looks down at the phone, then back up at Tamlin. “All right,” he says. “If you’re sure.”

“I am.” Her voice leaves no room for argument.

He nods, then extracts his hand from hers and starts tapping on the phone, his face still flushed.

Everyone else files back in, computers and cell phones at the ready. Hardwick and the other professors begin organizing us so that we can upload onto as many social media sites as possible from different accounts and all at the same time so we create a flood that’s harder to shut down. We’ve got our own versions of Instagram, Twitter, and all the rest so that we can share magical videos and stuff without anyone non-magical stumbling across it—not that it doesn’t happen from time to time, and there’s a division of the Circuit that deals with that exclusively, but it helps

keep those instances to a minimum—and we're uploading to all of those sites.

It takes some time to share the video with everyone and then upload it all. But we get it done.

Everybody's silent as they work. This isn't much, but it's all we can do at the moment. Cam's good with social media and is walking around the large space, quietly directing people. I've never seen him in a leadership role like this, and I have to admit it suits him well. I'd even say it's pretty damn hot, if it weren't for the fact that something is... off about him right now.

Sometimes it seems like Cam is made of pure sunshine. It's not that he doesn't take things seriously, but he does tend to want to lighten dark situations, to see the bright side, to cheer others up.

Right now though, his face is serious, his voice low and firm, his shoulders stiff. It's not like him at all.

"People are definitely viewing it," Tandy says, glancing up at me. Erin is peering over her shoulder and nodding along. "The numbers are ticking up fast."

"Good," I tell her.

People need to know that Agustin's lying. He doesn't care about regular magic users. He considers them worthless, weak, and disposable. All he cares about is himself. He probably wouldn't even care about Unpredictables if they didn't pose a threat to him.

Cam nods grimly, then slips out the side door.

Huh. Not even a smile?

I'm proud of him—proud of his quick thinking, proud that because of him now we might have a chance to get the word out—but he doesn't seem to feel the same way.

I touch Roman's arm. "I'll be right back."

He glances at the door Cam just went through. His brows furrow, then he squeezes my hand and nods.

When I slip out into the hallway, Cam's already several yards ahead of me, leaning his shoulder against the wall with his head bent. His back is to me, and when I put my hand on his arm, he jumps.

"Hey, are you—"

Before I can get another word out, Cam spins around, and now it's my turn to jerk in surprise as he grabs me, hauls me to him, and kisses the

breath out of me.

CHAPTER 5

Don't get me wrong. I love making out with every single one of my boyfriends. If I didn't, they wouldn't be my boyfriends, now would they?

And Cam's a damn good kisser. Playful, passionate, energetic.

But this doesn't feel like him.

Of course, it's still a fucking amazing kiss. I sink into it, and for a wild second I forget Agustin, our situation, and maybe even my own name as Cam pins me to the wall and devours my mouth until I can feel my body melting, thrumming with need.

It's not how he usually does things. Not at all.

There are plenty of empty rooms around, since half the Circuit staff are in stasis and everyone else is still in the main room uploading the video, so Cam just drags me toward the nearest one. I know I should probably stop and ask him what's wrong, but I can feel the energy thrumming underneath his skin and the coiled tension in his muscles. He doesn't want to talk right now, that's for sure.

He hauls me into what looks like a small conference room and kicks the door shut behind us. There's a large oval table in the middle of the room with a few office chairs arrayed around it, and a smaller table along one wall. I take all of that in at a glance while Cam fumbles quickly with the door handle, turning the lock, and then his hands are on me again, his mouth slamming back onto mine as if the few seconds our lips were apart was pure torture.

Whatever is driving him, whatever is stoking this fierce, burning need, it infects me too. My body responds to his with an answering hunger, and

my tongue meets his stroke for stroke. We almost stumble as he backs me toward the table, since neither one of us is really watching where we're going. As soon as we reach it, his hands slide down my back and over my ass, gripping my thighs and lifting me easily, depositing me on the sturdy wooden surface.

He rips his mouth away from mine, and when he pulls back, his cheeks are flushed, his blue eyes slightly manic.

"I have to be inside you, Sin." He shakes his head, his nostrils flaring as his large hands massage my hips and thighs. "I have to."

He sounds almost apologetic, like I'll be put out or offended that my boyfriend wants to fuck me so bad it's making him a little crazy.

But I'm right there with him.

I can feel wetness dampening my panties already, and I'm breathing harder as desire dances through my body like a lick of flame. I nod emphatically, my head bobbing up and down.

That's all the go-ahead Cam needs. His hands move unerringly to the button and fly of my jeans, working them open before peeling my pants and panties off in one go. I shift my weight to help him, and when they get tangled up on my shoes on the way down, he lets out a noise of impatient frustration before yanking my shoes off too.

The smooth wood of the table is cool on my bare ass as I watch Cam unzip his pants, shoving them down on his hips as he retrieves his cock. It's hard and heavy and swollen, precum already beading at the tip as if we've been torturing each other with foreplay for an hour instead of two minutes of hot and heavy kisses.

Then he's stepping between my legs, nudging them open wider as his hands find my ass again, pulling me toward him so I'm perched right on the edge of the table. One hand moves to grip his cock, and as soon as the smooth head finds my entrance, he surges forward, burying himself inside me.

A loud, satisfied, shocked noise falls from my lips at the suddenness of the intrusion, and Cam's gaze flies up to meet mine. He doesn't move. Doesn't pull out or thrust in again. He just stays like that, buried so deep that I can feel him everywhere.

Oh God. He really wasn't kidding about needing to be inside me. He doesn't even seem willing to withdraw to fuck me in earnest.

Not that I'm complaining.

There's something perfect and grounding about being joined with him like this, completely filled by him, the most deeply connected we'll ever be. My legs are wrapped around his waist, and our faces are close, our gazes locked as we stay like this. I squeeze my inner walls tight around him, and he groans. So I do it again. He bites his lip, his breath coming quicker.

But he still doesn't move.

One strong hand wraps around the back of my neck while the other slips between us, the pads of his fingers quickly finding my clit. He rubs in tight circles, making pleasure radiate through my entire body. I pulse around him, squeezing his cock in the same rhythm that he might thrust into me, and I know he feels every single one.

"Come, Sin," he mutters, the muscles in his neck straining as he fights for control. "I need to feel you come on my cock."

The tempo of his fingers increases, his beautiful sky-blue irises burning as he watches me. His gaze tracks over every inch of my face, collecting each small shift in my expression as he pushes me toward the edge.

"Fuck! Oh, God."

The tension building inside me snaps, flooding me with overwhelming pleasure, and I convulse around him, squeezing him so hard he lets out a choked grunt. His fingers abandon my clit as he wraps both arms around me, crushing me tightly to him and burying his face in my hair as I cling to him, riding out the waves of my orgasm. He's muttering soft words into my hair, and I can't quite make out what they are, but as my body slowly relaxes, coming down from the high, so does his.

I can feel his heart beating hard against mine as he slides his hands under my thighs and lifts me off the table, carrying me across the room with his cock still buried inside me.

Uh oh. Was he that serious about needing to be inside me?

I have a sudden vision of us walking out into the hall like this and going about the rest of our day, as if Cam actually got his wish and somehow bound us together permanently.

But he doesn't reach for the door handle. Instead, he lays me down on the floor and settles his body over mine, then rises up on his forearms to look down at me. And finally, he pulls out of me.

After having him stay so still for so long, the friction of his cock against my sensitive inner walls feels fucking amazing, and when he's almost all

the way out, he reverses course and thrusts in again, so hard and deep our bodies rock on the floor. Then he does it again. And again.

His thrusts are long and deliberate, and even as he picks up the pace, the intensity doesn't diminish. He's fucking me like a man on a mission, like if he could just get deep enough, he might be able to touch a part of my soul. My entire lower body feels flushed and swollen from the orgasm that tore through me earlier, and the way Cam is driving into me makes me certain another orgasm isn't far off.

He's close too. I can feel it in the way his cock is thickening, seeming to grow impossibly harder.

Bracing his elbows on either side of my head, he drops his own head to kiss me, fusing our lips together even as our bodies move in sync. He kisses me deeply, melding our mouths together, refusing to let either one of us come up for air as we both drown in the sweetness of it.

And I come like that.

With Cam's lips on mine, his cock inside me, his weight on top of me, and his warm sandalwood scent teasing my nostrils.

With everything that is this beautiful, kindhearted, soulful man overtaking my senses.

My arms and legs wrap around him, and he finally tears his lips from mine to let out a low groan as he thrusts in deep one last time. His cock pulses inside me, and I nip at his earlobe, drawing another noise out of him.

I can feel the tension draining from him, the strange intensity that was so unlike Cam's usual easygoing demeanor. His body drapes over mine for a second as he gets his breath back, then he pulls out and flops over onto his back beside me.

As he does, it strikes me that he's still—mostly—wearing pants and a shirt, and although my bottom half is completely bare, I've still got my shirt on too. Somehow, in the middle of everything, I hardly noticed it. But it feels a little strange now, so I sit up slightly and tug my shirt over my head, then roll toward Cam and do the same to him.

Maybe it isn't appropriate to take off more clothes at this point, but what the hell. We just fucked in an empty meeting room, so I think we've pretty much blown right past the "what's appropriate and what's not" question. And I want to be skin to skin with him.

Cam lets me take off his shirt and then tugs me into his body, wrapping his arms around me as I drape myself over his chest.

Gazing up into his eyes, I catch a few lingering sparks of manic desperation as they dance around in his irises, and I can't stop the question that pops out of my mouth.

"What was that all about?"

I try to keep my voice gentle and a little playful instead of accusatory. I don't want him to think I minded the extremely hot sex or that he's not allowed to ever feel upset.

Cam sighs, reaching up to run a hand through his hair. "This might sound weird or callous, but right now? With you and the others? I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life."

I blink, shifting in his arms a little to get a better look at his face. That's not at all what I thought he was going to say.

"For the first time in years, I have a *family*." He strokes my hair absently, threading his fingers through the strands. "Asher's family has always looked out for me and done their best to welcome me in. But now it feels like I'm not just a plus one or somebody that another family has absorbed into their ranks. I'm a part of this whole unit. I'm a part of all of us, an equal part. I haven't had that since my parents died."

His blue eyes soften, and my own eyes prickle as my heart swells in my chest.

"It makes me really damn happy, Sin," he whispers. "To share that with all of you, even if the conditions aren't exactly ideal. But on the flip side of that, I'm also the most damn worried I've ever been in my life. It feels like it could all be taken away from me at any second. I could blink and Agustin could be here, or someone else he's sent in his place, to steal away everyone I care about."

He pulls me a little tighter against him, gently pushing some of my hair out of my face. "I have everything I've ever wanted, but I also can't forget that I could lose it all in just the span of a second."

"I get it. I really do." A small sigh falls from my lips, and I smile sadly. "I was just telling Dmitri earlier how I feel the same way. I love you all, and I'm so happy to be with you, but—the more I have, the more there is to lose, you know?"

Cam makes a noise in his throat, and for a moment, we cling to each other, holding on so tightly it's hard to breathe. When I finally pull away, I rest my palms on his chest, feeling his heart beat in a steady rhythm beneath my touch.

“This isn’t over though.” I shake my head fiercely. “It’s not. We can’t just sink into despair. We have to keep fighting. We have to keep pushing. It’s not over until we say it’s over, and he hasn’t won yet. He thinks he has, and you know what, let him think that. But we’re going to keep taking a stand. We’re here together, and that’s already a victory.”

Cam looks at me with this soft expression that’s like... I don’t even know. Like I’m the moon, and he’s seeing me for the first time. He cups my cheek and kisses me softly, achingly, and I swear I can almost taste the sweetness of it.

Then he rolls me off of him and sits up, reaching into the back pocket of his jeans and digging around for—his wallet?

“I appreciate the thought,” I tease, wondering if he’s about to pull out a damn condom, “but it’s a little late for that, stud. You literally just came inside me.”

Cam gives me a playful, deadpan expression and then pulls something out of his wallet.

It’s... a bracelet.

It’s simple, silver, not flashy, with a few symbols carved into it. If I remember correctly, those are runes signifying love, connection, and resilience.

“This was my mom’s,” Cam says softly, holding it out to me.

It takes me a moment to realize he wants me to put it on. I hold out my wrist, and Cam slides it on—onto the spot where my cuff used to be, when I had to wear one to dampen my magic. *Hey, it fits. And it looks pretty good on me, actually.*

“I had to get rid of most of my stuff to pay for the funeral when they died. Social services took care of it all. But I was allowed to keep a few things, and I wanted to keep this. My dad gave it to my mom after they’d been dating for a while, I think to kind of test the waters on proposing to her. She wore it every day, no matter what else she was wearing, except in the lab when she couldn’t wear any jewelry. I never saw her without it at home.”

He runs his fingers over the silver band, and goose bumps flare where his fingertips brush my skin.

“So when I got to keep this and a few other things, I thought ‘someday, I want to give it to someone’. Every family has those heirlooms, you know? And so I thought it would be something like that. For someone that I knew

would be sticking around in my life for a long time. And, well, you're not like my mom, and I'd worry if you were, but you have so much love and compassion, Sin. Even if you like to pretend otherwise. And you're persistent, and resilient, and you never give up; you keep fighting. So I thought that just... made it all extra appropriate."

A lump grows in my throat. I don't even have words for how touched I am. It feels like my heart is trying to leap out of my chest and also like I'm stuck on the beach while a tsunami is headed straight for me—but in a good way. I don't want to move. I want the wave to knock me over.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice hoarse. I kiss him on the corner of his mouth. "Just... thank you, Cam."

He touches his forehead to mine and smiles softly. "Of course, Elliot. You're the love of my life."

We take our time getting dressed, relishing the few last minutes of peace in this little bubble we've created. Then we rejoin the group in the common room, most of whom haven't even noticed we left. The rest of the guys all did though. Dmitri silently pats Cam on the shoulder when we walk up, while Roman raises an eyebrow at me in question. I nod reassuringly, and he relaxes.

Asher doesn't even need to ask. He just has an amused and slightly besotted look on his face like he thinks Cam and me being sweet is the cutest damn thing he's ever seen, surpassing even videos of baby bunny rabbits.

I roll my eyes at him, but that only makes him grin wider.

The rest of the day goes by in a blur. We're all on our computers and phones, continuing to upload the footage Cam shot and spread it as far and wide as we can. News outlets are picking it up now, but they're scared to go against Agustin—a bunch of random Unpredictables uploading a video when they're already targets is one thing, but people who don't have a target on their back already aren't too keen to earn one.

Cam, Roman, Dmitri, Asher, and myself are "interviewed" by Tamlin to explain what happened and give more context to the video, and then we all start uploading that too. It's kind of crazy actually, to see the makeshift command central that's sprung up in the common area as everyone puts the video back up as soon as one gets taken down, spreading the word over and over: *if given the chance, Agustin will crush all magic users. None of us are safe.*

Around dinner time, I call Maddy. The cell networks are finally functioning again, and I want to make sure she's all right. I like to think she's okay at her school, but I don't know.

She picks up immediately. She must've been waiting for me to call. "Ellie?"

"Thank God you're safe!" I blurt out, then immediately feel like an idiot for saying that. She's safer than I am, theoretically.

"You're glad *I'm* safe?" Her voice gets a little high-pitched. "I'm not the one a psycho murderer with a tyrant problem just declared excommunicado from the magical world!"

"I'm okay," I promise her. "I'm fine. We're all just trying to figure out what our next move is."

I fill her in on what we've been doing all day, and when I finish, she makes a sort of growly sound in her throat.

"I knew that guy was bad news when he gave his little speech from the High Table. I didn't trust it for a second. But now that you've uploaded the video—people are watching it, and they're realizing just how fucked they all are without you guys. I mean, there are definitely people who still think Unpredictables are awful, or that you're liars or something. But from what I can see, a lot more of them are realizing how much they screwed up by buying into this anti-Unpredictable bullshit."

Well, that's a nice silver lining, I suppose. It feels kind of like too little too late, but I try to remind myself that it's not over yet, and that the tide of public opinion finally turning in our favor can only help us. That's why we uploaded the video, after all—to get people to see the truth about this asshole and not fall in line with him blindly. So at least that's working.

"Were you really there with him? In his lair or whatever?" Maddy asks. "I'm so glad you're okay. How did that even happen?"

"It's a long story. We kind of got in over our heads." I explain what happened at Agustin's house, and what's been going on since.

"Wow. He didn't waste any time," she comments, a note of disgust in her voice. "He must've realized it was getting too hot for him, and that he had to put his takeover plans into action or it'd be too late."

"That's what I'm thinking." I sigh. "And now I've got to go and try to kick his ass again."

"Do you have to though?" Maddy's voice gets quiet, a little tentative. "I mean, the video is helping people realize it was a mistake to rally against

Unpredictables, to see you as the enemy. People—at least here on campus and in a lot of the comments on social media—are saying that we *need* Unpredictables. That Agustin’s plan is to get rid of you all because he knows Unpredictables have the best chance of stopping him.” There’s silence on the other end of the line for a moment as she pauses. Then she adds, “But why does it have to be you?”

“Well, who else is going to go after him if we don’t?”

“The authorities, maybe?”

“What authorities?” *Ugh, that was probably too harsh.* I sigh. “Mads, I know you’re worried about me, and I appreciate that. And really, I’ll do everything I can to be safe. But there’s nobody left to stop him. He’s shut down the majority of the government. He has us in a stranglehold. We’ve got to do something, and we’re the only ones who can stop him. Or who at least have a hope of stopping him.”

I can hear Maddy inhaling, ready to give a response—when I suddenly hear something else too.

Loud noises, dulled slightly by the thick walls of the holding facility, echo from outside.

Oh, fuck.

Someone is here.

CHAPTER 6

“I have to go,” I tell Maddy, and I quickly hang up the phone over her protests. It might be nothing, or maybe it will even be good news, and if it is, I’ll call her right back.

I really don’t think it’ll be good news though.

My heart lurches as I hurry to a window and peer out.

Holy shit.

I suspected Agustin would come after us, but dammit, I didn’t think that it would be so quickly. And now—now there’s an army of mages and demons at our front door, trying to knock it down.

The onslaught came so suddenly that the perimeter guards didn’t even have time to raise the alarm, but the crashes, grunts, and howls outside are so loud that everyone in the facility knows we’re under attack. Everyone is screaming and yelling, fear and panic clear in their faces. I can’t blame them. Dozens of enemies are outside the gates.

“We have wards.” Cam dashes up on my left, bracing his hands on the windowsill as he peers outside. “That’ll slow them down.”

“But it won’t stop them,” Asher adds. “Look. They’re breaking them down already.”

I stare out the window at the actual army of goddamn *demons* that are gathered outside the fence that surrounds the holding facility, working on tearing down our protective wards so they can get inside. Creatures of smoke and flame, ice and darkness, magma and stone, and a few made up of what looks like actual vomit—honestly I’d rather face the fiery ones than the vomit-looking ones—they’re all just a hundred feet away from us.

My stomach lurches and twists. I'm not all that scared for myself, oddly enough. I've faced demons before, and so far I'm still alive and didn't get my body turned inside out so, that's a win. But what about my classmates? Especially the first-years who are so new, who've never used magic before and are just barely starting to learn how to control their powers?

Our cuffs are off, thank God. I suppose that's a small blessing, but it hardly stops the fear from choking me. We're surrounded, and I'm terrified my friends aren't going to make it out alive.

The demons are roaring, snarling, and stomping while the mages work to dismantle the wards. There seem to be a few other people mixed in with them—magic users who don't look super powerful or strong and seem a little frightened of the demons instead of single-mindedly concentrating on getting rid of the wards.

"Any idea who those people are?" I ask Asher, jerking my chin toward a few of them.

He concentrates for a second, and I know he's trying to probe their minds—not easy through the protective wards, but hopefully he's strong enough to skim their surface thoughts.

"I think they're Unpredictable haters," he says with a grimace. "There aren't many of them. They must be trying to get in good with Agustin, or maybe they just want a chance to get a few licks in."

"Everyone!" Hardwick yells, his voice bellowing through the room behind me. "Remain calm. Listen to Tamlin and Roman!"

Of course. Tamlin's our fight instructor and Roman has the most real-world combat experience. In the absence of any real Circuit officers, they're the ones best equipped to defend this place.

And they've known each other long enough and trust each other enough that they don't even have to confer before leaping into action. They start separating us into groups and dispatching us around the building, using our Unpredictable skills to our advantage, pairing people up with others who will complement them well and putting a skilled professor in each group to lead the defense.

"Elliot, Asher, Cam, Dmitri, with me at the front," Roman calls, his expression grim. I know it has nothing to do with favoritism—we're the ones who've got the most experience with demons and against Agustin at this point.

I think it might also be a propaganda thing, even if Roman doesn't want to admit it. If I'm the face of this whole Unpredictable movement, and that seems to be what I've become whether I like it or not, then it'll be good for people to see that I'm at the forefront fighting against an attack on us, striking back at Agustin.

I can also see why Tamlin and Roman made such a good couple, once upon a time. When it comes to planning a battle, they're completely in sync. That must've been what drew them to each other in the first place. But I understand now better than ever that it's not enough—they're too similar, both too controlled and poised, too focused on the same things. Tamlin needs someone who will knock her off-kilter and so does Roman, someone who will lighten him up.

I like to think that's what I do for him anyway. At least, I try.

But right now, I'm glad as hell that both Roman and Tamlin are here, and that they *are* so serious, controlled, and strategic.

The guys and I charge out of the main entrance and onto the grounds. Right on the other side of the fence, I can see our attackers. Ice and fire seem to lick my skin, and smoke rises up into the air as the demons move restlessly, eager to begin the destruction. They're fifty feet away, and it feels oddly far and too close at the same time.

How the hell is this happening? How are we going to survive this?

"How much longer until the wards break?" Dmitri's body is taut, his voice thick with tension.

"Seconds," Roman replies. His gaze is fixed right on the demons.

My heart thunders in my chest, and my stomach churns so hard I feel nauseated. We might not make it out of this alive. Any of us.

I take a deep breath, then another, then another. *Shit. Maddy!* I just hung up on her. I didn't even say a proper goodbye.

I whip out my phone and send a quick text.

Me: *I love you, Mads. So much.*

Just as I jam my phone back into my pocket, I see the wards cracking. The gate buckling.

I ready my sonic boom as Dmitri uses his duplication power to split himself into five identical copies. An almighty roar and a rush of heat rise up behind me, and I know that Roman's just summoned a demon of his own.

I have no idea what's going on in other areas of the facility, whether everyone else is okay, whether they're holding off the attack or being run over—but I block those thoughts from my mind for the time being. Worrying about them won't help them, and I need to focus on winning our part of this fight.

“Stand your ground,” Roman orders, his voice hard. “Step back from Elliot, all of you.”

He doesn't say anything more, but I know what he's getting at. I let the sonic boom build and build inside of me, like someone's turning the dial up on an amplifier until the noise becomes unbearable.

“Steady!” he yells. I can barely hear him over the rush of blood in my ears. “Steady, Reckless, steady...”

The wards shatter, the gate crashes to the ground, and mages and demons alike come flooding in, charging straight for us.

“Hold...”

Roman draws out the word, his voice firm and commanding.

He's lucky I trust him. I hold, and hold, and hold. And the monsters keep coming toward us.

They're right on top of us, only ten feet away—five feet away—two feet away—on all sides—

“Now, Elliot!”

I close my eyes and scream as I unleash everything I have.

I haven't let go with a sonic boom like this since I first did it instinctively outside of a nightclub. When that happened, I sent myself flying backward and cracked an entire building.

This time I'm ready, so I don't go flying anywhere, but I can feel the ground rippling beneath me as the force of the blast travels outward. I remember reading somewhere once that if you set off a sonic boom big and loud enough directly at the ground, it'll make the atoms vibrate so fast and become so jumbled that the solid earth will temporarily become liquid.

I don't know if it's true or not, but that's what it feels like all around me. Like everything's turned into liquid.

The demons and mages go flying backward in a wide circle. I see blood spurting out of faces and heads snapping back, necks broken, the sheer force of it doing God knows what kind of damage to their bodies. The demons don't seem to be quite as affected, but they're still blown back, left stumbling and disoriented.

And I'm at the center of it all. The eye of the maelstrom.

I've never felt this powerful before. I'm used to getting my ass kicked and just barely winning the day—or in certain cases, having someone else save my life at the last second.

But right now? I've just knocked a whole battalion of demons and mages on their asses, and I feel fucking fantastic.

The fight's not over though.

Far from it.

All around the grounds, I can hear the cries of battle, yelling and cheering and shouts of dismay. I can't tell how well anyone else is doing, if we're kicking ass and winning the fight, or if my little group is the only one left standing. All I know is that we have to deal with the guys who are in front of us, and giving up isn't a goddamn option.

Asher stays in the back of our little group, his eyes closed and forehead creased as he uses his mind control powers to try to get the mages and demons to turn on each other. Dmitri has a double stationed in front of Ash, guarding him as the others go on the offensive with Cam, who's using his teleportation ability to dodge blows, mostly from the demons. Roman stands like a mountain beside me, his hands extended, fingers like claws as he controls the demons.

He can't control all of them, obviously—and it's even harder to gain control because he's not the one who summoned them. But he manages to influence one or two of them and uses them to wreak havoc, turning them on their compatriots, who roar in anger. That's all it takes to start the dominos falling.

Our attackers are wary of my sonic boom now and stay out of my blast radius, so I can't use that, but I *can* use my mirroring powers.

The mages around me are all regular magic users, elementalists and potion makers and that kind of thing. And as I reach out with my feelings, trying to latch onto their powers, it strikes me that mirroring has never been this easy.

I hadn't ever thought about it before, but I've been mirroring Unpredictables this whole time. *Unpredictables*, with their crazy, random abilities and their super magical strength. Now that I'm up against regular mages, it's so much easier to latch onto their powers.

Holy shit!

I almost want to laugh hysterically in relief. This must be how it feels for Agustin, I realize. And I start to understand a little better why people are scared of us. Doesn't make it okay, doesn't make it right, but holy shit, I'm powerful.

It's still a hard battle. There are a lot more of them than there are of us. But for the first time I feel—vindictive. We're going to beat these assholes. We're going to kick their asses, and then I'm going to kick Agustin's ass and show the world that just because Unpredictables are powerful, it doesn't mean we're all evil. That some of us want to use our power for good.

By the end of it, my legs and arms feel like noodles. I've had magic flowing through me for the better part of an hour, and everything aches. Asher slumps to the ground with a groan, and Dmitri draws his duplicates back into himself, shaking his head to get rid of the disorientation.

"Good job." Roman straightens, breathing heavily.

I nod, limping over to him. "I didn't realize... how much more powerful we actually are."

He wipes the back of his arm across his forehead, smearing the small line of blood trickling down his temple from his hairline. "That's why people are so frightened of us. They assume that power like this automatically equates to a thirst for control, a lack of empathy. Maybe because that's what *they'd* do if they had our power. But being Unpredictable has just as many downsides as it does advantages."

"Feels like it's nothing but downsides lately," I admit. "I'm glad I'm finally seeing a benefit to this."

He gives me a tired smile, his intense cobalt eyes warming a little. "I'm glad to hear it. At least something good's come out of this goddamn mess."

Which reminds me—is everyone else okay?

Just as that thought settles into my mind, Tom, a friend of mine from Griffin, rounds the corner from the north side of the holding. He's sporting a black eye, and his shirt has huge rips in it that appear to be claw marks. "Elliot! You guys okay?" He's limping slightly.

"I should be asking you that." I scan him up and down as I walk up to him. "You look like hell."

"Yeah, you should see the other guys," he shoots back with a tired but elated grin. "Everyone's okay, no casualties on our side, but a shitload of injuries. Broken bones, burns, that kind of thing. The healers are doing what

they can, and I think everybody's going to be okay—but, man, that was terrifying.”

“I'm glad you're all right.” I glance at the dead demons and mages strewn across the ground around us. It's... sickening. Now that the elation of battle is over, I kind of want to barf up everything I've ever eaten. “Um. We need to get a cleanup crew together. Can you gather those who aren't injured to help? We should probably burn the bodies.”

That thought makes me feel even sicker, but we can't just leave them out here. Dead bodies, even demonic ones, stink like a motherfucker and carry a shit ton of diseases

“I need to do some interrogating first,” Roman says quietly, coming up behind me.

Oh. Right.

My darkly handsome professor has three powers: demon summoning and control, death touch, and necromancy. Raising people from the dead to question them is pretty damn helpful in situations like a murder investigation, and who knows, he might glean something useful from one of the dead.

I steer Tom away. I've never actually seen Roman resurrect a dead body, but he's described it to me and said that most people find it disconcerting.

Dmitri walks up as Tom goes to tell the others about organizing a pyre for the bodies.

“We got lucky with no casualties,” he mutters, his eyes hard as he scans the compound. “It's not safe here anymore.”

Dammit. I agree.

“We have to tend to the wounded and these bodies, clean up.” I rub my forehead. “And then we'll call a meeting.”

No rest for the wicked.

CHAPTER 7

Everyone is exhausted, and I know that I for one would like to just pass out and sleep for ages, but that's not an option until we figure out what we're going to do next.

It's not safe here for us anymore. Not that it was all that safe to begin with, but now the danger is more obvious than ever. We can't hold this place. I haven't exactly been poring over *The Art of War* here, but even I know that this building and area is shit for defending, especially now that it's been breached once. It's meant to be a place to hold people inside when you have a whole bunch of guards to keep them in line. It's not meant to be defended against outside forces.

As I look around, I see a lot of people sporting heavy bandages. Outside, Erin and a few other volunteers are tending to the fire and making sure it doesn't get out of hand. The rest of us are inside the main common room, professors and students mixing in small groups as they talk in low voices.

The line between those two groups feels like it's blurring. Most of the professors are in their mid-thirties and up, older than I am by at least a decade, but all of us students are adults too. The majority of us started at Griffin when we were in our early twenties, rather than at a younger age like most regular magic users, so we're young but not exactly children.

Now, with all of us scared and exhausted, with the governmental authorities gone... all those societal structures are falling away. We're all in the same boat.

Student. Teacher. It doesn't really matter anymore.

I sit down at a long bench between Ash and Cam and text Maddy, who's sent me—holy shit—fifty-three text messages.

I send her a text in reply, my fingers flying over the screen in my haste to give her some reassurance after leaving her hanging like I did.

Me: *We're okay. Agustin sent some demons and mages to attack us, but we fought them off. Discussing our next move. xoxo*

Her response is immediate.

Maddy: *Keep me posted. Please!!*

Seeing as how when I glance at Asher's phone, one of his brothers has just sent a text that reads, *I thought you were dead, asshat*, I'm thinking I got off easy as far as concerned-sibling lectures go.

A few minutes later, we all gather in a group around one of the large, long tables. I half expect everyone to start talking at once, spouting off their opinions, throwing in their two cents about what we should do next. But instead, everyone's just silent. Looking at each other. Daring one of the others to be the first to say something.

Finally, Hardwick clears his throat. "It seems to me that... despite our fears about being picked off one by one, safety in numbers is no longer really an option. Not as we are. If there was a place we could defend properly, then maybe that would be different. But we don't. Even getting back to Griffin would leave us too vulnerable. Open to attack."

A shiver runs down my spine. He sounds completely different than he does when he delivers our start-of-semester convocation address. His voice is harder, more blunt. He might've sugarcoated things a little bit when he spoke to us in our assemblies at school, but he's not sugarcoating anything here.

"I think that our best bet now, as much as I hate to say it, is to split up in some way," he continues. "We're simply too tempting of a target all gathered together like this. If we strategically separate into factions, then perhaps we'll have a better chance."

Roman stands up. He's wiped away the blood on his face from the fight, but he still looks like a goddamn warrior. "We can also do more to fight back if we're not all together. This isn't a war where we're all on a battlefield and whoever has the biggest army wins. If we're in smaller groups, we can still work together, coordinate, and find ways to strike back at him while presenting less of a target."

“But where do we go from here?” Kendal asks, raising her hand as she speaks because, well, she’s Kendal. “Do we just go into hiding?”

“Living until tomorrow is the most important thing,” says one person. I can’t tell who it is in the crowd.

“No, we have to fight back!” someone else argues.

That’s when the arguing finally breaks out. The stress and tension that’ve been hovering in the air, thickening the atmosphere for the past several days, snap like rubber bands pulled too taut. Everyone’s yelling and bickering. Half of the people here just want to live to see another day, and the other half want to do something about this, with a few people in the middle like Hardwick who are trying to mediate and restore order.

Ugh. I drop my head into my hands, scrubbing at my face. This is so ridiculous I can’t even stand it.

I stand up and let off a sonic boom, directing it up at the ceiling—just a small one, enough to make that distinctive noise that has everyone jumping and shutting up in surprise.

“For fuck’s sake!” I yell. “Don’t you see? There’s no point in fleeing or going into hiding to live if the future’s just going to get worse and worse. Of course we have to fight! If we don’t fight, then there won’t be anything to live *for*. I don’t know about all of you, but I don’t want to spend the last few days or weeks or months of my life cowering in fear. That’s not living! That’s barely surviving! This guy’s been going after us for longer than any of us even knew, and it’s about time we strike back. This is what he wants! He wants us to hide in fear!”

I gesture to Brodie, who’s standing off to one side, his shoulder brushing Tamlin’s as they both turn to face me.

“Tell them,” I blurt. “Tell them what you told me. About what happens to Unpredictables. How the big, fancy future that was promised to us if we graduated and got our licenses was all an illusion.”

Brodie’s face goes red, and he rubs the back of his neck. “Okay. Um, so I started doing a bit of research after my boss asked me to look into Unpredictable activity to see if we really posed a threat to society. The Circuit—you might not believe it, but the Circuit didn’t really want to go against you guys. There were some people who wanted to, but not most of them, not overall. Still, they had to do their due diligence—”

“The point, Brodie, please,” I prompt, trying to hide my exasperation.

“Right. Sorry. Apparently, over three quarters of the Unpredictables who’ve graduated over the years have disappeared. They’ve ended up missing or dead.”

That sends a shockwave through the crowd, sharper than my sonic boom. There’s frantic whispering and nudging. I clear my throat meaningfully, glancing at Brodie.

He takes the hint and continues, raising his voice slightly to speak over the murmurs. “It’s a really high number. I won’t get into the details, but basically someone—or a group of someones, I didn’t know at the time—took advantage of how Unpredictables are already sort of outcasts, and they used our isolation to systematically target us.”

“Now I think we all know who that is,” I add. “Agustin.”

Everyone’s still murmuring. They sound outraged, and I can’t blame them.

“Agustin’s Unpredictable power sparked when he was a young child, which in itself is really rare.”

I keep my gaze from flicking to Roman as I speak. He’s the only other person I know whose magic manifested that early, and it had devastating consequences. But unlike Agustin, Roman turned into one of the best people I know.

“As I’m sure you all know from the video, he has the ability to steal the powers of others, but it kills them in the process. He’s had this power since he was young. That’s at least a decade to hunt down Unpredictables and kill them, taking their powers.”

I see the faces around me go pale as everyone does the math. If so many Unpredictables have been killed, a staggering number of them had to be by Agustin’s own hand. Maybe not all of them, not with those high numbers, but a lot of them.

How many powers does he have? Two dozen? A hundred? There aren’t a ton of Unpredictables, we’re a subset of a small culture—magic users in general aren’t a dime a dozen.

But there are enough of us.

“If we stay together, we’re sitting ducks.” I speak into the silence that’s fallen in the room as all eyes focus on me, everyone almost seeming to hold their breath. “But if we separate completely with no plan, he’ll pick us off the way he always has. There are still Unpredictables out there. We’re not the only ones. So I suggest we split up into small groups, find those

Unpredictables, and gather reinforcements. If we can get them to help us, we can launch a proper attack against Agustin—all of us.”

I stand a little straighter, clinging to the last shred of hope and confidence I have.

“He’s scared of us. You saw that in the video. He knows we can defeat him. And as many powers as he might have, he’s just one person. We can take him. We just have to be organized and prepared. If we’re going to all be together, then we have to be launching an attack—and if we’re going to be separate, then it has to be for a purpose, not because we’re all hiding and fleeing. So can we please do this with purpose? Be proactive, not reactive. He’s been proactive this whole time, and it’s the reason he’s gotten this far while we’re still scrambling. We need to actually do something.”

I swallow, wrapping my hand around the bracelet Cam gave me, running my thumb over the polished silver.

