



ACADEMY OF  
UNPREDICTABLE MAGIC

TRIALS

SADIE MOSS

# TRIALS

*Academy of Unpredictable Magic #2*

SADIE MOSS

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## CHAPTER 1

A trickle of sweat works its way slowly down the back of my leg. There's a rhythmic, high-pitched squeaking noise coming from somewhere, and I can't tell if it's originating from the bed frame or me.

*God, I hope it's not me.*

Roman adjusts his grip under my knees, lifting me higher as he slams into me, and suddenly I don't give a single shit about what kind of noises I'm making. A breathy moan falls from my lips, and I massage my aching breasts, tugging on my nipples as I look down my body at the place where we're connected.

My breasts are flushed from the rough scrape of Roman's stubble, from his lips and teeth and tongue as he feasted on them earlier, and my whole body is covered in a light sheen of sweat. My ass hovers a few inches above the soft sheets, giving the breathtaking man above me the perfect angle as he thrusts hard and deep.

I can't stop staring at his body as he moves inside me. The thickness of his cock, the flex of his muscled abs, his broad chest and shoulders, the tension visible in his neck as he works us both toward our climax. He's gleaming with sweat too, and it makes him look even more stunningly gorgeous, more dangerous and wild than usual.

"Look at me, Reckless. Watch me while I fuck you."

His words, spoken in a rough baritone, make my pussy clench around him, and he groans as I comply.

I mean, I *have* been watching him. It's all I've been doing. I can't take my damn eyes off him.

But I know what he wants.

Dragging my attention up the hard planes of his body, I breathe harder as his cobalt gaze burns into me. I'm completely naked—aside from my magic dampening cuff—and have been for the past several hours, through two rounds of toe-curling sex before this, but something about the look he gives me now makes me feel like I'm laid completely bare in a way that has nothing to do with clothes.

I squirm uncomfortably, incredibly turned on by his stare but terrified of it too. His firm hold under my knees makes it impossible to escape though. And if I'm honest with myself, I don't want to go anywhere. My legs are shaking, my chest rising and falling sharply as another orgasm gathers deep in my core.

And I want that orgasm.

I want it so fucking bad, and I'm not going anywhere until I get it.

Squeezing my breasts, I pinch my nipples so hard I gasp, and for a second, I lose Roman's dark blues as his gaze flicks down. His nostrils flare, and I swear I feel his cock swell inside me, and when he looks back up at my face, there's an expression of such raw hunger on his features that it makes me impossibly wetter.

"Fuck, Roman. Oh God." I clamp my lower lip between my teeth, keeping my gaze locked on his.

"You're close, aren't you?" he grunts, the force of his thrusts making my whole body shake and the bed squeak even louder. "Does my girl want to come?"

*Fuck.*

He's pushing my buttons, and he knows it.

I've been so adamant about not being ready for a real relationship, about keeping this thing between us sex only... but hearing him call me *my girl* does funny things to my body. It's like my clit and my heart both spasm at once, and the resulting tremors crash through me like waves on a stormy sea, spreading pleasure so intense it's almost painful.

"Yes," I gasp, releasing my aching nipples to rake my fingernails up and down his forearms. Goddamn, they're so fucking strong, the muscles taut and lean as he holds me up and pumps into me. "Please!"

"Touch yourself again. Play with your clit. Make yourself come."

I love and hate that my hand is already moving before he finishes speaking, as if my body has already decided he owns me, that it'll do whatever he commands. My fingertips strum my clit, making heat build

warm and steady in my core. I can feel him sliding in and out of me, my fingers so close to where his cock penetrates me, and my hand moves faster, my body barreling toward release.

Roman's gaze moves down again, fixing on my frantically circling fingers, and a new expression crosses his face.

Possessiveness.

Before I can even register what's happening, he's pulling out of me, and I find myself flipped over onto my stomach quickly. He hauls me up onto all fours and plunges back into me from behind, filling me to the hilt from this delicious new angle. Then he wraps his arms tight around my stomach and chest, lifting me so we're both on our knees on the soft mattress, our bodies plastered together. The angle changes again, and with the thick bands of his arms pinning me to him, I can't do much but hold on and gasp for air.

I was so close... so damn close, and I'm still hanging on that precipice, needing nothing more than the slightest nudge to send me careening over the edge of my release.

"I changed my mind," he growls softly in my ear, in the tone that first made me wet for him when he came into The Den last summer. The tone that featured in more than one of my fantasies over the winter break. "I want to do it. I want you to come on my cock and on my fingers, and I want you to scream my name when you do."

*Oh, Jesus fucking Christ.*

He better get busy with those damn fingers before his words alone give me the most intense orgasm of my life.

I moan something unintelligible that has the word "yes" in it somewhere, and Roman finally decides to put me out of my sweet misery. One arm stays locked around my waist, holding me upright, while the other slips down to work my clit. His thrusts are slower and deeper in this position, and I can tell he's close too, holding off until he makes me come.

His lips drop to my ear, biting my earlobe and making me shudder. I turn my head and attack his lips with mine as the pleasure finally peaks, making white spots dance in my vision.

My body locks up, and I tear my mouth away from his to cry out, "Oh fuck! Roman!"

He grunts, slamming into me hard and grinding his hips against my ass as his cock pulses inside me and he follows me over the edge. "God, yes,



Elliot.”

When the aftershocks finally stop quaking through my body, I realize I’m covered in more than a ladylike sheen of sweat by now. My whole body is sated, wrung out, and sore, like I just finished a marathon.

And I guess I did.

A sex marathon, which is the best kind, as far as I’m concerned.

Roman slowly pulls out of me, securing the condom with one hand, before we both collapse on the bed. He lands on his back and pulls me roughly into his body, draping me partway over him so our sweaty skin sticks together. He pushes my wild hair out of my face and dips his head to kiss me thoroughly, stroking his tongue against mine so skillfully that my body perks up, convinced that maybe she could handle one more round.

“Down girl,” I mutter as I break the kiss, nestling into the crook of Roman’s arm contentedly.

“I’m not a girl.” He chuckles softly, the sound rumbling against my ear. “If you haven’t figured that out by now, I’ve been doing something very wrong for the past few hours.”

I slap his chest lightly, still catching my breath. “I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to me. I can barely walk, and my body’s already thinking about the next round.”

He groans, a pained sound that I think is partly because he can’t even think about going again right now and partly because he really wants to.

Good. At least I’m not the only one who turns into some kind of sex-crazed maniac around the other person. It makes me feel slightly better to know that he suffers from the same insane craving I seem to have.

He gives my ass a little slap, and I roll over so he can get up. He crosses to the bathroom and disposes of the condom before returning, and I watch him stride across the room in all his naked, muscled, Tall, Dark, and Handsome glory. I feel a sudden rush of possessiveness myself and work hard to keep the emotion off my face as he crawls back into bed with me.

I curl back up against his body, breathing in the leather and whiskey scent of him.

Man, I was so damn right. Alleys and little darkened alcoves are great and all, but a guy like Roman? He needs a bed. He needs space and time to work his magic.

Not that I mind a quick and dirty fuck every now and again, but sometimes great things should be savored.

And even though I purposefully avoided cuddling the first two times we had sex, going so far as to nearly sprint the other way, I've decided to give up the struggle against it.

After all, I should be capable of having casual, incredibly hot sex with a guy and cuddling with him afterward without falling in love with him, right?

*Right?*

I ignore the fact that my mind can't seem to give a satisfactory answer to that question, wriggling closer to Roman as he wraps his arms around me. We lapse into a contented silence, both still catching our breath.

*Fuck, I missed this over winter break.*

Maddy and I spent the time off relaxing at her campus. There's an option at Neptune Academy—where she's a first-year water elemental student—for people to stay in the dorms over the holidays if they want to. I think Griffin Academy, known to almost everyone as the Academy of Unpredictable Magic, has a similar option, but I sure as hell wasn't going to stay here for the three weeks we had off.

My only friends all went somewhere else for the break. Roman had something going on off-campus that he wouldn't tell me about, which didn't surprise me all that much. For a guy who's spent a lot of his time pushing to break down my walls, he's got some nice, tall, steel-reinforced ones of his own, I'm discovering.

Dmitri went home, and he recruited Cam to go with him so he wouldn't have to deal with his disapproving parents alone. I don't know the full story there, but from what little I've gleaned, Dmitri and his folks aren't on the best of terms. And Asher traveled down to San Francisco to visit his family. Unlike Dmitri's relatives, they're all wonderful people as far as I can tell, which doesn't surprise me, seeing as Asher's a goddamn saint.

With those four gone, there was really no reason to stay. The academy is small, only a few hundred students, but I haven't really gotten close with anyone else. My ex-roommate Alyssa went out of her way to make my life hell, and the only other friend I made last semester turned out to be a murderer and a liar who tried to steal a weapon of mass destruction from a hidden vault under the school. So... yeah. It's made me a little skittish about trusting new people.

Besides, all I really wanted was to hang out with Mads anyway. I missed the hell out of her last semester.

We holed up in her dorm room and binged Marvel movies, stayed up late talking, and checked out the area around her campus. I didn't have any more weird blips of magic—or whatever the hell that was—like I experienced the day Maddy came to visit me at the end of last semester.

*Thank God. I've barely got a handle on the two powers I already have, I'm not sure I can deal with more.*

It was fun to see my little sister in her element. A bunch of her friends were gone for the break, but I got to meet a few of them, and they all seem really great. It's amazing to watch her blossom after being shy and alone for so many years when we were younger.

Our mom's death really took the life out of Mads for a while. But now she's getting it back. And while my relationship with magic might be... complicated, to say the least, I'm grateful to it if it means she gets to have this wonderful experience.

But I did miss the guys, and I definitely missed sex, and ever since I came back to the Academy of Unpredictable Magic campus, I've somehow ended up in Roman's bedroom every night.

The man knows how to use his tongue. And his fingers. And... other things.

Maddy started classes already, but mine won't start for another two days. None of my roommates are here yet, but I was pleasantly surprised to find my handsome professor wandering the corridors of Wellwood Hall on my first day back. We managed to avoid having sex in a public place for once—woohoo, go us—but it's a good goddamn thing his room is warded with a sound dampening charm, or the whole school would probably know about us by now.

"I'm glad I came back a few days early. Talk about a welcome home," I joke, brushing a few strands of messy brown hair out of my face. I lost track of how many times I orgasmed tonight. I'm definitely going to need a shower in a second.

Once I can feel my legs again.

Roman rolls onto his side, propping himself on an elbow to look at me. Our legs are still twined together, the shared heat of our bodies mingling between us. "Careful, Reckless. I might start to think you're getting attached."