“We might go down. Agustin might win. I’m not going to tell you it’s impossible for us to lose. But at least this way if we do go down, if we do lose, it’ll be *because* we fought. We’ll go down fighting, we’ll lose having actually done something instead of waiting around for the end. And I don’t know about you, but that’s how I want to do it. That sounds like a pretty damn good way to go to me.”

If life were a movie, this would be the part where there’d be a moment of silence, then someone would stand up and do a slow clap, and then everyone else would stand up and join in, and there’d be thunderous applause and swelling music and all that.

Nothing like that happens here, and honestly, I’d be a little embarrassed if it did.

Instead, there’s a ripple through the group as people nod and murmur to each other. After a few moments of people quietly debating, some start standing up and agreeing. Hardwick says that he thinks this is the best course of action, and that we should divide the groups up the way we did for the battle, with an experienced professor placed with some of the younger people. People start splitting up into teams, organizing themselves based on powers and experience.

I sit back down, relieved—and feeling like we all might be a little less screwed in the long run.

We’ll need to try to get people as battle-ready as possible along the way. The professors can hopefully help with that, and maybe some of the older

Unpredictables that we recruit can assist as well, teaching the younger people how to use their powers specifically to fight.

“What about you guys?” Brodie asks, looking at me and gesturing to the men. “I mean, no offense but you’ve kind of got a massive target painted on your backs. Agustin clearly hates you five specifically. And he wants your powers.”

It’s true. The evil megalomaniac wants Asher’s mind control, for one thing—some of the mages we fought in the battle earlier seemed to have their minds being manipulated, but only one or two. Agustin’s power allows him to literally get inside someone’s brain and use them as a puppet, but Ash’s power is broader—he can use it on a single individual, but he can also mass influence people. Right now, Agustin’s power is concentrated, but if he stole Ash’s ability, he could control entire groups.

Then there’s the issue of Roman and myself. Roman’s got demon summoning powers, which Agustin clearly already has, but my handsome, stoic professor also has necromancy and death touch. And me? Well, with my mirroring powers, I don’t even want to imagine how strong Agustin could become. Coupled with his own magic, he could become literally all-powerful.

He made it clear when we faced him before—he wants the three of us. And I’m sure he wouldn’t object to the ability to teleport and absorb magic or phase through walls and make copies of himself either.

And, well.... he hates us. Me, specifically.

“We’ll have to separate from the others,” I tell Brodie. “I’m not sure what we’ll do beyond that. But we have to stay away from you all.” I shoot him a lopsided smile, even as my stomach flips around inside me like a fish on dry land. “Maybe we’ll draw Agustin’s fire, keep him occupied with us while you all get to work.”

Brodie nods. “Well, in that case,” he tells me, “good luck.”

“Thanks.”

We’re going to need it.

CHAPTER 8

We head out the next day, first thing in the morning. All the groups have been decided, and everyone's got an assigned area they're going to cover. Brodie's given everyone a list of Unpredictables to look for based on his research.

A lot of people are going back to their families first to try to recruit them to our side. Tamlin's apparently got some well-connected relatives near Seattle that she's going to try to shake down for help. Brodie volunteers to go with her.

"It only makes sense," she says when Roman gives her a look. "I've got the best fight training, Brodie's useless at defending himself, and he's got the list of all the Unpredictables who are still alive. He needs a proper bodyguard."

"Of course," Roman replies, his tone completely neutral and his expression blank. But I know him well enough by now to recognize the gleam in his cobalt eyes. "That's very sound logic. It'll be good for you two to stick together. Strategically speaking, I mean."

Tamlin flushes and purses her lips, looking like she's considering how much hassle it would be worth to try to lightly stab him.

My group—the men and myself—are among the last to leave. Asher and Cam spend all morning re-setting the protective enchantments around the grounds while I work with Dmitri and a few others to repair the broken-down gate at the front. Megan and a couple other Griffin students use telekinesis spells to move the rubble out of the way and piece everything back together as much as possible. We want it to seem like we're sticking it out here, like we're hunkering down and camping out, making a last

defensive stand. Hopefully, our protective wards will be strong enough that by the time a new army breaks through and realizes we're gone, we'll all be way the hell out of dodge.

We see everyone off, and Professor Perkins, who has power over light, uses his magic to obscure the vehicles as they leave the complex in case Agustin has some kind of spies watching us. Maybe he can talk to birds now, who even knows.

Before she leaves, Kendal gives me a big hug. So do Tandy and Erin and Tom. Even Alyssa gives me an aborted nod of respect as she climbs onto her assigned bus. But Kendal's the one that I hug back the tightest, the one that makes my eyes a little itchy.

"Look after yourself," I tell her, my voice a little hoarse. "You're a fighter. I'm not good with all this 'words' shit, but you're a lot stronger than you think you are."

Kendal squeezes me. "You're a hero. I know you don't think of yourself that way. But you are."

She pulls away, smiling, then climbs up onto her assigned bus.

I wave until everyone's vanished into the horizon.

And then there are just a few groups left at the facility, and it's time for us to go.

A lot of the other groups were bussed out, since that's how we were brought here originally. Once they're away from the facility, they'll either get ahold of other vehicles or use magical means of transportation. But Roman's car is here, so the five of us will be taking that. It's convenient, and it's also decked out with some pretty top-notch protective enchantments.

"That everything?" Cam asks as we finish up.

"I think so." Roman looks around. "The lights are on a timer, so it'll look like people are here at night—"

"Get down!" Dmitri hisses.

Just as he says it, I hear what he hears—a car.

We all duck behind Roman's car as another car pulls up, stopping right outside the gates.

My heart is hammering. This doesn't look like something Agustin would do, just a lone car, but who knows what he could have planned? Maybe there's a bomb inside. Or maybe it's more Unpredictables who are looking for shelter. Or—

The driver's door opens, and before I even consciously realize who it is, I'm running for her.

"Maddy!"

My little sister jumps up and down, waving and grinning, then starts running for me. I yank the gate open a second before she crashes into me, and then we're hugging each other so hard I can barely breathe, and I seriously don't know if I'll ever let go.

"You're okay!" she gasps, over and over. "You're okay!"

"Yeah, I'm all right, Mads." I squeeze her tighter, even as my face scrunches up in confusion. "But—what are you doing here? How did you get here? You have school!"

"School can fuck off," she says firmly, and my eyebrows shoot up. I know I have a mouth like a sailor, but Mom and I were always kind of strict about Maddy's language, and she's a soft-spoken person in general, so hearing her swear is always a bit jarring.

Mads pulls back so that I can see her face. "I'm here to help. I know you want to keep me safe and try to protect me, but I want to fight with you. None of this 'being apart' bullshit. I'm not sitting this fight out, and I'm sure not gonna fight without you. I want to be with you. You're my sister, and whatever happens, we're going to face it side by side."

Behind her, I see Justin getting out of the front passenger seat of the car. He looks a little dazed, and I can't help but wonder just how fast Maddy was driving.

Also, my sister doesn't have a car. Is that Justin's, or did Mads just steal one off the street?

I really, really hope Justin has a car.

Maddy finally steps back from our hug, crossing her arms over her chest and staring at me with her jaw set, like she thinks I'm about to send her packing.

Which, to be honest, I'm sort of tempted to do. The shit we're up against is terrifying, and the thought of Maddy getting hurt makes my heart seize up in my chest. But the thing is, she's not a little kid anymore. I don't have the right to make those kinds of decisions for her.

"Look," I tell her, "you're an adult. I can't stop you. But are you sure this is what you want to do? You have an education, you're not Unpredictable, and it's going to be crazy dangerous. I don't want you to do this because you feel like you have to, because I'm your sister."

Maddy shakes her head, her blue eyes shining.

“You *are* my sister, and I *want* to do this. It’s the right thing to do. Lots of organizations—other academies, businesses—are still limping along. Trying to act like they did before the government shutdown and Agustin’s takeover. Trying to make it normal. Some people are cooperating because they’re scared, turning in their charms and potions, that kind of thing. But a lot of people want to fight back.”

She gets more animated as she goes on, and I get the feeling she’s spent the entire drive from Neptune Academy with these thoughts running around and around in her head.

“A lot of people at Neptune are realizing that they shouldn’t have pushed Unpredictables down, and that it was all... orchestrated. That their hatred was whipped up and engineered, that they were used as tools and their worst traits brought out so that they could be taken over—and it *worked*.”

She scowls, practically vibrating with energy. “There are still people who want to keep their heads in the sand, who insist that everything will be okay if we cooperate with Agustin. But after seeing that video you posted, more and more people are starting to realize they’ve been played. Classes at Neptune are still limping along, but a lot of people are leaving—to go protest, to go be with family, just to do *something*. But I knew you’d be fighting, and I want to fight with you. No more sitting on the sidelines while my big sister gets her ass kicked.”

I snort. “My ass isn’t getting... okay, yes, I am getting my ass kicked. And I worry about dragging you into that, but I’m also glad you’re here. I’ve missed you.”

Maddy grins at me. “I’m glad I’m here too. I miss you all the time.”

Truthfully, I feel like it’s a bit... okay, if I’m letting myself be petty and bitter here, it’s too little too fucking late on the whole ‘oh no, we were so wrong about Unpredictables’ thing.

Bull-fucking-shit. Of course people only realize something’s wrong when it affects them, and suddenly *they’re* the ones with their rights taken away. But if it’s someone attacking another group, oh no, then it’s fine. We’re all so willing to hate other people for the slightest reason, to see the worst in others, and to imagine that others are out to get us. But we’re all *other* to someone else.

So, yeah, I’m kind of pissed.

But there's no point in saying all of that to Maddy—not when she sounds so happy that everyone is starting to do something. My sister sees the bright side of things, the *good* side of people, and I'm glad for it. I'm not going to rain on her parade.

And more public support for us has to be a good thing. It's better than having public support be against us anyway. Even if most people are too scared to do much, it means they won't try to stop us or get in our way, and some of them might even be willing to hide us, shelter us, help pass information along or something.

So it's a good thing. It is. And I need to focus on that.

"So anyway, we're here," Maddy says brightly. She gestures behind her as Justin walks up.

He's probably about Maddy's age, with skin the color of oak and warm brown eyes framed by glasses, and he shifts his weight awkwardly as he stops beside her, looking nervous as hell. It takes me a second to figure out why—he's already met me, after all, and that went okay. But then I feel a wave of warmth at my back and turn to look over my shoulder.

All four men are glaring at Justin like he's a hungry lion and Maddy is a little baby gazelle.

Ah. Right.

"Justin." I smile broadly as I walk up to him and pull him into a hug. I'm *not* a hugger, and the men know this, so that should help get the message across that they can back down on the older brother protectiveness.

As much as it fills me with joy that they're so worried for Maddy and are ready to pounce on this guy if he so much as breathes wrong at her, I think Justin's a good person, and I know for a fact that Maddy will not appreciate it if they scare him to death. Experience has taught me this.

I *might* have scared away Maddy's prom date. We don't talk about it.

Justin awkwardly hugs me back, a little stiff from surprise, and I draw back to put my hand on his shoulder, turning to face the four men. "Guys, this is Justin."

Roman raises an eyebrow. Dmitri narrows his eyes. Asher's forehead is wrinkled, which means—

"Asher, stop reading his mind!"

He stops, looking sheepish.

Mads rolls her eyes. "This is my boyfriend, guys. Honestly, he's cool."

“I’ve heard a lot about you all,” the tall boy says affably. He puts on a nervous smile. *Ugh, poor guy.* “Maddy really likes you all, thinks of you as family. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Cam, ever the friendly one, clearly decides that if anyone’s going to break the ice, it’s him. “Hey, Justin.” He walks over and offers up his hand. “It’s great to meet you. Nice shirt.”

Justin’s wearing a shirt that says *To Boldly Go*, because of course he’s a Star Trek geek.

“Thanks.”

“Maddy’s got a real thing for nerds,” I announce.

My sister punches me in the shoulder.

“We’re glad you came to help,” Cam says, smiling, then pointedly clears his throat.

Asher walks over next, and he and Justin shake hands. Still looking a little chagrined, Ash apologizes for trying to read his mind. “Maddy’s become like a little sister to us too, so I guess we’re a little protective of her.”

“And she failed to mention you,” Dmitri adds, sounding betrayed.

Mads folds her arms. “I am not going to call you all the moment I get a boyfriend, it’s my personal business.”

All four men look affronted at the suggestion that Maddy *won’t* tell them every single detail about her life. I lift a hand to cover my grin, stifling a laugh.

Roman says hello to Justin next, and apparently Justin knows a bit about Roman’s career, because he starts gushing about doing his freshman semester final on Roman’s work with the Circuit police in regard to a serial killer when Roman was only fifteen, and for the first time in my life I get to see my handsome, stoic professor embarrassed. His cheeks go a little pink as he tries to shrug it off, saying it was nothing and that he was happy to use his necromancy to help with the investigation.

It’s adorable as fuck.

Dmitri is last, and he grips Justin’s hand so hard I can see the poor kid wince.

“Ease off, cowboy,” I mutter, sidling up beside Dmitri.

He lets go of Justin’s hand, but his eyes are still narrowed to slits as he says, “Nice to meet you.”

Hoo boy.

“He’ll warm up to you,” I promise Maddy’s boyfriend, giving mine a firm look.

He’ll warm up to Justin if he knows what’s good for him, in other words. I’m not above withholding sex until Dmitri starts playing nice.

Dmitri correctly interprets the look on my face and puts his hands up in a gesture of surrender as he steps back, smirking slightly—probably because he knows my “punishment” would torture me just as much as it would him.

With the introductions out of the way, it’s time to go. Roman puts some of the wards and enchantments from his car onto Justin’s so that he’ll be protected too. Two cars could be better than one—it’ll mean we can split up if we have to, or send one vehicle somewhere as a decoy.

Justin gets into his car along with Cam and Asher, who seem the least likely to rip the guy’s head off. Maddy wants to stick with me, so she’s in Roman’s car with Dmitri and myself.

“You ready?” Roman asks, glancing over at me as he starts the car.

I nod.

As ready as I’ll ever be.

CHAPTER 9

Our first stop is to hit up Asher's family.

His brothers are a bit scattered across the country, but several of them are in San Francisco—it's where they all grew up, and where their parents still live. There's a big family home at the top of a hill in one of the best neighborhoods, and it's not until we pull up the drive that I realize just how loaded Asher is.

Dmitri's family uses their wealth and power like a weapon. They constantly wield it, wear it, draping it all over themselves like some kind of spiderweb that sticks and refuses to come off.

I knew Asher's family was wealthy and well-connected, but I always assumed they were on the modest end of that spectrum. He's got twelve older brothers, thanks to some crazy old spell on the family line that blessed them with a lot of sons—which probably made much more sense in medieval times than in the modern age. Even for people who've got a lot of money, that many kids can put a strain on the budget. And Ash certainly doesn't act like he's filthy rich. He doesn't drive an outlandish car or wear designer clothes.

But as I slide out of the front passenger seat and stare up at the massive three-story house with a sweeping yard, pristine flower beds and marble fountains everywhere, and a gorgeous view of the bay beyond, my jaw sags open.

Holy shit.

Justin and Maddy are gaping a little too. I don't know how much Mads knows about Asher's family situation, but it's probably less than I do. And Justin knows nothing.

Asher sees Justin gaping and gets a pleased little gleam in his eyes, as if he's thinking, *yeah, if you break Maddy's heart I can afford the best hitmen to destroy you.*

Not that Asher will need to hire a hitman. Dmitri will definitely already have that covered. I feel bad for poor Justin, Maddy clearly didn't expect her sister's four boyfriends to play big brother when she introduced him. He's had no warning.

Ah, well. If he wants to be a part of the family, then he's going to have to win the men over, and that's that. I'm sure he'll be tough enough for it. Maddy might like 'em nerdy, but she also likes men of strong character. The good guys. Superman was her favorite comic book hero growing up. If she likes Justin and he's worthy of her, then he'll have a good backbone underneath the *Legend of Zelda* references.

Cam grins as we get out, gazing up at the house with eagerness instead of awe. He's stayed with Asher before, so he's comfortable as can be. Roman raises an eyebrow but doesn't say anything. He's got some family money, but I don't know how comfortable he is around rich people.

I lean in to whisper to Dmitri as we walk up the wide front steps. "What do you think?"

He shrugs, glancing around. "It's a nice little house. Quaint."

"You realize your parents cut you off, right, Mr. Smarmy Pants?" I say, but then I notice the way he's pressed his lips together to try to hide a smirk. That asshole, he was joking with me.

I punch him in the shoulder. "Very funny."

His dark eyes glint with amusement. "Your face was hilarious."

As we step inside the large foyer, Asher is immediately enveloped in a hug by his mother.

"Thank goodness you're okay!" she exclaims. She's got brown hair like Asher and a face that always seems to be smiling a little.

Cam's pulled into a hug next, then me, and so on down the line. Maddy welcomes the hug because she's Maddy and she's a hugger. Justin looks a little confused but rolls with it and thanks Asher's mom for putting us up.

"Oh, please, call me Linda," she insists.

"Not Lin," Asher whispers to me. "Only my dad's allowed to call her that."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I whisper back.

Linda gets us all set up in guest rooms, which brings a moment of awkwardness. Not from me, which is what I'd expected. I think Asher's explained our whole dating situation to his parents, because Linda simply tells me I'll be staying with Asher and Cam, who always share a room when they're here, and asks Roman and Dmitri if they would each like their own room or would like to share as well.

No, the awkwardness comes when Linda asks if Maddy and Justin will be sharing a room.

I raise my eyebrows at her. I don't care—I mean, I *do* care, of course I care, but I can't judge. The first time I met Roman, we fucked in the alley behind the bar where I worked. If I even thought about calling Maddy out for sleeping with her official boyfriend, she'd have receipts on me so fast my head would spin.

All four of my boyfriends are pointedly looking in other directions. Maddy's an adult, but she's five years younger than Cam and Asher, seven years younger than Dmitri, and nine years younger than Roman. To them, she's still a kid in a lot of ways.

But my sister stands staunchly, keeping her chin up. "Justin and I will be sharing," she says. "Thank you so much."

I smother a grin as Linda shows Justin and her to their room. Maddy's got a bit of my fire in her as well, that desire to be contrary when people try to put expectations on her. And I can't be mad about that.

When Linda returns to take Dmitri and Roman to their rooms, Asher shows me to the room he shares with Cam.

"In San Francisco, with thirteen kids, we had to share," he explains. "They just don't make houses that big here. By the time I was born, my oldest brothers were out of the house, but there were still times we had to make do."

His room is painted a calming light blue color, with two large beds on either side against the wall and space in between. There's a big window with an amazing view, and it feels like the ocean outside is bleeding into the walls inside, creating a relaxing, open feeling.

"This wasn't my room growing up," Asher says. "We'd shuffle rooms every few years as my brothers got older and moved out or had different needs. But now that they're all gone, I picked this one as mine. The color soothes me, with the whole..." He taps his temple.

Ah, makes sense. “So there are colors that are more soothing to you than others?”

Asher nods. “Every power’s got a downside. Mine makes me kind of... easily overstimulated. Of course, with the cuff on it wasn’t an issue, and it’s not so bad now that I know how to control my magic better. But it still helps. Reds are annoying and loud, overstimulating. Blues and greens are better.”

Cam dumps his stuff on the bed as a clattering sound erupts from downstairs, followed by a loud, “Asher! Where are you, you little shit?”

I have *never* heard Asher described as a “little shit”, since in our group that role is usually filled by Cam or Dmitri, but this must be one or several of his brothers.

Asher winks at me, then leaves the room. “What do you want?” he bellows, and I hear him going downstairs.

“Asher’s the quiet one,” Cam tells me with a lopsided grin. “But he’s also the baby, so he got this weird mix of... being spoiled and being forgotten, with how crazy everyone else is.”

“Makes sense.” I cross toward where he sits on Asher’s bed. “How was it for you? Joining him for holidays and stuff?”

He shrugs. “Oh, you know. Weird at first. I came from nothing, and suddenly I’m in this big fancy house, and people are buying me nice presents when I can’t afford to give them anything in return. I worried that I was some kind of hanger-on, you know? That I was taking advantage of them.”

I sink down onto the bed next to him, and he rests a hand on my knee, his thumb tracing idle circles as his gaze goes a little out of focus.

“Even before my parents died, it was just me. I didn’t even have any cousins. That’s why I was so alone after they died; there were no close relatives to take me in. Then, bam, I’m in this home with thirteen other guys, and a lot of them have spouses or at least someone they’re dating, so those people are here too, and it was pretty overwhelming.”

I shake my head, blowing out a breath. “God, I can imagine. It sounds intense.”

“But after some time, I got used to it. I started to see that they didn’t want anything from me, that they’re just good, generous people who wanted me to be happy and feel included.” Cam smiles. “They don’t just feel sorry for me—they really like me.”

“His mom seems to be fine with the whole... you know...” I gesture between the two of us.

“Oh, the dating multiple people thing? Yeah, I mean, Asher’s got two gay brothers, and another brother of his brings a new girl home every month. His parents are used to the unconventional, and honestly, I think they’d rather Asher be with someone who is honestly and openly with multiple people in a committed relationship than someone who’s always hooking up and got a new partner all the time, you know?”

“When did Asher tell them? *What* did he tell them?”

“That we fought for your honor and it was a draw,” Cam says, deadpan. Then he cracks a grin. “Nah. Asher explained that all of us liked you, and instead of fighting over you, we agreed to ask if you’d be open to being with all of us. And you said yes.”

“What about... I mean, we’re not thinking about marriage or kids yet, but...”

“Look, Asher’s parents grew up raising thirteen kids. They didn’t raise all those kids on their own. The older siblings helped raise the younger siblings—Asher’s oldest brother was sixteen when Asher was born. His folks know it takes a village sometimes. They had friends and neighbors helping them out. The way I see it, they’ll probably think it’s a good thing, if we do have kids, that more people will be on hand to help with everything.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way. I like that.”

A little bubble of warmth fills my chest as I lean in and kiss Cam. I don’t want kids anytime soon, but I can’t deny I’ve started to think about these things as my relationship with the guys has gotten more serious.

Roman doesn’t have family. Neither does Cam, and Dmitri has cut all ties with his, but Asher’s close with his family. He loves them, and they love him. I would hate to put him in an awkward or painful position because of me, because of the way we’ve all decided to be together.

Looks like I don’t have to worry about that anymore.

“Kids!” Linda’s voice rises up from downstairs. Damn, the woman’s got a hell of a voice on her. “Dinner’s almost ready!”

I want to protest that I’m far from a kid, but then, her oldest son is just over forty, so we must seem incredibly young to her.

We all troop downstairs, where I see Asher, his father, and three of his brothers hanging out in the living room. They seem to be discussing

something seriously.

Asher looks up as we enter. Through the large arched doorway, I see that Roman, Justin, and Maddy are helping Linda with setting the table and finishing preparing the meal.

“We’re talking about the situation with Agustin,” Asher explains.

“It’s all very sudden,” his father tells us. “Everyone’s frightened and unsure what to do.”

“At first, people were blaming the Unpredictables for Agustin’s rise,” says one of Asher’s brothers. *Aiden, I think.* I’m going to be honest, I’m terrible with names, and I can’t quite remember who’s who. Luckily, it hasn’t been an issue yet, but if we’re going to be staying here for a few days, I should probably get Cam to quiz me on them so I don’t fuck it up and hurt anyone’s feelings.

“That stopped fairly quickly though,” Mr. Prince says. His name is Nicholas, but I haven’t quite gotten to the point of calling him that yet. “All these new regulations, about potions and charms and all that—people don’t like them. They see the writing on the wall now.”

“Now that it’s coming for them,” I point out, trying not to let too much bitterness seep into my voice.

Asher’s father nods in agreement. “Exactly. But I suppose it’s better late than never. They’re coming around. People are talking secretively about going against Agustin’s directives, hiding enchantments and potions, starting a black market.” Then he looks over at Dmitri, shaking his head. “Your parents are getting a lot of shit, son. Pardon my language.”

Dmitri’s been hovering at the periphery of the conversation, listening but not actively joining in. I can tell he’s still getting used to a family as loud, loving, and boisterous as this one—I’m sure it’s nothing like what he grew up with.

He raises his eyebrows at that though, stepping forward. “Oh?”

“Don’t sugarcoat it on his account, Dad,” Asher assures him.

Mr. Prince sighs. “Well, people are condemning the Mikhailovs for being too anti-Unpredictable. We run in the same circles, from time to time. Money and power and all that. A couple of my sons have to deal with them regularly. And they’ve used their influence to get a lot of other people to turn against Unpredictables as well. Everyone follows the trendsetters.”

Dmitri’s jaw clenches, his body stiffening as he absorbs that information, and I have a sudden memory of what he told us in the car as

we drove around searching for leads the day we found Agustin—that he was afraid his parents had been behind the movement to shut down Griffin Academy.

It's not Dmitri's fault his parents are assholes though. He didn't make them that way.

Mr. Prince leans forward a little, resting his elbows on his knees. "Now people are starting to see that Agustin is the real problem and that they were being duped all along. Nobody wants to admit that someone appealed to their worst urges and that it worked, so they're putting blame on a few key families. I can't say that I feel all that bad for the Mikhailovs, honestly, but I'm not sure how productive it is."

Productive or not, I have to work hard to keep a vengeful smile off my face. *Ha. You bully your own son? This is what you get.*

"And the way your parents treated you doesn't help their case either, with the marriage and all," Mr. Prince finishes, looking at Dmitri. "Everyone's heard about that. Pretty damning on top of all the rest. You've got a lot of sympathy, a lot of people in your corner."

Dmitri blinks. He looks simultaneously grateful and like someone smacked him in the face with a frying pan. I don't think he ever expected anyone outside of our little group to take his side or to even really care about him once the excitement of hijacking his own wedding had died down.

Now he's learning that people he's never even met before care about him and think he was wronged. I think that's pretty big.

I also think it's the least his parents deserve after the bullshit they put him through, not just with the wedding but for his entire life. Dmitri deserved a better family.

A few minutes later, Linda calls us into the dining room for dinner. As we eat, we discuss the Unpredictable situation some more, as well as other topics like whether Asher's fifth brother is going to finally get the guts up to propose to his girlfriend or if they're all going to have to suffer through another year of his cold feet. Lighthearted stuff, family stuff, not end-of-the-world stuff.

It feels a little odd to be talking about anything *but* our impending doom, but it feels necessary too. Like we need it to keep us all from going crazy.

Afterward, I volunteer for dish duty and end up in the kitchen with Linda.

I can't stop glancing at her out of the corner of my eye. I know Cam said she was fine with our whole sharing thing, and she seems to be on the outside, but... is she really? She could be putting up a front just to keep the peace, just because there's a bigger issue at hand here besides her son's relationship choices.

"So, Elliot," Linda says, and my stomach tightens. "How are things? Between you and the men?"

I think my spit is trying to strangle me. I can't seem to swallow.

"Um. Things are—uh, they're good. Well, they're not good, what with Agustin and all, but that's a whole separate... I mean, things between all of us are..."

I trail off. *Oh, good lord. Come on, Elliot, get it together.*

Squaring my shoulders and shoving down the nervousness that's trying to turn my stomach inside out, I force myself to face her fully.

"Mrs. Prince. Linda. Cam said you know what's up with the five of us, and I just want to be sure you're actually okay with all of this. With us."

Linda stops drying the dishes and turns to look at me. "Oh, Elliot. As long as you're all communicating and open with each other, that's all that matters."

"You're sure?"

She laughs. "I've raised thirteen men. Fourteen if you count Cam. They come in all shapes and sizes. You wouldn't believe some of the stuff that they've gotten up to. The relationships they've had, the crazy stories, the trips, the mishaps. If you're all happy, that's what matters to me. Besides, this gives me more of an excuse to start mothering Dmitri and Roman. All those poor men without proper mothers. Breaks my heart." Linda makes a *tsk* noise with her tongue. "I'll just have to start calling them my sons-in-law, and they're going to have to put up with it."

She winks at me and goes back to grab another dish, and I feel an overwhelming emotion well up in my chest faster than I can tamp it down.

To my own shock, I grab her and hug her.

"Oh!" Linda jumps a little, startled, but then hugs me back. "Oh my dear, it's all right. Really. We're just glad you make our boy happy."

Fuck, I'm tearing up a little. I don't think I realized just how much I wanted the approval of Asher's family—especially after the disaster that is

Dmitri's family—until right this second. And to know that this woman, this wonderful woman, looks at my three other men and sees the good in them and wants to pretty much adopt them, and I *know* that all three of them deserve a proper parent...

It's a lot, that's all.

And maybe, just maybe, I'm missing my own mom a bit. My mom, who would hug me and tell me it was going to be okay if she were here right now. Who would assure me it would all work out, even as everything in our society is literally going to shit.

Linda hugs me tightly and pats me on the back, and I compose myself and pull away. I'm not going to cry forever on this poor woman's shoulder.

"I'm glad," I tell her honestly, when I can speak without my voice cracking. "Asher loves you guys so much. I'm glad and... and grateful that you guys are welcoming us into your family."

"Well, of course," Linda replies, smiling. Then her gaze slides past me to focus on something over my shoulder, and her grin widens as she shakes her head. "You can stop lurking, honey."

CHAPTER 10

I turn around and see Asher lingering by the doorway while also trying very hard to look like he's *not* lingering by the doorway.

I raise my eyebrow. "Eavesdropping?"

He blushes. "No. Nothing like that. I just wanted to make sure everyone was... getting along?"

"We're good," his mom assures him with a light laugh. "Off you go, you two, I can handle the dishes from here."

Asher doesn't waste a second. He takes my hand and drags me away before I can even protest against leaving Linda to finish everything.

We pass through the dining room, where everyone's now relaxing and chatting. Maddy's fitting right in, and all of Asher's brothers and his father are looking at her with these besotted looks on their faces like she's the cutest little kitten they've ever seen.

She tends to have that effect on people.

"Where are we going?" I ask as Asher leads me upstairs.

"I want to show you something."

"What is it?"

"You'll see," is his cryptic response.

He takes me all the way up to the top floor, and then up even farther, to the attic.

It's not what I would've expected an attic to look like.

It's not filled with boxes or being used to store old furniture. Instead, it's a light, airy room, with a small bed, a couple beanbag chairs, and some posters tacked to the slanted wall.

“This was my childhood bedroom,” he explains. “The one I started out in.”

“It’s amazing,” I tell him, swiveling my head to take in the space. “This is so cool!”

“A little hard to access the rest of the house from all the way up here, so I’m down there now, but yeah. I wanted to show it to you.”

It’s such a little thing, but it’s another piece of Asher, another piece of his past, and I’m feeling a lot of emotions right now—of family, of home, of all of that—and I can’t help myself. I lean in, resting my hands on his chest, and kiss him softly.

“What was that for?” he whispers, his voice soft but amused.

I shrug. “Nothing. Everything.” I lean in and kiss him again, and Asher, well, he’s far from complaining.

He wraps his arms around me and kisses me back, light and sweet at first. But the longer we kiss, the deeper it gets.

Kissing Asher always makes me forget the rest of the world exists. It’s like falling down a well, but in the best way. Even in the midst of everything going on, with Unpredictables in hiding and a madman attempting to take over magical society, Asher somehow manages to make me feel safe. Hopeful.

Our kiss is slow and deep, and I’m so lost in it that I barely notice my feet moving until the backs of my legs hit the small bed in the middle of the room. I fall backward onto the mattress, and Asher comes with me, laying me down gently and crawling up with me as I scoot backward, bringing us to the middle of the bed.

He draws away slightly, and I gaze up at him, running my hands over the lean, defined muscles of his back, slipping them under his shirt to graze his warm skin.

“Did you ever bring girls up here?” I murmur, biting my lip.

“No.” He shakes his head, chuckling under his breath. “I moved out of this room when I was twelve, and at that point, I thought all girls had cooties.”

I laugh too, skating my fingertips over his sides where I know he’s ticklish, making him squirm even as his hardening cock grinds against me.

“Do you still think girls have cooties?”

He pretends to think about it, his green eyes shining with warmth and desire. “Nah. I might’ve been wrong about that.”

My hands move higher up his back, pulling him closer, my touch turning from playful and light to hungry and exploratory.

“You have a girl in your room right now, you know.”

I can feel his weight between my thighs, his cock fully hard now and straining against his pants, bumping against my clit as he rocks slowly against me.

“I know,” he whispers.

A lock of shaggy brown hair falls over his forehead as he brings his face a little closer to mine. I can smell chocolate on his breath from the cookies his mom put out after dinner, and it mingles with the citrus scent that I’ve come to associate purely with Asher.

“Yeah? So, what are you gonna do about it, do you think?” I ask.

I catch a wicked, amused glint in his eyes a second before he drops his head to kiss me again.

“This,” he answers, barely pulling his lips away from mine long enough to say the word.

We roll around on the bed, kissing and groping each other, sliding our hands underneath clothes and over bare skin. The bed is small, the mattress a little soft, and somehow, kissing Asher like this makes me feel like we’ve gone back in time. Like we’re two teenagers who snuck up here where our parents would never find us, desperate to get our hands on each other after being good all evening.

I never did anything like this in high school. I was sixteen when Mom got sick, and taking care of her and Maddy, and then just Maddy, became the primary focus of my life. So making out with Asher in his childhood bedroom feels like making up for lost time in a way.

When he tugs my shirt off over my head, I mirror the gesture, getting rid of his shirt and dipping my head to kiss the defined planes of muscle on his chest. He kicks off his pants, and I shimmy out of mine, and when we’re down to just our underwear, he rolls me over on the bed again, covering my body with his as he trails his lips along the line of my jaw.

I melt into his touch, rolling my head to one side to give him access to the long line of my neck. He takes it, working his way down the sensitive skin before brushing kisses over my collarbone and down my chest to the swell of my breast. He runs his tongue along my skin just above the line of my bra and then moves lower, closing his mouth over my nipple and sucking it through the silky fabric.

It feels so fucking good, but I want his lips on my skin, my *bare* skin. He's using my own clothing to torture me, and that's just so unfair.

"Asher," I whine softly, my voice hardly more than a whisper. The thrill of pretending we're teenagers who snuck off to have sex will be totally ruined if we *actually* get busted by his mom.

His only response to the plea in my voice is to switch his attention to my other nipple, drawing my breast into his mouth and sucking hard, making sparks of sensation shoot through me like little tendrils of lightning.

"Asher!" I'm louder this time, even though I don't mean to be.

He tilts his head up, locking gazes with me as he flicks his tongue back and forth over my nipple, and I writhe beneath him, locking my legs around his waist, prepared to rub my clit against his stomach if I have to just to get some damn relief.

He releases my breast, leaving twin wet spots on each bra cup. Cool air hits the damp fabric, and my already peaked nipples tighten even more.

"Sorry, Elle. What was that?" He grins innocently at me.

"You dick." I scowl at him in mock-anger. "You can't make me scream at your parents' house."

Heat flashes in Asher's eyes, along with something like pride and possessiveness. Oops. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. I think I've just put a bunch of ideas in his head that he shouldn't be having.

I'm not sure if he picks up a hint of what I'm thinking through his mind magic, or if it's just that clearly spelled out on my face, but he grins down at me as if to say, *watch me*.

Then he shucks his boxers and quickly scoots down my body, hooking his fingers into the waistband of my panties as he goes. He draws them down my legs and tosses them away, then he buries his face between my thighs.

A half-cry bursts from my mouth before I press my lips together in a tight line, breathing hard as I try to silently ride out the torrent of sensations Asher's tongue is unleashing on me. I want to open my mouth to yell at him, but I'm pretty sure if I *do* open my mouth, that isn't what will come out.

So I bite my bottom lip, closing my eyes and whimpering softly as Asher laps at me with the flat of his tongue. I squirm beneath him, but he holds my thighs open and doesn't stop, swirling the tip of his tongue in a pattern that makes me shake.

Asher has a wickedly talented tongue, and tonight, it seems like he's trying to prove something. I toss my head back and forth, biting my lip so hard I'm sure it'll leave an imprint of my teeth. Intense pleasure is melting all my muscles, and I don't know how anything in the world can feel this good.

I'm gonna come.

I'm gonna come all over his face, and when I do, there's a good chance I'll scream so loud everyone on the first floor of the house will hear me.

Asher... I'm...

Keeping my mouth tightly shut, I try to warn him mentally, hoping he can read it in my mind. But even in my head, it's hard to get out a complete sentence.

I'm gonna... oh, fuck!

The words I'm trying to send to him are replaced by a torrent of images and sensations—the sight of his head buried between my legs, sparks dancing through my body, the feel of his hands, gentle yet commanding, on my thighs. I project all of that toward him, letting him know what he's doing to me, and the movement of his tongue stutters as he looks up toward my face.

Our gazes lock, the trembling in my body intensifies as the connection between us flares. I'm trying so hard to hold back, but I can't anymore. I slip over the edge, and then I'm coming, pleasure spiking in my veins.

Asher surges upward, settling over me and thrusting into me in one fluid movement as his lips find mine. The feel of him inside me only intensifies my orgasm, and I do scream—but Ash's mouth catches the sound, muffling it and drinking it up as I clutch at his shoulders, holding on for dear life as he fucks me hard and fast.

He rides out my orgasm, thrusting into me in a way that lets me know the last of his restraint has finally snapped. He teased us both for so long that he's as desperate now as I was.

“Fuck, Elle. You're so perfect. Perfect for me.”

The words are a breathless whisper against my lips, and then Asher stops, grinding his hips against mine with a soft, choked sound. He buries his face in my hair as I roll my hips against him, squeezing and milking his cock as it pulses inside me.

I feel his body soften above mine, melting into me as we sink a little into the soft mattress. We're both breathing hard, our hearts crashing

against each other through our ribs, and I feel deliciously limp and sated.

And I managed not to call his entire family up here with my noises, so, double win.

After a few moments, Asher pulls out of me, rolling over onto his side and drawing me into his body, my back to his front. He rests his head against mine as he wraps his arms around me, bringing us almost cheek to cheek. His breath stirs a few flyaway strands of hair as he speaks.

“I’m glad you’re the only girl I’ve ever brought up here.”

I turn my head a little, and he lifts his so he can meet my gaze.

“Me too.” I reach up to plant a chaste kiss on his lips, which still taste like me. A little aftershock of pleasure hums through my body, and I smile. “This is officially my favorite room in the house.”

CHAPTER 11

I call Tamlin the next morning to ask how she and Brodie are doing on their end.

“It’s going well. Better than I expected, so far. My relatives have agreed to help us, and we’ve already contacted a few people,” she tells me as I find a quiet corner of the living room. Justin is discussing some computer programming thing with Dmitri, who I did not at all expect to be into computers, while Maddy and Roman are talking to Mr. Prince. It’s very cozy and domestic, and it makes my heart warm.

“I’m glad.” Settling into a chair by the window, I gaze out at the beautifully manicured front lawn. I want to soak up as much peace and comfort as possible while I can. “How’s working with Brodie going?”

“It’s good.” Tamlin keeps her tone purposefully lighthearted and neutral. “We’ve been doing some good work, coordinating our information. He’s got a really great memory, almost photographic, and a good head for numbers.”

Yeah, she can play it cool all she wants, but I can still hear the fond tone that creeps into her voice.

“Nice,” I tell her, swallowing my grin. “Any Unpredictables in our area that we could get into contact with?”

“Yes, actually, hold on...” There are some rustling noises in the background and some murmuring, I assume between Tamlin and Brodie. Tamlin sounds softer in her tone with him than I’ve heard her be with anyone else.

Ha.

“Okay, here we go,” she says after a minute. “Got a piece of paper?”

“Uh...” I make a waving motion with my hand, then a writing motion. Cam, thank God, sees me and realizes what I mean, and passes me a pen and paper. “Okay, go.”

I write down the names, thank Tamlin, tell her to thank Brodie, and then hang up. After one last wistful glance out the window, I turn to face the room. “Okay, guys, I’ve got a starting point.”



We all go out together—the four men, myself, Justin, and Maddy. We don’t want to be too conspicuous, but there’s safety in numbers at this point, and I hope we can pass as nothing more threatening than a group of young twenty-somethings out for a fun afternoon.

It feels weird to be out on the streets without my cuff. I didn’t have it last time I was out in Portland either, but we were chasing down Agustin then. It didn’t really feel... real, exactly. We were on temporary leave, on a mission, not just... out and about.

This feels more like out and about.

We’re walking down the streets of San Francisco, and we could be anyone. We pass by other people, and no one looks at me suspiciously or with judgement.

It’s weird, but amazing.

We try to keep a low profile as we go along. We’re not being loud, but we’re chatting, smiling. Maddy and I take a few selfies together in some pretty spots, just trying to look like normal people out on an unremarkable day.

The last thing we want to do is alert Agustin or any of his people that we’re here. I’m still his number one target.

Our first stop is to see an older woman by the name of Eleanor. Her house is in a quiet, out of the way neighborhood, and when we reach it, we gather into a quick huddle at the end of her walk. It’s decided that Maddy and I will knock on the door first while the men hang back a little. We don’t want to scare or overwhelm her.

Eleanor is a small woman, with a pile of white hair atop her head and light blue, watery eyes. “Yes?” She eyes us up and down as she opens the door halfway. “You look a little old to be Girl Scouts.”

“Hi.” I try to smile. Next to me, Maddy beams. “I’m Elliot, and this is my sister, Maddy. We’re—”

Eleanor’s eyes light up. “Elliot Sinclair?”

“Um... yes?”

The older woman gestures for us to follow her inside. “Come in, come in. I saw your livestream, and your video about the holding center—awful, awful, business.”

I turn back and gesture for the men to approach. “Is it okay if my friends join us? They’re my classmates and one of my professors from Griffin. And one of Maddy’s classmates too.”

Eleanor looks past my shoulder, taking them in. “Ah, yes. I recognize some of you from the video—the one of Agustin. Of course. Come in.”

We’re ushered into a lovely, rather old-fashioned looking house. There are pictures on the walls of Eleanor with several other people throughout the years, including a wedding photo.

She catches me looking as she leads us through and smiles. “Ah. Good memories. I was lucky to have such a strong network of people who loved me. Being an Unpredictable was even harder in my day.” Then she chuckles. “Ha! My day! Makes me feel like I’m a century old. But I couldn’t get a job anywhere. I’m lucky I had a husband with a good job who was happy to support me and let me stay at home. Not that I *wanted* to stay home—I ended up getting a job at a non-magical library, got a degree in Library Science at a non-magical college and all that. Half of my friends were non-magical.”

“Didn’t that suck?” Maddy asks. “To hide so much about yourself from them?”

“It wasn’t fun,” Eleanor acknowledges, leading us into a cushy living room and gesturing for us to sit. “But it was easier to do that than to deal with the magic users around me who judged me for something beyond my control. At least my non-magical friends looked at me like I had value.”

A hint of bitterness creeps in at the edges of her voice, and I can’t blame her for it one bit. “Sounds awful.”

Eleanor nods. “Tea, anyone? Water? Coffee?”

I don’t really want anything to drink. I’d rather just get down to discussing what we came here for, but our hostess seems a bit old-fashioned, and I feel like it would be rude to refuse her hospitality. The

others must've had the same thought, because we all ask for waters—the quickest and easiest of the available options.

After all that's taken care of, it's time to get down to brass tacks. "You're probably wondering why we're here," I tell her.

Eleanor nods. "I assume it has something to do with Agustin. Such an awful man. Making the rest of us look bad. I can't say I'm surprised his plan worked. People have been prejudiced against us for ages. It takes so little to fan that spark into a flame."

"We're trying to stop him," I confirm. "Unpredictables are the only ones who are strong enough to go up against him. We're trying—my classmates and I from Griffin, and the staff—we're trying to find as many Unpredictables as we can to work together to attack the High Circuit office where he's currently residing."

"And you want me to join you as one of them," Eleanor says, finishing my thought. She sighs, putting down her coffee mug. "You seem to be a dear girl. And a fighter. We've all appreciated how you've stood up for us, for every Unpredictable out there. It can't have been easy."

I shrug, keeping my gaze fixed on her as she continues. It doesn't really seem like a good time to expound on how *not easy* going up against Agustin is.

"I am thankful for what you've done—and for what you're trying to do." She shakes her head, looking almost sad. "But why on earth should I get involved to help people who derided me all of my life? Who insulted my husband for marrying someone 'like me'? Why should I help the people who denied me a job, who shut me out of restaurants and bars and clubs, who wouldn't have me in their sewing circle or invite me to their cocktail parties? My poor John endured decades of humiliation for being married to me, and I'm lucky he stuck by me. I had friends in the magical world who stuck by me as well, but they paid the price for it."

She leans forward a little, squinting slightly.

"And look at how little it took for Agustin to convince people to go against us, to try to take our magic from us and treat us like—like animals. The provost of a respected magical training program. One of the richest and most influential families in our society. And so many more. Why should I bother to help people who were so eager to take me down and to believe the worst of me and everyone like me? To oppress us?"

“I get that,” I tell her fervently. “I promise you, I totally get that. My mom wasn’t Unpredictable, but when she died, neither my magic nor Maddy’s had sparked yet. Nobody was there for us. The magical community just abandoned us. And I was bitter. Really bitter. So when I found out I had Unpredictable magic, I almost decided to just let them take it from me and not be a part of the community, because why should I be a part of something that had rejected me?”

I glance at Maddy and find her looking back at me, her blue eyes shining. She was the one who convinced me to keep my strange new powers back then, to give Griffin Academy a shot. And despite the fact that I almost died at that school multiple times, I’m so glad I listened to her.

“But this is bigger than that,” I tell Eleanor, turning back to her. “It’s bigger than either of us. I’m not denying that what they did was wrong. I feel like it’s a pretty ‘too little, too late’ situation as well. But there will be innocent people who get hurt in this too. People who have always believed in us and always wanted to help.”

Her gaze falls to the floor, and I scoot forward a little, perching at the edge of my seat as I continue.

“And you know he won’t stop—not until we’re all gone. Agustin wants to be the only Unpredictable. He doesn’t want anyone to be able to challenge him or his rule. So he’s going to keep hunting us. He’s been hunting us for years. You said that you had a good network of people. You had a husband and friends, and I’m guessing your family stuck by you?”

Eleanor nods. “Yes. Always.”

“Not everyone had that. Nearly three quarters of the Unpredictables who passed their exams have vanished or died over the last several years. That’s because of Agustin. He was picking us off. I’m guessing your death or disappearance would’ve been too noticeable, since you actually had a support network. But now that he’s made his move, he’s going to come after you too, and everyone with our kind of magic. It’s only a matter of time. We can’t let old grudges—as justified as they are, and trust me, they’re fucking justified—get in the way of fighting back and doing what’s right. For the people who always supported us, for the innocent people who have no clue what’s going on, and for all of us Unpredictables, because he *will* find us if we just cower in hiding.”

Eleanor looks at me for a long moment, taking sips of her coffee. She’s contemplating, and I don’t want to rush her, but I’m also getting more and

more nervous the longer she sits in silence.

“All right,” she says at last, setting her mug down. It shakes just slightly in her hand as she rests it on the coffee table, but that’s the only outward marker of her fear, and her voice is strong when she speaks. “You’ve made a compelling case. I see what you mean. And I don’t intend to simply sit around and wait for that odious man to bang my door down. What do you need me to do?”

I grin, a heady feeling of victory flooding my chest.

It’s just a little thing. Just one Unpredictable. But it gives me hope. One and one and one and one more, and one more after that—that’s how you build an army. A single person at a time.

We’re not out of the game yet, Agustin.

CHAPTER 12

It's been a fairly successful day, and I remind myself of that repeatedly as we all head back to Asher's house for dinner.

We visited a few other Unpredictables after leaving Eleanor's place and convinced them to help us. I know it's something, and I'm glad for it. I still wish we were actually attacking Agustin though. And I can't help but worry about everyone else and how they're doing. Hardwick, Tamlin and Brodie, Kendal, Tom, Tandy and Erin—are they being attacked? Are they lying low? Have they been able to find any other Unpredictables? How have those conversations gone?

I think the worry and stress is finally getting to me, because halfway through dinner I get an awful headache. I haven't had a migraine like this in ages. Not wanting to be rude, I try to just power through, forcing down a few more bites of food in the hope that it will help.

It doesn't though. My head just hurts worse, and now my stomach is churning uncomfortably too.

"Excuse me," I mutter, interrupting Cam and Asher's debate with Justin over which *Star Trek* movie is the best as I stand. "I think I need to go lie down. I'm sorry."

Everyone looks concerned, and Maddy squeezes my hand as I walk by. I force myself to smile, giving her a soft squeeze back. "It's just a headache, no worries."

Ugh, my head feels like someone's splitting it open with an ax. I practically stagger up the stairs, desperate to get horizontal in a dark space. Maybe I should get some medicine or something before I lie down, this is insane—

I grip the handrail and squeeze my eyes shut as a blinding flash of pain rips through my skull. For a moment, light dances in front of my eyes, and I feel like I've just seen a flash of the world through the negative lens of a camera, all the colors inverted and reversed.

What the hell? I've never had a migraine this bad before.

I make it up to the second-floor landing and am about to head for Asher's room when another flash hits me, so strong it makes my legs buckle.

But this time it's an image.

I'm standing in front of a teacher. I'm small. The classroom is large, and the rows of seats that fill the space are empty. I was held after school for misbehaving, and I'm angry. I'm so mad about it that fire burns in my veins. Something sparks in my fingers, like electricity, but not. More powerful than that.

I grab my teacher's wrist—

And his eyes go wide. He makes a noise in his throat, halfway between a cry and a groan, and he staggers. His other hand moves toward me, but it's as if my touch is draining the strength from his body, making his movement sluggish and slow.

I easily evade his grasp and keep my hand locked around his wrist. His shocked gaze meets mine before shifting down to the connection between us. He shakes his head, looking terrified.

It seems to last forever, and when it's finally over, the man collapses, dead in front of me.

There's no alarm or panic inside me. Instead, I feel... curiosity. Did I do that? I reach down and shake him.

Definitely dead.

I try to reach for that power again. How did I do that? But instead of the weird not-electricity, I get... water.

My teacher used to be able to make water dance.

But now I can do it.

The flash ends, and I'm left on the landing, gulping air, my head screaming, my ears ringing.

What the fuck was that? What's happening? Why am I—

My parents think I'm a water elemental. I don't tell them any differently. They'll send me to prison or some other awful place if they know. Not just that I killed someone, but that I'm Unpredictable. Not like

other magic users. I know what they do to Unpredictables, how they treat them. They're scared of them.

They'd be scared of me. Because they would know that I'm stronger.

I'm at a school. Neptune, an academy for water elementalists. All my classmates are years older than me, but I'm in a special program for those whose magic sparks early.

I'm not a water mage though. I don't want to be just a water mage. The power in me is hungry. I want to feed it.

It's so easy to sneak out. Nobody's looking. I'm a kid. What do they think a kid can do?

The first three are hardest. They're all elementalists, and I plan it all very carefully. I can't have anyone announcing there's a serial killer on the loose. I have to find people who are far apart, who have no connection to each other.

But when it's all done, I have power over fire, earth, and air.

People care about elementalists. They're regular magic users, accepted and respected. No one cares so much about Unpredictables though. I won't have to be as careful with them.

When I come back to myself, I'm on my hands and knees, struggling to breathe. My stomach heaves, and even as bile tries to force its way up my throat, my lungs keep trying to suck in air, making me feel like I'm choking as panic sets in.

It's Agustin, it has to be, it fits what I know about him. But how am I seeing this? What's going on?

I don't get scared easily, as I'm sure anyone who's seen me treat a life-threatening situation as an annoyance that interrupts my schedule can attest. Once, I had a nightmare about a zombie apocalypse, and my response in my dream was to pick up a baseball bat and beat the undead over the head while screaming, "I have to go to work! I don't have time for this!"

So I think I can safely say it takes a lot to rattle me.

But this is someone *inside* my head, and I don't know how it's happening. I can barely keep myself upright because my head hurts so much, so much, so *much*—

Why do I have all this power? It must be for a reason. What should I do with it?

I'm the best. The brightest. The strongest. I'm smarter than everyone around me. Smarter than my classmates, my teachers, my parents. I should

be in charge.

If I get enough powers, they'll have to let me be in charge.

Gritting my teeth, I force my consciousness back into the present, into the hallway of Asher's family home. My forehead rests on the floor, and my lips pull back into a grimace.

God, what a spoiled little brat. That's the conclusion he came to? That's what he decided? What kind of entitled—

There's another burst of pain, and this time I don't feel or see another one of Agustin's memories. This time, I feel one of mine.

He's rooting around in my brain.

Stop it! I scream inside my head, as loud as I possibly can.

I see my mother lying in the hospital bed, when it was near the end, when she looked so frail and fragile. I see myself kissing Roman for the first time outside the bar. I see myself throwing my stuffed animals around the room when I was ten and my mom had to tell me that my father was never coming back from his business trip, that he'd left us. I see myself lying, telling the kids around me at school that my father died, because I'd rather have a dead father who wanted to be with me than an alive father who didn't care about me. I see Maddy graduating from high school, and me clapping, tears in my eyes, wishing Mom was there.

He's tearing through my memories, my *personal* memories, my *life*, like it's nothing.

That motherfucker.

I want to kill him so badly, more than I've ever wanted anything in my life—

Foolish of me.

My whole body freezes as I hear Agustin's voice in my head.

Oh, shit.

It truly was an error on my part, choosing Raul all that time ago. I should have chosen you.

I get another flash of pain, and I try to scream, but the sound is stuck in my throat, choking me. God, it hurts so much I want to bash my brains out just to make it stop.

And then... there comes the strangest feeling, like a key sliding into place, turning a lock, and I feel... numb.

Everything's fuzzy, hazy, distant.

What did he do? It's like I've been injected with a drug, I can't think or feel. I'm all numb. I've been set adrift in an ocean like the one outside, and the tide is dragging me under, pulling me away from the shore, away from myself...

I stand up. My headache is gone. I feel fine.

I feel nothing.

I walk downstairs. I feel nothing.

I enter the dining room. I feel nothing.

Everyone looks up. "Hey, is your headache better?" Cam asks.

Cam can teleport. That's useful. I should use it.

"Hey, are you okay?" Asher asks. He's squinting at me. This man has mind powers, psychic abilities. He can sense something is off.

I must get rid of him first.

Mirroring Cam's magic, I teleport to Asher, letting off a sonic boom as I do it. Asher slams back into the wall.

Everyone jumps to their feet. "What the fuck?!" someone yells.

"Ellie?!" Maddy shrieks. She sounds worried, and my stomach twists, disrupting the waves of the ocean that are rocking me gently.

Maddy...

No. Disable Asher.

Of course. Right. That's all that matters. I focus on Asher. I have to take him alive, it's very important.

The mage with the tousled brown hair lets out a groan. He collapsed to the floor after he hit the wall, and now he stumbles to his feet. But he's too slow and disoriented. Reaching him in a few long strides, I grab him and glance around.

There are too many people here. They won't allow me to leave with my prize unless I kill them first.

Where's Roman? I need his death touch.

Hmm. Across the room. Too far away. But I have my sonic boom. I can concentrate it. Concentrate it right in my fist. Punch someone with it. Smash their face in.

"No! *Ellie, no!*" Maddy grabs me and lets out an ear-piercing shriek.

I stumble back. *What—?*

"Maddy?"

Blinking, I turn to look at her. Is she hurt? Why is she screaming? I haven't heard her scream like that in ages. She sounds like she's in pain,

like she's terrified, hysterical.

I blink harder, and the world comes into clearer focus with every flicker of my eyelids.

Asher's on the floor beneath me.

Everyone's staring at me.

I don't—I don't understand.

What am I *doing*?

CHAPTER 13

Something's wrong with me. Something's not right, but I can't quite get my brain to focus well enough to put the pieces together. I'm attacking Asher. Why am I doing that?

Ash scrambles out of the way, yanking Maddy back from me. "Stay back! She's not herself. She's not your sister right now."

"What the fuck does that mean, exactly, Asher?!" Dmitri yells.

His voice nearly cracks my skull in two as the headache returns with a vengeance. There's a momentary flash of pain that makes me double over, and then, just like that, it's gone.

The ocean is back, pulling me under. The tide is carrying me out again, and I'm numb, so perfectly numb. It's so easy to exist in this place where it's calm and peaceful; nothing hurts, and nothing matters. I'm drowning softly in this ocean.

A flash in my periphery catches my eye, and I spin. Someone is moving toward me. One of Asher's brothers.

Hmm. He has fire. I can mirror that.

I conjure a fireball as my gaze shifts around the room. Who is my biggest threat?

Not Roman. I want his powers. I must bring him to Agustin.

Dmitri is advancing on me, his dark eyes wild and his nostrils flaring. I know from previous experience that he's a good hand-to-hand fighter, which means I can't let him reach me. Duplicating powers are nice, but not necessary. He is expendable.

So I throw the fireball at him.

Maddy screams. Dmitri phases out just in time, and the fireball passes through him before exploding against the wall.

I glare, my lips twisting in frustration. But it's okay. My mirroring power has never been this easy to use before, but now it feels effortless. I'm just a puppet. I don't have to think, don't have to work to access my power. It's all Agustin.

My body moves without my command, hands extending outward as I throw more fireballs. There are panicked, horrified shouts and yells. Everyone is attacking me, trying to make me stop. But they're pulling their punches because they don't want to hurt me.

I am *not* pulling my punches.

It's chaos. Beautiful chaos. I reach out with my senses, mirroring each one of them in turn. Except Roman. He keeps away from me, too far to reach, but that's okay because there are so many others. Fire. Teleportation. Duplication. Water. I have all of them at my fingertips, and I cycle through one power after another, wreaking destruction.

Until a demon appears.

It lands right on top of me, knocking me off my feet. Quick as lightning, its clawed fire-magma hand wraps around my throat, and its knee presses into my chest. It has me pinned.

No! I can't let them stop me. I can't let them hold me. I have to teleport. Have to get away—

Hands grip my face, warm and gentle. I struggle against the touch, which feels so good it almost burns, stealing me back from the ocean. Someone presses their forehead to mine.

An image comes to me. A blue room with a view of the ocean. Calming. Safe.

"That's it," Asher whispers. "You're in the room with me. Nothing can get to you there. Just stay with me."

I blink and glance around me as the whole scene shifts. I'm no longer just seeing the room in my mind's eye—I'm *in* the room. Asher and I sit on the bed playing cards. We used to do this back at Griffin sometimes, just the two of us. Asher is perfect to play games with. He tries hard, but he's not so competitive that it makes him either a sore loser or a smug winner.

But why are we playing right now? Why are we here?

I start to glance around, but Asher touches the back of my hand, bringing my focus back to him.

“Concentrate on the cards,” he murmurs, keeping his gaze locked on mine. “Concentrate on beating me.”

All around us is blue. Cool, calm blue.

Someone’s trying to get into the room, but Asher isn’t letting them. The door is locked.

“Just keep playing cards with me, Elle,” he whispers.

I keep playing cards in the calming, quiet blue. And slowly, the pounding on the door stops. The room is quiet.

“There you are.” A soft, relieved smile spreads across Asher’s face. “There’s our girl.”

He takes my hand and leads me out of the room, and finally, I open my eyes.

There was no room. It was all in my head.

The weight of the demon on top of me is gone, and now that I’m no longer under Agustin’s control, I can actually feel pain, and *fuck*. The bastard left a burn mark around my neck from where he gripped me. I cough, feeling smoke in my lungs. I’ve got bruises all over.

But that’s nothing compared to the room.

There are scorch marks and holes in the walls. The dining room table is smashed. One of Asher’s brothers is on the floor, knocked out. Furniture is broken. Food is everywhere. The chandelier is now on the floor. Mr. Prince has a black eye and a split lip. Cam is clutching his arm, which is all bloody. Justin looks like he got hit by a fireball, with singed clothes and burn marks all over him.

While I was under Agustin’s hold, I thought I saw everything that happened. And I did. But it was as if something in my eye-to-brain filter was broken. I saw, but I didn’t understand. I didn’t really know what was going on. I was so out of the driver’s seat.

Now that I see it with clear eyes and fully understand what I’ve done, I almost throw up. I start shaking. It’s like the panic attack I had when my classmates attacked me but so, so much worse. That wasn’t my fault, but this?

This is all me, devastation I caused with my mirroring powers.

“Hey.” Asher’s holding me, and he pulls me into his chest. “Hey, Elle, it’s okay.”

I realize I’m crying. I don’t know how long tears have been streaming down my cheeks, but my face is wet.

“M-Maddy,” I choke out. “Maddy! Where’s Maddy?”

If I hurt her... Oh God, if I hurt my baby sister—

“I’m here.” She crouches down next to me, and I fumble for her hand. I’m shaking so hard my motor functions are shot. “I’m okay, Ellie, I’m okay.”

Relief makes my limbs feel numb again, but I just cry harder at the sound of her voice. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Mads. I don’t know how it happened, I didn’t mean to! I’m so sorry.”

“Shh, it’s okay, I know, that wasn’t you, it’s okay.” She squeezes my hand tightly.

Roman is standing at the back of the room, still out of range of my mirroring powers. I could possibly reach him from that distance if he was the only one in the room, but with everyone else there and their powers clouding up my head, I couldn’t sift through them to reach him.

Thank God for that.

Everyone else looks horrified, but Roman’s face is blank, neutral, harder than stone. I start to cry even harder. Is he angry with me? Will he ever forgive me for this?

As if he’s reading my mind, Roman crosses the room in an instant, pulling me into his arms. I clutch at him, curling into his chest. He tries to speak, and I hear his voice crack, and I realize—he’s not angry. He’s trying to stuff his emotions down, the way he always has, to be the strong one.

Finally, Roman clears his throat, holding me even tighter. “Asher and I will get her upstairs.”

“This isn’t your fault,” Linda tells me softly. I keep my eyes squeezed shut and breathe in Roman’s smell, leather and a hint of brimstone. I can’t bear to look her in the eye right now, not after she accepted me and welcomed me into her home and her son’s life, and this is how I repaid her. “This is him, not you, dear.”

“I can block him,” Asher says. “Stop him from getting into her mind. I have to be near her, but I can do it.”

“For how long?” I blurt out, my voice raspy and ragged. “We can’t spend forever—”

I choke on the words, and on the emotion rising up in my chest.

“Let’s get you out of the way,” Roman murmurs. He stands, keeping me in his arms, hauling me up and cradling me to him like I weigh nothing. “You guys can start cleaning up down here.”

I open my eyes and I see Dmitri storm off, Cam hurrying after him even though the blond man is bloodied and hurt.

It takes me a moment to realize that Dmitri's headed for the front door, before Cam gets in between and stops him.

"I'm going to kill him," Dmitri seethes. "I'm going to rip him *apart*, I'm going to flay him, I'm going to—to—"

"Stop it." Cam gets his hands on Dmitri's arms. "Dima, stop, that's not going to help anyone. You'll die, and then where are we gonna be, huh? We can't lose you, all right? We're going to figure this out."

Dmitri shudders, and for the first time since I've known him, I see him really collapse. Cam pulls him in, hugging him tightly as Dmitri clings to him like I'm clinging to Roman. I can't hear what else Cam is saying as he murmurs softly in Dmitri's ear, but I hope it helps him.

Fuck. Agustin was controlling my mind, but *I'm* the one who did all this, I'm the one who was here—and I can't help but feel like it's all my fault. I've made Dmitri this angry, this helpless, this hurt. I ruined the night and destroyed the dining room. I knocked Asher's brother unconscious. I wounded Cam.

And what if this isn't the only time?

Now that Agustin's been in my head, what's going to stop him from getting in again?

Roman carries me upstairs. Maddy looks shocked and upset but stays downstairs to help with the cleanup. God, I want to just run away into the night and never come back. I hurt my family, hurt the people I love. How can I possibly come back from that?

Asher leads Roman into his room, the one he shares with Cam now, with the blue walls. The two of them use Roman's small levitation charm to push the two beds together, and then Roman sets me down on the mattress. I feel exhausted, weak, and shaky—probably a combination of having my mind invaded and having so much magic flowing through me as I tore through the house.

Asher sits down on my other side, taking my hand gently.

"You can't babysit me all the time," I point out, shaking my head.

I start to wipe at my eyes, and Roman passes me a box of tissues from the bedside table.

Shooting him a grateful look, I grab several, then blow my nose and wipe the tears from my eyes. I must look a complete, disgusting wreck.

That's what I feel like anyway.

"You have to sleep, for one thing. And that felt... I felt *really* powerful. Like nothing I've ever felt before, like it was all so easy. It felt effortless just to mirror you guys and unleash on you. Putting my sonic boom in my fist like I was about to do to your brother, Asher—I had never thought of doing that before, never thought I could. What if the next time I'm so powerful you can't stop me?"

Ash and Roman exchange a worried glance, but don't say anything.

"The whole time I was attacking, I wasn't in control, but I could still see what was happening. What if next time he takes me over so much that I'm gone? I'm just in this little black cage at the back of my mind, and he's got full run of the place? He could use me like—like a clone and mirror his own magic. I'd be able to mirror everyone around me, *and him*. Any of his powers. I'd be the ultimate weapon."

At least until he can get to me in person, then use his power to kill me and take my mirroring abilities for himself. Which reminds me...

I look up at Roman, a knot hardening in my stomach. "He still wants you," I whisper. "He still wants your death touch and your necromancy. He wouldn't let me hurt you because he needs you." I glance over at Asher, tightening my grip on his hand. "You too."

Honestly, I don't know which idea is worse to me—the fact that Agustin wanted me to just kill everyone, or the fact that he wanted me to keep Roman and Asher alive to steal their powers.

Both are just as awful, in different ways.

"I'm too dangerous with Agustin in my mind. This can't be a permanent solution, Asher watching me. It's not enough," I insist.

"You're right, it's not," Roman replies gravely.

I blink. *What?*

"Did you just agree?" I thought he was going to fight me a bit more on this.

"Yes. But I'm not going to agree with whatever else you'll say." His cobalt eyes flash, the silver specks in his irises almost seeming to glow. "About how we need to get away from you or whatever insane heroic nonsense you're about to spout. But I do agree that you can't go on like this, and neither can Asher. Agustin's remote mind control powers are obviously stronger than any of us gave him credit for. I should've seen this coming, I should've known he would try to take over one of us."

“You can’t blame yourself for not knowing the next step of an asshole,” I point out.

“Or a madman,” Asher adds. “We can play the blame game all we want with ourselves, but it’s not productive. How I ended up with three Broody McBroodersons, I don’t know,” he flashes a soft smile to let us know he’s sort of joking, “but I’m not letting you two or Dmitri go all Batman on this, standing out in the rain and talking about how you have to go it alone and you brought this on yourselves. All right?”

Dammit, he knows me way too well. All of us, really. Because there’s a good chance I would’ve suggested something along those lines—that it’d be better for me to go it alone. I hate to even think of leaving my men, but I hate the thought of what Agustin could make me do to them even more.

“I know someone,” Roman says, breaking the silence that’s settled over us. “My old mentor. Liam. He took me in when I was a kid, after I killed my parents.”

Asher’s eyes widen, and I feel his body stiffen a little with surprise as he glances up. He’s aware of Roman’s magical abilities, but he didn’t know about his past. Not all of it anyway. It took a long time for the darkly handsome man to open up to me about it, and I know it’s painful for him to talk about.

Roman sighs as he shifts his gaze to Asher. “You know that my third power, the reason Agustin wants me so badly, is a death touch. I touch someone, I take their life force, they die. I was one of those rare Unpredictables whose magic sparked when I was just a child, and I... when I was young, I accidentally killed my family with it.”

His voice hitches a little, but the words seem to come easier than they did when he told me. I hope saying them out loud to another person, and seeing sympathy, not disgust, flash across Asher’s face, will help Roman take one more step toward forgiving himself for something that wasn’t his fault.

Then again, I can’t forgive myself for what just happened downstairs, so I’m not really one to talk.

“As I use that power, the hunger to keep using it grows,” Roman continues. “And I was so young and inexperienced that the High Circuit wasn’t sure I was safe to be around. Liam disagreed. He took me in, raised me, and taught me everything I know about control.”

“When Agustin first took control of me,” I say slowly, a shiver working its way down my spine, “I saw flashes of his life. The moment when he first killed and took the power of a water mage. He used that to pose as a water elemental, so no one even knew he was Unpredictable, and he’s been stealing power from other Unpredictables ever since. It’s such *bullshit*. He’s so entitled. He truly believes he’s better than all of us, that he deserves our worship and fear.”

I let go of Asher’s hand and run my fingers through my hair, which is a little tangled and knotted from the fight.

“But something else I noticed was that his power, I think, is kind of like yours. He was hungry for more, to take more power, just like you feel when you use the death touch. Only, instead of fighting it or controlling it, he decided to feed it. I was seeing through his eyes and hearing—no, not just hearing, *having* his thoughts. It was like I was him, for those moments. I don’t know if that’s just how his process works for taking over people’s minds or if it was an accident or if he wanted to show me all of that, but I could feel what he felt, and he felt that same hunger, that craving.”

Roman nods. “That’s good. There might be some way we can turn that against him.” He looks at Asher. “I’ll get in touch with Liam. He’s completely off the grid now. He wanted to retire and was sick of people coming to him for assistance with things or judging him for his magic. He was always reclusive, but by the time I left, he was well on the way to becoming a hermit. I suggest we leave tonight.”

He kisses me softly on the top of my head, squeezes Asher’s shoulder, then leaves the room.

Asher pulls me into him, his citrus and lemongrass scent soothing me as his arm wraps around my shoulder. “You look exhausted.”

I nod, tears gathering in my eyes again. I *am* exhausted. Completely wiped out. More than that though—I feel like shit. Like I don’t even want to be myself anymore.

Asher puts his fingers to my temple. “Then sleep, Elle.”

And just like that, I do.

CHAPTER 14

While I sleep, wrapped up tightly in Asher's comforting arms, everyone else gets ready. Roman said he wants us to leave tonight, and I honestly don't blame him. We need to get me away from civilization, from other people I could hurt, as quickly as possible. Not to mention the fact that our commotion probably alerted the neighbors. I think Mr. Prince has to cast some kind of illusion spell on the police officers who come to check out the disturbance and make sure everything's okay, since Asher's with me and can't use his powers to simply convince them everything is fine.

Cam wakes us up when the time comes to go. His arm is all bandaged up now, and he tells me he and the others who were injured got healing potions from Linda. But he still looks a bit pale, and I immediately feel like shit all over again.

Asher and Cam help me downstairs. I can feel Ash's power wrapping around my mind like a shield or a warm blanket, muffling my senses a bit—but if it keeps everyone safe from Agustin, safe from *me*, I'll take a little fuzzy-headedness.

The rest of the Prince family is gathered downstairs with Maddy, Justin, Dmitri, and Roman. Dmitri's face still looks like thunder. His already dark eyes look almost black, and his hands are balled into fists.

I almost burst into tears again when I see Asher's family. His brother is awake now, also bandaged. Everyone's got some kind of bandage on them, honestly.

After my fight at the holding facility, I felt so proud of myself. I loved my powers, I felt confident. I loved that I was getting stronger.

Now I feel like shit, and I wish my magic was weak and uncontrollable again. That I hadn't had the power to do this.

"I'm so sorry," I tell them, my voice rough as I force words past the lump closing up my throat. "I'm so, so sorry. You're wonderful, and I just—I have nothing to say. I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to apologize for," Linda insists. She hugs me tightly.

Mr. Prince shakes my hand, holding it in both of his. "It's okay, Elliot. We know it wasn't you. This is Agustin's fault, and his doing. Not yours."

Asher's brothers say the same thing, smiling warmly at me and telling me to come back and visit again when this whole thing has been cleared up so I can spend more time getting to know everyone.

It doesn't make me want to throw up any less.

We get into the cars. We have to take both vehicles because Maddy and Justin insist on coming with us. Normally, I'd argue about that. I'm not going to have my little sister anywhere near me if Agustin does that to me again. But I'm too exhausted and dazed to fight her on it right now.

"Okay, here's the plan," Roman says as he slides into the driver's seat. The guys are all crammed into his car—none of them were willing to separate from me. "I have a damn good idea of where Liam is. He's got a hidden place up in the Plumas National Forest. But I'm going to need you all to follow my lead and do exactly as I say, no questions, no hesitation, got it?"

Everyone nods.

Just how insane is this guy we're going to see?

"I thought you said you'd get in touch with him," Asher says.

"Well, I tried. It's not like he has a phone number I can just call. And I don't have a week to send him a goddamn raven."