My heart does that weird squeezing thing in my chest again as a combination of happiness and panic floods my body.

He *wants* me to get attached. He's made it pretty damn clear he'd like more from me, but I just don't know if I can do that. If I'm ready for it.

"And I think the endorphins are mushing up your brain," I shoot back, grinning.

Roman huffs a laugh and leans forward to kiss me again. Then he looks over at the clock on the nightstand. "Pretty late."

"Yeah." I wrinkle my nose regretfully. "I better get going."

All my stuff is unpacked in the guys' dormitory room. What started off as a temporary solution when I was forcibly booted from my old dorm has turned into something a little more permanent, though it's still definitely against the rules. According to the records in the admissions office, I still live with Alyssa, Megan, and Kendal, but I much prefer living with people who like me and don't spread rumors about me for shits and giggles.

"Elliot." Roman's chiseled features soften as he cocks his head at me. "If you want to spend the night here, it's not going to be the end of the world."

I sit up. "Thanks, but I think I'm good."

"You sure about that?" he asks, a bit of a teasing growl coming into his voice.

I shiver. Damn it. I hate how drawn I am to him, and how much I enjoy being around him. It could so easily become something more, and I'm starting to think maybe I'm a giant idiot for fighting this so hard.

But my reasons aren't *all* stupid. For one thing, there's the fact that I really don't know a lot about certain parts of his life—for example, most of his history before he came to this school. I asked him about it once, and his answer was vague and short. I don't even know if he has brothers and sisters, although I don't think he does.

And for another thing, there are three other men I'm undeniably drawn to as well, and I'm still trying to navigate that whole situation.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure," I reply, trying to keep my voice light and casual. Roman's an amazing guy, and he's put up with my emotional distance a lot better than most people would. I don't want to be a jerk, as much as it often feels like being a jerk is all I'm good at.

His brows draw together. "It's all right. I won't push you, Elliot. I won't ask for more than you can give. But you can trust me with the pieces you *do* give—you know that, right?"

*Goddamn it.* Unable to resist the pull of his cobalt gaze, I crawl back on top of him, straddling his hips as I rest my hands on his chest. His heartbeat is a steady thrum beneath my palms.

“Maybe it would help me open up more if *you* opened up more,” I murmur, raking my fingernails gently down his chest.

Yup. There it is. The shutters falling over his eyes, the wall going up. *Takes one emotionally closed off loner to know one, mister.*

But he surprises me by dipping his chin once. His jaw muscle jumps, but he holds my gaze steadily. “Okay. What do you want to know?”

Oh shit. I didn’t think he’d actually take me up on that. My mind races, trying to figure out the perfect question to ask. There’s so much I want to know, but I’m afraid if I poke too deep, he’ll rescind his offer. So I start with something that’s been on my mind more than I’d like to admit—a challenging question that still seems to fall into safer territory than family history or deepest, darkest secrets.

“You and Professor Tamlin—Josephine—used to date, right?”

His eyes narrow slightly, but he nods. “Yes.”

“Who broke up with whom?”

His chest rises and falls beneath my hands as he sighs deeply, and his own hands slide up my thighs, caressing the skin of my hips and waist. “I broke up with her.”

“*What?*”

My squawk is neither dignified nor sexy, but I’m fucking shocked. Tamlin is gorgeous, classy, smart, and always looks like she arrived straight off the catwalk. I can’t imagine any guy in the world not wanting to be with her.

Roman sighs. “It’s complicated, Reckless. I’m... not the easiest person to be around all the time. I didn’t want to put her through that.”

I scowl at him, digging my fingernails a little harder into his skin. “Oh, but you want to put *me* through it? Rude.”

He cracks a devilish, seductive smile, grabbing my arms and tugging me down so my body is draped over his. “Maybe I just think you can handle it.”

My heart skips another beat, and I swallow hard.

He must see the flash of panic on my face, because his gaze softens and he brushes his thumb over my cheek. “I like you, Elliot. A lot. But I don’t want to pin you down. I can tell that’s not the kind of person you are. I

won't push you for something you're not ready to give, and I won't try to dictate the terms of our relationship. I know there's something between you, Cam, Asher, and Dmitri. If you want to explore that, I have no interest in stopping you."

I blink at him, my mouth going suddenly dry. "Are... are you breaking up with me?"

*Damn it.* For all my talk about keeping an emotional distance, the thought of this thing between us ending makes me feel a little sick.

His dark brows draw together as he looks at me like I'm crazy. "No. I'm telling you I *want* you; whatever part of yourself you can give."

"Roman—"

"And that you're worth sharing."

My jaw snaps shut at that. I peer into his eyes, like I might find the lie somewhere in their dark blue depths. But it isn't there. He gazes back at me steadily, his thumb still stroking my cheek.

I'm not really sure what to say—don't know how to handle someone telling me he thinks I have enough love to give that even just a piece of it would satisfy him. That he thinks I'm worth being with even if our relationship doesn't follow a conventional path.

*Of course,* the evil little voice in my head whispers, *it could just mean he doesn't care enough about you for it matter to him who else you're with.*

I try to shut that voice up. I know it's just insecurity, but it's hard to shake.

Fuck. This is why it's just easier to not get serious with anyone in the first place. None of this crippling fear or uncertainty, none of this doubt and dread of looming heartbreak.

He's still regarding me seriously, waiting for a response to his statement. His words have taken root in my heart, and I know I'll spend a lot of time thinking about them later, but right now, I've just about reached my quota of emotional openness for the day.

So I rub myself against Roman's body like a cat, grinding my hips harder against his as my boobs press against his chest. "Are you really sure about that whole not pinning me down thing? Because in the right circumstances, I might *like* to be pinned."

"You're trying to distract me," Roman points out with an arched brow, but I can feel him responding, getting interested.

“Mmm, maybe, but it’s working, isn’t it?” I lean in, my mouth at his ear. “You did promise me you would show me those pretty silk ties of yours...”

Roman growls and turns his head, claiming my lips in a kiss, and I can’t help but laugh. His mouth swallows up the sound as his arms wrap around me, holding me tight, and I can’t stop the rush of—of *safety* that comes with that. Roman can be almost as cranky as Dmitri sometimes, and he has this way of growling through conversations like a bear who got his hibernation interrupted. But there’s also this intensity in his gaze when he looks at me that makes me feel like he’d tear the whole school down if it meant taking care of me.

The kiss slows down a little, moving from rough and fast to deep and slow as Roman runs his hand slowly up and down my back. It’s almost sweet, if you can call anything about Roman “sweet”. It’s like dark chocolate, the intense bite definitely still there but with a hint of sugar to balance it out.

It makes my heart thump dangerously in my chest, and I push farther into the kiss, trying to make it less... less... I don’t even know.

Or rather, I *do* know, and I just can’t say it yet.

I nip at Roman’s lip and he gets the message, flipping me over and pinning me down onto the bed.

Yes, I think, and then moan so he gets the message. No more of this soft intimacy stuff tonight, thanks.

My heart’s in enough danger already.

## CHAPTER 2

**A**fterward, I really do go back to my dorm room, despite my wobbly legs. A lot of the professors and admins at the academy have their own quarters, but Roman lives in one of the men's dormitories with the students—albeit in a bigger, slightly fancier unit. He's on the first floor, while the guys and I live on the third, in a large quad with four beds, four desks, and a couch with a coffee table set up near the windows. It's also got an attached bathroom, and before I head to bed, I hop in the shower to clean up.

The powerful spray of water pours down over me, slicking my dark brown hair to my head and back. I soap up my deliciously sore body and let the heat of the water penetrate my muscles.

My second semester will begin the day after tomorrow. I'm not quite sure how I feel about that yet. On the one hand, I'm excited to dive back in and keep learning, to improve on my control and get a better handle on my magic. But on the other hand... last semester was kind of a train wreck.

I just hope the next few months will be a little calmer. I don't need any more excitement, and Maddy's already worried enough about me. She got anxious the last few days before I had to leave Neptune, claiming she had nightmares and curling up in bed with me like old times instead of just sleeping by herself. She seemed better by the time we said our goodbyes, but I'd really like to show her I can make it through a whole semester without any major calamities.

Hopefully the craziest thing about the rest of this year will be that I'm banging my professor. Although I'm not sure how much time we'll have for that once school actually starts back up. It's been easy enough to sneak in



and out of his place the past few days, since a lot of the dorm residents aren't back yet. But once they are? Once we're all back in classes? It'll get a bit more difficult to keep things between us secret.

I finish up my shower and pull on my bathrobe, still deep in thought. Then I swipe a hand across the mirror, revealing the foggy, water-speckled reflection of my wet brown hair, matching brown eyes, and high cheekbones. I got more of Dad's looks, and Maddy got more of Mom's, which I kind of hate, but what are you gonna do? Assholes can pass on their genes just as well as anyone else, I guess.

After scrubbing a towel over my hair, I leave it to air dry and walk back into the dorm room—

Only to get jumped.

"Gah!" I yelp as a mountain of muscle topped with sunshine-blond hair tackles me.

Cam has literally sent me stumbling backward with the force of his hug. My shriek of surprise turns to one of delight as I recognize him immediately by his scent—cedarwood and spice. He picks me up and whirls me around for a second, then sets me back down, his sky-blue eyes wide. "Geez, Sin, what the hell have you been doing in there? We've been waiting to surprise you for almost an hour!"

"An hour of my life I'll never get back," Dmitri deadpans.

"Aw, I'm so glad you got that personality transplant over the break." I bat my eyelashes at him, falsely sweet. "You used to be such an asshole."

Cam steps back so Asher can come forward and hug me. Asher's hugs are one of the best things in the world—like wrapping yourself in a warm blanket on a cold evening.

"How was your break?" I ask him, greedily breathing in his clean, citrus smell. It's truly unfair that on top of being drop dead gorgeous, all these guys smell good enough that I want to make a nest out of their clothes and live in it. But not in a creepy way, of course.

"Great!" Asher replies. His forest-green eyes glow with happiness as he pulls away. "Missed you, though. Next time, you can come and spend it with my family, if you want. They'd be happy to have you—and Maddy."

"You're sweet."

"My break was awful," Cam volunteers. "I didn't get to see your face the whole time."

"And yet you somehow survived."

“Just barely.” He clutches a hand over his heart dramatically.

I laugh. “I thought you guys weren’t getting in until tomorrow!”

“Yeah, the plan was to meet up in Portland, spend tomorrow there, and then all drive in together,” he explains. “But we decided we’d rather get back to campus early. We heard the shower running when we got back and decided to hide and surprise you.”