"A what?" Cam snorts. "Are we in *Game of Thrones*?"

"Oh, can it, wise guy."

Roman starts the car, and behind us, Justin flicks his headlights on as his engine rumbles to life too.

I lie down in the back, cradled between Asher and Dmitri with my head in Asher's lap, his hands on my head. The fuzzy feeling in my head intensifies, and I know he's strengthening the shields around my mind. "Sleep some more," he whispers. "You'll need it."

Just like that, I fall asleep.

Over the course of the night, I phase in and out of sleep, waking up for restroom breaks or when there's a bump in the road. Asher's with me the whole time, his hands on my head, his fingers lightly combing through my hair. I hear the others talking from time to time—they're updating the rest of our network, letting them know that Agustin has come after me.

"He specifically wants her," I hear Dmitri growl into the phone, I think to Brodie. "He wants all of us gone, but he wants her as a weapon. He'd be unstoppable with her at his side. She's his priority."

There's a pause as the person on the other end of the line speaks.

"We're getting her someplace safe," Dmitri replies, his voice gruff. "Or as safe as possible anyway."

I fall back asleep again.

When I finally wake up for good, the first hints of pre-dawn light are turning the world outside a hazy grayish blue. I feel the car pulling off to the side of the road, slowing and crunching over rocks and gravel.

"We're here," Roman announces from the front seat.

Asher helps me sit up. *Ugh*. I feel like shit, and not in the guilty way like earlier, although I do still feel guilty about all of that, thanks. Don't think that's going to go away anytime soon.

But this is just a plain old massive-headache-and-exhaustion type shitty feeling.

"I'm sorry," Asher murmurs, and I realize he can probably feel my mental pain right now, since he's tapped into my mind. "It'll get better soon."

He sounds more hopeful than certain, like he's convincing himself that Liam will be able to take the pain away. I hope like hell he's right. I don't want to walk around like this, or to have to stand by uselessly while others go and take care of Agustin for me.

We all get out of the cars, and Maddy walks up to me and wraps her arms around me. "How are you feeling?" she whispers.

"Hhnngh," I tell her.

She hugs me tighter.

"Okay," Roman says. Everyone turns to him, Maddy letting go of me to focus. "Liam doesn't like visitors. And this place is going to be well protected. So I want you all to be careful and to follow my lead. Stick together. Don't touch anything. Step only where I step and let me lead. Understood?"

Everyone nods. *Hoo boy.*

Asher and I take up the rear with everyone else ahead of us, walking in a line, Roman at the front.

This looks like a section of ordinary woods, not like some special protected place. I don't even have a clue where we are—and I realize with a start that this is probably part of why Asher had me sleep the entire time. Not just for my own sake, but so that Agustin can't search my memories to find out where we are and send a huge army after us.

My head pounds in time to my footsteps as we trek deeper into the woods, and as we walk, I get a sort of a shivery, crawling feeling along my skin. Magic. This place is coated in it. Non-magical people probably feel something similar and think these woods are haunted and creepy, and stay away. But magical people recognize the feeling for what it is. There are a crap ton of magical enchantments on this place, meant to keep people out.

Roman suddenly holds up his hand, curled into a fist, his arm bent upward at the elbow. We all freeze.

I don't hear or see anything—other than the feel of powerful magic that's all around—but Roman clearly does.

He bends down and moves some branches out of the way, revealing a pit trap right in front of us.

Holy shit. I would've had no idea that was there. Left to my own devices, I would've walked right into it.

Roman puts a finger to his lips, then points down into the pit.

We all carefully crowd around to peer inside, and my heart fucking skips a beat.

There are three corpses, walking upright, milling about in the bottom.

You know, I was feeling kind of hungry, having not eaten since dinner last night and barely even then because of my headache, but right now I'm super glad I haven't eaten because I just might throw it up again if I had.

Roman leads us silently around the pit, then puts the branches back in place in case one of Agustin's agents is following us.

"I thought you could only revive the dead for a few minutes," I whisper, glancing back at the hidden pit as Roman leads us onward.

"You can technically keep them around for longer," he replies in a low voice. "But the longer the undead remain that way, the less of who they were in life lingers. Their personality, their *soul*, fades away, and they turn into what you saw in the pit. Ghouls, with their human needs warped.

Humans need food, sleep, and companionship. A ghoul can't sleep, and they lose the ability to understand companionship, and so the hunger is all that's left to them. It takes them over, and they become zombies, essentially."

"Holy shit." Cam's eyebrows shoot up, and I can see him scanning the ground around us, as if he's waiting for a decaying hand to burst up from the earth. "That's dark."

Roman shrugs. "Necromancy is... complicated. The longer a person has been dead, the harder it is to bring them back properly. Their soul begins passing on, and if too much time has gone by, I can't recall it. In my line of work with Liam, we often reanimated bodies of people who had a connection to a crime or murder—sometimes even the murder victims themselves. But if we got to them too late, it was much more difficult to get useful information out of them."

I cast a glance at Roman, taking in his slightly hooked nose, black hair, and strong jaw. His expression is serious and focused, and even as he speaks, I can tell his senses are totally alert, scanning for traps.

He's a font of information about magical technique and control, but I rarely hear him talk about his own powers—not just the death touch, but any of them. I think it's because death related magic tends to be looked at with more fear than other Unpredictable powers, and he probably got tired of people shooting him suspicious glances. The fact that he's willing to talk about it now says a lot about how much trust has developed among the five of us. Not only between me and him, but between all the men too.

I like that.

No, I love it.

We all fall silent again as Roman leads us deeper into the woods. There are some more pit traps, and magical traps, trip wires, sigils carved into trees, a bear trap... thank God Roman knows what he's doing here because if not, we'd all have lost a limb or something at some point.

At last, we reach a small clearing with a squat little cabin and an even tinier barn behind it. Huh. These structures both look pretty cramped. Good enough for one person, I suppose, but I don't know how the rest of us are going to fit here for the next however long. I really hope we don't end up having to camp. I kind of hate camping.

Roman signals with a fist in the air again, and we all stop right at the edge of the clearing.

I can't see them, but after my time at Griffin and then the holding facility, I recognize the feel of them: protective wards. These feel stronger than the ones around Griffin though, even after they beefed up security around the campus.

"You can come out," Roman calls. "We know you're here, Liam."

An older man, probably in his sixties, steps forward out of what looks like thin air, and I practically jump. My heart slams in my chest, and my headache, which had started to fade as we trekked through the woods, throbs dully to life again as blood rushes in my ears.

His sudden appearance caught me by surprise, but I quickly realize he must've been using an invisibility charm or enchantment on himself. He's rugged, with a braided white beard, and a long scar down his cheek, possibly from a sharp claw. His shoulders are broad and muscled, and I'm ninety percent sure he could kick my ass if he felt like it—which is saying something, since I'm a damn good hand-to-hand fighter. He's got a tall staff in his hands, held out in front of him like a weapon. He actually looks like he was a heartbreaker back in his day, and even now, a kind of rugged handsomeness still clings to him.

Clearly, this is Liam, and judging by the pissed-off look on his face, he's ready to take on all uninvited guests. If the traps, wards, and trip wires didn't get us, he'll damn sure finish the job himself.

Then his gaze alights on Roman.

He stops, stares, then sets his staff down, and I watch his expression transform from angry to surprised and delighted.

"You idiot!" Liam says, in a tone of such fatherly fondness that my heart skips a beat on Roman's behalf. I'd give anything to have someone talk to me in that tone of voice—the way I always imagined my father would speak to me.

The older mage strides over, waving his hands about like a madman, and I feel the magical wards dissipate. "You could've lost an arm or a leg back there! What the devil are you doing here, boy?"

I hear Cam snort with amusement, and Dmitri looks shocked that anyone would dare to call Roman—the oldest and most responsible of us, someone even Hardwick and the other professors at Griffin look up to and respect—something like "boy".

But Roman grins, one of his very rare full-on smiles, and walks forward to meet Liam. The two men hug tightly, clapping each other on the back,

and then Roman steps away and turns, gesturing to us.

“Everyone, this is Liam.”

“Yeah,” Cam says, his gaze flicking back and forth between the two of them as a grin tugs at his lips. “No shit.”

CHAPTER 15

Liam shakes each of our hands as Roman introduces us. He squints at us as he does so, taking us in, and I feel like I'm being put under a microscope.

"Come inside," he tells us gruffly, turning on his heel and gesturing for us to follow him. I stare at the cabin as we walk toward it, wondering how the hell we're all going to actually *fit* inside.

Then we step through the front door, and my jaw drops open.

Of course. A pocket dimension.

Liam's had time to set up all these elaborate traps around the place, of course he's had time to create a pocket dimension to hold everything he could possibly want inside of a small, unobtrusive cabin. There are indoor pens with some animals held inside, a big dining hall, and a massive upstairs loft for sleeping in.

"Why do you have all this room for visitors when you don't ever have anyone over?" Justin asks, craning his neck to take in the wide space.

It's a fair question, in my opinion.

"I like to be prepared." Liam shrugs, running a hand over his white hair. "Never know when the apocalypse is going to finally happen..."

Roman rolls his eyes fondly.

"...and you'll need to house people off the grid," the older man finishes. He looks over at us shrewdly before cutting his gaze back to Roman. "And you're all proving my point that I was right to do so. What's going on out there that has you bringing all these pipsqueaks to me?"

Cam and Dmitri look highly offended at the use of the term "pipsqueak". Justin looks resigned, like he's used to people defining him

that way, and Asher shrugs as if to say, *hey, fair assessment*.

And I guess, in a way, it is. Liam's probably seen and done more crazy shit in his lifetime than any of us, although Roman's gotta be a close second.

Roman sighs and gestures for us to sit in what seems to be the living room area, where a bunch of big couches are gathered. As I look around, I notice that there's not a speck of technology in the place. I don't see any laptops or computers, no television, no phones. There's electricity, but it's just being used for kitchen appliances and lamps.

No wonder Liam's somehow managed to not get the memo that our society is being taken over by an insane megalomaniac.

Roman fills Liam in, with the rest of us occasionally interjecting to explain some other details or parts Roman missed. We end up going a bit deeper into the entire history of our struggle against Agustin, from our first run-in with Raul all the way up to the day we tracked him down at his house in the suburbs where he nearly murdered Roman. Liam sits quietly and listens throughout the entire thing.

"And now he's found his way into Elliot's mind," Roman says. His voice is hard and clipped, almost pained—as if he'd rather rip out his own vocal cords than say those words. "She needs to learn how to block him out, and you're the best person I know of to help her do that."

"I've been keeping him out for the time being," Asher adds. "But I can't be with her all the time."

"No, you can't be," Liam agrees. He eyes me carefully, and I feel like a bug under a microscope again. "Well. I've got the training barn still up and ready. We can work on your mirroring power while we're at it. Sounds like you could use some help with that too."

"Will you help us fight against Agustin?" Maddy asks, leaning forward eagerly. Her blue eyes are shining, her eyebrows slightly raised, and I'm glad she was the one to ask. She's so earnest and sweet it makes her incredibly hard to say no to.

Believe me. I've tried.

Liam makes a rumbling sound in the back of his throat, pursing his lip. "I've learned it's best for me not to meddle in things. I told the High Circuit I was going into retirement and I meant it. I like it out here by myself, in the peace and quiet. Training your sister here is enough for me—my

contribution to the cause. You all seem strong and capable, and Roman was my best student. I know you'll all be fine on your own."

Fuck.

Well, I can't exactly *make* him go with us, even if the kind of guy who made all these traps, and a pocket dimension, and trained Roman is clearly the kind of guy we need on our side in the final fight against Agustin.

Roman didn't sit when we did, choosing to stand behind the couch instead as we explained our situation to Liam. When I tilt my head to look up at him, I see a disappointed look flash across his features, but he smothers it after a split second and settles his features back into a neutral expression. He hides it well, but I know he's disappointed that Liam doesn't want to fight with us.

I reach up and take his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

He squeezes back, smiling down at me softly.

When I look back, I can see the white-haired man looking at us with a curious expression on his face. It's not suspicion, it's more like he's seeing a new way of doing a math problem that he'd never considered before.

"You can all sleep in the loft," Liam says, standing up. "You look dead on your feet. Elliot and I will start her training later in the morning when it's not the ass crack of dawn."

We all troop upstairs to the loft, where there are several small beds laid out. As reclusive as Liam claims to be, I wonder if there's a part of him that still does crave a connection to society—and if that's why his hidden compound in the woods is so surprisingly equipped to accommodate visitors.

After I hug Maddy goodnight and kiss each of the other three men, I crawl onto one of the beds with Asher. There's just enough room for the two of us, and he curls around me, slinging an arm over me protectively. He'll stay awake, continuing to block my mind while I sleep, and then he'll rest while I'm training. It's not an ideal situation, but it's what we've got to work with.

Safe in Asher's embrace, I fall into an uneasy sleep.

And I don't dream of anything at all.



slept through a good portion of the car ride up here, and that, coupled with a few hours of sleep in an actual bed, does wonders for my mental and emotional state. When I wake up again in the late morning, my head doesn't hurt anymore, and I actually feel pretty refreshed.

Which is good. Because I have a feeling training with Liam isn't going to be easy. He doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who pulls his punches.

I roll over in Asher's arms so we're face-to-face and find his lips with mine, running my fingers through his slightly shaggy brown hair. Then I press little kisses to the corners of his mouth before pulling away.

"Thank you. Get some sleep, okay? I love you."

He nods, his eyelids already dropping closed as I stand up. By the time I reach the stairs to head down to the main level, he's fast asleep.

While Asher catches up on rest and the others get settled in at our temporary home base, Liam takes me to the barn. Like his cabin, it's much bigger on the inside than on the outside. It looks like it could be a training school for ninjas if he was interested in starting up a little side business.

"There are so many protective wards woven into the wood I used to build this barn that an army couldn't take it down," he tells me with a note of pride in his voice. "So don't worry about unleashing your power in here. Or unleashing your power on me. I can handle it."

"What if Agustin takes me over?" I doubt even Liam, tough as he is, can handle Agustin channeled through me at full strength.

Liam laughs. "Agustin can't get to you in here. Part of the wards on the barn. Nobody can use mind powers to penetrate in here."

He raps on one of the wooden beams with his knuckles. "This is where I trained Roman. He was summoning demons right and left. None of those demons ever got out of this barn. Although they sure as hell tried."

That helps me to feel a little more relaxed. "All right."

"Good. Then let's begin."

I was a third-year at Griffin before the school got shut down, so I have a solid understanding of how to control my magic, and I thought I'd gotten pretty good at it. Roman trained me and all of my classmates in magical control—that's his specialty as our professor.

But from the first second I start working with Liam, it becomes glaringly apparent to me just how much more I have to learn.

"Roman's given you the basics, and you've got a good start." The grizzled man nods approvingly, then adds, "But you've got a long way to

go.” He narrows his intense hazel eyes at me. “I’m not going to go easy on you.”

Yeah, I thought not.

“I can take it,” I tell him. Not because I’m super tough or anything like that, but because I honestly don’t have a choice. I *have* to be able to take this, I have to be able to fight Agustin. Failure just isn’t possible, not when it might mean the death of not just everyone I love but the death of hundreds or thousands of other innocents. If Agustin gets ahold of me...

It doesn’t even bear thinking about.

Liam gives me an odd look. “You know, I really think you can.”

That’s about the closest he gets to praise all afternoon.

For the next several hours, we work on focusing my powers more acutely, on repressing them when I don’t want them, on accessing them faster when I *do* want them, on fine-tuning my mirroring abilities so that I can quickly pluck the power I want from the right person. Liam’s harsh on me, but not unkind. Just really, really sure about what he wants me to do and certain that I can do it.

His unwavering confidence that I can do what he asks helps me push myself and work hard to meet every one of the challenges he throws at me. I feel so exhausted by the time we’re through that I think my legs have turned into jelly.

Liam lets me stop to get some water, and I gulp it down like I’ve been in the Sahara for a week.

“You’ve made some progress,” he tells me, tugging at his braided beard. “You catch on quickly.”

I manage a weak thumbs up. “Yay.”

He chuckles. “You’ve got a hell of a sense of humor. Reminds me of Roman’s.”

“Was it the sarcasm or the deadpan that reminded you of him?” I shoot back.

That draws a proper laugh out of him, and his eyes glitter when he looks at me again. “You’re good for him, you know?”

“Oh?” I stop guzzling water for a second. I don’t want to drink too much, too quickly—that’ll only give me a stomach ache. “You’ve just met us.”

“Yes, true, but I can see how you two are together. In all the time I’ve known him, Roman’s kept everyone at arm’s length. Even me, in some

ways, poor kid. Not that I was always the cuddliest guy to grow up with as a mentor.” Liam takes a drink of water himself from his own bottle. “Roman’s always tried to be an adult. The strong one. The capable one. The guy who’s got it all together. But he’s soft with you. He reaches out for you instead of waiting for you to come to him.”

“I was... not so great at the whole relationship thing,” I admit, grimacing. “I had a lot of walls up. I didn’t want to admit I had feelings for him or that we could be something more.”

“Maybe that was what Roman needed.” He caps his water bottle and wipes the back of his hand over his mouth, squinting at me. “Someone who was more closed off than he was, someone who forced him to have to reach out and open himself up so that they’d trust him in return.”

I freeze midway through putting the cap on my own water bottle. *Huh. I hadn’t ever thought about it like that.*

Tamlin warned me that Roman never fully let her in when the two of them dated, but I don’t think I ever stopped to examine why he would open up to me, and not her, and not to anyone else.

“It wasn’t a tactic,” I hurry to explain. “I mean, I know Roman keeps himself on a tight leash. And I know he’s a private person. But me dragging my feet at the beginning wasn’t some strategy to get him to try harder or anything. It was just me being an idiot. For a long time, I refused to think about the idea of an ‘us’ at all. He did the reaching out. And I know now that it was hard for him, but he was so patient with me. So I hope I’m returning the favor, and that I’m giving him what he needs.”

I don’t say this part out loud, because I don’t know what Liam’s picked up on regarding the other three men and myself, but I suspect that’s part of what’s helped Roman too, now that I think about it. He doesn’t have to always be the one to open up to me or to support me one hundred percent. In times when he needs to step back, there are three other people there to pick up the slack and be there for me.

And more and more, I think he’s starting to realize that the other guys can be there for *him* too.

“I’m not tryin’ to get all sentimental,” Liam says. “Hell, I’m the least romantic son of a bitch you’ll ever meet. But the fact that Roman brought you out here to me? That says more than anything else ever could. He knows I like my peace. Even for some asshole like Agustin, he wouldn’t be

bothering me. He's not here because some idiot is trying to take over our society. He's here because you're in danger."

His words hit me right in the chest.

They make my heart swell, make it feel so big my rib cage can't possibly contain it.

He's here for me.

CHAPTER 16

As soon as Liam decides that we're finished for the day, I go to find Roman. The grizzled necromancer brings Asher into the barn to talk with him about blocking Agustin and using his mind manipulation powers more effectively to keep the megalomaniac mage out of my head. Maddy and Justin are cuddling and being generally adorable out on the back porch, which overlooks a small vegetable garden. Cam and Dmitri are in the front yard, experimenting with a few offensive charms Liam had stored away.

Roman is upstairs in the loft, sitting in a large easy chair that faces away from the stairs. He's leaning an elbow on one arm of the chair, forehead resting on the heel of his hand, and when I reach the top step, I see him rub his hand down his face in a tired gesture. His phone is sitting nearby, and I'm guessing he was just trying to contact Hardwick or someone. Liam doesn't have a cell tower or anything here, and he's blocked any attempts at surveillance coming in, so Roman probably had to do some real fancy magical footwork to get a cell signal out.

"Hey," I say softly, so I don't startle him as I approach.

Roman glances up as I come around the chair to face him and starts to get to his feet. "Hey, how's—"

Before he can stand, I crawl onto his lap, straddling him as I wrap my arms around his neck and hug him tightly. He jerks slightly in surprise, but his arms go around me too, hugging me back.

"What's up, Reckless? Is everything all right?"

I don't even know how to say all that I'm feeling, so I don't try to stumble my way through an explanation. I just kiss him.

His grip on me tightens, and he kisses me back. I can still feel the lingering confusion in him, the uncertainty about where this is coming from, but it doesn't stop him from responding to my touch.

The masculine, leather and whiskey scent of him seems to saturate the air around us, filling my senses with Roman. I press myself closer to him, already feeling him harden against me as we both give in to the connection that flared between us the first time we ever met and has only grown stronger over time. A deep, bone deep, *soul* deep craving.

It was almost like my body knew, that night we met at The Den, that this man was perfect for me.

I've never really believed in fate or destiny. But I do believe in luck.

And I'm so goddamn lucky this man loves me.

His warm, firm lips move against mine, and when he dips his head to trail them over my neck, his stubble scratches the sensitive skin, making pleasurable goose bumps rise up. My fingers find his hair, threading through the soft, thick strands as I tilt my head, arching my back to offer up more of myself to his touch.

The loft has no door. It's open to the living room below, connected to it by a staircase on one side of the room. Everyone at Liam's compound is busy doing other things, so no one is downstairs, and they couldn't really see us at this angle even if they were. But we're not exactly in the most private spot.

Still, when has that ever stopped me and Roman?

He nips at the place where my shoulder meets my neck, and my clit throbs as my hands clutch his head harder.

God, I want him. I want to show him how good he makes me feel, how happy I am to be with him.

Tightening my grip on his silky black hair, I haul his face back up to mine and kiss him until I'm gasping for breath. When I finally pull away, I'm sure my cheeks are flushed, and Roman's hair is perfectly mussed. I like him like this. I like to make him come undone a little.

And that's exactly what I'm going to do.

It may be a little reckless, but hey, I gotta make sure I keep living up to the nickname he gave me, right?

Sliding off his lap, I stand in front of him, still holding his gaze with mine. He watches me carefully, his expression intense and unreadable as I drop to my knees in front of him. I press his legs open a little wider and slip

between them, running my hands up and down his thighs, using my nails to scrape gently over the fabric of his pants. His legs tense beneath my touch, the firm muscles becoming rock hard as his eyes shift, the vivid blue deepening and the sparks of silver glinting like stars in a night sky.

“Reckless...” he murmurs, his voice rough as he runs a knuckle over my cheek.

I expect him to tell me we shouldn't do this, to at least put up some resistance before he caves to his desire. But he doesn't. He doesn't try to stop me at all as I reach for the button of his pants and then work his fly down. I shove the fabric down a little and then reach inside his boxer briefs, palming his cock.

He lets out a noise somewhere between a growl and a groan, shifting his hips upward into my touch, and it spurs me on. I pull him out, adjusting his clothes just enough to give me access to what I need, then I wrap my fingers around the base of his shaft.

Roman has a beautiful fucking cock, and maybe it's weird to say that, but it's true. It's long and thick, a little darker than the rest of his skin, and softer than silk. It's a damn work of art, and the fact that he knows how to use it only makes it that much better. I run my hand over it, my touch teasing and light, and Roman grunts again.

“Put your mouth on me.”

The words are quiet and gruff. I can hear the strain in his voice already, and I fucking love it.

And he doesn't have to tell me twice. I lick at the broad head of his cock, then wrap my lips around it and swirl my tongue over the smooth skin. I can taste the salty tang of precum, and I hollow my cheeks as I bob my head up and down in a slow and steady rhythm, trying to take a little more of him each time.

Roman's thigh muscles shift under my hands, and I know it's taking all of his restraint to stay still, to hold himself back from thrusting up into my mouth.

“Fucking hell, Reckless. What are you doing to me?”

Well, if he hasn't figured that out yet, I guess I better try a little harder.

Instead of answering him with words, I attack him with my mouth, coating him with saliva as I work up and down his cock, running my tongue along the pulsing vein until I hear his breath catch.

One of his hands fists my hair, but instead of using the grip to control my movements, it seems almost like he's using it to anchor himself, to survive what I'm doing to him. I grin around his shaft, then release it for a second to glance up at him through my lashes.

The look on his face is both tender and fierce, soft and dominant all at once, and it makes my core clench and my clit throb in time to my heavily pounding heart. I'm tempted to put my hand between my legs and take care of the growing ache building there, but I'm enjoying driving Roman crazy too much. I want to focus on him entirely.

Still holding his gaze, I flutter my tongue across the tip of his cock and watch as his nostrils flare. When I draw him into my mouth again, he throws his head back, the muscles of his neck standing out as he bucks his hips.

"Fuck. Oh, fuck."

My hand joins my mouth, working together to cover his entire length as I bob my head up and down quickly, sucking and licking. I can feel him thicken inside me as he lets out a stream of low, guttural curses. His hand leaves my hair, and he grips the arms of the chair as his thighs tighten around me, trapping me between them.

When he comes, I feel it in his whole body. His cock pulses and jerks, his stomach contracts, and his hips rise up to meet me as I swallow the salty cum that hits the back of my throat. His orgasm seems to go on forever, and I keep swallowing around him until I'm sure I've gotten every drop.

The built-up tension drains from him completely, and feeling him relax beneath my touch like this is one of my favorite things in the world.

Drawing back, I let his cock slip out of my mouth. It juts out from his body, hardly softened at all. Heat pools in my lower belly, and my clit still aches—but watching Roman come undone was enough for me.

I rock back on my heels and stand up, and when I lean forward to press a kiss to his lips, he meets me greedily, sweeping his tongue inside my mouth with such skill that my knees actually go a little weak. I give him a satisfied smile as we break apart.

He shakes his head, still looking a little bemused. "What was that for?"

"Just wanted to show you how much you mean to me," I murmur.

I kiss him once more and then move to step away. But before I can make it far, his hand whips out and grabs my wrist, stopping me.

“Uh uh, Reckless.” Heat and dominance flash in his eyes, and his voice is low. “You think you can just suck my cock like that and then walk away?”

“Well, yeah.” I arch an eyebrow, smirking at him.

His grip on my wrist tightens a little, and before I know what’s happening, he hauls me back down onto his lap. My knees end up on either side of him, straddling his waist again as his lips curl up into a slow, hungry smile.

“I don’t think so.” He shoves his hand down the front of my stretchy workout pants, cupping my pussy before sliding one large finger inside me. “My girl needs to come.”

Oh, fuck. I think I just did.

As if he can read my thoughts, the ravenous smile on his face widens, and he slips another finger inside me, grinding the heel of his hand against my clit as he fucks me with two thick fingers.

I got myself so worked up giving him a blowjob that I’m already close to the finish line, and I’m so wet I can feel myself coating his hand as he works me toward an earth-shattering climax.

My breath is coming in sharp gasps, my heart pounding like it’s trying to escape my chest. I imagine his thick cock stretching my inner walls as he plunges his fingers inside me, and when he presses his lips to my ear and growls, “Come for me, Reckless,” I do.

I jerk in his arms, dropping my head and pressing my body flush against him, trapping his hand between us as pleasure crashes through my body.

“God, Roman!”

He barely has room to move his hand anymore, but he works the heel in rough circles over my sensitive bud, drawing out my orgasm until I’m as limp, sated, and relaxed as he was.

I guess I really should’ve known I couldn’t “suck cock and dash” with him. Because Roman takes care of me. Always.

We stay like this for a long time, and even though I knew we’re tempting fate with every minute we linger—someone could still come up to the loft anytime, and even though we’re not naked, they wouldn’t have to work hard to figure out what we were just doing—I can’t quite bring myself to move.

Not yet.

CHAPTER 17

Over the next few days, Liam routinely kicks my ass.

Okay, that makes it sound like he's more of a hard-ass than he is. And he *is* a hard-ass, don't get me wrong. It's no wonder Roman's so damn tough, if he was raised by this guy. And Roman had Liam whipping him into shape from the time he was six or so.

I'm exhausted though. Not just physically—using magic feels like a damn workout—but mentally, just completely drained. At the end of the day I can barely eat dinner because I just want to sleep, although I'm so starving that I wolf down whatever's put in front of me.

But it's worth it—because I'm making progress.

We check in with Tamlin and Brodie using the magical jury-rigged setup that Roman's managed with some help from Justin, whose specialty is the combination of magic and technology. He's apparently designed some apps for magic users' phones.

We put Tamlin and Brodie on speaker and everyone gathers around. Even Liam listens in from the back of the room, although he pretends to be reading a book—but I know his attention is focused on us because his eyes aren't moving across the page, and he's been staring at the same spot in the book for five minutes.

"You wouldn't believe what Hardwick's been doing," Tamlin tells us, a mixture of pride and worry in her voice. "While we've all been trying to keep a low profile, recruiting others to join us in secret, he's been openly campaigning in support of Unpredictables, taking the spotlight."

"He needs to be careful." Roman's brows draw together, and he leans a little closer to the phone as if that will somehow get the message to

Hardwick, wherever he is. “That’s dangerous. He’s making himself a huge target for Agustin.”

“I’m sure he knows that.” Tamlin sighs. “I mean, how could he not? But Hardwick doesn’t give a fuck about that kind of thing right now. He’s on the warpath. Or, well, the warpath by Hardwick’s standards.”

“It’s working,” Brodie adds, his voice practically vibrating with energy. “He’s gathering more support for our community, reminding people that silence is complicity. People are starting to speak out because of him, you know? Non-Unpredictables, I mean.”

“I bet he’s making himself this much of a public target on purpose.” Asher stares at the phone thoughtfully, but I don’t think he’s really seeing it. “Not just because it’s the right thing to do. But because he wants Agustin to focus on him.”

“What would that accomplish?” Cam asks.

“It draws focus away from the one person he’s been targeting this whole time,” Ash explains. “Elliot.”

My stomach twists. *Fuck*. I don’t want Hardwick to put himself on the line for me like that. I don’t want to be the big hero, and I don’t want to be Agustin’s big target.

But it’s not up to me. I don’t have a choice in this. It just is what it is.

“Is he going to be okay?” I ask.

“We hope so,” Tamlin says. “We don’t know. Nothing’s certain right now. He might be making himself more of an obvious target, but it’s not like any of us are really safe right now.”

“Agustin sees you as a threat,” Roman says, glancing at me. “He wants you out of the way or he wants to use you. We can’t allow either of those things to happen. Hardwick is smart and experienced. I’m sure he’s being as safe as he can with this. But he’s also smart to be putting himself out there. You’re the weapon Agustin wants, and we can’t let him have you. So we have to keep you away from him. If Hardwick can draw Agustin’s fire, at least for a little while until we can get you properly trained and prepared, then we have a better chance of winning this thing.”

“But what if…” I shake my head, biting the inside of my cheek as my eyes burn. “I just want him to be okay.”

Hardwick’s more than just my dean at this point. He’s not just a school administrator. Same with all of my professors. Not that being a teacher or anything is a little thing, but they’re not only teachers now. They’re also

getting out there, taking an active role in all of this, putting their lives on the line to protect us and to stand up for what's right, for themselves and for others.

I'm really proud to know them. I never would have expected this from Hardwick, or any of my professors, when I first met them. I didn't know them that well then, and I only saw one side of them.

Now I'm seeing just how brave all of them are, and I feel honored to know them, honored and humbled that Hardwick especially is putting himself on the line for me. He and all the others could just say, "Fuck it, if Agustin wants to use her as a weapon, we need to destroy her first." Harsh, sure, but logical. They could say, "We're getting out of the way and looking out for number one," or they could say, "Let Agustin attack Elliot, and we'll work on destroying him in the meantime."

But no—he's putting himself out there, for me.

The next time I see him, I'm giving him a huge hug.

Our talk with Tamlin and Brodie does remind us, though, that we don't have a lot of time. It will only be a short period—maybe even days—until Agustin finds a way to shut Hardwick up for good.

Asher, Liam, and I talk and decide that I need to learn how to mirror Ash's powers. That will help me in keeping Agustin at bay, as much as the idea of having mind control over the people around me scares me.

"You can't be scared of it," Liam tells me gruffly as we set up later that day. We're in the training barn, and I'm sitting across from Asher, only a foot of space separating us. "And I'll be right here if shit hits the fan."

That's comforting, I suppose.

"Okay," Asher says, as I focus on him. "The thing about mind control and seeing into people's heads that people don't often think about is that it's a two-way street."

I shift a little from side to side, settling into a more comfortable position. "What do you mean?"

"People tend to think of it as a two-way mirror. That I'm the cop in the viewing room looking into your head, and you're the person in the interrogation room who can only see the mirror, see yourself. You can't see me. But that's not how it works. When I go into someone's mind, I'm opening a door, and anybody can step through that door on either side. I can step into your mind, but you can also step into mine. It'll probably be even easier for you with your mirroring powers."

My mind immediately flashes to the visions I had of Agustin's childhood when he invaded my mind back in San Francisco. As if he knows what I'm thinking—which, duh, he probably does—Asher nods.

"You saw a bit of that when you were able to see some of Agustin's past. I don't think that was entirely on purpose. When you first connect to someone else's mind, it's just this unfiltered flood of emotions and memories on both sides. My guess is that Agustin was so focused on trying to control you that he didn't really bother to worry about what you might be seeing in his mind on his end of things."

Ha. I take a tiny measure of satisfaction in that, although it doesn't make up for everything that happened after.

"So if someone were to come at you and try to control your mind," Asher continues, "you need to know how to shield yourself, but you can also learn how to get into their mind and see what's going on with them. Maybe you can't stop their control of your mind, but you might actually be able to fry the circuits in theirs. And that goes the other way around too—you need to remember to shield your mind so that they can't get into it while you're in theirs, taking them over."

Oof. That sounds like... a lot.

My concern must show on my face, because Asher smiles reassuringly. "It's okay. Let's start simple, all right? You try to get in my mind while I have no shields up. You have to tell me, out loud, what you saw me thinking about."

It takes me a few tries, narrowing my focus and opening my mind at the same time—and if you think that sounds like a contradiction, congratulations, you're one hundred percent right. I keep my eyes closed and work on mirroring Asher, reaching out, feeling for the spark that is his magic.

When I have Asher's power, it's like I'm aware of people on a whole new level. Like there's a sixth sense I now have. You know how when you're just walking down the street, you have a sense of the people around you, how far or close they are to you? This is sort of like that. I can sense the presence of people—another layer—like a glowing fire inside everyone.

Once I tap into that fire, reaching out with a simple thought—I can get into their minds. Feel what they feel, think what they think.

At first, Asher's not shielding himself at all, so I latch onto his thought easily: he's thinking about pancakes.

When I tell him that, he laughs. “Good. Let’s make it a little harder.”

He starts putting a few shields up, more and more layers, and one by one I start to take them down—to figure out how to get around them, to work my way in through the cracks. It takes a physical toll, draining me as much as an intense sparring session would, and I can’t even imagine how much power it must take for Asher to project his control into multiple people, or for Agustin to project himself into my mind from hundreds, maybe thousands of miles away.

It takes time, but I get better at it. And as I pick out the thoughts that he’s holding out for me like carrots, I start to get glimpses of other things too. Things I don’t know if he intends for me to see.

Or perhaps they’re thoughts he does want me to see, or at least is all right with me seeing, because they’re all things about me.

I get a flash of the first time Asher saw me, through his eyes. He’s sitting down at The Den the night I noticed them all come in. He looks up and sees me behind the bar—and my heart skips a beat.

I never realized this was how he saw me, even all that time ago. That he saw me as someone so... *lovely*.

That’s the odd thing about memories. They’re not objective. In my memories, I don’t necessarily see things how they actually were. They’re filtered through the lens of whatever I was feeling at the time.

And to Asher, I look wonderful.

I can feel the strange sense of wonder, the soft inhale in his thoughts, the *oh, hello, there you are*.

I can also feel him noticing Cam and Dmitri’s reactions. I can sense the way he thinks, *hmmm*. Contemplating.

We shift, and I don’t know if it’s deliberate or if it’s just a natural progression of Asher’s thoughts, but now it’s the two of us together, the first time we had sex. I remember that time fondly—of course I do—but it takes my breath away to know that Asher views it in this... sort of rosy glow in his mind. Not in a “perfectly lit romance movie” kind of way, but with so much fondness and love that it saturates everything like a color, something you can’t help but notice.

I don’t want to invade his privacy too much or make him uncomfortable, so I pull out, receding from his mind and going back into mine. That’s the thing about controlling or reading someone’s mind—it’s easy to lose track of yours in the process.

And that's when I realize—oh, *shit*.

I didn't leave my shields up.

Asher gives me a gentle smile, and I know he knows what I just realized. "It's hard to do two things at once, mentally," he acknowledges.

"So you saw inside my mind."