“But we didn’t know you’d be in there for a thousand years,” Dmitri grunts. “Did you use up all the hot water?”

I glower at him. “You really planning on taking a shower right now? It’s the middle of the fucking night.”

“You never know, Princess.” There’s almost a threat in his words, like if I hadn’t come out when I did, he might’ve busted into the shower looking for me.

That thought sends a shiver of heat up my spine. Whatever kind of antagonistic feelings might exist between Dmitri and me, there’s no shortage of sexual chemistry.

“How was your break?” Asher asks smoothly, ever the peacemaker.

“It was all right.” I shrug, crossing the room to sit down on my bed. “Pretty low key, but that’s exactly what I needed. Maddy says hi, by the way.”

She met them all at the end of fall semester and decided she liked them right away—even Dmitri, who for some inexplicable reason is super nice to her even though he’s always been kind of an asshole to me.

As if he can tell I’m thinking about him, the man in question narrows his dark eyes at me. “You had your cuff on, right?”

“Careful there, you almost sound worried,” I drawl. But I hold up my wrist, showing off the magic repressing brace that’s still firmly attached. Until we finish our magical training, we’re supposed to wear them at all times—except for in specific classes where the professors take them off for us. “Nothing to be concerned about though. I had it on the whole time.”

It took me all last semester to get used to the metal brace, and I still find myself tugging at it absently from time to time. I caught Maddy staring at it a few times while we were together, a look of pity on her face. She doesn’t have to wear one, so she was able to practice her magic over break, which... I’m trying not to be envious about.

I have a somewhat complex relationship with magic. For so long, I thought I didn’t have it, and I made my peace with that. I separated myself

from the magical community and resigned myself to never being a part of the world my parents belonged to.

But now that I know I do have magic, it seems unfair that I'm not allowed to use it the way everyone else is. The magical world treats Unpredictables like we're ticking time bombs, and the incidents last semester probably didn't help with that impression. Even though that was just *one* Unpredictable magic user who went rogue and turned on his own kind.

And he was just a damn kid who was corrupted by an outside influence.

Sometimes I wonder who Raul was working with... or for. What kind of lies they fed him, how they twisted his understandable anger at the magical world for how he was treated into something so violent and selfish.

"I bet all Maddy's college friends had a huge crush on you," Cam says, giving me a wink. He's shameless in his flirtations, and I wish I could say I mind—but I really, really don't.

Probably because I know that underneath all his jokes, there's real pain and sadness and depth, and that beneath all the flirting with me, there's our genuine friendship.

"Terrified of me, more like," I reply with a fierce grin. "They know I'll kick their asses if they fuck with Maddy. And I tried to keep it quiet that I'm an Unpredictable, but she insisted on telling people. Wanted them to know she was proud of me."

"Way to go, Mini Sin." Cam chuckles, nodding approvingly.

"I just wish I could've practiced my magic, honestly," I add with a shrug.

"Our magic is dangerous," Dmitri snaps, his dark eyes flashing.

My gaze shoots to him. *Shit, I must've hit a nerve.*

After getting to know Dmitri, I can tell when he's just being cranky and doesn't really mean anything by it, and when he's genuinely upset and angry. And right now, he's the latter.

I look over at Cam, who gives me a sympathetic *what are you gonna do* shrug.

Carefully, I turn to face Dmitri. "Yeah, fair, but the only way to stop it from being so dangerous is to learn how to control it, and we can't do that without practicing." I tilt my head. "I take it you *didn't* have a good break?"

Dmitri fixes me with a hard stare. "Mind your own business, Sinclair."

"Fine, I will, Mr. Complicated Russian Last Name I Can't Pronounce."

“Annnnd I think it’s time we all go to bed,” Asher says quickly. “Opening talk from Hardwick tomorrow, start of classes and all that soon, yeah?”

*Yeah, sure, I’ll take the olive branch.* I give Ash one more hug because I just can’t help myself, and he returns it, burying his nose in my hair before releasing me.

“You guys must be exhausted.” I step back. “I’ll let you get ready for bed.”

“Actually, I *do* need a shower,” Cam says, grimacing down at himself. “I smell like airplane.” He grins over at me, waggling his eyebrows. “Wanna help scrub my back, Sin?”

As tempting as it is to hop into the shower with a golden-haired guy who looks like he’s the offspring of a god, I don’t want to cause friction between any of us, and I’m exhausted from the weekend sex marathon I just had.

Besides, it’s not like my saying no is going to crush Cam’s spirits. He’s been outrageously flirting with me since the day we met, and I think he’ll keep doing it until the meteor finally hits us and puts us all out of our misery.

“Maybe Asher can help you with that,” I joke instead.

The tall mage rolls his eyes fondly at us. “*Asher* is going to bed,” he announces, pulling off his shirt and stepping over to his dresser to grab his sleep clothes.

He’s got dark hair like Dmitri, but unlike Dmitri and Cam, who are both beefy and broad-shouldered, he’s lean and chiseled with a swimmer’s build. I think maybe that makes people underestimate him a little, but as his shirtless state right now proves, Asher’s no slouch. He’s all muscle.

And, okay, so maybe I’ve had a daydream or two about putting my mouth all over that toned chest and stomach of his, but... nobody needs to know that.

Cam disappears into the bathroom, and I get into bed before Dmitri flicks off the light. His gaze lands on me in the darkness, and I stare right back, even though I can barely make out his sharp, angular features through the shadows. He pisses me right the fuck off sometimes, but I missed him just as much as I missed the other two.

Not that I’d ever tell him that.

It would give him way too much leverage against me.

Our gazes hold for another moment, and then he walks across the moonlit room toward his bed. As he passes me, I could swear his fingers graze my hair, but the touch is gone before I can be sure.

I sigh contentedly, burrowing deeper into my blankets as my eyelids drift shut.

We're all back together again.

*Now school's starting to feel like home.*

## CHAPTER 3

The next day, we head out for the dean's speech in the auditorium. I can't help but feel nervous as we approach the large stone building. The last time there was a big assembly, Raul used a complicated and powerful spell to freeze time in a bubble, trapping everyone in the hall and suspending them in time. Only Roman, Cam, Dmitri, Asher, and I were unaffected by it, since Dean Hardwick had called all teachers, staff, and students for the emergency announcement.

But nothing happens as we enter the large space to find our seats—well, nothing *much*. Alyssa sees me and diverts her course in my direction, clipping me hard with her shoulder as she passes me while the rest of her posse glares my way.

Jesus. They're like a fucking herd of preteen bitches. Except that they're all in their early twenties and should definitely know better by now. But privilege seems to have a way of slowing down emotional development sometimes.

They seem to go everywhere in a pack. Alyssa is the clear leader, and Megan, Kendal, and Cristina trail in her wake. Kendal, the one with dark red hair, is kind of at the bottom of the totem pole compared to the others. Megan's the most vocal, loudly supporting whatever Alyssa says, and then there's Cristina, who does an impressive job of giving off an aura of vast superiority despite never saying a word.

I'd been hoping time away from them over break would help them forget about me and find something more productive to focus their energy on, like school, or helping orphaned puppies, or knitting.

But it seems taunting me is still their favorite hobby.

*Super.*

As I move past them, ignoring their dirty glares, Cam loops two of his fingers into my belt loop to tug me closer and whisper a joke as Asher holds a seat for me, brushing the shaggy dark hair out of his eyes as his soft smile lights up his face.

The glares from the girls intensify and I realize... I'm an idiot.

Okay, so I'm not exactly dating Cam, or Asher, or Dmitri. But nobody can tell if we are or not. I live with them—unofficially, anyway—I always hang out with them, and Cam and Asher have no problem being as close and touchy with me as if we were dating.

Cam's parents were scientists and died when he was sixteen, so I don't know anything about his status in the magical community. But from what I know about Asher and Dmitri's families, they're both big deals. And I think I know now why Alyssa and her crew are so determined to be bitchy to me: without even meaning to, I've scored the three hottest and most eligible men on campus.

Even if I *wasn't* romantically interested in the guys, any girl who wanted to get close to them would probably have to go through me.

The fury at someone like me getting in good with these three men has to be eating away at Alyssa and her friends. It makes a lot of sense now why they dislike me.

Do I still think it's bullshit? Fuck, yes. But at least it takes on some kind of twisted logic.

I sit down with Cam on one side, Asher on the other, and Dmitri on the end of the aisle glaring at anyone who thinks to sit and join us.

"I see his antisocial meter is at an all-time high," I whisper to Cam.

"It was a tough winter break." He grimaces, his blue eyes flashing with sympathy as he cuts a glance at his friend.

*Fuck. That sucks.*

Dean Hardwick gets up and gives a speech similar to the one he gave at the beginning of the fall semester. It's the usual spiel about how important the academy is to our young minds, how much he hopes we enjoyed the break, all the opportunities that will be afforded to us this semester, and so on.

So, you know, the boring stuff.

I'm just glad he doesn't mention anything about what happened with Raul. The guys and I were kind of hailed as heroes in the weeks following

that incident and were credited with not just saving lives but also with keeping the school from being shut down. Which is nice, I suppose, but it's not like I went out of my way to do it for the praise. I did it because I'm a decent human being, and I like to think most other people would've done the same thing in my shoes.

I'm not the kind of person who likes a lot of attention. Never have been. So I'm glad it looks like Hardwick wants to move on, same as the rest of us, and forget that whole terrifying ordeal ever happened.

After about thirty minutes, the dean wraps up his speech, and Cam gives a heavy sigh. "Welp, that's it. Break's officially over."

"Thank God," Dmitri mutters.

"Hey, at least the holiday didn't have one thing," Asher points out.

"What's that?"

"Homework."

*Oh, fuck me.*



The guys and I make the most of our final day off after the assembly by doing... well, absolutely nothing.

Cam and I go for a run in the woods, bundled up against the cold wind, and then we all chill out in our dorm room, swapping stories of our time off and making predictions about what the semester will hold. Dmitri listens but doesn't add much. I don't push him—not just because I don't want to get my head bitten off, but because I know what it's like to have shitty family members, and I don't want to make him get into it if he doesn't want to.

It feels a little weird not to sneak over to Roman's room in the evening like I have the past three nights, but I decide against it. It seems too risky with all the students back in the dorm. Plus, despite the fact that all four of these men have now straight-up told me they'd be willing to share me in a five-way relationship... I have no idea how to navigate that.

I mean, what's the protocol here? Do I just say *hey, I'm gonna go have hot, dirty sex with my other boyfriend, be back in a bit*? Do I invite them to come with me? What?

So, like the true coward I'm proud to be, I don't do anything.



Besides, I missed the guys a lot, and as mind-blowing as sex with Roman is, I'm perfectly content curled up on the couch between Asher and Cam watching stupid comedies. Cam has his arm slung casually around my shoulder, and Asher's hand rests gently on my knee. I know if I call it out, or even think about it too long, I'll get all awkward and flustered about it... so I don't.

I just let myself enjoy it instead.

We're up bright and early the next day, and after breakfast, we all walk over to Wellwood Hall together before we part ways. The main school building is massive and imposing, and it sort of looks like the architect changed his vision half a dozen times while designing it. There's not really a cohesive style, and parts of the structure soar at least six or seven stories high while others are only three or four stories. Then there are the turrets and towers that rise up in places, their gray stone facades piercing the blue sky.

I have some classes with the guys, but since they're a year ahead of me, I also have a lot of stuff on my own. When I walk into my first class, my gaze darts around, and I feel a sudden pang in my chest as I realize... I'm looking for Raul.

We always sat together in the first-year-only classes. It was our thing. We supported each other that way, even if we weren't always super loud and vocal about it.

My heart squeezes. *Just another reason why you can't let yourself get attached to anyone. You never know how or when the universe is going to yank them away from you.*

I sit down at the front, if only because Alyssa and the others tend to sit in the back and I'd like to do my part to avoid the drama.

Roman enters the large classroom, and my stomach flips. I haven't seen him since the night the guys got back, and I know that was only a day and a half ago, but it already feels too long.

I'm turning into a damn sap. Fucking hell.

"Welcome back, everyone."

He thunks his books down on the desk as he surveys us. Warm morning sunlight streaming through the windows glints off his ebony hair, and he's got that hint of shadow on his jawline that I love. I remember how that scruff tormented the tender skin of my breasts and thighs, and I have to squeeze my legs together to suppress the ache that rises up.

His gaze lands on me, and even though his lips don't move, I could swear his eyes are smiling at me. I flush slightly, biting my cheek to hide my own smile as I glance away.

Roman's a tough teacher, and he doesn't make an exception for me... although sometimes I fear he pays a bit more attention to me than to the others. It's probably to make up for how he panicked a little and was far tougher on me than on anyone else at the beginning of last semester, but still. The last thing I need is Alyssa or one of her friends figuring out I'm sleeping with a professor.

We do our morning meditation, something that's a staple of this class because it helps us relax and tune into our emotions, then move onto the rest of class. I watch Roman's hands as he starts the day's lecture, writing glowing runes on the large board behind him to illustrate his point. I don't know where my darkly handsome professor got his training from, but sometimes it feels like he knows everything about everything to do with magic, and it all just seems to come so... easily to him.

So far, all I can do is my sonic boom, which isn't always helpful since it tends to send people—me included—crashing into walls, and my spider climb. Alyssa was kind enough to nickname me “Cockroach” for that little trick.

But Roman makes it seem so easy and effortless—beautiful, almost. And he's so passionate, his voice rising and falling as he discusses the importance of a true connection between the head and the heart.

That's about when I realize I'm not actually paying attention to the lecture the way I should be.

*Shit.* I grab a pen and my notebook and start scribbling down notes. Here I am, getting all starry-eyed over Roman the exact way I promised myself I wouldn't. *What the hell, Elliot? Get your head in the game!*

I need to focus up and buckle down. The course load here is difficult—lots of research papers and studying for classes like Magical Theory and History of Magic, and exhausting hands-on work in classes like Physical Training, Practical Magic, and Combat. I need to keep my head down and give it everything I've got if I want to learn how to control my magic and pass with good grades. Then I can graduate and go back to my normal life with Maddy, and I won't have my magic stolen from me.

Yup. *Stolen.*

That was the choice I was given by the Circuit representative before I came here, and I'm still a little bitter about it. But Unpredictable magic is apparently so worrisome that if you don't agree to go to a specialized school for it, the Circuit—the local law enforcement for magic users—will take your magic away for good.

Awesome, right?

I almost decided to let them take it from me. My magic sparked so late in life that I'd gotten used to living without it and existing somewhat separate from the magical community, so a part of me had thought maybe it was best to continue that way. But Maddy's magic sparked right before mine did, and being cut off from the community meant I might get cut off from her.

I couldn't let that happen.

So, here I am.

My gaze flicks up to Roman again as he continues lecturing. As much as I try not to, I can't help but remember how it felt to have him on top of me. Inside me. His scent surrounding me, the dominating presence of his body making me feel small and sexy as his gaze raked over me...

*Goddamn it, Elliot! What did I just fucking say?*

Mentally chastising myself, I clench my pencil a little harder and focus on copying down what he's written on the board. Sheesh. I do not have time to be daydreaming about my professor.

*I'm not trying to pin you down,* he said.

The possibilities of that...

Cam and Asher already made it clear they're happy to share me if that's what I want. Dmitri—God only knows what goes on in his head, although I suspect he cares more about me than he wants to admit, given how protective of me he is when danger so much as thinks about knocking. If Roman truly is okay with sharing me...

It could be incredible.

But can I afford to let my feelings for Roman, for *all* the guys, deepen? Can I really open myself up to that? Nearly everyone I've ever cared about in my life has left. Dad abandoned us, and God only knows what he's up to now. Mom died. Friends fell away after Mom passed and I had to take care of my sister, none of them wanting to commit too much of their time and energy to helping us. Maddy's been the only constant in my life.

Can I really trust any of these guys to stick around, and to mean it?

Roman gives me a slightly worried look as class ends, and I know he's noticed that I'm sort of withdrawn, stuck in my thoughts. I want to tell him I'm fine, but that would be a lie, and he's always been able to see right through me no matter how hard I try to run from him.

It's annoying and touching, how perceptive he can be.

My next class is Combat, with Professor Tamlin.

Roman's ex-girlfriend.

Professor Tamlin is a great person, honestly. I really like her. She's also sophisticated, put together, effortlessly beautiful, and literally everything I'm not. I still don't understand why Roman isn't dating her—how he could've broken up with her. His answer the other night about why things ended between them was vague, and the tone of his voice when he talked about her made it clear he still cares for her.

I try not to let that knowledge sit like a rock in my stomach as I change into workout clothes before slipping into the large classroom on the fourth floor. The desks are all arranged around the perimeter of the massive room to give us space to work in the middle.

"All right, everyone," Tamlin says, clapping her hands once. "This semester, we'll be working on incorporating more magic into your fighting. The second- and third-years can begin sparring right away, but for the first-years, I'll work with you a bit more on some magical techniques to make sure you're ready before you try them out in combat. Control will obviously be *very* important, since you'll need to be able to pull your magical punches as well as your fists. You'll only begin sparring magically when you feel ready. Understood?"

There's a general murmur of assent from the students. There are about twenty people in this section of Combat class, and almost half of us are first-years. Cam shoots me an excited grin as he and the other guys head over to one side of the classroom to get geared up for their sparring session, and even Dmitri looks a little more cheerful at the prospect of a fight. I shoot them a thumbs up before turning my attention back to Tamlin.

"Today you're going to work on making objects move using your magic." She sweeps an arm out, showing us a large basket she's set up on our side of the room. "Now, I know some of you might be thinking 'but Professor Tamlin, I don't have telekinetic power.' And I know that." She grins. "What you're going to do is learn how to use *your* magic to achieve the same goal as all of your classmates. It'll help develop your control over

your power and hopefully make you see it in a whole new way, but it can take a while to get the hang of it. So we'd better get started."

She hands us each a tennis ball and directs us to get it into the basket across the room.

*Um... what?*

Brows pinched, I stare down at the fuzzy yellow ball in my hand. How the hell am I supposed to get this into the basket with a fucking sonic boom? Without injuring everyone in the room, preferably.

I try, I really do, focusing with all of my might, but I just can't make it work. Megan actually *has* telekinetic powers, the cheater, and she does a little happy dance as her ball floats docilely into the basket. It takes all my willpower not to glare at her. Alyssa manages to get hers in too after a few minutes of effort, literally stretching her arm across the length of the room to drop the ball in. Her body transformation power then allows her to slowly retract her arm, and she and her groupies celebrate loudly.

We work on the task all through the two-hour class, and one by one, nearly all of my classmates find a way to use their magic to move their tennis balls. With every new cheer of success, my panic and frustration rise.

*Fuck.* These people around me have lived their whole lives steeped in magic. I haven't, which means I'm playing a constant game of catch-up.

My irritation is growing like some kind of itch I can't scratch. Maybe Roman's just been too distracting. Maybe I wouldn't be so behind if I could've practiced my magic over the break instead of having it locked up inside me. Maybe—

Before I can stop myself, I snatch up the tennis ball and hurl it across the room.

It ends up in the basket, which doesn't surprise me since I've always had a good arm and good eye-hand coordination, but... I have the feeling a non-magical solution was kind of the opposite of what Professor Tamlin wanted.

Alyssa sees it and snickers, whispering into Cristina's ear. Kendal gives me a sheepish sort of *better luck next time* shrug, then quickly looks away.

Cheeks burning, I cross to the basket to fetch my tennis ball.

God, today sucks.

As everyone else files out of class and I'm gathering my things, Professor Tamlin walks over, her athletic pants and top perfectly flattering and color-coordinated as always.

“Elliot.” She folds her arms. “I couldn’t help but notice you were a bit frustrated today.”

I shrug. “How I’m supposed to use a sonic boom to get a ball across a room is beyond me, Professor.”

She gives me a small smile. “Well, your sonic boom generates kinetic energy. When you hit someone with it, you send them flying. So it’s a matter of figuring out how to tweak it, to make that force smaller and more concentrated, so that, perhaps, it flies out from your hand at just the right strength to drive the ball forward and into the basket.”

My face scrunches up. “That sounds impossible.”

“It will take a while, but I can assure you, it’s entirely possible.” Her smile doesn’t waver. “Why don’t you and I work one-on-one for a few weeks? Roman mentioned you’ve been feeling a little behind. Maybe some tutoring sessions would help.”

My head jerks at the mention of Roman’s name, and I have to work hard to keep my expression neutral. Roman’s been talking to her?

*Duh, of course he has. They’re both professors here. They probably talk about students’ progress all the time.*

Still, I can’t help the unreasonable coil of jealousy that twists in my gut. Does he still have real feelings for her? Does he regret breaking up with her?

“I get the feeling I don’t have a choice in this,” I say with a groan.

“Of course you have a choice.” Professor Tamlin looks appalled that I would see it any other way. “But I do worry that if you don’t get some extra tutoring, you’re going to fall behind, and I don’t want to have to hold you back in class.”