Asher nods. "It was wide open. I didn't go too far in, just kind of let memories or whatever else you were thinking about brush against me."

That means he probably saw me thinking about my memory of our first meeting and our first time. My face heats up, but I'm not blushing in an embarrassed sort of way. Just in a... pleased way. I honestly don't mind that Asher's in my mind, seeing those things.

We're getting to know each other in a really intimate way right now, and I like that. It's not something most couples get to do, and I know I wouldn't want him in my mind all the time, but for something like this? Yeah. I like it. It's nice.

"Okay, let's try this again," Asher says, taking my hands and lacing our fingers together. "Remember your shields this time. I'm going to think of a specific memory I want you to try to get from me, and you have to keep me from getting to a specific memory of yours, sound good?"

I nod. I can handle this.

I think.

Turns out, I can't handle it, at least not at first. It takes a few tries. But Asher is patient, and Liam occasionally yells advice from where he's lounging on a large chair in the corner reading *Better Homes and Gardens*.

By the time the sun starts to set, I'm finally getting the hang of it. It's not to the point of being almost instinctive the way it is for Asher, who's had three years to hone his power, but it's something I'm feeling more comfortable with. Maybe even something I can go up against Agustin with.

A sudden thought strikes me as Asher, Liam, and I head back to the small house in the clearing, stopping me in my tracks.

Agustin. *Oh, fuck.*

Asher's been in my mind today, rooting around, and I haven't cared. Because it's Asher, and I trust him, and it's a new and welcome level of intimacy between us.

But Agustin has been in my head too. He's seen—God only knows what he's seen. What he knows about me now.

My skin crawls.

What has he seen?
What does he know?

CHAPTER 18

I try to shove that worry out of my mind. There's no point in freaking out about what Agustin might have seen. I'll just pretend he saw everything, and then I won't drive myself crazy wondering about it. And what could he see that he could use against me anyway? He already had a damn good clue about me and the men from when we fought in person. A quick background check on my name would tell him about my sister, my dead mom, and my dad.

And, uh, honestly—this is going to sound really harsh of me, but if he feels like kidnapping my dad, good fucking luck to Agustin. Dad's powerful and connected, and I don't stand around wishing he'd die in a fire, but I'm not going to worry about him either.

So, really, what could Agustin see? What could he know that he wouldn't have found out another way or has *already* found out? It's nothing for me to worry about. Nothing to panic over.

That's what I try to tell myself, anyway.

I don't say anything about this to the others. It's done, finished, what could they possibly do about it? Offer me therapy?

Instead I keep focusing on my training. Liam wants me to work with each of the men in turn to learn how to mimic their specific powers, because in the case of a fight, they'll be the ones who'll most likely be closest to me, so being able to pick up their powers and use them with some skill will be helpful.

Dmitri's up next, bright and early the following morning. Liam, who probably got filled in by Roman, elects to do some work with Justin and Maddy on their powers while I'm with Dmitri.

“Your reputation about not playing nice with others clearly precedes you,” I point out as we push open the doors of the training barn.

“I never said he couldn’t watch,” Dmitri grumbles.

“No, you just made it clear with the muttering and the glares that you don’t want him giving you advice on how to work your own power.”

Dmitri rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t contradict me.

“Let’s keep it simple,” he tells me, stepping into the middle of the large space. “Don’t try to use magic while you’re duplicated. We’ll split. Each one of you will spar each one of me.”

I’m good at sparring. I’ve gotten better and better at using my magic, but physical combat is the area where everything’s always come naturally to me. And Dmitri and I have always been the best sparring partners—we paired up every chance we got in Tamlin’s fight class, and honestly, it’s the main way that we flirt.

Every couple has that one weird thing, and that’s ours.

“Sounds easy enough.” I roll my neck and stretch my arms behind my back.

It doesn’t sound easy at all, actually. None of this does. But it’s a lot easier than trying to duplicate myself and then fight a bunch of different people using my magic. It could be worse.

I mirror Dmitri and split myself, which is... weird. It can be really disorienting, as I learned to my dismay when I was fighting Agustin with the guys in his basement lair. It’s like trying to watch five televisions at once—no, play five video games at once, since you’re not just trying to pay attention to the screens, you’re also trying to control them.

Dmitri raises an eyebrow, his dark eyes glinting. “You’re doing it wrong.”

“I literally haven’t even done anything yet, but thanks.”

“These aren’t just puppets for you to operate,” he explains. “That’s what I thought when I first started doing this. It’s an easy mistake to make. You think you have to control them constantly.”

He splits himself, and his doubles all drop into a fighting stance. “But they’re not puppets. They’re you. If you let go of your control, they’ll do their own thing. It’s like having a clone. They have your memories and your personality. If you want to give them orders, then give them. They’ll usually obey. But don’t try to be everywhere at once. You’ll just drive yourself crazy like that. Relax into it.”

I cock my head at him, pursing my lips. “If you say this is like fucking meditation...”

“Then I won’t say it,” he says, smirking.

Oh, that asshole. He’s lucky he’s hot.

“All right, wise guy.” I roll my eyes at him, then draw in a deep breath, reaching out for my duplicates with my senses. “I’ll try.”

Following his advice, I think just one thing at my doubles: *fight Dmitri*.

Sure enough, they all launch themselves forward, each lunging toward one of Dmitri’s doubles.

I, of course, take on the original.

Fighting like this is so bizarre. I can feel what my doubles are feeling, but it’s more like an echo of it. Like I can’t feel the stone dropping into the water, but I can feel the ripples. I’m vaguely aware of them—one’s punching, another’s doing a flip to evade a hold—but it’s similar to the way I was aware of what people are doing in the rest of fight class when I used to spar with Dmitri. I’m able to put it in the background.

That’s kind of nice. I thought I’d have to somehow focus all of my attention on five separate things at once. When I tried that against Agustin, it led to things like one of my doubles crashing into a wall head first.

But this is a lot easier.

Except...

I can feel whatever my doubles are feeling, right? Like an echo. And that isn’t just when one of Dmitri’s doubles lands a good blow on one of my doubles. It includes their emotions. Their exhaustion, their frustration—

And their lust.

Like I said, sparring is sort of our form of foreplay. It’s how we flirt. Sparring in front of people like we did in Tamlin’s class became an exercise in restraint because the instinct to let it lead to something more—something very inappropriate to do in front of other people—was pretty damn strong.

Right now though, there’s no one around. So we can give in to those feelings.

I know Dmitri is feeling it too from the way he’s getting flushed, the way his eyes are shining, predatory, and the way a smirk is tugging at the corner of his lips. When he just wants to win a fight, he gets even more tense, his eyes narrowing in concentration, a snarl stuck in the back of his throat, his teeth bared.

This isn’t that. This is arousal.

I know I shouldn't do it—I'm trying to learn how to fight better with this power, after all—but I let Dmitri pin me.

He gets my hands up above my head, and he's straddling me, staring down at me, his chest heaving, and all around us our doubles are losing control, no longer in tightly ordered pairings but a full-on melee, and two of them sink down onto the floor, kissing passionately, then one of Dmitri's doubles gets a hand down the pants of my double and it's oddly hot to watch, and I can feel how she—me—we—are getting wet, moaning, breathing harder, so incredibly turned on.

A part of me kind of wants to watch the show, watch Dmitri fuck me in four different ways, make me scream four different times, but the rest of me just wants it to be the two of us. Not echoes, but real, immediate, right here.

I pull my doubles back into myself, and a second later Dmitri does the same.

I've barely even finished when his mouth crashes onto mine.

A rush of desire fills me, like an echo of everything my doubles were just feeling, as if there are five of me contained inside my one body, and they're kissing five Dmitris. As if the chemistry between us has increased exponentially.

Our teeth knock together as we kiss fiercely, neither one of us holding back from what we're feeling. Those days are long gone, and I think we both like to remind ourselves of that sometimes—that we no longer have any reason to dance around our feelings, to avoid or deny them.

His hands are all over me, squeezing and massaging my breasts through my shirt, sliding over my hips and ass, his touch possessive and demanding.

“Don't think this is getting you out of training, Princess,” he pants, abandoning my lips to bite and nip his way down my neck. “You still need to practice. I'm gonna fuck you till your knees are weak and then make you spar with me.”

Wetness floods my panties at his taunt, mostly because I have no doubt at all that's exactly what he'll do. Still, I can't have him getting cocky or anything, so I dig my fingernails into his back, grinning up at the ceiling as I tilt my head back.

“Yeah? Well, good. 'Cause this is just my warm-up.”

He laughs against the skin of my throat, and I swear I feel the vibrations of it all the way down to my clit.

Before I can say anything else, he spins me in his arms, pulling me flush against him with my back to his front. He's already hard from our sparring session, and he grinds his cock against my ass like a weapon, making me whimper breathlessly. He must like that, because he does it again, splaying one large hand across my stomach while the other dips beneath the neckline of my shirt, rolling my nipple between his fingers.

I hiss out a breath, digging my heels into the floor for more leverage as I press back into him, rubbing my entire body against his like a horny cat. He grunts, then uses his grip on me to keep me from falling as he walks forward, guiding us to the far side of the large room.

There's a pommel horse set up alongside several other pieces of training equipment, and Dmitri grabs my hands, keeping his body plastered to mine as he places my palms on the smooth surface of the leather, bending me over almost in half.

"Keep your hands there, Princess. Don't move them."

Goddammit, I love when he gets all growly and demanding. If I decided *not* to keep my hands on the pommel horse, there's not a lot he could do to make me—we've proved by now that we're pretty evenly matched when it comes to sparring—but I do what he says eagerly. Good things happen when I give growly Dmitri what he wants.

He hesitates for a second, as if testing to make sure I'll really stay put. Then he slides his hands slowly back up my arms, over my shoulders, and down my back, tracing the muscles along my spine. The movement is unhurried and deliberate, and although he's not even touching any of my best bits, tension ratchets up inside me with every inch.

When he reaches my lower back, his hands drift down to palm my ass, groping and squeezing as he makes a low noise of appreciation in his throat. My hands have turned into claws on the pommel horse as I struggle for the willpower to remain still under his ministrations. I want to spin around and grab him, to kiss him until I can't see straight as I slip my hands into his pants and—

A sharp slap to my right ass cheek makes me jump, more out of surprise than pain. The sting fades immediately as warmth floods in to take its place.

"Stay still, Princess. Do you think you can do that?"

Dmitri's voice is a low rumble, and I realize I must've unconsciously started to move as I thought about all the things I wanted to do to him.

“Yes,” I gasp, craning my neck to look at him over my shoulder as I flatten my hands on the pommel horse again.

He grins, the expression breathtakingly beautiful and wicked at the same time. “Good.”

The hands on my ass move up a little, hooking the waistbands of my pants and panties and dragging them down. He leaves them bunched up midway down my thighs, but it’s enough. Cool air hits my bare ass and pussy, and I shift my weight backward as much as I can without taking my hands off the pommel horse, trying to get closer to Dmitri.

He chuckles, running a finger over the curve of my ass. “Impatient, are we?”

“Maybe I just want to get back to training,” I shoot back, biting my lip to hide my grin.

I’m joking, but I do feel a momentary twinge of guilt that breaks through the haze of desire swimming in my mind. The magical world is on the precipice of disaster, and I’m about to fuck Dmitri in a barn. What does that say about my priorities?

But I’ve *been* working. I’ve been training. For hours and hours every day. Our fight against Agustin consumes my thoughts, both waking and sleeping, and not a single one of the people here with me could be accused of slacking off either.

Right now, I need this. I need to connect to Dmitri, to feel something *good* instead of the relentless fear and determination that drive me these days. And I know he wasn’t kidding about making me spar with him afterward, even if my legs feel like wet noodles.

So I push the guilt aside and let myself have this moment, shivering in anticipation when I hear the rustling of Dmitri’s clothes as he shoves his own pants down. He slides his cock up and down my slit, gathering my wetness and brushing it over my clit, making me groan.

Dmitri’s been known to tease me like a motherfucker—which I may secretly love—but today, he doesn’t. Just as I’m bracing myself to withstand his agonizing, drawn-out torture, the head of his cock slips inside me, and he surges forward.

My whole body rocks from the force of it, and I use my hands on the pommel horse to keep myself from falling over. Our voices mingle in the air as we both groan in satisfaction, and he drapes himself over my back again, pushing my ponytail over one shoulder as his lips find my ear.

“There’s no better place in the world than buried inside you, Princess,” he murmurs roughly. “I could die happy like this.”

A sudden stark fear makes my heart stop, and I turn my head to look at him, our faces so close our lips are almost brushing.

“Please don’t die.”

He freezes, his gaze locked on mine, his expression shifting. I know he’s thinking about it too—everything we have, and everything we’re each terrified to lose.

Then his hand comes up to grip my chin, holding me tightly as his gaze bounces between my eyes. I can feel his heart slamming against my back as he shakes his head.

“I’m not fucking planning on it.”

He claims my lips in a bruising kiss, and when he breaks away, he pulls out and drives back into me. His hands move down to grab my hips, holding me steady as he thrusts in deep, fucking me hard and fast. As if he’s trying to remind me he’s still here, to prove we’re both still alive.

Or maybe he’s just trying to make me forget everything else but this for a moment.

And I do.

My legs burn from keeping my balance as he pounds into me, and my focus narrows to just the feel of the worn leather beneath my palms, the feel of his fingers digging into my hips, the muffled noises from behind me, and the exquisite friction of Dmitri’s cock.

It goes on forever. My core clenches, and heat sweeps through my veins, but I don’t give in to the orgasm that’s trying to overtake my body. I’m not finished. I don’t want this to be over yet.

Dmitri obviously feels the same way. I can feel how close he is, but every time he reaches the edge, he changes his rhythm, delaying the inevitable for a few moments longer.

My palms are a little sweaty, and they keep slipping down the side of the pommel horse. Finally, Dmitri wraps his arms around my torso, pinning me to his chest and bringing me almost upright. It changes the angle of his penetration, and he bends his knees a little to keep thrusting into me, hitting a spot that makes sparks dance in front of my eyes.

“Oh. Shit.”

He gives a tortured groan, sliding one hand down to my clit. He barely touches me, but that’s all it takes. I clutch at his forearm, feeling the

muscles dance under my touch as his fingers circle wildly, and when I throw my head back and arch into him, he follows me over the edge into pure, mad bliss.

He pumps in and out of me a few more times, eliciting tremors of aftershocks from both of us. Then he kisses my neck and slowly withdraws his cock.

“What do you say, Princess?” he growls softly. “Are you all warmed up?”

“I’ll say.” I chuckle under my breath, turning my head dazedly to kiss him. “And ready to kick your ass.”

He nips at my bottom lip, his dark eyes gleaming. “Right back at you.”

We get ourselves cleaned up and tug our clothes back into place, and then Dmitri makes good on his promise.

My legs feel like limp noodles.

But we train hard anyway.

CHAPTER 19

That evening, we get some bad news.

Well, there's good news too, from Tamlin and Brodie. The students and teachers have spread out across the country, some using portals and some using non-magical transportation, and they're reaching out to more and more Unpredictables. That's good, and I have to remember that. I have to cling to that.

What isn't good is that Agustin sent another mini-army to the housing facility.

It took them a while to break down the wards, or so Tamlin tells us, but once they did, they saw right away that it was empty.

Now Agustin knows the truth. He knows that it's not just myself and my men who are out of the facility—that it's all of us. He's going to be doing whatever he can to track us down now.

Fuck.

"He must know that we're working against him as an organized group," Roman says as we're finishing up dinner.

"Somewhat organized," Dmitri grumbles, jabbing his fork into a piece of potato.

"We've got a plan and we're utilizing it." Asher waves a hand. "We're not just scattered to the winds. If we were, then Hardwick wouldn't be gaining so much steam. Agustin's an asshole, but he's not a total idiot, or he wouldn't have gotten this far in the first place."

"So, what do we do?" Cam glances around the table.

"Keep getting Elliot ready," Roman says. "She's our best chance."

"Surely your death touch is our best chance," I point out.

He shakes his head. “Not if I can’t get close to him. You saw in the basement, we’re evenly matched in our demonic control powers, and I’d bet we’re just as even on every other level. But you can mirror him. Even if we did decide to go after him with my death touch, we’d need you to weaken him enough or distract him enough that I could get through.”

That’s fair.

“This all means jack shit,” Liam says, rising to his feet with a loud scrape of his chair, “unless we get her ready in time. So let’s go.” He jerks his chin at Maddy and Justin. “You’re up, buttercups.”

“I would really prefer not to beat up my sister,” I say as we all stand too.

“I’ll be fine, Ellie.” Maddy laughs. “I’ve got two and a half years under my belt, and so does Justin. I think we’ll be okay.”

“All right,” I tell her, but as we head out to the barn, I promise myself I’ll go easy on her to start.

That turns out to be a fucking mistake.

Mads easily kicks my ass the first go-around, knocking me flat with a tidal wave and then dangling me upside-down by my ankle using a snake of water.

“Seriously, Ellie?” She puts her hands on her hips. “You’re not even trying.”

“You’re right,” I tell her. “I’m not.”

I mirror her and send a wave of water right back at her, soaking her and breaking her concentration, which sends me falling to the floor. I roll just in time to avoid landing hard—and painfully—on my elbow and get to my feet.

Mads grins at me, wearing an expression I’m not sure I’ve ever seen on her face before.

“All right.” She raises her hands again, wagging her fingers. “Bring it.”

After that, it gets a lot more fun and a lot tougher. Maddy’s not pulling any punches, and I’m seriously impressed. I never would’ve thought of my little sister as a fighter like this. I guess I’ve been underestimating her.

She holds her own against me, and then Liam brings Justin in so that I can battle two elementalists at once. It’s more difficult, but after another full day of practice, I start to get better at that as well. I work on switching off between Justin’s powers and Maddy’s powers, using one against the other, able to fully access their powers and manipulate the elements the way that they do.

We've been at Liam's compound for almost a week, and the training has been grueling and nonstop. But it really is working. A new sort of confidence fills me, a comfortability with my magic that I never quite managed to achieve even in two and a half years at Griffin Academy. It's like when I used my sonic boom in the fight at the Unpredictable holding facility. I feel powerful, in control, like I'm the eye of a storm.

I love it.

It's nothing like when Agustin took me over. That terrified me and made my powers feel alien and wrong, like I wasn't the center of the storm or controlling it—but like I *was* the storm, out of control and destructive.

This feels so much better.

I've reached a point where I can almost—not quite, but *almost*—mirror both powers at once. I can switch off now, very quickly, and I can handle Liam, Justin, and Maddy all at once, but I can't *mirror* them all at the same time. Not yet.

Liam has confidence that I'll be able to. "You've got it," he promises me. "You'll be fine."

I'm banged up as hell by the end of our session, but I feel good as Mads, Justin, and I walk back toward the house. I'm worn out, but I don't care—I finally feel like my mirroring power is something I can reliably use in battle, not something I have to scramble to use, something that's just out of my grasp.

This whole thing has been good for the men too. We've gotten to spend a lot of time together, and when I've been busy training, they've gotten to be with each other. I think it's good, especially for Dmitri and Roman, to keep having this reinforced: this idea of family.

We're a family.

And we'll always have each other's backs.

Liam has told us tons of embarrassing stories about Roman every night at dinner, which is amazing. Roman always blushes furiously and ducks his head while the rest of us die of laughter. The darkly handsome man is always so put together, so competent, and he's kind of our leader, so to hear stories about him as a teenager who would make trouble or a kid who would pull pranks, sass back to Circuit officers, or try to break into a building to catch a bad guy and then get stuck halfway through the window...

It's absolutely hilarious.

I think all of this has been good for Maddy too. Not just for her to be with me, although I do love that. These past couple of years I haven't gotten nearly enough time with her, and I'm glad we're getting that now, even in the midst of all this bullshit.

But it's been good for her and Justin too.

I've seen them doing little things like looking at each other and blushing. Holding hands. Leaning into each other's space, smiling at each other, sitting next to each other.

After our all-day training session, I come out of my shower and find the two of them curled up on the couch. Soft voices upstairs tell me that the men are doing something up there, and Liam stayed out in the training barn to take care of some things, so there's nobody else down here. It's just Maddy and Justin in the large living room.

Maddy's curled into him, her head on his shoulder, her knees tucked up on the cushion. Justin's arm is around her, and he's got his cheek resting on the top of her head, against her hair, and they're whispering together. Occasionally Maddy will turn her head to kiss his neck, or Justin will kiss her hair, and it's just... fucking adorable.

They seem so happy and content. It's what I've always wanted for her, although I admit I didn't think too much about her romantic prospects. But in general, I want her to be happy like this. And if Justin makes her this happy, if he makes her this content, then I'm glad he's around.

I don't say hello—I don't want to ruin their moment.

So I just slip quietly upstairs to change and kiss each of my men.



I've decided I definitely approve of Justin, and I make sure to tell Maddy so the next day as we walk the perimeter of the clearing where Liam's set up his home.

I'm feeling a little stir crazy, honestly, as much as I love the training. At Roman's place, there were all these great paths through the woods that we could take, and we could drive into town if we wanted. Here, we're just stuck on the compound. We can't stay in this place forever, and we'll need to make a move on Agustin soon—but in the meantime, we're stuck here.

So Mads and I go for a short walk, careful to avoid the traps, which Liam's taught us how to recognize so we won't get caught in one of them.

Asher trails a short distance behind us. Unless I'm in the training barn, he's always close by, although now, instead of him shielding my mind, I'm mirroring his power to put up the shields myself.

"I'm happy for you," I tell my sister.

She jumps slightly, like I've startled her. "Are you—you're sure?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" I glance over at her. "Is it crazy that I want you to be happy?"

"No, no, of course I know that. But... I kind of got the impression that you'd never think anybody I ever dated was good enough for me."

"Well, I'm not saying he's good enough for you," I joke. "I'm saying that he makes you happy, and I'm glad of that. That's all we can ask for, right? If we went around wondering if so-and-so really deserved so-and-so, we'd go crazy. If the person makes you happy, and you make them happy, then that's what counts."

Her eyes twinkle. "Careful, Ellie, that was almost romantic."

"I know, right?" Rolling my eyes, I shake my head. "I'm getting soft in my old age."

Maddy laughs. Then her expression grows serious as she turns to me. "He does make me happy though. Everything that's happened has clarified things for me. As soon as Agustin attacked and the video went live, I knew there was only one person besides you that I wanted by my side, that I wanted to have with me, so I went to find him and... it turned out he was busy looking for me. He'd realized the same thing."

She gives me a shy, giddy smile, like she just can't help herself. "After we, um, you know, said how we felt, I didn't know how to get to you, but I was determined to find a way, and he just up and volunteered his car and said he'd come with me. I didn't plan on asking him to come, since we still had school and all that, and I didn't want to make him disrupt his life. It wasn't his sister, you know? But he wanted to, wouldn't take no for an answer. He said he wanted to fight for what was right and he especially wanted to do that by my side."

Well, if that isn't the cutest most romantic fucking thing.

Of course, I would expect nothing less for Maddy. She's always loved romantic movies, and she loves the big gestures, the sweeping romance. I'm glad that she got to have this, that this is happening for her.

“And it’s been everything you’ve wanted it to be?” I ask.

She nods, blushing furiously. “He’s so sweet. And we can talk for hours. We do talk for hours, actually. And there were times driving out to you at the holding facility where we’d just sit in silence, and it wasn’t uncomfortable. It felt nice. Like we could just exist together, just *be* together.”

“That’s good.” I grin.

“I was worried you wouldn’t like him. I’m glad you do.”

“He seems to really care about you.” I nudge her shoulder. “As he should.”

“Thanks, Ellie.”

Maddy stops walking suddenly and hugs me, and I hold on to her, remembering a time when she was so much smaller than I was. Now she’s my height.

“I’m always going to be a little protective over you when it comes to shit like this,” I tell her. “But it’s your life and your choice, and I’m glad you’re happy. That’s definitely how it should be.”

We pull away, and Maddy’s smiling—

And then she screams.

The sound makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up as my muscles all tense for a fight. She yanks me down, and I feel a *whoosh* over my head as something strikes the air where I was just standing. I look up and see some kind of demonic creature above us, with wings made of smoke and claws, a head like a gargoyle, and a tail like a scorpion. It swoops through the air, and I realize it just dived down to try to snatch me up and missed.

“Elliot! Maddy!” Asher races toward us.

“What the fuck?” Maddy blurts, her mouth hanging open as she stares up at the sky.

“Agustin.” My voice is a growl. “Fuck. He must’ve summoned it and sent it. He figured out where we are somehow. Maybe he saw it in my mind, I don’t know.”

How he could’ve managed that through the protections on my psyche, I have no idea, but maybe he just did some simple logical deduction to find us. Or maybe these demons can track a specific person.

Whatever it is, we’re at the edge of Liam’s compound, the edge of his protective wards, where they’re weakest. Have the demons been circling all

this time, waiting for one of us to draw close enough to snatch?

The demon banks around just as Asher reaches us, preparing to swoop down again.

“Can you get its wings wet?” I ask Maddy.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Okay. You do that.” I ready my sonic boom, glancing over at Ash quickly. “Help me with the shields on my mind. Just in case.”

The last fucking thing I want is for Agustin to swoop in just as I’m about to unleash a powerful attack and make me turn it on my sister or my boyfriend.

Asher nods, and Maddy throws her hands out as the creature heads for us, emitting a ragged screech that sets my teeth on edge. My sister draws the moisture from the ground and the air around us, forming it into a wave that bears down on the creature from both sides, left and right, splashing over it.

The demon shrieks as it starts to fall out of the sky, trying uselessly to flap its wings. I wait until it gets low enough, and then I release my boom.

The powerful blast smacks into the demon, and it goes flying backward, colliding with a tree. It bounces off the thick tree trunk and lands on the ground with a thud, and Maddy immediately dumps more and more water on it.

I mirror her to do the same, drawing from a small stream that runs nearby and pouring water down on the monster as it splutters and claws and tries to escape. But its wings are too wet to function, and it clearly can’t handle so much water. I’m not sure if it’s drowning or melting, but either way, it’s definitely dying.

It’s not pleasant to watch, I’ll be honest. I don’t like killing something, even a demonic creature like this, and watching anything die panicked and in pain isn’t fun.

But then it’s all over, and the demon collapses into a putrid pile of sulfur and smoke.

Maddy looks at me and Asher, pale but grinning. “Wow. We did it!”

She holds her hand up for a high-five. I laugh and roll my eyes but high-five her back.

“That was badass. The three of us just stopped a demon!” she blurts, breathless and excited.

“The *two* of you,” Ash corrects, although I think he deserves plenty of credit for keeping my mental shield up while I summoned a sonic boom. He can’t use his mind powers on demons, since they’re literally from another realm, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t contribute.

Mads is still bouncing on the balls of her feet, practically vibrating with adrenaline. I’m about to tell her that this isn’t the kind of sister bonding I was expecting when we decided to go for a walk, but hey, I’ll take it, even if I’d rather not have any demons attacking us at all—

When her eyes go wide again.

I have just enough time to think *oh fuck*, and then I whirl around to blast the incoming demon, except this one is much closer than the last.

The claws are aimed right at my face, the beast already so close that I can smell the acrid scent of sulfur and smoke, but before it reaches me, Maddy shoves me down. The fierce claws miss me, only this time, the demon doesn’t swoop up into the air to reset for another dive. It keeps moving forward, and Maddy raises her arms to protect me or to blast it, I don’t even know which.

But it doesn’t matter.

She never gets the chance.

The demon snatches her, wrapping its talons around her shoulders and lifting her into the air.

A scream is torn out of my throat as I reach for her, running, with Asher right at my back. I jump, but I can’t grab her in time. Maddy’s screaming right back for me, sounding scared, like a child all over again, and I’m running and running but I can’t fucking reach her.

I can’t.

She’s gone.

CHAPTER 20

No. No, no, *no no no no no...*

I scream, except I can't hear myself screaming. I can feel it, in my throat, rubbing raw, but it's like all the sound has gone out of the world.

Not Maddy, not my baby sister. She's my only family, and I promised I'd always keep her safe, I *promised*.

Asher's arms wrap around me from behind, his touch the only thing that keeps me from flying apart. "We have to get the others, Elle," he whispers. "It's gone. The demon's gone. We can't catch it."

He's right. I know he's right. So even though a part of me wants to tear through the wilderness, gaze fixed on the sky as I just keep running, I don't. I let Asher guide me back toward the small house in the clearing, supporting most of my weight as my knees keep buckling.

As we near it, the front door opens and Cam rushes out. "Asher? Elliot?"

I must really look like shit if he's calling me by my real name. He runs up to me, grabbing me by the shoulders and tugging me from Asher's embrace. "Hey, hey, Elliot, what's wrong?"

Words are nearly impossible. I try to breathe, and the air seems to get stuck in my throat. I try a few more times and finally get something out. "Maddy," I manage. "Maddy—"

Cam looks behind me and seems to realize that Maddy isn't with us anymore. He pales. "Oh, shit. Is she caught in a trap? Did a..." He lowers his voice so Liam can't hear him use the annoying word. "...zombie get her?"

I shake my head. God, I want to cry—no, I’m already crying. I’m a goddamn mess, but I can’t be a mess, I have to be strong. I have to get Maddy back. He *took* her. He fucking took her. And I’m going to kill him for it.

“It was Agustin,” Asher says grimly, stepping up beside us. “He sent a demon, and it got Maddy. It carried her off.”

Cam’s eyes bug out of his head, and although he’s usually the most cheerful and upbeat of all my men, for a moment, a look of pure anger crosses his features. I recognize the emotion because it’s what’s boiling me alive from the inside out.

“Guys!” he yells as he starts to help me back into the house.

Everyone is already on their feet when we enter. When Maddy, Asher, and I left, Dmitri was sprawled out on the couch, napping, Justin was doing something with Liam, and Roman was reading a book upstairs in the loft, but I guess the sounds of my yells or the tone of Cam’s voice has made them realize something’s wrong.

“What happened?” Dmitri snarls, immediately heading for the front door, ready to take on all attackers.

“Maddy,” Asher says, his voice quiet. “Something got Maddy. Agustin, he took her.”

“What?!” Justin strides for the door too, hot on Dmitri’s heels, and Roman has to snatch him by the back of the shirt collar like he’s a disobedient puppy.

“Dmitri, get back here.” Roman’s voice is strained. “There’s no use, he’ll be long gone. We can’t lose you too.”

Dmitri stops in his tracks. He glares out at the woods, then slams the door shut.

Liam tugs on his beard, looking frustrated and tired. “What happened?”

I meet the grizzled man’s gaze. Cam still has his arm around me, and it’s the only thing keeping me grounded to the world.

“He sent a demon,” I say, trying to keep myself under control as I force the words out. “We thought it was just one, and we took it down, but there was another one we didn’t see. It dove out of the sky. It was aiming for me, but she pushed me down, and it got her—it got Maddy, he has her—he has *Maddy*—”

I start to lose it again, and Cam gets me over to the couch and sets me down. Asher sits next to me and takes one of my hands. “Hey, it’s okay, this

isn't your fault."

"It should have been me," I manage to get out. Ugh, I'm such a mess of snot and tears. "He was after me, not her!"

"You are the weapon he needs," Liam argues. "Maddy did the right thing making sure you were out of his grasp."

"Dammit, I'm not a fucking weapon!" I scream. I'm on my feet before I even realize I'm moving. "I'm a person! Maddy's a person! I don't care about whether it was a good fucking war strategy! We're not just numbers on a map! This isn't *Risk!*"

"We gotta do something, right?" Justin asks, his voice cracking a little. His gaze darts from Liam to Roman and back again, evidently deciding that they're the people who have their shit most together in this situation. "We gotta get her back. We can't let her stay with him; we can't let him have her."

Liam and Roman look at each other, and I can see that they seem to be having one of those longstanding silent arguments—the kind that you can only have with someone you've known intimately for a long, long time. Mom and I used to have those kinds of arguments in front of Maddy, especially right when Mom first got sick and I wasn't handling it very well.

"Of course we'll get her back," I say, my voice firm. I glare at all of them in turn, as if any of them would possibly contradict me on this. The guys love Maddy like a sister. "We're definitely getting her back."

Justin looks slightly comforted to hear me say that. I'm glad he cares so much, because Maddy deserves someone who will fight to make sure she's safe, but I'm not really... capable of telling him that at this exact moment. The world is still topsy-turvy, and I still feel like I might do something stupid like faint from a lack of oxygen. Or storm the High Circuit and challenge Agustin to a death match.

"Get her back? And how exactly do you plan to do that, hmm?" Liam asks, his eyebrows rising as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking. "Your training isn't complete yet, and he holds the cards. You're the one with something to lose, not him."

No. That's not true. Of course Agustin has something to lose. His power. The power he's clung to so desperately since he was a child. The power he stole from dozens, maybe even hundreds of other Unpredictables.

I freeze, a half-formed thought growing in my mind. His power...

That has to be the key to all of this.

The panic finally starts to fade, and I sink back down onto the couch. Asher gets up and comes back a moment later with a glass of water and some tissues for me. Ideas are starting to form in my mind, determination at last cutting through the chaos of my panic attack.

Okay. Okay. You can do this. Breathe, Elliot, fucking breathe. You're getting Maddy back no matter what.

“Let’s check in with Josephine and Brodie. They need to know what’s going on,” Roman says, with a final stern look at Liam, who shoots an equally stern look right back at him.

Roman’s the only one in our group who calls Tamlin by her first name. I mean, at this point I probably could too, but I’ve just gotten so used to calling her by her last name as my professor that now I can’t think of her any other way.

Liam nods curtly. He breaks his silent stare-off with Roman and brushes past Dmitri to head out the front door, I assume to the training barn.

Cam and Asher give Roman a questioning look. Dmitri finally shuts the front door and walks back over to sit on the coffee table in front of me.

Roman sighs. In answer to Cam and Asher’s unspoken questions, he says, “Liam and I parted ways when I was an adult, not just because I had to go to Griffin, but because he and I disagree about some things. He’s pragmatic, and sometimes that’s a good thing, but he can be that way to a fault. I didn’t agree with his emotional detachment, and I didn’t agree with the risk to people’s lives that he would sometimes take. He thought I was too emotional, too soft, and that my sentimentality would allow for whoever we were up against to win. I felt that my morality, and compassion, shouldn’t be sacrificed in the name of the ‘greater good’.”

I’m with Roman. Sure, Liam’s point has merit, I guess, but with my sister’s life in the balance, I don’t give a shit about pragmatism.

Maybe it would be a smarter move tactically to not go after her, but fuck that. If we don’t fight for the people we love, then how are we better than the person we’re supposed to be fighting? Agustin doesn’t care about anyone. We *have* to care.

“He’ll be fine. He may disagree with us, but he won’t try to stop us.” Roman’s voice holds a hint of sadness. He glances at the front door once more, then shakes his head, turning his attention back to us. “I’ll get the tech, we’ll check in with the others.”

He heads up to the loft to grab his cell phone and the enchantments that give it enough juice to make calls out here in the wilderness. Tamlin answers quickly, and she and Brodie have somewhat good news for us, at least.

“The sentiment toward Unpredictables is changing fast,” Brodie says, the words all coming out in a rush.

“Public opinion is heavily in our favor,” Tamlin adds. “Agustin’s attempt to portray his takeover as a peaceful one is crumbling, and people see us as their last hope.”

“Not sure I’d call us the saviors they’re saying we are.” Brodie huffs out a breath. “We’re just human, same as them. But I suppose it’s better than having them see us as something to be gotten rid of.”

I’m not comfortable with this hero idea either, and I hope Unpredictables don’t let it go to their heads. Agustin’s hero complex is what got us into this whole damn shit-show in the first place. We’re normal people, and that’s all I’ve ever wanted us to be seen as—members of the community just like any other magic users, not *special* in a bad way or a good way, not people to be demonized or worshipped.

Just. People.

“Yes,” Tamlin agrees. “Hardwick’s campaigning has...”

She keeps talking, but the words suddenly start to sound like they’re coming from miles away, down a long tunnel that makes them muffled and distorted. The whole room has suddenly gone a bit fuzzy.

And then I feel something, like a snake, brushing up against the edges of my mind.

Agustin.

Oh, fuck.

I grab onto Asher’s wrist, channeling his power as I throw my shields up. Walls and walls and walls, a maze of my own design, locked doors and barriers, all forcing Agustin out.

“I’ll go talk to Liam,” Roman says as the call ends. I don’t think he’s realized what’s happening.

Asher has. He’s staring at me intently, and I wonder if he’s getting ready to shield me himself if my own shields don’t hold.

As Roman leaves, the others look at me, and I see their expressions shift as they realize something is wrong.

“He’s... trying... to get in,” I manage. It’s hard to talk, hard to think about anything other than keeping my shields up.

I can feel Agustin pacing outside on the edges of my mind, like a ghost, just waiting for something in my defenses to slip and fall.

“He’s not... going away,” I grit out through my teeth, clenching Asher’s hand so hard it hurts.

“Agustin?” Cam’s face goes still, his cheeks reddening.

Dmitri looks like he wants to smash something.

I nod, the movement jerky.

I know I shouldn’t let him in. I shouldn’t. He could take me over.

But he’s coming to me right after he took Maddy. That means he knows he got the wrong girl, but he also probably knows he managed to snatch up the person who’s most important to me in this world. Doesn’t take rocket science to figure out my only sibling is someone I’d die to protect. So he’s probably here to gloat about her capture or make demands in exchange for her return.

Or to tell me she’s dead.

No. No. I can’t even think that.

But I have to know.

“Asher?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m going to lower my shields. Just a bit. I need to ask him about Maddy.”

Cam and Dmitri share an alarmed look. Asher chews on the inside of his cheek and taps his fingers on his thigh, thinking, weighing the pros and cons. He’s the mind expert. If he says it’s too risky, I’ll probably have to listen to him. Probably. But if he thinks it’s all right...

Finally, he relaxes a little and nods once. “I think it’s worth the risk. We need to know what he wants. And I’ll be right here,” he promises me.

I nod back. Dmitri glowers at both of us, his jaw clenching. “I say it’s too big a risk.”

“You’re not the one taking the risk,” I point out, letting go of Asher’s hand to reach for Dmitri as I look up at him pleadingly. I’m not going to let him stop me from doing this, but I want him to understand. “I am.”

I know that if Agustin does take my mind over, I’m risking more than just myself, but we’re prepared this time. Asher’s ready to shield my mind and take me over like he did before if Agustin gets a hold of me.

Dmitri's whole body is tense, his muscles as hard as a block of granite. "Fine. But be fucking careful, Princess. Please."

Bracing myself, I open up my mind—just a little bit, like opening a single window in a boarded-up house, but it's enough to let Agustin get a peek in.

Where's Maddy? I ask loudly inside my head.

For a moment, there's just silence, and then I can feel him chuckling. I don't hear it; it's not a sound. It's more like *I'm* chuckling, but my body isn't actually moving.

Safe and sound for now, I assure you.

I take a few deep breaths. Dmitri has one of my hands gripped in his, and Cam takes my other, while Asher rests a reassuring palm on the back of my neck. A reminder that he can stop this anytime, that he won't let Agustin take me over again.

Tell me where she is, or I'm going to rip you limb from limb, I tell Agustin. God, I hope he can *feel* how much I mean it.

Ah, Miss Sinclair, that's not the kindest way to talk to someone who has your sweet sister in his clutches, is it?

My stomach flips over on itself, making me feel like I'm going to throw up, but I try to stifle my fear. I don't want him to know how truly terrified I am.

You realize you sound like some over-the-top Bond villain, right?

How about this, Agustin thinks at me. *I'll give you back your sister. Safe and sound. Not a scratch on her. If you give me, well, you.*

Is this the part where I'm supposed to be glad you want to keep me alive instead of just stealing my power?

If Agustin wanted to take my power, he'd kill me. No doubt about it. I guess he's figuring that using a second body as a puppet has more value to him—at least for now—than killing me outright and having to deal with wielding all his powers plus mirroring other people's at the same time.

Seeing as I've been struggling just to mirror two powers at once, I can somewhat agree with his logic. Except for the part where, you know, I'd be under his control for the rest of my life.

That part, I have a slight problem with.

You're the last real power I need, Agustin tells me. *Forget the others. With you by my side, I could have my powers doubled. Who knows. I might even let you see your sister from time to time.*

But you'd let her go? You promise? She would be freed, safe and unharmed?

Agustin projects a magnanimous air that makes me want to wring his neck. *You have my word, Miss Sinclair.*

My gaze flicks to Asher. I can feel him inside my head too, poised and ready to put up the shields if he needs to, but I can't tell if he can hear this conversation. I'm not sure what the rules are for mentally eavesdropping when one person is inside the head of another person.

I hope he can though. I need him to protect everything in my head except the thoughts I'm deliberately feeding Agustin. Because an idea is forming in the back of my mind, and I can't let that asshole know what it is.

Fine, but we're doing the trade-off where I want to.

I can feel Agustin mulling that proposition over, turning it around in his head like a smooth pebble.

Very well. There's an indulgence to him, a smugness, like he knows he's won, so it's no matter for him to let me have this one little thing. *Where would you like to make the exchange?*

Griffin Academy. I answer immediately. I don't even have to think about it.

His chuckle resonates in my head again, his sense of indulgence increasing. He thinks I'm being nostalgic, that I'm doing this out of a fondness for the place.

If he honestly thinks I'd just pick something out of pure emotion and not for any other reason, then he clearly doesn't know me all that well. You'd think he would by now, since I've gone up against him several times over the past couple of years. But then again, he's so hugely egotistical he probably can't stand to think about anyone besides himself for that long.

On the other hand, I *am* choosing to put myself and the rest of the magical world—and hell, even the non-magical world—at risk just to make sure my sister is safe, so maybe he's got a point in thinking I act on emotion more than logic.

But it's too late to change course now.

Very well. Victory swells inside Agustin's consciousness, like he's already won. *You have twenty-four hours.*

And just like that, he's gone.

CHAPTER 21

My head feels blessedly empty without Agustin in it.

The four men gathered around me are silent, watching me intently. I think Asher can tell that Agustin's gone, but the other three can't. Justin looks nervous, like maybe someone's going to need to snap me out of it, like I'm in a trance. Cam and Dmitri are boring holes in the side and front of my head, respectively, watching me.

I take a deep breath and comb through every corner of my mind, making sure Agustin isn't hiding somewhere in wait, trying to infiltrate while my defenses are lowered. When I don't sense him, I reach out for Asher's power and renew all my shields. I feel some of Asher's own making fall into place too, a double layer of protection I'm grateful as hell for right now.

With the inside of my head fully my own again, I glance at the guys gathered around me. "Okay. He's gone."

Justin's shoulders actually slump in relief. Cam pulls me in and kisses my temple.

"What did he say?" Dmitri growls. "What did he want?"

I repeat the entire conversation I just had with Agustin. Asher must've been able to listen in, because he nods along as I speak, and he doesn't seem as shocked as the others when I get to the end.

As soon as I tell them I've agreed to meet Agustin at Griffin Academy, Dmitri jumps to his feet, his whole body seeming to puff up with protective anger. "No! No way. You are not giving yourself to him."

I look up at him and raise an eyebrow, kicking his foot lightly. "What makes you think I'm going to just go belly up? When have I ever tapped out

of a fight, huh?”

“You have a plan?” Cam asks, his blue eyes shining with hope and worry.

“She has... half of a plan.” Asher shakes his head, gazing at me like he’s watching me skydive without a parachute and knows there’s nothing he can do to stop me.

The front door opens, and Roman enters—with Liam behind him. Both men look weary, like they’ve been at it for hours. I don’t know how much time passed while Agustin was in my head, but it definitely wasn’t that long.

That must’ve been a doozy of an argument between them.

Liam walks over and gives a heavy sigh. “Well. I’m still not sure I agree completely with your reasoning, Elliot. But there’s no use in my sitting around here while the rest of the world goes to shit. Only a matter of time until the shit comes knocking at my door.” He glances around at the group of us, a glimmer of fondness creeping into his hardened expression. “As you all have proved. So I’m with you. In whatever battle you find yourselves stuck in.”

I nod at him, trying to be gracious. “Thank you, Liam. It means a lot.”

Roman wears a triumphant expression, and I want to give him a chastising look, but he’s too damn sexy when he goes all commanding and alpha male like that.

“I’m going to be making an exchange,” I tell Liam and Roman. “Supposedly, it’s myself for Maddy. Maddy goes free, I go with Agustin, he uses me as his puppet to double his powers. He agreed to meet me at Griffin.”

Roman stiffens. He shakes his head and opens his mouth to argue, but before he can say anything, I hold up a hand.

“I have a plan. Well...” I glance at Asher, wrinkling my nose. “*Half* of one. Or rather, two parts of a plan that I really hope work together.”

Roman runs a hand over his jaw, looking worried but intrigued. “What are you thinking, Reckless?”

My pulse picks up. I’m simultaneously terrified and pleased that he’s willing to listen, to let me take the lead on this. It means he trusts me. But dear God, I hope I deserve that trust.

“Well, for the first part of my plan, I want us to reach out to as many Unpredictables as possible. Use Tamlin and Hardwick and the others to

spread the word, and tell everyone to meet us on campus. We need as much backup as we can get when we face Agustin. And we *know* Griffin, all its ins and outs. It's as good a place for a final stand as any, right?"

Roman nods sharply. "And every Unpredictable in the country knows where it is. It's a good rallying point." He gathers up his cell phone and the attached enchantment. "We'll get as many people as we can."

"Good. Tell them to hurry. The more time we have to prepare before Agustin arrives, the better. We need to hit him with everything we have for the second part of my plan to work."

"What's the second part of your plan?" Justin asks, looking like he's not totally sure he wants to know the answer.

I hesitate for a second, but Asher, who's already seen inside my head, gives me a small nod of encouragement.

Taking a deep breath, I lay it out for everyone.

It's a dangerous plan. Maybe even a crazy plan. In fact, saying it out loud definitely makes it sound a little insane.

But it's the only way I can think of to end this once and for all.

So it has to work.



Dmitri and I pack while Roman, Cam, and Asher work on getting into contact with all the other Unpredictables. In other words, we let the ones who are actually good with people do the talking.

Not that Roman's an extrovert, but being a professor and having worked in the public spotlight for most of his life, he's much better at it than, say, someone like me, who tends to get impatient and ask if everyone's planning to remove their heads from their asses anytime soon.

This is why it's a good thing the Trials livestream didn't include interviews.

We get packed up with supplies—Liam's got a few choice potions and charms and such that he wants to bring along, and frankly, I don't even want to know what half of them do—and then we navigate our way out of the woods, avoiding the traps.

The grizzled older man is keeping those traps activated in case some interloper or annoying hikers decide to try to tromp through his woods

while he's gone.

Yikes. I really hope hikers stay away from this area, those poor folks.

The drive up to the Griffin campus is almost nice. Almost. Everyone's very quiet, and my thoughts keep drifting to Maddy, but I get to curl up with each of my men in turn, and that helps. It's almost a nine-hour trip, and with no time to stop at a motel and rest, we're driving in shifts for once.

It makes me wish we were doing this for some other reason. A fun road trip, just the five of us, for no reason other than to see the sights and spend time together.

Maybe, hopefully, we'll get to do that someday. When this is all over. If we're still *alive* when this is all over.

There are so many ways this could go wrong, and the main way would be that I get taken over by Agustin and used as a puppet to kill everyone I love and take over the world with no willpower of my own for the rest of my life.

So, you know, no biggie.

I'm trying not to think about it. I'm trying to think only about victory. About getting Maddy back and punching Agustin through a wall. Positive thoughts, right? That's how this works?

We roll up onto campus, which still has its protective wards in place. Everything's still the way it was the day that we were all carted off by the Circuit to be taken to the holding facility.

I shiver involuntarily at the memory. God, that was an awful day. Everyone was terrified. Nobody knew what was happening to us, whether we'd be safe if we went along with the Circuit or if we were being marched off to get our magic ripped from us without even a second thought.

Liam scoffs at the wards as we all pile out of the two vehicles. "Clearly these need work," he grunts.

I think I know what Liam's going to be spending the rest of the day doing.

Justin looks around in curiosity, craning his neck to inspect the place. "So this is where you guys train?"

"Yup."

"It doesn't look anything like Neptune."

"Neptune has a lot more students," I explain. "And younger students too, and so it's all set up more like a regular college. We're very... haphazard, here."

I thought Griffin was pretty odd when I first got here too. But now I love it. It feels like home.

“We need to check the area.” Roman steps forward, getting right down to business. “Figure out the best choke points, see where we can hide the students and other Unpredictables when they get here, strengthen the wards, maybe lay some traps...”

“There is no way we’re getting all of that done in the next twelve hours.” Dmitri grimaces.

“No, there isn’t,” Roman agrees. “But we can do as much as possible.”

As if his words were the starter pistol at a race, we all spring into action, getting to work as quickly as we can.

It’s eerie, being the only ones on campus. Especially with everything just left abandoned like it was. We had no chance to prepare for the Circuit coming, no chance to pack our things properly or get ready.

Asher, Dmitri, Justin, and I work our way through Wellwood Hall, raiding classrooms for charms and enchantments that might be useful and setting traps around the building.

Seeing the halls empty like this, with a few books and backpacks scattered around like corpses after battle, ghosts of what once was, creeps me out. It sends an odd chill up my spine, like we’re looking into another dimension. Liminal spaces, I think they’re called. When you’re somewhere that should be full of people but it’s not, your brain can’t handle it very well. Survival mechanism tells you that if there are no people here, it’s because they fled from danger, so you should flee the danger too.

Justin looks pretty creeped out too, but also fascinated.

“Growing up, we didn’t know a lot about Unpredictables,” he confides to me in a low voice as we enter the combat classroom. “It was kind of like having a cousin who was gay or something, you were just polite and didn’t talk about it. Then as I grew up and learned more about it, I thought it was wrong that we treated Unpredictables like something that should be swept under the rug.”

“Is anyone in your family Unpredictable?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No. I didn’t really know too many Unpredictables, just knew *of* them. I knew someone who knew one, you know what I mean? But we’re not going to get anywhere by pushing each other down. That just helps awful people like Agustin turn us against each other. It’s our job to

support each other, lift each other up. There's this saying, you know? That none of us are free until we're all free. I really believe that."

Okay, this guy is pretty much permanently on my good list.

"That means a lot to hear, Justin." I clear my throat, willing myself not to cry as I talk about my sister. "I said this to Maddy too, and I know you don't need my permission or my approval, but I'm glad you two found each other. You seem to make her happy."

"She makes *me* happy," Justin replies, a goofy smile spreading across his face. "She's amazing. You helped raise a really incredible person. She's just—yeah." He looks completely besotted.

I grin at him. "Yeah. I get that."

Maddy brings that out in people, and I'm not surprised her boyfriend turns into a dopey wreck just thinking about her.

Then he sobers up. "And we will get her back, right? I don't like the idea of you... using yourself as bait like this, but..."

"I don't like it either. I'd do anything for my sister, but I'm worried about this going sideways and people getting hurt and this asshole getting the best of us. We have to try though, and I really, truly believe this is our best chance."

Justin looks at me for a long moment, then nods. He runs a hand through his hair and adjusts his glasses slightly, his brown eyes earnest behind the lenses. "You know, you're Maddy's hero. She believes in you, and I know if she were in my shoes, she'd believe that you were right and that you could pull this off. And if Maddy believes in you, then so do I."

Goddamn it, maybe I *am* a hugger. Or my transition into full-blown sap is finally complete. I wrap my arms around his shoulders before I can stop myself, squeezing hard before letting go.

"Thanks, Justin." I step back a little, giving us both a chance to get our shit together. "I appreciate that."

Then I raise my voice so that the men who are on the other side of the large classroom can hear me. "Hey, guys, looks like we won't have to kill him and hide the body after all!"

Asher smiles softly and flashes a thumbs up, and Dmitri gives a deadpan, "Yay."

Justin looks like he's torn between being actually kind of scared of us and amused at the joke.

We're about to head toward the corner of the room where Tamlin stored the non-magical weapons—staves and blades, and even crazy things like maces and axes—when a sound outside makes me jump. The others hear it too, and we all race toward the windows, leaning on the wide stone windowsills and pressing our faces to the glass.

A bus is pulling slowly up the road that curves around the quad.

My muscles tense, primed and ready for a fight, even though my logical mind knows that the twenty-four hours haven't passed yet, and that Agustin is hardly likely to arrive by a damn bus. Not stylish and dramatic and impressive enough for him.

The bus pulls up in front of the school, and behind it, I see a pickup truck, and then a trailer, and then another bus. A wave of relief hits me so hard it practically knocks me over.

They came.

It's the other Unpredictables, those that could get here in time anyway.

I hurl myself away from the window, sprinting out of the room and down the hall so fast that my feet skid on the stone floor. I pound down the steps and burst through the front doors with the guys right behind me.

The first bus's doors open with a hydraulic hiss, and people start to file out, gathering on the quad. A flash of familiar red hair in the crowd catches my eye. Kendal.

"Hey!" I yell, waving my arms.

She rushes over and hugs me tightly, so much so that my feet lift off the ground for a moment. "We've all been so worried!" she says. "When we heard Agustin was after you specifically, we were so scared for you!"

"Jesus." Tom shakes his head, walking over. "You just attract trouble everywhere you go, huh, Elliot?"

I can tell he's teasing me, and I hug him too. "Thanks for coming, you guys."

"Well, hey, it's just a small thing, right?" He shrugs. "Not like all of our lives are at stake or anything."

"You should see the public support you're getting!" Kendal tells me. "Hardwick's been campaigning like a madman, popping up to hold rallies and then going back underground again. And the Prince family and Tamlin's family have been doing a ton of work rallying magic users to stand up to Agustin."

My heart squeezes in my chest. I'm so fucking grateful that even after I destroyed their damn house, Asher's family have stood by him, me, and all of us.

Other people are getting off the bus and climbing out of the other vehicles that drove up behind it. I recognize some of them from Griffin. But some I don't. They're completely new to me. Unpredictables who graduated from Griffin who knows how many years ago, who have come to take a stand at the place that maybe felt like home to them once too.

If nothing else, that's something, isn't it? All of us standing together? All of us saying that enough is enough, and that we're going to deal with this rat who's decided to play god?

Roman, Liam, and the other men start directing people immediately, dividing them into groups and telling them where to go. People are asked to sound off what their power is, and where their areas of magical and non-magical expertise lie. We can then put people into groups with powers that will boost or complement each other.

Asher's been keeping my mind blocked from Agustin, and the key figures in our little resistance movement have all gotten ahold of enchantments or potions that protect their minds from invasion too. But there's no way the madman hasn't figured out something is up. There are too many people all headed to Griffin for him not to have gleaned it from *someone's* mind by now.

That's okay though. Because the people who know the full plan, the *real* plan, are protected from him. The secret is safe.

Agustin is justifiably confident in his insane amount of power, but whether or not he thinks he could take us all on by himself, I'm sure he's bringing backup. We have to be ready for literally anything, including another demon army.

Tamlin and Brodie arrive a few minutes later, although I don't get the chance to talk to them since I'm too busy helping organize people into pairs and groupings. I can't help but notice that she and Brodie are standing very close to each other and seem to insist on working together for the battle.

I crack a grin. *Guess the two of them worked through their, er, differences over the past few weeks.*

It takes well into the night for us to have everything ready. My entire body feels like it's buzzing with electric energy, and I can't stop the clock ticking down in my head, reminding me of how little time we have left.

Asher sticks close to my side all night, maintaining my shields. Agustin wouldn't know what honor was if it bit him in the nutsack, so we can't discount the possibility that he might try to attack early and renege on our deal. I haven't felt him so far, but that doesn't really mean jack shit.

At last, we're all good to go, and everyone hunkers down for what little sleep we can get. I end up in a classroom on the first floor, sandwiched between all four of my men, and I try to sleep because I know I'll need it.

A part of me doesn't want to though.

If we lose, this might be the last night I'll ever have with them. I don't want to waste that time sleeping.

But in the end, it doesn't matter. I'm exhausted, and whether I like it or not, I fall into slumber.

I dream of Maddy, and of being her hero.

CHAPTER 22

Agustin's a punctual bastard, I'll give him that. He shows up right on time, as soon as the allotted twenty-four hours are up.

And just like I expected, he's not alone.

My men and I are standing on the front steps of Wellwood Hall, standing shoulder-to-shoulder in a line, when there's a bright flash of light beyond the large metal entrance gate.

He comes in through a portal that he's created just outside of the protective wards on the school grounds. Behind him, pouring out of the portal in what feels like a never-ending stream, come all kinds of demons and quite a few mages. I see a handful of Unpredictables, but it mostly seems to be regular magical users, no doubt equipped with charms and potions to enhance their powers.

These must be the last few who truly believe that Unpredictables are the scourge of the earth, a stain on the magical community. Or people who are just so sure Agustin will win that they've decided to support him no matter what they believe. I wonder how many of them have free will, and if some are under his control.

I guess we'll find out soon enough.

Roman makes a small gesture with one hand, and the wards around campus come down. Hardwick is controlling the original wards, and Liam is handling the boosted protections he added yesterday.

Two demons surge forward, grabbing the gate and ripping it open, and then Agustin and his army move toward us, marching across the quad in a slow procession.

Agustin's dressed nicely, in a suit, like he thinks this is a televised event or something. He even has his hair done. I'm in a damn t-shirt and jeans, my hair's pulled back out of my face in a messy ponytail, and I haven't showered in two days. But whatever. I'm actually here to get shit done, and I've been working through most of the night. I didn't just show up this morning to do some kind of victory lap.

Of course, that's what he thinks this is. He thinks he's got this shit in the bag.

As they near us, I tear my gaze away from the massive army of demons and mages and focus in on Agustin—and it feels like my heart stops.

Maddy.

She was obscured by his minions before, but as they fan out around him, I see her. He's got her by the arm, and she's staring straight ahead with a blank expression. He must have her under mind control to keep her docile.

Rage boils in me, a kind I've never known before. I want to kill Agustin, I want to run across the quad and hug Maddy to me, I want to make sure nothing ever touches her or hurts her again.

Behind me, I can hear angry muttering from the men, and somehow, their fury eases some of mine—enough that I can breathe and think clearly anyway.

Dmitri puts his hand on my shoulder and squeezes.

I'm not alone in this. They're with me.

I take a deep breath and blow it out. "Okay. Let's do this."

We walk out to the middle of the quad.

Roman, Dmitri, Asher, and Cam all flank me as Agustin steps forward to meet us with Maddy trailing listlessly along beside him.

As he walks over, I can see the haze lifting from her eyes. She blinks a few times, looks around, and then tries to jerk away from Agustin in a panic. Agustin keeps too tight of a hold on her, and a look of pure terror crosses her face as she realizes what's going on and where she is.

"It's okay, Mads!" I call to her, my heart thundering so hard I can barely hear my own voice. "It'll be okay!"

Agustin smirks at me, self-satisfaction dripping from his words. "Did you really think I wouldn't know what was going on here, Miss Sinclair?"

I glare at him and gesture around us. "What? You mean the incomplete redecorating job after you dropped three towers and an army of demons on us last year?"

Agustin *tsks* his teeth. “As stupidly quippy as ever.”

“I mean, it’s kind of my brand by now, right? I’d hate to disappoint you after you came all this way.”

Agustin’s expression goes tight, his jaw clenching and his gaze lowering to glare at me. “I still have your precious baby sister here.”

Maddy’s expression has shifted from panic to looking like she’s ready to spit at him. *That’s my girl.*

“You might have been shielding your mind, Miss Sinclair,” Agustin says in the patient tones of one explaining two plus two for the hundredth time to a very stupid child, “but your companions weren’t. And I don’t mean those ridiculous boy toys of yours.”

“I prefer the term sugar baby, myself,” Cam says.

I don’t see it, but I can hear Roman elbow him.

“All of the other people hidden within those walls,” Agustin goes on. “All of the dozens of Unpredictables that you recruited to try to fight me. Did you really think I wouldn’t notice the activity? Or that I would come alone? Did you think I wouldn’t try to get into their minds? That I’m so focused on you that I wouldn’t be trying to learn about and control any other Unpredictables out there?” He chuckles. “I must thank you, Miss Sinclair, truly. You did me a favor by gathering all of you into one place. I know not all of the Unpredictables in the country are here, but thanks to your efforts, most of them are. So loyal. So ready to fight. So... inspired by you.”

A grin spreads across his face, and for the first time, I see it. The insanity, the burning hatred, the pure *evil* that exists inside this man. His bland, pleasant features usually hide it, making it hard to believe that a man like this could be capable of the things I know he’s done.

But I believe it now.

And I know he’ll do so much worse if given the chance.

“You truly are a hero to them,” he purrs, his lip curling. “Although I’m sure that will be of little comfort to you once I destroy them. Knowing that it was you and your work that gave them the courage to try to stand up to me. I never would have agreed to meet you here otherwise, you must know that. I knew it would be my chance to end Unpredictables, to cast you all out of the way, finally, once and for all. The raw power here...” Agustin sniffs the air, as if he can actually smell it. “It’s intoxicating, almost.”

“Yeah. I know you wouldn’t have come otherwise,” I tell him. “I know I’m not the strategic genius of the year, but I figured out that much, at least. That’s why it was the perfect bait.” I shrug. “Who could resist all of their enemies in one place, right?”

Agustin narrows his eyes, his jaw twitching. His arrogance wouldn’t let him believe that I could possibly guess what he was doing, what he would have planned. As if controlling people’s minds and messing with them hasn’t been his M.O. since day one.

“You’ve invited your friends to their doom, Miss Sinclair,” he snarls.

My stomach clenches into a hard knot, but I keep my voice even and my head held high.

“Maybe. But at least now we get to fight you on our turf, on our terms, instead of having to try to break into the High Circuit to get to you. And every single person here knew you’d come. They knew what they were signing up for. You brought your army? Well, I brought mine.”

Agustin looks positively livid now, and he opens his mouth to speak again. But I don’t let him.

I raise my voice to a yell, throwing my hand out. “Sic ’em!”

Confession: I’ve always wanted to say that.

The doors to the school burst open, and Unpredictables come pouring out. Tamlin, Brodie, and a few of our most powerful professors are right behind us, running across the quad, but more Unpredictables are hidden using Liam’s wards and invisibility spells in other places around the grounds. Agustin and his army walked right past some of them without even knowing it, huddled groups hiding in plain sight only inches from the demons and mages.

Now, we’ve got Agustin surrounded.

It’s time to kick some ass.

CHAPTER 23

Maddy dives to the side as I unleash a sonic boom at Agustin. Everyone is leaping out of their hiding places and erupting from the school buildings, firing off the magic they've prepared. The mages and demons with Agustin aren't taken completely by surprise, but our attack was sudden enough that we can all get in a few hits before they really start fighting back.

"Get out of the way!" I yell to Mads.

She scrambles backward as Agustin raises up the ground around him, twisting it, turning it into huge lumps of earth that he can lob like great stones, trying to crush us.

Maddy gets to her feet and immediately starts drawing water from the air and earth. I want to tell her to get out of the fight, to run to safety and stay there until this is all over—but I know I wouldn't do that if I were her, so I just race to her side and quickly grab her arm, squeezing it. "You okay?"

She nods, still concentrating on the water she's manipulating. There's something hard and determined in her blue eyes, alongside a lingering hollowness from having her mind overtaken by Agustin.

"Yeah, I'm good. I mean, not great, but I'm okay. Promise."

"You're not just saying that to make me feel better?"

She drops a wave of water onto the head of a nearby mage. "I promise. I just want to kick some ass."

Pride swells in my chest. "Hell yeah, you do."

Sticking close by Mads for now, I focus back in on Agustin, using my sonic boom to knock his chunks of earth out of the way and shatter them so

that small, harmless clumps of dirt rain down on us.

The battle kicks into high gear, demons, mages, and Unpredictables spreading across the quad. And that means it's time to put phase two of our plan into action.

Here's the thing—I didn't tell Agustin *all* of the reasons we brought an army here to meet him.

Sure, a big part of it was because it's easier to fight him here than at the High Circuit headquarters, which I'm sure he's secured with dozens of wards and protective enchantments.

But the other reason is, we needed to make Agustin fight. We needed to confront him with a big enough threat that he had to engage us. We need him distracted, because it will obscure what I'm doing.

See, I'm not going to be fighting Agustin. While he's busy going after all the Unpredictables who have bravely offered themselves up as bait, I'm going to do the same thing I did with the demon bird—mirror his powers to undo all the shit that he's done.

And I'm going to start by waking up all of the government officials he put to sleep.

I catch Cam's gaze and nod, and the men rush Agustin while I step back, keeping just within range enough that I can mirror him but not close enough that I present an easy target. I try to sift through his powers, to find the one that I need—the one that will undo that particular spell.

It's not easy. Demons and mages are everywhere, and I have to fight them back from time to time, and then there are all my friends around me just adding to the chaos. Magic is flying, and it reminds me of when Raul undid all our cuffs in the dining room during my first semester and everyone went berserk with their magic. I'm going to get hit with a stray fireball or God knows what else if I'm not careful.

My men don't have it easy either. They don't just have to fight Agustin, they have to make sure they don't kill him. I can't mirror his power and use it to undo his shit if he's dead. Unlike him, I don't steal powers. They aren't mine once the person's out of range or once they're gone from the earth.

And that's what this is all for. To keep Agustin distracted but alive long enough for me to take care of what I need to. It's what all the traps and backups are for, to keep him from killing me while I try to mirror his magic.

It's... somewhat successful.

Even an all-out battle isn't quite enough to make Agustin forget how much he hates me and wants to use me. The guys launch a series of attacks at Agustin, but he refuses to be distracted from me.

I'm trying to sift through all the powers around me to get to him, and then sift through all of *his* powers to find the right one, and also trying to look busy and not like I'm just standing in the middle of the quad staring at him like an obvious idiot—and he's gunning right for me. He wants to use me, and I can tell by the crazy light in his eyes that he's going to stop at nothing to get what he wants.

Agustin conjures up his super strength and his lightning whip and rips his way through the men. He's literally yanking Dmitri's doubles off of him as they launch themselves at him to keep him from me. Cam teleports and Agustin uses some kind of super speed and grabs him by the throat, flinging him backward and sending him flying into Asher, sending the two of them crashing to the ground. Cam's head glances off a large chunk of stone, and his eyes roll back, his body going limp.

I wince, my stomach dropping. Shit, is he okay?

Roman tries to intervene, but Agustin sends two demons after him, and now he's got his hands full dealing with them. *Fuck!*

The necromancer could possibly kill Agustin right now with his death touch, but that wouldn't help us since I need him alive. And even if Roman brought him back to life, it's not like he'd be Agustin's master or something. He couldn't control him, and so we'd be back at square one.

I stumble back as Agustin, his path clear, advances on me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a watery snake lifting up into the air.

No! No way.

Mirroring Maddy's water power, I use it to sweep her up, sending her crashing and slipping and sliding out of the way. I know I'm supposed to be letting her make her own choices and shit, but I'm not letting her intervene in this and get herself hurt. I just can't.

Agustin quirks his eyebrows at me, like he saw me do that and is amused by it but isn't going to bother going after Maddy—not just yet anyway. He's focused on me, and me alone.

I guess I should be flattered?

I keep backing away, maintaining my mental shield while struggling to mirror him. There are so many powers to sort through, and I don't necessarily recognize what each one is before I mirror it. Each type of

magic feels a little different, but most of these are Unpredictable powers. How am I supposed to know instinctively what each one does? There's no fucking way.

Agustin's face transforms like melted wax as he snarls, bits of madness leaking through, showing just how drunk on power, on himself, he really is.

"I *will* have you," he snaps at me, his face red and sweaty, his eyes gleaming. "Your attempts to resist are pathetic! A child throwing a tantrum!"

"I'm the child?" I yell. *Jesus*. He's the one throwing a tantrum because the world didn't automatically bow down to him and treat him like a damn god.

I dodge a fireball and then try to mirror him, managing instead to mirror some kind of—shield? A shield of air?

Well, hey, it keeps me from dying as he lobbs all four elements at me, trying to blast me off my feet. I move backward and collide with the front doors of the main school building.

Shit. That fucking hurt.

Okay, okay, okay—this is my school, my turf, not his. I know more about this place than he does. I can make this work. And at least I know he can't use his mind control powers in a fight, since I'm way out of range of Asher.

I manage to mirror his lightning whip and crack it at him, causing Agustin to stumble back a little as he dodges it. He regains his equilibrium and comes after me with a vengeance, and I yank the heavy door open and dart inside the building, then run down a hallway.

The ground beneath me rumbles, and I instinctively scale the walls to the ceiling using my spider climb. It's a damn good thing I'm fast too, because the floor is now lava.

Wait. Did he just—transform the ground into lava?! What the fuck?!

I skitter along the ceiling, dodging blasts of magic. I'm pretty sure one of them is a disintegration blast, judging by the hole that opens up in the ceiling.

"If you want to use me as a weapon, you idiot," I yell over my shoulder, "you might want to actually keep me alive!"

A few of the traps we laid out inside the school go off, slowing Agustin down. But it's not enough. He's too powerful, and he's right on my tail.

Up ahead, I spot the door to the tower we climbed when we fought the demon bird, and I put on an extra burst of speed, gunning for it. As soon as I reach it, I drop down onto a spot where the floor is still solid stone, sending a sonic boom back behind me before yanking open the door. Stairs rise up in a tight spiral within the tower, leading all the way to the roof.

Maybe fighting your enemy on the roof isn't the greatest idea, although it sure is the most dramatic one, but I don't have any better options right now. He boxed me in and forced me inside the school, and now he could too easily trap me at the end of a hallway with no one around, and nobody would know which corridor or room we went into.

Agustin snarls behind me as I dash up the stairs, my heart pounding. He's still in range of my mirroring powers, so I keep trying to sort through them as I run.

I haven't been up on the roof since I fought with that demon bird that Agustin was so kind as to send us, and it was terrifying enough when we were in the middle of the roof. Now I'm scrambling onto it from the tower window and running across the uneven surface way too close to the edge for my liking.

Agustin doesn't scramble through the window.

He just blasts a hole in the tower.

I dive for cover—not that there really is any—as rocks and stone go flying everywhere. Dust fills the air, and Agustin sends another blast. Crackling, rumbling sounds fill the air as the tower falls. *Shit, shit, shit.*

That's the only way I know of to get onto the roof. I mean, there have to be other ways, but the way this building is designed, there's no logical roof access point.

Which means Agustin has just cut me off from my backup.

At least everyone now knows where we are now though. There's a swell of voices yelling from the ground, and when I raise my head to look, I can see people pointing up at us. I landed roughly on the roof, scraping up my elbows and palms in the process, and I'm covered in dust. It chokes my lungs as I try to get my breath back, and I hack and cough as I struggle to my feet.

I stand on shaky legs and turn around just in time for Agustin to catch me around the ankle with his lightning whip, sending me flying up into the air and then crashing to the ground. I claw at the roof, trying to find some purchase, something to grab onto so that I can wrench my ankle free. My

skin burns, and my body is wracked with painful electricity, and before I can break the whip's hold on me, I'm thrown again.

Goddammit. No! I am not dying up here.

I reach out desperately with my magic to mirror a power, any power, it doesn't matter what—and suddenly—

Uh.

So for those of you who think it might be fun to transform into, say, an animal?

Don't.

Just don't. I really don't recommend it.

Because it's not some magical *poof*, and then you're a fuzzy-wuzzy bunny rabbit. Oh, no.

It's your bones cracking, shrinking, and rearranging. It's your skin tearing and shifting and your body flexing. I'm pretty sure this is what it would feel like to be strapped to a medieval torture rack.

The one good thing about it is that in the process of transforming, I've escaped from the lightning whip by contorting and expanding and writhing into a new body.

But now I'm completely confused and disoriented. Why are colors weird? And, oh God, the *smells*. There are so many scents attacking my nostrils it's a fucking sensory overload.

I look down at myself, and sure enough, I have fur. And paws.

I'm a goddamn wolf.

Great. He stole from an Unpredictable with a wolf shifting power. Fun. Dandy. How the *fuck* do I change back?

That's something I need to figure out fast, but in the meantime, there's no point wasting these perfectly good fangs.

I leap at Agustin, snarling, and manage to get my teeth fastened around his shoulder. *Ah-ha, you fucker! Take that.*

Agustin screams in pain as I bite down harder, my jaws so much stronger than they've ever been, and the coppery taste of blood hits my tongue as skin and muscle give way.

Mentally, I scramble for a power to mirror. *I think I can feel one—*

I grasp onto it and immediately transform back into a human, repeating the same painful process in reverse. My howl of pain turns into a ragged scream as my bones shift back to their usual configuration.