“Can’t you just give me an A for effort?” I flash her a hopeful grin.

“Trust me, I wish I could. But I have a responsibility to ensure everyone who graduates from my class can accomplish certain tasks and meet particular goals.”

Ugh. Failing definitely isn’t an option. But tutoring sessions with Roman’s ex? The absolute last person I want to look like an idiot in front of? And what if she gives Roman progress reports?

Sounds like one of the lower circles of Hell to me.

“I’ll email you some times I’m available, and we can set up a few sessions,” Professor Tamlin says. “You’re powerful and very naturally gifted, Elliot. I’m sure it won’t take long for you to catch up.”

*Great.*

## CHAPTER 4

The next couple weeks seem to fly by in a flash as the whole school gets back into the swing of things.

Classes are fine. I can't complain. They're still difficult for me though, and I find myself getting frustrated probably more than I should. The written stuff is totally fine. My History of Magic class, for example—I'm doing pretty well in that. But the practical stuff...

I hate to admit it, but Professor Tamlin was right. I need some extra help, or I'm going to fall behind. And I can't have that. I won't fail out of this damn school and be forced to give up my magic; I won't lose my powers or my sister.

The guys have noticed my frustration. Well, Cam and Asher have. If Dmitri's noticed—and he probably has, he's observant as hell—he isn't saying anything about it. Maybe he's worried it'd ruin his school-wide reputation as an unfeeling bastard or something.

Or maybe it's just because he doesn't like to talk about his problems, so he's not going to push me to talk about mine.

Asher patiently helps me with my homework, even though I know he probably doesn't really have the time for it. Cam takes me out on runs in the morning so I can get some energy and frustration out. And it helps, it really does. So does sneaking off to see Roman when I can. Ah, the power of orgasms.

But none of it can really take away from the fact that I'm behind my fellow students in practical magic use.

And that's just not going to cut it.



I'm in a hell of a bad mood as I get dressed after Combat class, my mind still wrestling with my latest failure. The second- and third-years got to spar all class while the first-years did more combat-focused magical drills. And once again, it didn't go well for me.

It sucks because last semester this was one of my favorite classes, and now I'm starting to dread it. But that's because fall semester was mostly non-magical sparring, which I literally kicked ass at. I used to wonder why we have a Combat class at all—it made me feel a little like we're being trained as soldiers or something—but after Raul's attack on the school, I understand better why the professors might want us to know how to fight and defend ourselves.

The world of magic has always held danger.

I sit down on the bench in front of the lockers to put my shoes back on. I'm due to have lunch with the guys next, and I'm trying to breathe slow and deep so they won't see my bad mood. It's not their fault that I'm a fuck-up; I don't want them to have to deal with it.

"Well, well, well, where are you off to in a hurry?"

I glance up to see Alyssa smiling down at me like the cat that just ate the canary. "Lunch."

"Mmm. With Asher, Cam, and Dmitri, right?"

"How is that any business of yours?" I ask, grabbing my backpack and slinging it onto my shoulder. I'm not going to sit around and be interrogated or insulted.

I walk over to the door and push it open to step out into the hallway, but the girls follow me. Kendal's hovering in the back like she thinks I might bite or something while Megan and Cristina are tittering like sparrows, leaning into each other, their heads almost touching.

Alyssa's right on my heels. "Don't think that we don't know what you're doing."

I ignore her.

"Stringing them along like that? Talk about a bitch move. They deserve better."

Okay, that gets my blood up. I stop and turn around. "What are you talking about?"

Alyssa puts her hands on her hips. She's a pretty girl, honestly. Great curves, heart-shaped face, bright eyes. But there's something nasty and

petty in her expression that just ruins it all. You look at her once and think, *oh, she's pretty*. You look at her twice and all you can think is, *ouch*.

"I'm talking about how you're stringing them along," she spits out. "Snaring just one of those poor men for yourself? Bad enough. But you've got to have all three of them wrapped around your little finger—are you that slutty, or are you that worried about getting a husband?"

"What the actual *fuck* are you talking about?" I demand. "I'm not looking for a husband, genius, I'm not even twenty-five."

Megan scoffs, stepping up beside Alyssa. "Don't play dumb. That's why you're here." She makes a gesture that seems to encompass the whole school. "That's why most of us are here."

I openly stare at the four of them. "Okay, I am really fucking confused here."

"It's because we're Unpredictables," Kendal blurts out.

The other three slowly turn their heads and stare at her, their disappointment practically a flashing neon sign over their heads, but Kendal plows on. "Our—our families don't usually like that we're, you know, uh, like this."

"Just say we're freaks, Kendal. God," Cristina mutters with a roll of her eyes.

Kendal's face goes bright pink. "Right. Well, most of our families are well known in the magical world. So it's important we keep up our status and, well, if you're Unpredictable, you don't get a lot of job options, so..."

"So you find a guy from a powerful, rich family and marry him, and you get to keep your status," Alyssa finishes. "It's called survival, sweetie, and if you're really serious about not knowing what you're doing with those men? Do us all a favor and back the fuck off from them. Some of us actually need to get hitched."

"I'm not stopping you," I shoot back. "You want to talk to them, go right ahead! Good luck with Dmitri, though, he's a real pain in the ass. I'm sure he'll know just how to sweep you off your feet, seeing as I'm pretty sure if he even *looked* at a romance novel, he'd spontaneously combust. But Cam's friends with practically every person here, and Asher's a sweetheart who tries to find a redeeming quality in everyone—so knock yourself the fuck out."

"We would," Alyssa sneers, taking a step toward me, getting up in my face, "if your skank ass wasn't in the way! Leading them on and making

them wait to see which one you'll choose—”

*Okay, that's it.*

I drop my backpack, my voice pitching into a low growl. “I’m warning you, slut shaming is so very last decade.”

“What are you gonna do about it?” Alyssa taunts.

I can’t help but smirk as my hands curl into fists. “You ever been in a bar fight, sweetheart?”

“Elle! There you are!”

I turn just in time for two strong hands to lightly grab my shoulders and... a pair of lips to land on mine.

*Asher.*

I know it, because I’ve made out with Cam and done a hell of a lot more with Roman, and neither of them kisses like this. Soft and sweet, lips lingering as he pulls away. I expect that to be the end of it, but Asher moves in again, kissing me a little harder, like he’s got to make absolutely certain everyone understands what’s going on here. My hands come up to rest on his chest, and before I can stop myself, I open my mouth, letting my tongue swipe tentatively against his.

That’s all he was waiting for, and in a heartbeat, he’s tilting his head and deepening the kiss. Our mouths move in sync—slowly, but with a smoldering kind of passion that makes me hot and achy all over.

When Asher pulls away, I’m panting, heat sliding down my spine, pooling between my legs. I can so easily see him taking me apart ever so slowly, spending hours and hours until I’m a puddle, until I can’t even beg I’m so gone on pleasure.

I blink myself out of my daze, and I have to clench my jaw so I don’t gape at him.

He gives me one of his small, crooked smiles. “We were wondering why you were late to lunch.” Then his arm slides around my waist and he looks over at Alyssa. “Sorry, did I interrupt something?”

The Queen Bitch has two spots of bright pink high up on her cheeks, and her eyes are blazing. I have to hold in my laughter—she honestly looks a little ridiculous. “Asher. Um... I’m surprised to see you without Cam or Dmitri—”

“Yeah, they’re holding down the fort.” Asher’s tone manages to be both polite and dismissive, and I’m kind of in awe. He looks at me, his deep green eyes warm and soft. “Shall we?”

He leads me away, even taking my backpack for me, and it's not until we get around the corner that I let myself burst into laughter.

"Oh my God." I grin at him. "That was amazing. Did you see their faces?"

"That's why I did it," Asher replies quietly. "They've got no right to treat you like that."

"Is it..." I swallow, my stomach twisting and churning like a damn washing machine. "Is it true, what they said? Girls here are just focused on getting married? That's why they come to the academy?"

"Not... exactly." Asher sighs. "We can talk about it after lunch—"

"I don't want to go to lunch," I blurt out, only realizing it's true once I say it. I don't. I can't be around Cam and Dmitri and pretend everything's fine, but I don't want to tell them what happened either. That run-in with Alyssa put me more off balance than I want to admit.

Asher digs into his backpack and pulls out a wrapped sandwich, handing it to me. "Here. I snagged this before I came looking for you. You need to eat."

"Thanks." I'm surprised he's not insisting we go to the dining hall, but then, Asher's a lot more patient with me than I deserve.

Instead he leads me out to the quad, and we find a bench to sit on near a big tree. It's freezing, but I don't mind—because of the cold, nobody else is out here.

"Those girls all come from powerful families," Asher notes. "So do I. So does Dmitri. It's... we're not royalty or anything, but even though we're in the twenty-first century, we're still expected to kind of... make a good match of it. Magical families can be powerful, and you don't want to piss off the wrong person."

I bite into the sandwich he brought me, listening intently as I chew.

"Not a lot of families are supportive of our magic. My family was really happy that I'm Unpredictable, but they're in the minority. I've got a lot of siblings, so it doesn't matter to them if I'm a little... you know." He shrugs, brushing his dark brown hair out of his face. "And mind reading is helpful—or it will be, once I master it. But not all families see it that way. You're a liability to them because you're dangerous, supposedly. And if you can't use *magic* to advance your family, then marriage to someone with power and money is the next best option. Because magic can be unpredictable, no pun intended, but power and wealth stay the same no matter what."

“That...” I shake my head. “Shit, that sounds awful. They’re not pawns, they’re people. And now...” I look at him. “Are you having to deal with women coming up to you and just throwing themselves at you?”

“Oh, no, I have to deal with men doing it too,” Ash replies. He gives me a small smile that he probably intends to be reassuring. “I’m okay, don’t worry about it. And like I said, I’m a lucky one. My parents just want me to be happy. None of this pressuring me to marry or anything. I honestly feel bad for those girls.”

“Didn’t stop you from kissing me.”

“Well, I had to make a point, didn’t I?” He bumps my shoulder gently, his eyes warming. “I’m choosing you, not them, not anyone else.”

I snort. “God only knows why you’d do that.”

My dad is powerful, or something. That’s what Mom told me anyway. She didn’t talk about him a lot. He left when I was ten, and I’ve made it a specific point not to look him up. I think, technically, I *could* be the same rank as Alyssa and those other girls because of him. But I don’t give a shit about that, and I don’t think it would be fair of me to use it as leverage to get anyone to respect me. After all, Dad ran out on us. Doesn’t exactly speak volumes about his love for me or Mads—and call it stupid pride, but I’m not going to start name dropping my asshole father just to win a battle of social ranking with some shallow, desperate girls.