Holy fuck, oh my God, I am never doing that again.

I fall to the rooftop, spitting out the blood that's still in my mouth, grimacing as I struggle to identify the power I'm currently feeling. It's like I'm seeing a bunch of fireflies in my head. Tiny dancing lights. Very faint, floating and pulsing. All at different points in... in a web of some kind. Like I'm the spider, and they're the flies, trapped.

What...?

Agustin grabs me by the front of my shirt and hauls me up, lifting me off the roof's uneven surface as if I weigh nothing. Holy shit, he's strong. His other hand comes up and grabs my throat, squeezing. I claw at his arm and kick at him, trying to get him off.

"You insolent little bitch," he snaps.

All my fight skills are useless. He's too strong, I can't break his hold, my feet are off the ground so I have no leverage, and he's squeezing hard enough that I'm seeing spots in front of my eyes. I can't concentrate, I'm losing too much oxygen. And if I use a boom while I'm dangling in the air, the kickback will probably send me flying right off the roof.

Faintly, I hear someone yelling my name.

One of the men, I'm pretty sure, but I don't know which one.

I can't think.

I can't breathe.

"I was going to keep you alive," Agustin hisses. "I would've given you a very nice life. When I didn't need your help, obviously. But no. You just had to be so goddamn stubborn. Maybe it's better this way though. Now I'll just take your power. I'll have any magical ability in the world at my fingertips. Nobody will be able to stop me, and it's all going to be because of you."

Right, because I'm the one who made him an egotistical idiot in the first place.

Fuck. I need more power, need more strength. I just need *more*.

In a move driven by survival instinct and desperation, I reach out with everything inside of me and just fling it all at Agustin, greedily trying to snatch up everything he has, yanking on every thread from him that I can find.

I latch onto two that I recognize, even as Agustin raises his hand, letting a strange spark ignite between his fingers.

It's the one I saw when I was in his memories, the one he used to siphon magic from his teacher slowly and painfully.

He's about to steal my powers.
To take them and to take my life.

CHAPTER 24

There's no time to think, no time to second-guess, as I start to lose sense of the world from lack of oxygen and my body starts to twitch. I just reach inside him and unleash any and every one of the powers that I'm feeling from him.

A powerful blast explodes between us, tearing me from his grip. I'm shot backward, and I should be falling off the roof to my possible death, except that I'm—still in the air.

Holy shit, I'm levitating.

Agustin has also been shot backward, his clothes and chest burnt. I unleashed a fireball at him. While levitating.

I'm mirroring two of his powers at once.

"Elliot!"

Cam teleports onto the roof and body slams Agustin, who's gaping at me. Blood mats my boyfriend's blond hair and coats the side of his face, and I can see a large lump with a gash in it near his hairline. But he's up and conscious, and I'm so fucking glad he's here.

Agustin is knocked off-balance by the blow and stumbles, and I propel myself back onto the roof, reaching out with my senses as I land and blasting him with water.

Ha! Oh my God. I can do this!

And all it took was nearly dying. I guess that is a pretty damn good motivator.

A second later, there's a crashing sound from the partially collapsed tower, and then several massive chunks of stone are shoved up and out of the way. Roman bursts through the gap that's been created, and the demon

who broke through the rubble follows him onto the roof, flexing its massive, veiny muscles and roaring.

Roman makes a commanding gesture, siccing it on Agustin. The asshole mage snarls and throws his hands out too, and the demon slows, shaking its head as if trying to clear it.

Good. Locking Agustin in a battle of wills over control of the demon will hopefully keep him distracted long enough for me to take care of things.

Still keeping one hand extended toward the wavering demon, Agustin scrambles to his feet, gaping at me. “I didn’t think you could do it,” he says slowly.

There’s grudging respect in his voice, but I don’t really give a fuck. Absolutely nothing I’ve done today, or *ever*, has been to impress him.

“Thanks,” I mutter, a little distracted. I can still feel that weird... firefly thing in the back of my head. The spiderweb. What is that, what is it doing? “I thrive on succeeding out of spite.”

The demon roars, lurching toward Agustin as the mage’s concentration breaks. Baring his teeth, Agustin refocuses on the massive creature just as Dmitri and Asher emerge from the hole in the rubble of the tower.

“The tide’s turning!” Asher yells, and at first I think he’s telling me, trying to encourage me, but then I realize he’s talking to Agustin. “Give it up! We’re stronger than you are!”

“*No one* is as strong as I am.”

Agustin spits at him, readying another spell. Cam teleports close and body slams him again, and I feel the fireflies in my mind jolt.

Huh. It’s almost like they were affected by what happened to Agustin.

I try to reach out a little farther into the spiderweb, following the sticky trail of it toward the little dots of light. It’s like there’s a connection between them and me, carried along the lines of my spiderweb.

Only it’s not mine, it’s Agustin’s.

It’s almost a part of him somehow.

The men are hitting Agustin with everything they’ve got. A few others scramble out onto the roof too, Kendal in the lead. I don’t recognize the people who are with her, but I know they’re on our side because they immediately launch an attack on Agustin.

Down below, the tide of battle does seem to be turning in our favor, thank God.

Agustin's down, but he's not out yet. Not by a long shot. He fought off five of us handily in his basement, and he's doing it again now.

I ignore the urge to just throw myself into the fray and try to destroy him, concentrating on the threads. Agustin's still trying to reach me, pursuing me with single-minded focus, so I reach out, mirror Dmitri, and split into multiples.

Then I give each of them a simple order—mimic me and move around. I start moving around too, like the human equivalent of that game where you have a ball hidden underneath one of three cups and you switch the cups around really fast so whoever's watching loses track of which cup has the ball. I don't want Agustin to know which one is the real me.

Even as my body moves erratically through space, the fireflies in the web draw my attention again.

The more I follow the lines of the web toward them, the more convinced I become that... they're people. The points of light are people. And I can feel that Agustin has some sort of link to each one of them. Not like they're his family or anything, but like he knows them, he's touched them, he's spoken to them. He could name each of them if he had to.

Curious, in my mind, I pluck at one of the threads.

It reverberates through the web, down to one of the fireflies. I see it vibrating, and I hear a gasp, what sounds like the jolt of a heartbeat, and the firefly lights up, shining as brightly as a sun. I can sense the person's thoughts, feel them waking up.

This is it! This is the power that was keeping everyone in stasis.

That's why he managed to get so much of the government but not all—he had to personally be in contact with each person. Touch them or something, have some face-to-face contact to establish a connection, to create the threads of the web.

When we hunted him down, the men and I surprised him at his house, catching him off-guard, so he probably had to put his plan into action early instead of wiping out one hundred percent of the government.

And he still nearly succeeded in everything, even with the rushed execution.

Okay. Okay, I just have to wake everyone up now.

Fuck. I hope I'm doing this properly, and that I'm not somehow inducing brain damage or whatever. I start plucking at the threads, strumming them, calling out in my head.

Wake up, wake up, wake up.

The fireflies in my mind all light up like torches and I can feel the jolt. Yes! I'm doing it! I can't do it all at once, I don't think I'm practiced enough, but the more strings I pluck, the more people are waking up. Just a little while longer...

"Reckless!"

Roman's voice breaks through my concentration, a warning in his tone.

Agustin conjures a hefty spear from thin air and hurls it at one of my doubles, catching her right through the abdomen. I nearly bend over in pain as I feel the echo of her agony.

"I know!" I yell, and I have my doubles echo me. Agustin's still dangerous as fuck, maybe more so now that he's starting to lose. Goddammit, we have to kill him soon. "Keep holding him off! I'm almost there!"

Agustin hears that and starts fighting with renewed, angry desperation. I don't think he knows exactly what my plan is—he can't look into my mind while he's busy fighting off magical attacks and wrestling for control of a demon—but he knows I'm up to something. He knows there's another plan underneath the one he read in all of those Unpredictables' minds, and that he's been duped.

Just a few more strings. Come on, just a few more...

Someone down below waves their arms up at us and shouts something. Asher runs to the edge of the roof, disengaging from Agustin, his brow furrowed.

"Officials in the infirmary downstairs have woken up!" he yells, beaming at me. "You're doing it!"

A thunderclap of air comes flying at him and Cam teleports, grabbing his friend and teleporting away with him just in time before Asher can be thrown off the roof. Agustin lets out a yell of fury as he realizes what Asher just said, and what that means I'm doing.

But it's too late for him to stop it. With growing confidence, I pluck the last few threads, and the last few people—I think, I *hope*—wake up from stasis.

Yes! Our government's back, bitches.

Agustin flings out daggers of ice, one piercing Dmitri's double in the chest, another slicing Roman's arm. Roman doesn't break concentration on

the demon—until Agustin sends everyone flying across the roof with a powerful cyclone.

“Tell them it’s over!” I scream at Asher as the cyclone rages and the demon, temporarily freed from Roman’s hold, roars its anger. “Go in for the kill! It’s over, I got them! They’re all awake!”

I don’t think everyone on the roof knows what I mean, since not all of them knew the full plan—they couldn’t, or Agustin would’ve read it in their minds—but they sure as hell appreciate Asher telling them to go in for the kill. Still sprawled on the roof where he fell, Asher uses his psychic powers to speak to everyone in their minds. He’s not giving them an order they have to obey, not controlling them, but making sure the message is heard. And it sure beats one of us trying to scream over the noises of an entire battlefield.

We don’t need to keep Agustin alive anymore.

A vicious joy fills me at that thought, and I suck my duplicates back into myself, ignoring the pain from the ones who’ve been injured. Two were killed, and they disappeared on their own, winking out of existence.

With no more doubles to hide behind, I advance on Agustin. The look of rage on his face is all-encompassing, but so is the rage I’m feeling.

This man has been manipulating and murdering people for at least a decade. He’s tried to kill me and everyone like me—his own people. He took my baby sister, and he was going to hurt her.

He’s a selfish, self-centered, small-minded, violent, giant man-baby. He tried to kill Roman, he tried to kill everyone I care about, he’s tried to strip our entire community of our rights and to establish a dictatorship.

I want him dead, and I want him dead *now*.

I know I shouldn’t do this. Roman’s told me about the danger, about how long it took him to get his power under control. That his power wants to consume him once it’s activated, that it hungers for more and more and more. I saw it myself, with my own eyes, on top of the tower last year when Roman killed the mage that was about to kill me. For just that brief instant, it wasn’t Roman living in his eyes, it was something else—something dark and ravenous. Honestly, it scared me. It was the one moment since I met him that I haven’t felt safe with Roman, because in that moment, it wasn’t really Roman in control.

But even though I know all of that—I’m angry. I’m so, so angry. I’m fury, I am rage, and I am vengeance.

I mirror Roman.

And I take his death touch.

Agustin has his eyes fixed on me, furious and red-faced. He advances on me as I advance on him. My men are still scattered by the force of the cyclone he conjured, but they're picking themselves up slowly, Roman holding out his hand and bringing the demon back under control.

“Sin! Watch out!”

Cam clearly thinks I'm still in danger—and maybe I am, I could definitely still fail here—because he staggers to his feet and teleports into Agustin's space, body slamming him for a third time. But this time, Agustin is ready. His super strength and super speed make him move like lightning as he lifts Cam as though the broad-shouldered mage weighs nothing and slams him to the ground, pinning him with a pile of earth and rock he's conjured. Cam lets out a ragged cry of pain as the heavy weight lands on him, and I hear something—a bone—cracking.

Oh, no, you fucking don't.

I mirror the same super speed Agustin just used and rush forward so fast the world blurs around me. Then I grab the evil mage by the neck, letting Roman's magic surge within me.

It feels... strange.

Something that's a part of me and yet not latches onto something inside Agustin and begins to pull, drawing it out of him in deep drags. He stiffens and raises his hand to cast a spell, to stop me, but I tighten my grip on his neck.

He chokes and gurgles, but it's not because I'm cutting off his air supply. It's because I'm cutting off his life. Siphoning it out of him to feed the *thing* inside me.

I'm hungry.

I'm so very hungry.

I want to feed.

And this man has so much power, so much life. It's filling me up, satisfying the gnawing hunger that just wants more.

The cyclone that was tearing across the roof dies out into a light breeze. Agustin throws everything he has left at me, like an insane magician pulling rabbit after rabbit out of a hat. But I mirror every one of his powers, counteracting the magic he summons, and as he grows weaker, I grow stronger.

Right before it ends, I see it in Agustin's eyes. The knowledge that he's lost.

He starts to scream, to say "no", but I bring my other hand up to grip the side of his face, and I think one word.

Feed.

My palm glows a deathly, unnatural orange, searing Agustin's face where I touch him. He screams, the sort of agonized scream that you never hear, not even in movies, because nobody has ever felt that kind of agony and lived, so who could possibly replicate it?

I suck it up. Every last bit of it. I consume all of his *life*, and it tastes... amazing. Like a burst of pure dopamine in my head, like fireworks, like the best food ever in my mouth, it just feels good.

Agustin's scream dies out as he collapses to the ground. His face is gaunt and hollowed out, his skin leathery and dry, his eyes unseeing.

For a moment, I gaze down at him, a sense of perfect satisfaction passing through me. Contentment, almost.

I did it. It worked.

And then, so fast it almost makes me gasp—I'm hungry again. I want more. That wasn't enough, not nearly enough. I don't even feel any vindication that he's dead, I just feel more hunger.

Cam is beneath me, struggling to get the huge, heavy chunks of rock and dirt off himself. I think his arm's broken. I can hear his life force beating inside of him. His heart.

And I want it.

I'm so hungry. I want it. It's like there's a void of darkness open inside of me and I need the light to feed it. And Cam has so much light. So much sunshine.

I want to feed on his sunshine.

"Elliot, no!" Roman gets between us, standing above Cam, his legs on either side of his fallen friend. Cam makes a surprised sound—I don't think he realized I was looming over him. "Reckless, don't do this. Stop mirroring. Let go."

But I have to. I'm hungry, I'm so *hungry*—

Elle, no. It's Asher, in my head. *Don't. Let go. It's okay.*

I'm so hungry, Asher. I'm so hungry. I want it. I can't even feel anymore, I just—I want—

Shh, it's okay. Let go and you won't be hungry.

I can feel the men circling me. Asher. Roman. Dmitri. And on the ground, gazing up at me, Cam.

They can't touch me while I'm like this because I'll just drain their life, but they want to. They want to stop me. Why? Don't they want me to stop being hungry? Don't they want me to be full and happy? Because they love me?

"That's right," Asher says out loud, clearly still reading my thoughts. His voice is warm and soft. "We want you to be happy because we love you, and you *will* be happy if you stop mirroring Roman and let go. I promise, Elle. We'll always do what we can to make you happy. We love you, and you love us."

"Come on," Cam murmurs. He's still sprawled on the rooftop in front of me. "Come on, Sin, stop mirroring him."

Roman starts backing away, and I have a vague notion that he's trying to get far enough back that I can no longer mirror him. Cam's still right there, and I'm still so hungry—

Taking a lurching step forward, I extend a hand toward Cam, the hunger rising up inside me like a beast that will gnaw right through my skin to get what it wants.

I expect to see the same things on Cam's face that I saw on Agustin's. Terror. Raw fear. Desperation.

But instead, when I meet his gaze, his blue eyes are soft and warm. There's no fear in them, just... love.

"You won't hurt me, Sin," he murmurs, shaking his head slightly. "I know you won't."

And then he reaches for me.

His hand lifts to reach toward mine as mine extends down toward him, and a flash of panic jolts through me like a thousand watts of electricity. *If we touch, I'll kill him. What is he doing?!*

The shock to my system snaps me out of my trance a little bit.

But it's enough.

Enough that I manage to yank my hand back before Cam's fingertips brush mine.

Enough that the real me—flawed and reckless and stubborn as she is—can force her way back to the surface, shoving away the dark hunger.

Finally, I let go and stop mirroring.

It's like some monster I didn't even know had a hold on me releases me. Chains I didn't know were wrapped around me fall off, and I sink to my knees, shaking from head to toe.

"Holy... shit," I choke out.

That was—awful. I've never experienced anything like it, and I sure as fuck hope I never do again. I almost killed Cam.

Oh, God.

"Cam!"

The word is torn from my lips as my gaze flies up to land on him. He's almost worked his way out from underneath the earth that trapped him, but I crawl forward to help him as much as I can, scrabbling at the chunks of rock and shoving them aside.

As soon as he's clear, I throw my arms around him, burying my face in his neck as I cling to him in a loose, careful hug. I want to wrap my arms around him so tightly it would take a crowbar to separate us, but his arm is broken, and I don't want to hurt it.

"I almost—" I can't say the words. I can't breathe. "Almost—"

"No, you didn't." His voice is low, and even though he can't hug me back properly, he buries his face in my hair. Only now can I hear a hint of fear lingering in his voice. "I knew you wouldn't hurt me, Sin. I knew it."

He didn't know. He couldn't have. Hell, *I* didn't know. That death touch magic was raging so strongly inside me that I was hardly more than a puppet obeying its will.

But he trusted me anyway.

He believed in me.

Tears burn my eyes, and I kiss his neck, not even caring that he's sweaty and grimy and streaked with blood. It's Cam. And he's alive.

"I love you," I mutter. "I'm so sorry."

"For what?" There's a touch of humor in his voice now, and I feel his lips press against my hair. "For saving the day?"

A sound that's part scoff, part laugh, and part sob escapes my lips.

Roman comes hurrying back, and he gets an arm under Cam's, helping him stand as Dmitri pulls me to my feet. I hug the dark-haired mage tightly, swaying, and I realize for the first time just how fucking exhausted I am. Waking everyone up and then using the death touch, and the fight with Agustin before that, has left me wiped.

Asher grabs me next, and I sink into him, letting him kiss me and smooth my hair back from my face, and finally, Roman pulls me into a crushing embrace. I wrap my arms around his broad back, feeling his muscles shift under my palms as he breathes deeply.

“I—I understand,” I whisper, and he tightens his grip on me and presses his lips to my hair, the stubble on his cheek scraping against my temple.

God, do I understand. In the grip of that fierce, consuming hunger, all logic fled, and I can’t even imagine being a child and experiencing something like that. The only thing that snapped him out of it was looking around and seeing his family dead.

Roman nods, but he doesn’t release me. I can’t see his face, but I feel the movement of his cheek against my temple. Dmitri and Cam limp up to join us, wrapping their arms around us as much as they can, and Asher presses in close too. And for a moment, we all just hold each other like that.

Like the rest of the world doesn’t exist.

CHAPTER 25

If this were a movie, maybe this would be where the music would swell and the film would end, cut to credits and all that. But this isn't a movie, and we just destroyed half my damn school.

The guys and I slowly disentangle from each other and turn to face the other people who made it up onto the roof to fight with us. Kendal steps forward. She's got what look like claw marks on one of her arms, her face is white, and her lip is split. I hug her carefully, avoiding her bad arm.

"You did good," I tell her, because Kendal's not exactly aggressive or a fighter—she's the opposite, honestly—and it means a lot to me that she came here and threw herself into the fray anyway.

Kendal gives me a wan smile. "You did it," she tells me, her voice a hoarse whisper, either from exhaustion or pain. Maybe both. "That was amazing."

I'm not sure if I'd call it amazing, personally. It was messy and scary and almost ended in horrible tragedy. But... I'm glad she thinks so.

We leave the destruction as it is, along with Agustin's shriveled body. We're all fucking dead on our feet, bruised and battered, and we can clean up later. We limp—literally—downstairs, everyone supporting each other. My throat hurts when I swallow, and it feels bruised and tight where Agustin grabbed it. Everybody's bleeding from somewhere, most of us from multiple places.

When we finally reach the first floor and head outside, the fight on the ground is over, and everyone's kind of gathered in a group to wait for us. There are dead demons and mages everywhere, and I see a few dead Unpredictables, which makes my heart crawl up into my throat and

threatens to strangle me. I don't see anyone I recognize, which makes me selfishly relieved, but the fact that we lost anyone at all is heartbreaking.

It's not as many casualties as I'd feared though. I didn't say this to anyone because I didn't want to put the thought in anybody's mind, but... I honestly was scared that we might *all* die today. That the insane plan we'd cooked up was nothing more than a suicide mission, and that I would've incited all these people to fight only to lose their lives.

But it's not nearly as bad as all that. I start to relax a little as the people gathered before the front steps all turn and watch us walk out of Wellwood Hall.

Right at the front of the crowd is Maddy.

Justin's supporting her—she's got what looks like a bad burn on one of her legs, and she can't seem to put all her weight on it—so I'm careful when I walk up and hug her. Maddy flings her arms around me, clinging tightly, and I feel her chest heave with a sob.

"It's okay," I murmur, my throat closing, making it hard to speak. "It's okay, Mads. I'm here. I'm safe. It's all over. I'm sorry about the, er, the water thing."

She chokes out another sob and punches my arm lightly, then nods into my neck. I feel my shoulder getting wet, and I hold her and keep shushing her, soothing her, until at last she pulls away and lets Justin support her again.

Justin and I shake hands. He looks a little banged up, but nothing too bad. In the crowd I see Erin and Tandy, Tom, Tamlin, Hardwick—even Alyssa, Megan, and Cristina. Those three look... cowed, I guess you could say, a little nervous as they look at me. Like they know they don't really have a right to be staring at me like this after the way they behaved.

I nod respectfully at them. They may be bitchy and shallow, but they stepped up in the end and did what they could to fight the good fight. We're never going to be friends, and I'm not going to be thrilled to see them at a party, but when the chips were down, we were on the same side. That's what matters right now.

The three of them look surprised and nod back at me, then look away. I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Maybe they wouldn't be so gracious in my shoes—and I admit, it's tempting to rub it in their faces—but I'm not sinking to their level.

As the guys and I make our way through the crowd, Tamlin and Hardwick walk up to us. Hardwick looks like he got hit full blast by a smoke bomb or something. Ash and soot cover him from head to toe, and for once, Tamlin is in complete disarray, her hair a mess, her clothes singed and smudged with dirt and blood.

“You all right?” Hardwick asks, eyeing all of us with concern. I think we’ll always be students to him, people he needs to look out for and protect, even if all the men have graduated and I might possibly be more powerful than he is.

I nod. “Yeah. We took care of it.”

And if that isn’t the nicest-sounding euphemism for “we killed an evil, maniacal mage”, I don’t know what is.

Hardwick smiles at me and claps me on the shoulder. “We’re all quite proud of you, Elliot.”

A little cloud of dust rises up from his arm at the sharp movement, and I have to swallow down a lump in my throat. “Thank you, sir.”

I’m not sure if I’ve ever called Hardwick “sir” and really meant it, but I do now. I underestimated him and kind of dismissed him sometimes, but at heart, he’s an incredibly brave, dedicated person who was ready to do whatever it took to help make a better future for us.

Tamlin steps forward and hugs me. I hug her back without hesitation this time, expecting it and glad for it. I still think it would feel weird to address her by anything other than her last name, but I’m calling it—we’re friends now. We’ve been through enough shit together that even if I’m still technically her student, our relationship has evolved beyond that too.

“The Circuit members who were here have woken up,” she tells me. “You’ll want to talk to them. They’re coming out of the infirmary now.”

As if walking around the abandoned school grounds as we prepped for the fight wasn’t creepy enough, we found several Circuit officials in the same kind of stasis as the ones at the holding facility had fallen into. A few members of the Griffin healing staff who came to fight brought them all in the infirmary, and someone stayed behind to monitor them during the battle.

“Good.” I glance over in the direction of the building on the west side of campus. “How many are there?”

“Close to a dozen. They were left behind after we were loaded onto the buses and taken to the holding facility. I think they were supposed to make sure everything was kept in order, so that we could have it ready when we

got back or that it was prepared to be shut down properly. The Circuit didn't yet know what they were going to do, so they wanted people on site and prepared for whichever. They fell asleep just like everyone else and, now..."

"Could someone explain what the fuck is happening?" somebody yells.

Tamlin winces. "That would be one of them, I'm sure."

With the men flanking me, we walk through the crowd, making our way across the quad to where a bunch of dazed and exhausted-looking Circuit officials are standing. They're being counseled by Brodie, who has half of his shirt missing from either the claws of some monster or a fireball or maybe a combination, I honestly can't tell.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Brodie turns to look at me, relief clear on his face. "Ah, there you are. Elliot, this is—" He gestures toward the officials, not bothering to introduce them all by name. "Hey, guys, this is Elliot. She's the one I was telling you about, I'm sure you all know her."

The Circuit officials all gaze at me with various levels of recognition and suspicion. I glare back at them, raising an eyebrow. I am so not in the mood to be treated like I did something wrong here. Not after I just risked my life saving all of them. I could've left them in those damn comas.

"Elliot is the one who got rid of Agustin," Brodie adds. "He was the one who was causing all the problems at Griffin, and I can show you—well, I don't have it on me right this second, but I can show you the numbers—he made Unpredictables disappear for years, and he was the one attacking us. He put you all into comas—"

"Eighty-five percent of the government was put out of commission," Hardwick says.

"You just all woke up feeling woozy, right?" Brodie raises his eyebrows, his expression earnest. "That's because you've been in stasis for the past several weeks."

The Circuit officials all nod slowly, looking down at themselves as if they're expecting to find that cobwebs grew on them, or like they're checking to make sure everything's still where they left it.

"It was Griffin's students and alumni that defeated this threat," Hardwick says. He has that "stern dad" tone in his voice, the kind that says he's not going to back down on this. "You know that there was one individual who was attacking us and our school. Fomenting prejudice

against Unpredictables and stirring up trouble in the government and in our society. You know that this person posed a threat. He would've only become a greater threat, and we have video documentation to prove it. But we stopped him. We fought back. Especially Elliot."

Hoo boy. I wave awkwardly, and then wince inwardly, because *waving*? Really? Ugh. You'd think after all this time, I'd be somewhat used to this whole being put in the spotlight thing, but nope.

Hardwick seems to wait for me to explain, but when I just blink at him silently because I have no idea what I'm supposed to say, or how to say it without sounding arrogant, he speaks up again.

"Elliot has mirroring powers. She's the only one with them, as far as we know. Unique even to the Unpredictable community. She can get close to a person and use their powers, and she used Agustin's to wake you all back up from the stasis that he'd put you in. Without Elliot, you might very well have stayed that way forever."

The officials all visibly react to that, eyes widening, heads jerking back.

"He had some contact with each of you personally," I explain. "He needed to, in order to set the spell. And then it was kind of like a web in his mind, and he could just activate it and send you all to sleep. If we'd just killed him without deactivating that web, then I think you all would've been stuck that way permanently. The switch had to be flipped back, if that makes sense."

"You're all awake and alive thanks to her," Dmitri growls from behind me.

The Circuit members all look at each other, an unspoken, uncomfortable energy passing between them. They seem a little nervous, shuffling their feet and murmuring as if they're coming to grips with the fact that an Unpredictable, and one that got a hell of a lot of shit from all of them, is the one who saved their asses.

"Oh, no, please. Groveling isn't necessary," Cam says dryly. He's cradling his broken arm, and his face is still bloody, but some of the color is starting to return to his cheeks.

At that, at last, the officials start to thank me and to thank the rest of us. They all seem to be a bit in shock, but one recovers faster than the others and looks a little more in charge than the rest. He reminds me a bit of Aurora, with that same air of natural authority, like he could walk into a room and know that everyone in it will do as he says.

I hope Aurora's okay, actually. We moved the Circuit officials out of the Unpredictable holding facility when we left, so she wasn't there when Agustin sent his second attack. But I hope she's woken up too. She's not my favorite person, but she *is* a good person. She didn't deserve this any more than anyone else.

"Excuse me?" I step up to the man who seems to be in charge and clear my throat.

He gives me an odd look. "Miss Sinclair. We've heard of you. Thank you for your service."

"I wasn't in the armed forces, you can cut that out." I try to keep from sounding too curt, but I'm not sure I'm all that successful. "Listen. I had a deal with the Circuit. If I dealt with Agustin, you guys would let Griffin reopen. Well, I've dealt with him. He's gone. Permanently. I didn't just *find* him for you, I didn't just bring him to you in handcuffs, I got rid of him."

Maybe this is what Hardwick was waiting for me to say. This was a deal I struck with the government, after all, so maybe he wanted to let me be the one to remind them of it.

"So when can Griffin reopen?" I ask, standing a little taller. "I held up my end of the bargain, I took care of Agustin and proved that Unpredictables weren't the threat, he was. So, are you going to hold up your end?"

The guy looks at me with raised eyebrows, then turns and pointedly looks at the holes and scorch marks in the buildings, the ruined tower up on the roof, the caved-in walls, and the destroyed quad before glancing back at me.

I raise a challenging eyebrow at him. What, he's got a problem with this or something?

The guy sighs. "I'm not the official to be—I mean, I'll have to check in with my superiors. But I don't see any reason why they would say no. You have, as you said, proven that Unpredictables in general are not the threat and you've neutralized the person who was putting all of us in danger. I imagine you'll be allowed to open the school whenever you're ready."

I have no idea when that'll be, given all the damage, but hey, I will fucking take it. I turn to see if the others are paying attention, to make sure someone else heard this in case the Circuit tries to go back on their word later, and I catch Hardwick wiping tears away from his eyes.

My heart squeezes in my chest as a wave of acute fondness washes over me. This school was his whole life. He fought like hell for it, and now he's getting it back.

Kendal, Tandy, Erin, and several others have been milling about nearby, not eavesdropping but clearly waiting to see what's going to happen. The guys and I walk back over to them, and I'm grinning ear to ear as we approach.

"We got permission," I tell them, watching their eyes light up. "Griffin is going to reopen."

"What? What was that?"

A voice rises from the back of the crowd, and I look over at Hardwick, lifting a brow. He gives me a slight nod and then activates a charm around his neck that will amplify his voice.

I could be the one to announce it, but... I've had enough of the spotlight for a while. And Hardwick is still our dean. This is his school.

"Griffin is going to reopen!" he announces, the words booming across the quad, across the entire campus.

The cheer that rises up is deafening.

CHAPTER 26

Holy shit, I'm exhausted.

I want to collapse onto a bed with my four men and sleep for a week.

There's a lot of cleanup to do—the school is even more destroyed than it was last time we fought here, but at least no buildings have collapsed, thank fuck—but that can all wait until tomorrow. The battle only lasted a couple of hours, but they were the longest, most intense hours of my life, and before that, we were up almost all night preparing, so I think we've earned a fucking nap.

But first, we have to get everyone patched up.

Anyone with any sort of medical knowledge or healing ability is asked to help out, and soon I'm bandaging knees, wrapping up cuts, applying antiseptic and all the rest. The adults all know first aid, and the school's medical staff handle the more serious injuries like broken limbs and deep gashes and burns. Cam's broken arm is set, and he's given a potion that will speed up the healing process. Maddy's leg is treated so that the burns fade to fresh, pink scars.

After we tend to the living, the next order of business is to take care of the dead. We have to go through and identify everyone we lost, marking down their names so that we can contact relatives. Roman uses some technique related to his necromancy magic to preserve the bodies so that their families can come collect them.

Oh, except the demon bodies. Those we just burn, even though Cam points out that some of them might turn out to make a pretty good steak, and I think he was only half-joking.

Liam helps us deal with the bodies before getting ready to head out, back to his compound in the woods. Before he goes, he says goodbye to Roman. I don't know what's said between them since they're standing off to the side, a bit apart from the group, but I see them embrace, and when Roman walks back to us, he looks a bit lighter, like a weight has lifted from his shoulders.

"You all good?" I tilt my head, searching his face.

Roman nods. "He was just saying he's proud of the people I have around me." He pauses, hooking his thumbs into the front pockets of his pants. "When we parted, it wasn't on the best terms. We had fundamentally different views on how to handle things and it felt... irreconcilable." He grins slightly. "Something that Tamlin has informed me is typical between fathers and sons—the arguing, the parent driving you nuts, the rebelliousness."

He shakes his head, a pained look crossing his features like a cloud drifting in front of the sun.

"But my father, my parents... they were gone, so all I ever remembered was the idealized version of them, how much I loved them, how perfect they seemed. I was just a child when they died, so I never got to that older stage with them where things become complicated and we might fight or struggle to maintain a connection. I didn't realize that was what I had with Liam. So now that we've had time to cool off, to really... think about things, we can approach each other with more understanding. More appreciation for each other."

"I'm glad," I say honestly, taking a step toward him.

"Me too. I had no one besides him in my life growing up, not really, and I was a loner for a long time afterward. I thought Liam was a hypocrite, not having anyone in his life but telling me that I had to go out and find friends and more people besides just him. But he was right. I needed people. I needed you and the others. My life is so much better with you in it." He gives me a small smile. "Liam also wanted me to know that he thought I'd made an excellent choice in a partner and that he was proud of me."

I smile back, a wave of feelings expanding to fill my chest. "I'm glad that you could have that."

Roman shrugs, stepping forward to meet me and erasing the small distance between us. "It's thanks to you, honestly."

“No, it’s thanks to you too.” I swallow as I wrap my arms around his waist, tipping my head back to look into his eyes. “Look, I never would’ve... given us a chance if you hadn’t encouraged it. If you had walked away at the beginning, then I would have too. I was so bad at opening up and actually being a part of a relationship, and you were so patient with me, letting me take my time but making it clear what you wanted, and... I’m so fucking grateful for that.”

“I think it was more fifty-fifty,” Roman tells me, his cobalt eyes shining as he runs the backs of his knuckles lightly down the line of my jaw. “You have so much love in you, Reckless. I could always see that.”

He dips his head and brushes his lips over mine, and my fingers dig into the back of his shirt as I rise up onto my tiptoes, pressing my body against his to properly meet his kiss.

“Oh, thank God, it worked!”

A loud voice behind us draws our attention, and I reluctantly break away from Roman to see what the commotion is about. I turn just in time to see Tamlin launch herself at Brodie, flinging her arms around him and jumping up and down in excitement.

“Uh... Did I miss something?” Cam looks up from fiddling with his sling.

“You miss a lot of things,” Asher jokes.

Tamlin seems to realize what she’s done and steps back quickly, running a hand over her disheveled, beat-up clothes and clearing her throat. Brodie’s face turns bright red, but he can’t hide the pleased little smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

“Oh. Um. This.”

Still looking flustered, Tamlin takes something out of her pocket and holds it out to us. It’s a small camera, I realize. When I look up at her in confusion, she shoots a glance at the man beside her and then curls her fingers around the camera.

“Brodie and I were hoping... well, while you all were running around getting ready, Brodie had a brilliant idea. Media has played a large role in this fight, influencing things for either good or ill. Agustin’s used it, we’ve used it, everybody’s used it. It’s how we stayed in touch with what was going on in our society as things went to hell.”

Her gaze cuts to Brodie again, and a beaming smile spreads across her face. She honestly looks like she might start jumping up and down again.

“Brodie made the point that, however things went down, it needed to be known. People needed to see what happened here. They needed to know that no matter what the outcome, Unpredictables risked everything to help them, and we’re not the bad guys here. We wanted to prove that once and for all.”

“So we set up cameras everywhere,” Brodie adds. “We didn’t know if maybe some of the videos would get distorted with all the magic flying around, or if they would even survive the fight intact, and I think a couple of ’em did get crushed... but most of them seem to have made it out all right, with the footage preserved.”

“Footage of all of us kicking ass,” Tamlin says. She’s more energized than I’ve ever seen her, practically bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Especially you, Elliot.”

“This proves that we were really the only shot that the magical world had at defeating Agustin.” Brodie shrugs. “Not to toot our own horns too much or anything. But it all looks pretty badass.”

“We had it livestreaming onto the net.” Tamlin’s dark brown eyes gleam. “It seemed like the safest bet, because if we lost, no one would be left to upload the footage. I was worried that maybe it got cut off or something, but no, it’s been working!”

“The comments are astounding,” Brodie says. “Everyone is being so supportive.”

Tamlin nods, a little piece of hair slipping out of her messy ponytail. “They’re thanking us. They’re applauding. They’re realizing just how wrong they were and how close Agustin came to ruling us all.”

“He would have if it wasn’t for Elliot,” Dmitri grumbles.

Everyone looks at him.

He shrugs. “What? It’s true. Sure, we might have killed him. *Might* have. But Elliot’s been the one stopping him every time. She’s the one with the mirroring powers. She’s the one who woke up the government, and she was the one who got the deal to allow Griffin to reopen. It’s thanks to her.”

He pauses, as if realizing that he might be making it sound like the rest of them are chopped liver. “Not that everyone else didn’t help.”

I roll my eyes and kiss him on the cheek. “I appreciate you defending me.”

“We need to see about getting the other cameras,” Tamlin says, slipping her hand into Brodie’s. He jerks slightly and glances down at the connection

between them, a blush tinting his cheeks, but she doesn't even seem to have noticed what she unconsciously did. "We'll see you guys later?"

"Yup." I grin. *Much later.*

With no battles looming on the horizon, and the dead and wounded taken care of, there's no reason for everyone to remain on campus. A lot of the admins and staff stay behind to start planning the cleanup efforts, but everyone else begins to clear out.

Maddy, Justin, the guys, and I go home. Well, to Roman's.

It's funny how I just think of it that way in my head now. *Home.* A place that's for us.

Our family.

My sister sleeps in bed with me the first night. We used to share a big bed in our one-bedroom apartment, and after the day we just had, where she nearly saw her sister die after being kidnapped and held hostage herself... I can understand that she might need a little reassurance.

I fall asleep almost the instant my head hits the pillow, and I wake up a long time later with the oddest feeling.

It takes me a minute to realize what it is.

I don't have to do anything.

I don't have to get up and fight a bad guy. I don't have to get up and train. I don't have to save the world.

Thank fuck.



The next few days feel like a vacation. We barely leave the house, just relaxing and recovering together—soaking up this strange new peace. Justin stays with us too, getting to know all of us properly, which his parents seem to be fine with.

"I mean, you're the hero of the hour," he jokes. "What are they going to do, tell me I can't hang out with you for a week?"

On the fifth day, we're all hanging out in the living room, and I'm half asleep on Dmitri's lap when Cam comes bursting in.

"Guys, look at this!"

I nearly fall off the couch in surprise. I do not appreciate being woken up from my nap, but Cam sounds so excited that I decide I'll let him live.

This time.

The blond mage holds out his phone, where a clip from a talk show called “Magic Today” is playing. It’s the same program he showed us a video of last year—the one where those assholes were dissing on Unpredictables and calling us weapons.

Not that I’m bitter or anything. Of course not.

In this clip, the panel is made up of half the same people and half new ones.

“The fact is that if there are a few... well, bad apples, let’s call them, in the bunch, we clearly need some good apples to stop them,” one panelist is saying. “Someone of Agustin’s power and mindset could rise up again, and we’ll need Unpredictables to stop them. Our magical level simply can’t compare.”

Everyone is nodding in agreement as the guy continues. “Unpredictables were the ones who had power to go up against him, and obviously they’re not all awful. They’re just like the rest of us, some good, some bad, some average, and it was a clear mistake that our society had alienated them so much and given into bigotry, even on this very panel.”

“Absolutely right,” a woman with sleek red hair says. “If there’s a possibility of these powerful Unpredictables coming along who have evil intentions, then we need to also have the well-intentioned Unpredictables who can oppose them. Oppressing Unpredictables only hurts people and makes room for the ‘bad guys’, so to speak, to waltz in unopposed.”

“I mean, whether Unpredictables can stop them or not, they’re people,” another panelist says. “We should be treating them fairly on that basis alone, not based on how valuable they are to us. Otherwise we’re still not looking at them as fully human.”

I have to agree with this last panelist.

“Um. I have issues.” Dmitri’s glowering at the screen, probably wishing he was on that panel right now so he could give a few of those people a piece of his mind.

“Of course you have issues,” Cam shoots back, grinning. “Isn’t that your middle name? Dmitri *Issues* Mikhailov?”

They devolve into good-natured arguing. Honestly... yeah. I don’t think things are going to be perfect yet. Probably not for a long time. But public opinion is definitely swinging our way.

I think we’re out of the woods.

CHAPTER 27

Maddy and Justin aren't able to stay nearly as long as I'd like—they have to go back to their school, especially since Neptune didn't officially close down while the whole Agustin thing was going on. The administration decided to “soldier on” and keep teaching their students.

The two of them aren't in trouble for leaving though, which is what I feared at first. Apparently, soon after Maddy and Justin headed out to find us, the admins announced that anyone who wanted to leave to be with their families was welcome to do so.

I thought that was generous of them when Mads first told me about it, but apparently a quarter of the students left, so the school didn't really have a choice. It was either support their students or have a quarter of them expelled or suspended, and the administration probably felt that would reflect too poorly on them.

Besides—Maddy and Justin are heroes now. Footage of them kicking a demon's ass was captured by the cameras Brodie and Tamlin set up, and as more and more people watch the videos, both of them have gotten offers of dates from various people.

They're not the only ones either.

We're all sort of celebrities, in a minor way, for a little while. I'm looking forward to a time when people no longer stop me on the streets. I'm sure there will always be a few people who recognize me when I'm out and about, but as nice as it is to hear people thank me and as amusing as it is to get all this attention, I'm ready for it to be over. These people don't know me, and I like my anonymity. I like my quiet life.

I hug Maddy tightly before she leaves. My heart breaks every time we have to be separated, and I'm still a little extra clingy in the wake of her kidnapping.

At least now it's not just the two of us against the world. If my little sister was still all that I had, I'd be taking this a lot harder. But she has Justin and all of her friends back at Neptune. I have my men, and my friends, and oh shit, graduation in a semester.

I'm glad Mads has a guy who loves her—it's what she deserves. Someone who appreciates how wonderful she is and will treat her right and look out for her. If I can't be with her all the time, I'm glad someone else is watching her back. Maddy would probably say the same about me, actually, although she jokes that of course it takes four people instead of one to make sure I stay out of trouble.

To which I say, *hey, I don't go looking for trouble. It just finds me.*

It doesn't happen overnight, but Griffin does reopen. Perhaps sooner than it should, but who cares about a bit of construction if it means we get to go back to school? Everyone's education has been set back half a semester, and I know I'm not the only one who's eager to hurry up and get their life back on track. Hardwick's apparently bursting with ideas, now that public support and government funding are actually both behind Griffin, and we're not struggling for attention and funds.

Good for the school and for Hardwick, if you ask me. It's what both of them deserve.

Dmitri, Cam, and Asher are going to be staying at Roman's house while Roman and I head back to Griffin to finish out the semester. Cam and Dmitri definitely see it as their home now, and that warms my heart. Asher will always have a place at his parents' home, but he's talked with them about officially moving into Roman's—we're all going to go up over the summer holidays to spend time with Asher's family, and we'll sort through his stuff and figure out what he wants to bring back with him while we're there.

Unsurprisingly, his whole family has been very supportive, and they say they can't wait for Dmitri, Roman, and me to meet the entire family, nephews and sisters-in-law and all of it, over the holidays.

I'm a little intimidated, I'll be honest. Dmitri is too though, so we two introverts can cling to each other in crisis.

On the day we head back to Griffin, it's just me and Roman in the front seats. The car feels empty without the other three—without Asher sitting next to me or Cam singing along to the radio or Dmitri's solid presence. But it gives me time to talk about something with Roman that I haven't really had a chance to address until now.

"I understand," I tell him, repeating what I said right after the battle. "The... the craving. I get it. When I was in its grip, I didn't think about anything else. I had no emotion, it was just hunger. And I wanted to serve that hunger, if that makes sense."

Roman nods, keeping his gaze on the road. I asked him to let me drive, but he said he didn't want to die today, thanks.

Sheesh. I went ninety miles an hour in a forty-five zone *once* and none of them let me forget it.

"I wanted to say that I'm sorry," I add. "I'm sorry about what happened to your family, and to you, but now that I've felt it—now that I know what it was like—you know it wasn't your fault, right? I mean, I'm an adult and I barely pulled myself out of it. I was lucky you guys were there to stop me, to ground me. But you were just a kid, and nobody else was around. You had no idea what was happening."

Roman's face is still. I run my gaze over the striking lines of his profile as I turn a little in the seat to face him. He's so fucking gorgeous. Beautiful and broken.

But not *as* broken. Not anymore.

"And so as awful as it was," I go on. "I think that you should... I don't want you to blame yourself. Because there was no way you could have stopped it. Hell, it wasn't really even *you* doing it, and if they were around, I know your family would want you to leave your guilt behind too."

Roman gives me a small, sad smile, glancing at me out of the corner of his eyes before focusing back on the road. "Well. I know that. Or..." He sighs. "I sort of know that. It took a long time for me to stop feeling a crushing guilt. It happens in increments. Every time I think I've totally forgiven myself, something happens to make me realize I was still holding onto some."

"Are you still holding onto some now?" I ask softly.

He tilts his head to the side, thinking. "I don't think so. But then, that's the thing, I don't know. But I do know that some more of it has left me. Because of you."

His hand reaches across to mine and squeezes gently. I squeeze right back, the gesture automatic.

“I wish I could’ve met them,” I tell him. “I really do.”

Roman nods and smiles. “I’m glad to hear that. I think that they... well, I was a child, so perhaps I’m not remembering well. You know how kids are. But I think they would have liked you. I think they would’ve been glad I met you.”

I take a deep breath as Roman lets go of my hand and grips the steering wheel. “Tell me about them?”

I want to know. All that I know about them now is the tragedy. Their deaths and the aftermath. I want to know the good parts.

Roman thinks for a moment, tilting his head slightly.

Then he starts to talk about them. About his older sister, and how she always looked out for him but they often pranked each other too. About how they would sneakily watch movies their parents wouldn’t let them see by sitting on the stairs and peeking into the living room. He tells me about how his mother was firm, and how his father was the cook in the family, and about how in the summers they would take long vacations and stay in a cabin by a lake.

It sounds wonderful, and my heart aches all over again that he never got to have the rest of it. But it sounds like what he did have was good. And I’m glad for that.

Roman talks and talks, more than I’ve ever heard him do, actually.

Like he’s been holding his breath for ages and now he’s finally getting to exhale.



The day after Roman and I arrive at Griffin, classes start up again. Everyone else is back on campus too, and it’s a bit surreal, honestly. As if at some point, fighting Agustin became my *real* life and going to school like a normal person became the unreal dream, the fabrication, the fantasy.

Students and professors alike are a little shell shocked, but overall, people seem glad to be back. There are a few therapists that Hardwick’s brought in for people to talk to if they need it. I’m pretty damn sure that the

roster is full. And there are groups that you can go to and talk about what happened. I notice that some students are skittish, jumping at any loud noises. Some people are sporting bandages or casts.

But overall, everyone settles back into the routine pretty quickly. I think that for the most part people are relieved it's all over and they can finally relax. Well, except us third-years who have a big final project to prepare for. We're all freaking out.

"If I survived that final battle only to flunk out," Erin says at one point during a study group, gripping her pencil so hard it snaps in half, "I might actually go insane."

On the fifth day back, I run into Alyssa—literally. I'm coming around a corner on the second floor of Wellwood Hall, running late for class, and she's got her head down looking at her phone, so we smack into each other.

"Sorry, sorry, I'm sorry," I say, crouching to pick up her scattered things, not seeing who it is.

"No, I was looking at my phone, it's fine," she replies—and then we both look up and realize who we're talking to.

Ah. For a moment, we both freeze, staring at each other.

Then I hand Alyssa back her things and we stand up. She looks... well, she's dressed in the same style as usual, with the same clothes and hair and all that. But something about her seems different. Like there's a gravity to her that wasn't there before.

She gives me a slow once-over, dragging her gaze over me like she's slowly assessing me. Once, that would've made me angry. I would've demanded to know what she had decided to nitpick me for today.

Now, I don't even care. I've got so much else going on, why bother worrying what she thinks of me? Or what she might say or do?

"You did good," she finally tells me. It sounds like she's struggling to get the words out, like she hates admitting it. "With the whole thing. Thanks."

There are a lot of things I could say to that. *I didn't do it for you. So you're ready to admit I'm not a waste of DNA? Let's see some proper groveling. Yeah, I bet that really hurt to say.*

But I don't want to continue the fight or this stupid feud we've had going on for years. I'm not going to waste any of my breath on it.

"I'm glad you're okay," I tell her instead.

Alyssa's eyes go wide with surprise. I try to infuse as much sincerity into my voice as I can. "And I appreciate you helping out against Agustin in the fight."

"Oh." The blonde girl glances around like she's waiting for a camera crew to pop out or something. "I—um. Yes. I wasn't going to let that asshole win, now was I?"

Well, at least we can find common ground in that. "Yeah, same. Good luck with your senior project."

I start to walk away, and I've just about reached the end of the hallway when I hear her say, "You too."

Feels pretty good, actually.

Even though good things are happening though, and even though I am enjoying my classes, I can't help but feel... antsy. It's weird. I can't put my finger on it.

I try to explain it that night in bed as I curl up next to Roman. I'm openly living with him now because honestly, at this point, why not? He listens patiently, running his fingers through my hair as I ramble and stumble, but eventually I just give up.

"I'm not saying what I want to say." I puff my cheeks out, exhaling a deep breath. "But I don't know exactly what it is I want to say. I just know that I'm... that something's different."

"You've changed," Roman points out. "You're no longer the student you were when you arrived here. Even the other students who fought with us didn't face down Agustin over and over like you did. I'm sure they're all feeling a bit unsettled as well, but I'm not surprised you're feeling it more acutely than they are."

I suppose. I hope it'll go away with time. Or maybe I don't want it to go away. I don't know. Ugh. My head's kind of a mess.

At the end of my first week though, before I can drive myself too crazy with it—I get a call to Hardwick's office.

Hoo boy.

I don't think I'm in trouble. He probably wants me to do something publicity-wise for the school, or maybe someone's here to interview me, or it's a Circuit official who needs a statement about something or other. In the immediate aftermath of the fight, I spent an entire day with the men at a Circuit office explaining everything over and over and over again. You'd think I wouldn't have to do it for the millionth time, but red tape's a bitch.

When I arrive, Hardwick opens the door and greets me warmly. “Elliot, come in, come in. I hope your first week has been going well.”

“Oh, you know, as well as can be expected.”

There’s someone sitting in one of the chairs in front of Hardwick’s desk, and as he walks around to take his seat again, the visitor stands up, smoothing her blond hair back with one hand.

It’s Aurora.

I actually blow out a breath in relief as I settle into the chair next to hers. I mean, I figured she was okay, but it’s good to have confirmation on that.

“You look good,” I tell her.

She looks like she always does, but I figure after being put into stasis and all, she deserves a compliment.

Aurora gives me a small smile. “I’m glad to see you doing so well, Elliot.”

“Please don’t tell me I need to fill out another form.” Who knew heroism came with so much paperwork?

Aurora shakes her head. “No, I’m here to speak with you about a new initiative the Circuit is putting together. In light of all that you’ve done for the community and your work against Agustin, the Circuit feels that you have earned the right to be officially graduated from this school. We’ll consider your efforts against Agustin a ‘work study’ and count it toward your final project.”

“It would be an insult, we felt,” Hardwick says, “to claim that you still needed to work on your magical control for the rest of the school year when you’ve clearly proven that you have more control and competency than most.”

I’m not sure I’d go quite that far, but yeah, I do think I have my powers well in hand.

“Thank you,” I tell them honestly. “So, that’s it? I’m done? I’m graduated?”

They both nod. “Yes,” Aurora says. “We are considering you officially graduated.”

Wow. Holy crap.

A weight I didn’t even realize I was carrying lifts, and I almost whoop with relief. This is why I’ve been feeling antsy, I realize. After going out there and hunting Agustin, fighting him, meeting Liam and taking on the

Circuit—I don't really want to be back at school. As fun as Griffin is, as much as it's given me, as much as I love it... I've outgrown it now. I'm ready for the real world.

"I have another question for you, now that we've settled that," Aurora goes on. "As I said, the Circuit is putting together an initiative. In light of what happened with Agustin, we want to be better prepared should a magical person try to seize so much power."

Good plan. Maybe a little late on the draw, but better late than never.

Aurora purses her lips, uncrossing and then recrossing her legs.

"As I'm sure your history courses have taught you, it's a commonly held theory among our historians that the so-called gods of ancient myth were magically gifted people who let their power go to their heads. But the argument against that theory was that we didn't have magic users in our midst who were so powerful they could be mistaken for gods. Or at least, not gods with the multiple powers mythology claims they had. We assumed such stories were either embellishment or fabrication."

Her impassive expression hardens a little, her gray eyes glinting.

"But now, having witnessed Agustin's rise, we must consider the very real possibility that there are other magical practitioners who could reach his level of power. In that case, we feel it best to create a task force that could neutralize someone like Agustin, if a person arrives with his power, his lack of morality, and his criminal plans. We don't want to be caught with our pants down again."

"Sounds good," I tell her, raising my eyebrows a little at her turn of phrase.

"The Circuit is also working to create more support programs for Unpredictables," Hardwick adds, grinning. He's like a kid at Christmas. "Liaisons to our community, programs that support us rather than just shoving students into Griffin and then ignoring them. Really making an effort to welcome Unpredictables into magical society."

I'm really glad about that. Griffin's great, but up until now it's been literally the only home Unpredictables have, and then we're thrust back out into the world after graduation—a world that doesn't necessarily want us. Now, hopefully, Unpredictables will have a better life and a better future.

"So, why are you guys telling me this?" I ask, glancing between the two of them.

“Because we’d like you to be on the task force.” Aurora smiles. “The High Circuit has requested you specifically. Consider yourself... like when the case moves from the local police to the FBI, you’re the FBI. We’ll bring you in to handle things, particularly Unpredictables, that those of us with normal levels of magic can’t.”

Damn. That actually sounds pretty cool. I’d get to see the world, help people, and kick ass. All things I care about.

There’s just one thing...

“Can Dmitri, Cam, and Asher join?” I ask. “They’ve been looking for jobs but haven’t been very successful yet. A lot of people weren’t too keen on hiring Unpredictables.”

“One of the programs we’re looking into will promote bringing more Unpredictables into the workforce,” Hardwick cuts in, leaning forward.

“You are just overjoyed about all of this, aren’t you?” I tease.

“How could you tell?” He grins, and it makes him look ten years younger.

“Those were three of the four who helped you on your mission against Agustin, yes?” Aurora asks me. “They did admirable work. I see no reason why they can’t join the team if you all work well together. Perhaps you could also put a word in with your boyfriend.”

“You mean Roman?”

I take it this means Aurora either doesn’t know I’m dating all four of those guys, or she’s just being tactful. It’s hard to tell with her.

She nods. “Yes. He did great work in cases involving necromancy and unsolved murders in his younger years. We would love to have him on your team as well.”

“He won’t want to give up being a professor,” I say, “but I’m pretty sure I could persuade him to split his time.”

I can hardly hold in my grin. Holy shit. I get to work with all four of my men, and I get to be some kind of badass Avenger while I do it. Fuck, yes.

Aurora sighs. “You’re going to be causing me trouble for quite some time, aren’t you, Elliot?”

I waggle my eyebrows at her. “You bet.”

I can’t fucking wait.

EPILOGUE

I can't sleep.

I *should* be sleeping. It's six o'clock in the morning, and really, no one should be awake at this ungodly hour.

But I'm too amped up.

My eyes popped open at five-thirty, and despite my constant reminders to my body that it could really use the rest, that I don't have to be awake yet, I can't convince myself that I'm really tired.

Tilting my head back, I stare up at the ceiling above my bed. The white paint looks gray in the pre-dawn light that seeps in through the curtains.

Go to sleep, Elliot. Go to sleep.

There's a gentle rap on the door, and my head lifts off the mattress as I look over.

"Who is it?" I call softly.

"Cam."

"And Asher."

I grin.

Oh, thank fuck, because my mantra really wasn't working for shit.

"Come in."

The door cracks open, and two heads appear in the small space. Asher and Cam are both still wearing their sleep clothes—shorts and a t-shirt for Ash, who runs hot, and flannel pants and a tee for Cam—and they step inside and close the door behind them.

They cross the room together and then split up when they reach the bed, lifting the comforter and crawling in from opposite sides so that they sandwich me between them. Not that I mind one bit. I love sandwiches.

“Did you guys meet up in the hall or something?” I tease, turning onto my side to face Asher as Cam scoots close to curl his body around mine.

“Nah.” Asher smiles, blushing slightly. “I was awake, and I just sent out a little feeler to see if Cam was too. Turns out he was. So we thought we’d come over together.”

“I see.” A grin tilts my lips, and I lean forward to kiss him. “You guys couldn’t sleep either?”

“No way. Too excited.” Cam brushes my hair aside so he can nibble at my shoulder and neck, and I squirm, rubbing my ass against his growing hard-on. “This is a big day. We thought maybe we should kick it off right. You know, celebrate a little.”

“Ah. Makes sense.”

I pull Asher a little closer too, until they’re both pressed flush against me. Ash’s cock pokes into my stomach, and the feel of them both hot and hard against me, their muscled bodies encasing me, has slickness gathering in my core.

“What do you want to do to celebrate?” I ask, my voice a little lower and breathier as I move between them, grinding against one, then the other.

“Oh, we’ve got a few ideas,” Asher murmurs, glancing over my shoulder to grin at Cam. “But we’re open to improvising.”

I laugh at that, and then I lean forward and kiss Ash again, losing myself in the sweetness of it as I grope them shamelessly and they grope me right back. After a few minutes, the covers become too constricting, so we throw them off. Then Cam pulls my tank top off before he and Asher tug their shirts over their heads too. I end up on my other side, my tongue wrestling with Cam’s as I kiss him hard and dirty and Asher massages my breasts, tweaking and teasing my nipples.

I’m just about to switch sides again when three sharp raps at the door make me pause. Asher and Cam both pause too, and I can feel Ash’s smile against the back of my neck, where he was trailing kisses along my skin.

“Who is it?” I call, breaking my kiss with Cam.

“Dmitri.”

I glance at Cam, then turn to face Asher, lifting my eyebrows. “What do you guys say? Should we improvise?”

Cam’s chuckle rumbles in his chest, and Asher raises his voice to call, “Come in!”

A second later, the door pops open. Dmitri steps inside, a knowing look already on his face. We kind of gave up the game when Asher was the one to invite him in.

“What’s going on in here?” the dark-haired mage drawls as he stalks toward the bed—but he must already have a pretty good idea, because he starts taking off his shirt before he’s even finished speaking.

“We just thought we should celebrate.” Cam’s smile beams in the hazy morning light. “Big day and all.”

“It is.” Dmitri’s dark eyes flicker with a promise that makes my pussy clench. “We better make it a big celebration.”

Cam and Asher scoot back a little, giving me room to roll onto my back as Dmitri crawls onto the bed with us, making a beeline for me. He drapes his large, broad-shouldered body over mine, settling himself between my legs as he devours me with a searing kiss.

The two other men converge on me again, exploring the rest of me with their lips and hands as Dmitri angles his head to take our kiss even deeper. I wrap my legs around him, hooking my ankles just above his ass as tingles spread through my body, an overload of sensation from being touched in so many places at once.

Just as Dmitri breaks away, giving us both a chance to catch our breath, another firm knock sounds at the door.

All four of us swivel our heads to look at the large oak door on the other side of my bedroom.

Then all four of us—even Dmitri—burst into laughter.

“Who is it?” I call, even though process of elimination has already given me my answer.

“I think you know who, Reckless.” Roman’s voice is tinged with dry humor.

“Come in!” Cam lifts his voice, amusement still gleaming in his blue eyes.

We all scramble up to our knees as Roman pushes the door open, and heat fills his expression at the sight that greets him. We’re all topless, and I’m sure my skin is flushed, my lips swollen, and my hair a mess. The other three look a bit disheveled too, and Roman seems to like everything about it.

“You’re late,” Cam jokes as I crawl a little closer to the edge of the bed, anxious to kiss my fourth boyfriend.

Roman cracks a smile. “Clearly.”

“You better catch up then.”

That’s all it takes. Roman doesn’t hesitate, striding across the room as he tugs his shirt off. He’s bare-chested by the time he reaches us, and he hooks one arm around my waist, dragging me a little closer to the edge of the bed and bending me backward with his kiss. I grab onto his shoulders for balance, holding on tightly as he kisses me like a starving man.

I hope he always kisses me like this.

I hope he’s always a little bit starved for me.

Three other bodies gather around us—Asher and Cam on my left and right and Dmitri behind. They all made quick work of the rest of their clothes while I was distracted by Roman, and my hands drift down to feather over Cam and Asher’s cocks, trusting Roman to hold me up as he continues to kiss me. The two men murmur appreciatively, and I keep teasing them as Dmitri peels my pajama bottoms and panties down my legs.

I shift my weight to help him tug them over my knees and off, and then I feel his chest at my back, pinning me between him and Roman. He fists his cock, dragging it through my folds from behind, groaning when he finds me soaking wet.

“Are you ready for us, Princess?”

Fuck, yes. Always.

I mutter a “yes” that gets swallowed up by Roman’s kiss immediately, and Dmitri squeezes the head of his cock inside me. He doesn’t drive in balls-deep immediately. Instead, he works his way in inch by torturous inch, seeming to take great pleasure in watching my kiss with Roman grow more and more desperate as arousal flares through my body.

Finally, he bottoms out inside me, his pelvis flush against my ass. I feel utterly helpless suspended between these two men, held up by their large bodies and impaled on Dmitri’s cock—but I feel utterly safe too.

“Goddamn. Best fucking place in the world,” the man behind me mutters before he begins to thrust in long, even strokes.

Cam and Asher are still worshipping every inch of me they can reach, and every time Dmitri thrusts into me, my clit rubs against Roman’s cock through the layer of fabric between us.

I don’t even bother trying to fight the building pleasure or trying to control my movements. I just give in, letting the torrent of sensations sweep me away. I’m so close to coming, so damn close, when Dmitri pulls out of

me. I let out a shocked, disbelieving sound, and his answering chuckle makes my pussy clench.

“Don’t worry, Princess. We’re not done yet.”

The three men on the bed help me lie back as Roman shucks his pants, and almost as soon as I hit the mattress, he’s between my legs, settling his narrow hips between my thighs and thrusting into me. I moan, arching my back at the perfect feeling of fullness. Asher and Cam don’t let the opportunity go to waste, ducking their heads to lap at my nipples. Dmitri pins my hands above my head with his larger, calloused ones, and all I can do is twist and writhe as I come on Roman’s cock.

“God, yes! Oh, fuck. Fuuuck.”

Possessive satisfaction sparks in Roman’s eyes, and he thrusts several more times, breathing heavily as I tighten around him in the aftershocks of my orgasm.

When he pulls out, I feel bereft. But I don’t complain this time.

Because like Dmitri said, we’re not done yet.

Hands lift me again, turning me over and placing me on all fours. I end up oriented toward Asher, and lucky me, my face is at cock-level. I lean forward, wrapping my mouth around his shaft, just as Cam shuffles into place behind me. All four of the men are breathing more heavily, and so am I, as the blond mage slides smoothly into me. My body is more than ready for him, and as Cam begins to thrust, I try to stay focused on Asher, wanting to drive him as crazy as I feel.

“You’re so gorgeous like this, Elle,” the man before me murmurs. “The way you trust us. The way you take care of us. You’re beautiful.”

There are murmurs of agreement from the other men, and I wish I could say something back, but my mouth is kinda busy right now. So instead, I tell him without words, relaxing my throat to try to take more of him in as I moan around his cock.

I’m already working up to another orgasm, especially with Dmitri’s hand gliding down my stomach to massage my throbbing clit and Roman’s fingers rolling and pinching my nipples.

But before I do, our configuration switches again. A different cock slides into my pussy, and a new one finds my mouth.

We switch again, and again, moving around on the bed as we do, taking up every inch of available space on the king-sized mattress. The

combinations change, but there's always someone inside me, someone else in my mouth or my hand, and several mouths and hands on me too.

I lose track of how many orgasms I have. Some of them tear through my body like fire, and some move through me like a slow wave, drowning me in pleasure.

The men don't all come at once, but it's better this way, because I get to be connected to each one of them—my mouth on them or my pussy clenching them tight—as I feel them finally lose control.

Dmitri is the last to finish, and he braces himself over me as he slips a hand between us, coaxing one last orgasm out of my exhausted, sated, sweaty body.

“Fucking hell.”

His voice is raspy and strained as he slams into me, coming hard inside me.

When he pulls out, everyone flops down onto the bed in a tangle of limbs. For several long moments, none of us move, just getting our breath back and enjoying lying together like this.

The mantra I repeated as I stared at the ceiling earlier is finally true. *Now I'm sleepy.*

I'm just starting to slip into a light doze when Asher lifts his head. “We really should get up and get ready. We don't want to be late.”

Everyone groans. Because we're lazy and sex-exhausted. Sexhausted.

He's right though, and as soon as I remember why we have to get up, a thrill of excitement ripples through me, making my eyes pop open. This is what woke me up so early this morning in the first place.

Today is the first day of our new job on the task force.

It doesn't have an official name yet, but I'm sure we'll think of something. Well, actually, I already thought of a few names, but Aurora shot them all down. “You are not going to be named after a superhero group,” she snapped after I suggested Doom Patrol and the Justice League.

Personally, I think she's wasting a huge opportunity, but oh well.

Roman's going to be splitting his time between Griffin and the task force, but the other three men will be on it full-time with me. He loves teaching, and I would never want to take that away from him, but I think he's ready for something new too. He's spent so much of his time working out in the world, bringing justice to people and fighting, that I don't think he'd be completely happy just being a professor. Now he can do both.

“Yeah. Okay, okay, you’re right. We’ll get up.” I make a contented noise in my throat as I raise my arms overhead, stretching out the kinks in my deliciously sore body.

“I call the shower first then.” Cam sits up, shoving a hand through his disheveled blond hair.

“No, you don’t, you fucker—” Dmitri yells, but Cam’s already teleported into the bathroom and locked the door.

Dmitri jumps out of bed and phases right through the door, and a second later, I can hear scuffling and cursing on the other side.

“Just shower together, you five-year-olds!” Roman yells.

“He hogs the water!” I hear Dmitri yell back, his voice muffled.

I laugh. Everyone’s so relaxed with each other, teasing and goofing off. They all love each other, and somehow, they all love me too. We’re a family, a unit.

Sometimes, I can’t quite believe it. This feels... insane, that we’re so happy together, that I actually get to have this. After so many years of struggling on my own, trying to take care of Maddy alone, to have a family like this feels incredible.

But it is real.

It’s real, and it’s my every day, my new normal.

Looking back, it’s hard to believe that I almost didn’t go to Griffin Academy. That I almost took the easy way out and let Aurora take my magic instead.

The past three years definitely haven’t been easy.

There’s no denying that learning to control my powers, meeting four incredible men who knocked my world off its axis, and going up against the most powerful mage the modern world has ever seen was the hard way.

But it was so fucking worth it.



THANK YOU FOR READING!

I had so much fun writing this series, and I hope you enjoyed reading it just as much! If you did, please [leave a review](#) for your fellow readers (even a sentence or two makes such a huge difference).

This is the final book in the *Academy of Unpredictable Magic* series, but don't worry, I've got plenty more books in store!

Be sure to check out my upcoming series, *Hidden World Academy*, a fun, sexy romp through a world of magic!

Pre-order on Amazon:

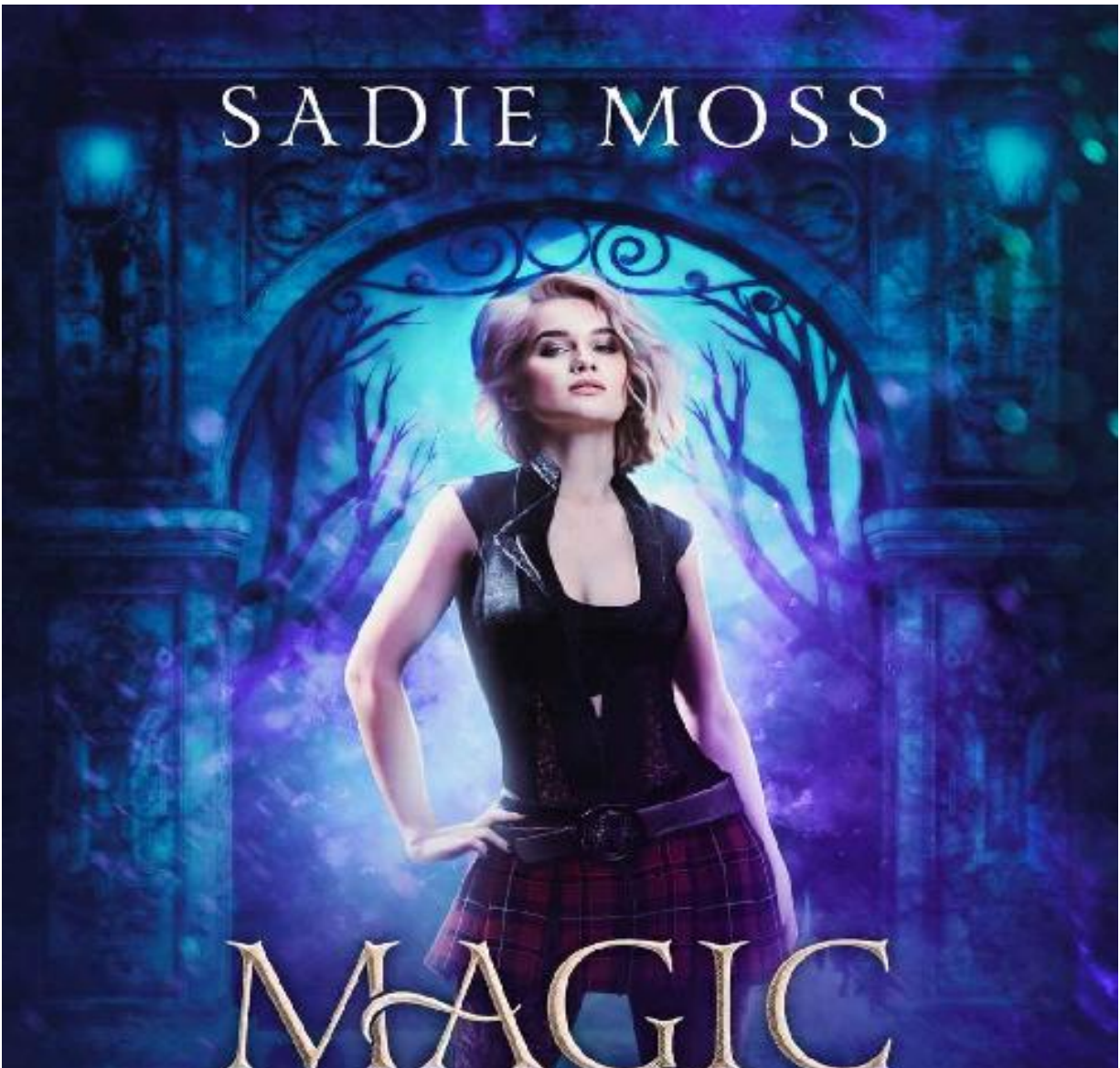
[CLICK HERE](#)

In the meantime, you can dive into my complete reverse harem urban fantasy series, [Magic Awakened](#), starting with the prequel novella, *Kissed by Shadows*.

[Click here to join my mailing list](#), and I'll send you your FREE copy of *Kissed by Shadows*!

Want access to exclusive teasers, cover reveals, giveaways, and more? Join my reader group, [Sadie Moss's Rebel Readers](#)!

COMING SOON





Radcliffe Academy is one of the most prestigious magical institutions in the Hidden World. Only the most skilled witches and warlocks grace these hallowed halls.

There's just one teeny, tiny problem.

I don't belong here.

At all.

First of all, I'm not a witch. I'm 100% grade-A, boring, bona fide human.

Second, this isn't even my life.

See, I was out celebrating my twenty-first birthday when I fell into an open manhole. Next thing I knew, I was being rushed to a hospital, and the EMTs kept asking me if I had allergies to unicorn blood.

Oh, and everybody keeps calling me Roxie--which is definitely *not* my name.

There's obviously been some kind of mix-up, but I can't let anyone here know that, or I'll be in serious danger.

So that leaves me with only one option: pretend to be this Roxie chick until I can figure out a way back to my world.

In the meantime, I have to deal with Roxie's arch enemy, who *miight* know I'm not her, a lothario across the hall with no sense of personal boundaries, and a teacher's assistant who's got a crush on me... er, I mean, Roxie.

No problem. I got this. Should be easy, right?

...don't answer that.

Pre-order on Amazon:
[CLICK HERE](#)

zlibrary

Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.



z-library.se

singlelogin.re

go-to-zlibrary.se

single-login.ru



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>