“Because you don’t care about any of it. I like that.” Asher’s voice is soft, and he squeezes my knee.

“I might have, if I’d grown up in it,” I admit. “Mom did magic, so we knew about its existence, obviously. But we were pretty isolated from that whole world. I don’t know much about... well, anything. I feel like a complete outsider. If I was raised by my dad, maybe I would care about all this, just like Alyssa.”

“But that’s a what-might-have-been, and if you think too much about those you’ll go crazy,” he replies with a gentle laugh. “You’re you, and I like who you are. You don’t care what people think about you. You don’t let it change who you are.”

“But... what if I *do* care?” I ask softly.

“What do you mean?”

I shrug, finishing up my sandwich. Asher’s sweet and lets me, waiting, not pushing or changing the subject. I look down at my hands, rubbing them together to warm them up. “I don’t know how much you heard...”

“Enough.”

I nod, still focused on my hands in my lap. “I know it’s not true, but it’s hard not to... to hear them when they call me names like...”

My voice trails off, and I wrinkle my nose as my eyes sting. *Goddamn it.* For all my brave talk to Alyssa’s face, I can’t help but feel hurt by her words.

*Slut.*

*Leading them on.*

Is that what I am? Is that what I’m doing?

Especially the “leading them on” part. Roman’s made it clear he wants something more with me and is okay with sharing, which is a whole mindfuck I’ve been avoiding thinking about, but I’ve been clear with him from the start I can’t promise more than sex. Cam and I have made out, and he flirts with me like we’re already dating, but we haven’t really talked about it in an official way. Asher and I have kissed twice now, and we’re sitting here so close together, and he’s said that he wants to be with me...

“If I’m leading you on,” I whisper, “or being unfair to any of you...”

“Hey, no. No way.” Asher takes my hand, squeezing gently. “If you were, I’d say something. There’s a difference between leading someone on and trying to figure out what you want.”

“You seem so sure.” I glance up into his deep green eyes. “You seem to know... so much. And then here I am just bumbling around in the dark about literally everything.”

“I wouldn’t say I know a lot,” he replies with an easy smile. “And I’ve *had* to be sure of who I am, even if others don’t always like it. I’m the youngest of thirteen, so it sort of comes with the territory.”

I gape at him. “You’re *what*?” I knew he had a big family, but not *that* big.

Asher laughs. “Your face is amazing. Yeah, there’s some old spell that affected the Prince family ages ago—we always have a ton of sons. I guess it was supposed to be a blessing of some kind? Back in medieval times when kids died a lot and sons were oh-so-important and all that.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah, I know. So. Twelve older brothers. My mom jokingly called me Hans after we saw *Frozen*.”

“You’re not secretly planning on stealing a throne, are you?”

“Nah, way too much trouble.” He smiles. “But, honestly, growing up with that many people in the house—I had to learn that I wasn’t always going to get all the attention. That I might fade into the background sometimes. And that that’s okay, if I’m confident in who I am. My time will come; everyone gets their turn. So that’s why I’m... the way I am. It wasn’t always easy, but I’ve made it work, and I think I make myself useful and appreciated.”

“You do,” I promise him. “You really, really do. For what it’s worth, I like who you became.” I nudge him with my elbow. “At least, until I meet one of your brothers and leave you for him.”

Ash chuckles at that. “Guess I’ll have to make sure you like me best, then.”

“I already do.” Then I give a bitter laugh. “Fuck. I’m the oldest of *two* and I don’t know who I am at all. You’d think we’d be the opposite.”

“Well... you said your mom is dead? If it’s okay to bring it up.”

“Yeah. She died four years ago. I had to take care of Maddy after she passed.”

“Do you think maybe you were so busy being strong and taking care of your sister that you never stopped to really just think about who *you* were, outside of being her caretaker?”

I stare at him. “That’s... huh. That’s pretty profound, actually.”

He shrugs. “I have my moments.”

“You have a lot of moments,” I reply. And I mean it. Asher is one of the kindest, smartest people I know.

A beautiful grin lights his face. “You have a lot of moments too, Elle. You’re amazing. I don’t want you to doubt that. Even if you’re still figuring yourself out.”

I know I shouldn’t do this. I don’t want to end up guilty of what Alyssa said. I don’t want to lead anyone on, and I don’t want to make this all more confusing and complicated than it already is.

But Asher’s being so damn sweet and looking at me like I’m something special, something *worthwhile*, and I haven’t had that for such a long time. Hardly anyone has looked at me like that since Mom died—well, except Mads, but she doesn’t count because she’s my sister. But these men do, for some insane reason.

Being around Asher makes me want better things for myself than I ever really had the guts to hope for before. He makes me want to be a better

person—the kind who’s worthy of a guy like him.

He makes my heart crack open and expand, and even though it scares the hell out of me, I like it too.

And so I lean in and kiss him.

I just mean for it to be short and sweet, a little thank you. But just like our kiss in front of the girls, it shifts. Deepens. Asher presses in, his tongue sweeps across the seam of my lips, and I part them, and oh... yes, yes.

Kissing Asher is like being pulled underneath the ocean’s surface, with its hidden depths and power, steady and sure, but I’m not at all scared of drowning.

In fact, I kind of *want* to drown.

His arm comes around my waist and he pulls me toward him until I’m straddling his lap. Find a guy who will kiss you after you just ate a BLT, I say. Asher doesn’t seem put off in the slightest, his tongue tangled with mine, working me slowly but steadily until I’m a puddle, melting in his arms. I feel shivery and hot all over, my hips starting to roll of their own accord, and I want to guide his hands up underneath my clothes and into my pants...

The contrast between the cold around us and the heat I feel inside is killing me in the best way. I want to combust. I want to drown. I want Asher to touch me and make me come over and over and over until I can’t stand it.

I pull back, panting, my lungs burning as I suck in gulps of air. Asher kisses slowly, deliberately down my neck, no teeth or hard sucking, just gentle, smooth kisses that leave me shaking.

“We have our next classes,” he murmurs, his lips brushing against the soft skin of my throat.

I’m sorely tempted to find an abandoned nook in the quad and take this further, but Asher’s not the kind of guy you want for a rough, hard fuck in public. That sounds a lot more like Dmitri’s style. Or Roman’s.

Asher’s more reserved than that. Sweeter and softer. He’d want to be someplace where we could take our time and savor each other.

He’d probably even want to light candles for the mood, the dork, and I wouldn’t mind since, well, I’m not a romantic... but it’s *Asher*. He likes the gentle things in life, and I like him that way.

“Yeah. You’re right.” I draw back slightly, running my fingers through his shaggy brown locks just because I can. His body gives a little shiver beneath me that I feel all the way from my clit to my heart. I press one more



kiss to his lips before I reluctantly slide off his lap. “I need to stay on top of my work this semester. I don’t want to get behind.”

It’s a good thing, I tell myself, that we’re not going further. As we walk back toward Wellwood Hall, I remind myself of all the reasons why I need to stop getting so deeply involved with these men.

But that doesn’t stop me from spending the rest of the day dreaming about myself, Asher, and a room lit by soft candlelight.

## CHAPTER 5

**D**etermined to prove to Alyssa, the guys—and most of all, to myself—that I can hack it here, I start my private lessons with Professor Tamlin early the next week.

And honestly?

I hate to admit it, but they're really helpful.

Darn it. I wish I could hate Tamlin. I really do. It would be easier for me to just put her in that little box of 'evil ex-girlfriend'. But she's not a bad person at all. She's patient with me, she seems to like me, she encourages me, she doesn't lose her temper, and she's clearly confident in her magical abilities.

God, I wish I could be her. I'm this awkward, grumpy nobody who thinks band t-shirts are the height of fashion and can barely braid her own hair.

And I can barely do magic.

"You rely too much on your emotions, Elliot," Tamlin tells me during our third session, sitting me down after I fail to make a modification of my sonic boom work. "It's how we all naturally do magic at first, since emotions are so powerful. But they're hard to control. It's very difficult to make yourself feel something, and the *right* thing, at the right moment, and then to be able to stop that emotion from going too far."

"You're giving me a real respect for actors," I mutter.

"Why do you think so few magic users *are* actors? It's difficult to open yourself up like that, go through raw and intense emotions—even if they are manufactured—and maintain control of your magic at the same time."

That makes sense.

Tamlin smiles gently at me. “You need to use your mental strength rather than your emotions. You’re a very smart and stubborn woman, Elliot. I know you have the mental power to control your magic. It’s harder and yields fewer immediate results than with your emotions, but it’s worth it in the long term.”

I look down at my hands, like they’re the culprits behind this whole mess. “What if I never manage it?”

“You will,” she replies, laying her hand on my arm. “Trust me, Elliot, you will.”

Despite the progress I’ve made, I leave our training session feeling empty, confused, and alone. All around me, everyone seems to be mastering their magic.

So why can’t I?

It’s not Tamlin’s fault. It’s not anyone’s fault. It’s not even my fault, exactly, in that I’m not slacking off. It’s just something that’s a part of me, like my eyes or my hair, and I can’t control it—and God, I wish I could. I hope one day I can.

When I step out of Wellwood Hall, I see that everyone’s making their way toward the auditorium. Huh. Is something wrong? A mass of students pour out of the building behind me, and my instincts have me backing toward the wall so nobody can sneak up on me from behind, still on high alert after Raul.

The crowd parts as Dmitri steps through—people tend to hustle to move out of his way, probably due to the resting bastard face he’s got going on. Dmitri’s handsome as hell, with his brown-black hair cut shorter on the sides and a little longer on top, his sharp jawline, broad shoulders, and piercing, dark eyes. *But* he also looks like he woke up on the wrong side of the bed for a month.

Cam and Asher are right behind him, their gazes scanning the crowd. Dmitri sees me and moves so that the crowd parts around me and Cam can grab my arm.

“C’mon, Sin! We’re gonna be late.”

I frown up at him as we hustle along. “For what?”

“Dean Hardwick called some kind of assembly. Said he had good, important news for us.”

The rapid patter of my heart slows a little. *Good news. Okay, that’s—I can work with good news.*

We reach the assembly hall and sit down in our usual arrangement. I want to thank Dmitri for getting everyone out of the way, but before I can speak, Hardwick walks onto the stage, making the crowd fall silent around us.

“Students!” He’s looking more chipper than I’ve ever seen him. Dean Hardwick is a middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair and a deep, soothing voice. Honestly, he’s the kind of guy who looks like you’d find him coaching your daughter’s soccer team, not heading a magical academy. “It is my great pleasure to announce to you that our school has, for the first time in its history, been selected to be included in the Inter-magic Trials.”

The auditorium immediately erupts into noise, buzzing as people whisper none-too-quietly to one another.

I look over at Asher. “What are the...”

Asher nods toward the podium, where Hardwick is speaking again.

“For those first-years who might not know,” the dean says, “the Trials are an annual competition held between magical academies. We like to think it’s a lot safer than the Triwizard Tournament, for those of you who know your Harry Potter. We won’t be sending your friends to the mermaids.”

There’s some laughter from the crowd.

“Schools such as Vulcan Academy, Neptune Academy, and others compete in a friendly inter-disciplinary competition to promote relationships between magical orders. Previously, it was felt that our school was... well. That Unpredictable magic was by its very nature dangerous, and that it would be too risky in a setting like that. I’ve been petitioning for years for you students to get your chance to shine and demonstrate your skills. But I’ve always been denied until this year.”

The whispers have died down completely, and now the entire auditorium is hanging on his every word. I glance around, a little surprised at the looks of excitement on people’s faces.

“The bravery shown by certain students in defending us from attack last semester has garnered a lot of goodwill from the rest of the magical world. We’re being seen more as equals. We teach you here that you’re not any less worthy because of your unique abilities, but some people are quite stubborn about those things. I’m sure you all know that, despite our best attempts to educate the magical populace, prejudice against Unpredictables still persists.”

A few heads swivel in our direction, and I duck my head, a flush creeping up my cheeks. *Move along, nothing to see here, folks.*

Dean Hardwick lifts his chin, gazing out at the assembled students. “This is a wonderful opportunity for us to show the world what we really are: no different from them. We’re hardworking magical practitioners. It’s also a great networking opportunity for you all. Even if you aren’t competing in the Trials themselves, you can meet people from other academies and foster connections that may be useful once you graduate.”

His expression hardens just a little, his voice deepening. “I cannot stress to you enough the importance of putting our best foot forward in this competition. The world likes to tell you that you’re out of control. That you’re dangerous. But we know better, and now’s the time to show that. I hope you’ll join me in representing our school well.” Hardwick gives a little smile. “And of course, I hope we kick their asses.”

A burst of excited laughter fills the auditorium.

“For us to win this competition would be a huge accomplishment for Griffin Academy. It would really show the world what we can do. But also...” He chuckles, bobbing his head. “I’m competitive, and I just want to be able to parade that trophy around for a year.”

Everyone laughs again, including me this time. I’m a bit competitive myself.

“So.” Hardwick clears his throat. “One student is picked from each pillar of magic to represent their academy. Those of you who are not picked will be encouraged to watch the Trials and cheer on our representative. There will be events aside from just the competitions, and I highly recommend that you attend and mingle.”

Dmitri snorts, a look of disgust clouding his features, and Cam nudges him to be quiet.

“In order to choose who will be representing us, we will have a competition of our own. The winner will have the privilege of representing Griffin Academy in the Trials for the very first time. And I wish to emphasize that this competition is open to all. I don’t want any of you saying that you won’t get it because you’re a first-year up against third-years. You never know. Sign up and see.” Hardwick grins. “And if we get every single student to participate in the competition, then I’ll arrange a reward for everyone for their school spirit. I think that’s it—we’ll be

emailing you more information shortly and putting it up on posters around campus. Thank you all, and may the best magic user win!”

He steps away from the podium, and the room goes absolutely bonkers.

Cam’s already poking at Dmitri and going on and on about how they have to enter and how exciting it is and how he hopes he gets it, but if he doesn’t get it then Dmitri should. Even Asher is sitting up a little straighter, a thoughtful smile spreading across his face.

I’m... less excited. I mean, it’s great for whoever gets picked, but if they think *I’m* entering this competition, they’re nuts. I can barely do magic on a good day. I’m not going to set myself up to be humiliated, thanks.

Not to mention... well, I hate to rain on anyone’s parade, but this feels kind of like when people go to a circus and see the freaks on display. Sure, the “freaks” are getting attention, but at what price? And why? Because they’re oddities and people want to poke at them.

I just can’t shake the fear that whoever enters the Trials on behalf of our school will just be that. A freak sideshow. Not the main attraction. Nobody’s going to actually want an Unpredictable to win or even really care *if* we win. They’ll just want to be able to pat themselves on the back for including us and then laugh at us behind their hands later.

I honestly feel sorry for whoever’s chosen, having to deal with that mess.

“You should enter, Sin!” Cam grins at me and drapes an arm around my shoulder. “You’d do great with your sonic boom.”

“That’s just a one-trick pony type thing.” I wrinkle my nose. I’m pretty sure I’d have to have more than just one ace up my sleeve to make it through the Trials, whatever they may entail.

“Yeah, but it’s still a damn cool trick.” His blue eyes gleam with pride.

I shake my head evasively. “Nah, I don’t think so. You three should enter, though. You’d do well.” Especially Dmitri, he’s built for battle. “If everyone else in the school enters, and I’m the only one holding us back from a massive pizza party, then I’ll do it. But otherwise? Hell no.”

Yeah...

I really need to stop and think about these “famous last words” I keep throwing around.

## CHAPTER 6

The Trials are all anyone talks about for the next few days.

It starts to feel a little like I'm stuck in some kind of magical echo chamber. *Trials, Trials, Trials.*

I try to get into the whole school spirit thing, but that's never really been my personality type—I was never a cheerleader in high school, if you can believe it. And don't people know they're just setting up whoever wins to be a guinea pig for the entire magical community?

Not to mention, I hear a lot of people saying they'll try out when... um... I know for a fact they won't win. I'm talking bookworm second-years who get their asses kicked by Dmitri every fight class, or first-years like me who can barely get a tennis ball into a basket. Why do people set themselves up for humiliation on a slim to none chance?

Alyssa, of course, is planning on entering. So are her other three cohorts. I could actually see Cristina being some kind of threat—she's got this quiet air of *I will cut you* about her that I can't help but respect just a bit. But Kendal? Oh, man. Poor thing's going to get eaten alive in the first round.

I wasn't exactly expecting the competition to be a sit down test, but I'm surprised when I hear it's going to be a fight competition, much like our class taught by Tamlin. I do pretty well in that class, or at least, I used to, as far as the non-magical aspect goes. I've always been able to hold my own in a scuffle. A woman who works late shifts at a bar? Yeah, I had to break up a few fights and be prepared for the worst on my walks home.

But this is no-holds-barred magic as well. The rules seem to be pretty simple—use your magic in any way you can to win, while also using your

fists to beat the shit out of your opponent.

*Cheerful stuff.*

The guys are all entering, and Asher's the kind of person who reads all the terms and conditions before clicking "I Accept", so I'm well aware of the rules by the time the day of the competition rolls around. You can't use the same magical trick over and over to win fights. It's cool if you can freeze or levitate your opponent, but they don't want a one-trick pony to win, so you have to employ multiple magical tactics as the rounds go on. There's a preliminary round of single combat, and then those who win their preliminary go into a battle royale, everyone against everyone.

I distinctly recall how everyone reacted in the dining hall when Raul made our cuffs burn off, so I don't know who thought this battle royale thing was a good idea, but if you ask me, they're insane. I nearly killed Asher with my sonic boom, and about twenty students ended up in the infirmary after that debacle. And they want to just unleash us on each other like that again?

There's also a rule about not killing your opponent and just trying to incapacitate them or get them to surrender, because of course there is, but I don't know how well that whole thing will work. I'm honestly a little worried that it won't—and that one of my men will be the one getting hurt.

Um. Not that any of them are *mine*, strictly speaking.

Everyone who's competing has to check in first in one of the large first-floor classrooms in Wellwood Hall. I read over the rules posted on the entry doors one last time as everyone files in. There are tables set up for people to sign in if they already put their name down, as well as tables to register if they've decided to join at the last minute.

Dmitri's stretching already while Cam and Asher wait in line to sign in. I can see Roman sitting at the table for the last-minute sign ups, looking stoic and stern as always. I haven't gotten to sneak over to his room in a couple weeks, and I resist the urge to wave or walk over and talk to him. I certainly don't talk to the guys—they need to focus, and I don't want to distract them.

"And here I thought you'd be desperate to sign up, Roach," Alyssa muses, walking up beside me and staring at the rules, like I'm not even worth making eye contact with. "Get all that attention you're so desperate for."

"Right, I'm the one who's desperate for attention."



She scoffs, tossing her blonde hair. “Please. Why else would you need *three* men to boost your ego? And that whole stunt with saving the school?”

“Did you seriously just suggest I helped save the school because I wanted attention? Like, as a stunt?”

“I don’t pretend to understand you,” Alyssa replies, her tone dripping with disdain. “Anyway. I think it’s a good thing you’re not competing. We wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”

I stare at her. “Are you saying I couldn’t handle myself?”

“I didn’t say it, *you* just did,” Alyssa replies, giving me a smug smile. Goddamn it, I’d like to smack that smirk right off her face. “But honestly, it’s for the best. I’d hate for you to get hurt and embarrass yourself in the first round. The person who saved the school basically flunking out of the competition? Ouch. Talk about a blow.”

“Your concern is so sweet,” I reply, my blood nearly boiling. “I suppose, as a first-year, you’re not entering either? I wouldn’t want you to chip a nail.”

“Oh, no, I am. You see, I’m not a coward.” She shakes her head, like she’s so disappointed in me.

“What, now you *want* me to enter? I thought you just said it was a good thing I wasn’t in the competition?”

“Well, there’s a downside too. The person who saved the whole academy should show a little more school spirit, don’t you think? And it does make you look rather... snobby. Or scared. Take your pick!” Alyssa smiles brightly. “Quite a Catch-22, isn’t it? Oh, well!”

I grit my teeth. She’s right that I’m not one for school spirit. I stopped Raul because he was planning to do bad things, not because he was doing them on academy grounds. And I don’t think just because I stopped a rogue mage once—which any decent person would do—that should mean I have to participate in every school event ever. What am I, fucking prom queen?

I’m not an attention grabber, and I’m not the only one who was there fighting Raul. Roman was there, and so were Dmitri, Cam, and Asher, and they’re all in the competition. I’d say that’s plenty of damn school spirit represented right there.

But at the same time...

*Motherfuck.*

If I don’t enter the competition, Alyssa’s going to spread the rumor I was too scared to do it; I just know she will. If I do enter the competition,

she'll still say something—probably that I'm an attention hog and all that—but hopefully, I can at least get through the first round to the battle royale part. Then I can go after her smug little face and punch her, and nobody can punish me for it.

*Hmm. That actually sounds like a great way to spend the afternoon.*

All right. I'm probably going to regret this, but if it gives me a chance to deliver the royal smackdown on a girl who's been nothing but a bitch to me since day one? I'll take the chance.

You only live once, right? And when else am I going to get a no-holds-barred opportunity to punch Alyssa?

"Guess I'll just see you on the battleground, then," I tell her sweetly, and then I turn on my heel and march over to the sign-up table where Roman's sitting.

His dark eyebrows shoot up toward his hairline as I walk over. "Elliot."

I hold out my hand. "Give me a damn pen, I'm signing up."

"Are you sure about this, Reckless?" Roman asks quietly, his eyes narrowing even as he hands me the pen.

I sign my name and list my two powers—wall walking and sonic boom. "Look, if I don't sign up for this? Everyone's going to gossip about me. If I do sign up for this? Everyone's going to gossip about me. At least this way I get my anger and aggression out, right?"

Roman looks simultaneously intimidated, worried, and turned on. He leans forward, lowering his voice. "Not that I don't admire your attitude, Elliot, but—"

"You can't stop me."

"I'm well aware of that," he drawls, his eyes darkening in a way that makes my clit throb inappropriately. "I don't think I could stop you from doing anything you set your mind to." Then he pauses before adding, "But please be careful."

"Hey." I shrug casually, projecting more confidence than I feel. "I'm not going to get hurt."

"I meant more with your sonic boom." Roman hesitates, like he knows this is a delicate subject and is mulling over how he wants to say his next words. "When you hurt Asher... you were torn up about it for days, I could see it in you. I don't want you to do anything you regret later."

"Trust me," I reply, setting the pen down, "I'm not going to regret doing what it takes to give certain people a black eye."

Roman's gaze flicks over to Alyssa, who's now standing with the other three girls and complaining about something. Her new hair conditioner, I think. Jesus, she really is fucking vapid.

And she's doing her damndest to make it clear to the whole room she doesn't care one way or another what I do. *The lady doth protest a little too much, methinks.*

Roman's low voice drags my attention back to him.

"I know she's given you hell, Reckless. And I know you can take her." For a moment, heat, humor, and savage pride flash in his eyes. Then he sighs, his serious expression dropping back into place. "Just be careful, all right?"

"You can't tell me what to do," I say with a defiant arch of my brow, even though he can and he has and I fucking loved it.

His expression tells me he just had the exact same thought I did, and my cheeks flush, blood rushing through my veins at lightning speed. *Shit, I better get out of here before we break every damn "not in public" rule we've established.*

Roman hands me my badge, his fingers sliding over my wrist as I take it from him. Little trails of fire zip up my arm from his touch, and from the look in his eyes, he wishes he could touch me a lot more than that. But of course, since no one but the other three men is aware of this little thing between us, he can't do anything but let his fingers linger for a second.

The heat in his gaze makes my heart beat a little harder, and I look down as I pin the badge to my chest, needing a second to gather myself. Fuck, he throws me so off-balance sometimes.

According to the rules posted on the door, the badge has a little sensor that will monitor my heart rate or whatever, and it also has my name on it, in case people forget that. I really hope nobody is paying attention to my heart rate right now, although I can't be the only student in the room with a rapid pulse.

Roman drops his hand to the table slowly, his dark eyes watching me. His gaze is still too intense, so to keep my skin from spontaneously bursting into flames, I distract him with a question. "Why do you dislike Alyssa so much, anyway? I mean, I know why I don't like her, but what's your beef?"

"Well, this is going to make me sound like a hypocrite, given our relationship," he says quietly, one eyebrow lifting wryly, "but I don't make

a habit of sleeping with my students, and I don't appreciate said students talking about me like I'm a piece of meat."

*Oh.* Roman didn't know I was his student when we first hooked up at the bar I worked at back in Portland. In fact, at the time, I wasn't his student—I didn't have my powers yet and had no idea I'd be going to the Academy of Unpredictable Magic in the near future.

Our decision to continue our sexual relationship is a questionable one—I'm well aware we're not exactly being prudent here. But I'm not into him because he's my teacher. That's not my particular kink, thanks. And he's not into me because I'm his student.

I can definitely see why a bunch of people giggling over how hot he is and talking about him like an object could get on his nerves. Not to mention, make him uncomfortable. I've had to deal with that kind of shit from men at the bar, I don't wish it on Roman or anyone else, no matter what their gender.

"Yeah, that is shitty. You want me to punch her for you?" I ask lightly.

"Your instinct toward violence is concerning," he replies, but a smile quirks his lips. It's soft and devastatingly sexy—the one he gives me when he's looking down at me in bed, the one that makes me forget I don't want anything serious. "So as your *professor*, I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that."

A loud bell rings out from the quad, and he stands up. "Ah, you should go, they'll be starting soon." He lowers his voice. "Good luck."

I nod, feeling my cheeks heat up, and then start for the quad.

Somehow—with magic I'm sure—the quad has been transformed into a sort of arena. There are sections marked off with white paint, like the kind they use for the lines on sports fields, which I assume will be there for the first round of one-on-one, keeping us apart.

Professor Binns checks my badge and does some kind of spell on me—I have no idea what, which concerns me slightly—and then I'm put in one of the sections. I see everyone around me being lined up for the same thing. It looks like the whole school did indeed sign up.

Yay. Pizza party, I guess?

Silver lining, it means there won't be any spectators for this first round besides the professors. Since we're all paired off, there's no one left to sit in the stands. There will be for the battle royale, but if I get that far, I doubt

anyone will be able to really tell who's who with all the magic and fists flying.

Someone comes to stand across from me, I'm guessing my opponent. I turn, ready to say something like "sorry you're stuck with me," but then I look at her face and blink.

It's Kendal.

## CHAPTER 7

**K**endal looks startled to see me, her blue eyes going wide. I remember reading somewhere that the rarest hair-eye combination is red hair and blue eyes, and Kendal genuinely rocks the look. She also lacks the hard-edged, nasty sort of expression that takes away from whatever natural beauty Alyssa has. Kendal tends to look like she's Alice who just landed in Wonderland and has no clue what to do with that.

"Elliot!" she blurts out.

"Kendal."

"I guess... um..." She shuffles her feet. "May the best woman win?"

"Uh... sure."

I'm surprised not to be met by an insult, but then again, Kendal doesn't seem to have the taste for blood in the water like the other three preppy sharks do. Not that she stands up for me, either, so we're sure as hell not friends.

Dean Hardwick's voice is magically amplified as he gives us a little speech explaining what's going to happen and going over the rules one more time.

*No trying to kill or maim your opponent. Only get them to surrender or to step outside the bounds marked by the white paint. So on and so forth.*

"When you hear the bell, begin!" he announces.

I spread my feet out and drop my weight. Kendal brings her hands up like she's about to cast a spell.

There's a moment of silence, and it feels like the whole world goes still as we all wait.

I know Tamlin's been telling me to use my mental strength and not my emotional strength, but I can't rely on that if I'm going to get past this first round, not when I've been failing so spectacularly with my magic lately. Instead, I think about Alyssa and how much I want to get her to go away, how much I want her to disappear, how much I want to punch her, punch my dad, shake some sense into people like Aurora who gave me the ultimatum of go to this damn school or lose my magic forever—

The bell dings.

With all the fury working in me, I let off my sonic boom.

I aim for the ground near Kendal's feet, since a direct hit with a sonic boom could put her in the infirmary for weeks. A small crater appears in the earth, and Kendal is catapulted backward out of our section, landing on her ass on the grass with a shriek. She's okay, just a little bruised in the ass region, I'm guessing, but she sits up just fine, coughing a bit to work the air back into her lungs.

Light shoots up from the lines of our section, surrounding me in a cage that looks like bright sunshine, and I look around to see I'm not the only one encased like this. I guess it's what happens when someone wins—I can see Cam dusting off his hands and grinning as his section fills with light too.

He sees me and gives me a thumbs-up. I grin back at him. I'm glad he made it through.

Asher and Dmitri have made it too, though I didn't ever doubt they would. Alyssa and Cristina also got through, and I grit my teeth.

Good. I'm coming straight for them.

Once everybody's won or lost, the light goes away and the lines disappear, as if the light burned them away. Only the outside lines remain—the one marking the edges of the arena.

"Congratulations!" Hardwick announces as the school medical staff check people for injuries and the defeated take up spots around us to watch. "Now it's time for the battle royale. Last person standing gets to move on."

I stretch out my arms, trying to breathe and not let nervousness overtake me.

"The Trials will be messy, and you'll be going up against multiple opponents at once. The goal is to see who can handle their magic the best under the most stressful of circumstances. This doesn't just mean how you

can use it in a fight, but how you can control it so it doesn't kill or maim someone else. It's *all* about control," he emphasizes.

*Well, I'm fucked then, and not in the fun way.*

All the professors and staff are gathered around the arena, their stances alert and ready. I have no doubt they've been instructed to intervene if any of the fights get out of hand. This whole thing is about bringing good press to the school, and it wouldn't look too great if one of the students were seriously injured before the Trials even start.

"The goal here is to be the last person standing. That means your opponents have either surrendered, been pushed out of the arena, or been incapacitated—that is, rendered unconscious or otherwise unable to fight. Throwing a magical net around your opponent so they can't move, for example, counts as being incapacitated."

*Okay, makes sense.*

"Non-magical tactics, including hand-to-hand, are available to you as well," Hardwick finishes. "When the bell sounds, it's everyone for themselves."

My eyes find Alyssa across the arena. I'm not letting anyone, and I mean *anyone*, get in the way of me smashing her into the dirt. It's ninety percent of the reason I signed up for this shit.

I should probably be a lot more concerned about this bloodlust than I am. Oh, well, chalk it up to another issue I'll inevitably have to discuss when finally I get a therapist.

The bell sounds, and chaos erupts.

Everyone's charging at everybody else, conjuring, summoning, unleashing insane powers. I dodge a fireball as someone to my right transforms into a goddamn wolf, and several students on the other side of the arena start floating. Just picture a food fight in a high school lunchroom and add a shit-ton of crazy magic, and you've got a good idea of the insanity I'm surrounded by.

I head right for Alyssa, dodging and weaving, using my spider climb to actually parkour off a few people like they're walls to avoid getting hit by a wayward mini tsunami.

*Jesus Christ, it's total pandemonium out here.*

Alyssa's distracted, flinging spells at someone else, so she doesn't see me coming until I...



Well, okay, I'm not all that proud of it, but I take a flying leap and tackle her into the dirt.

Look, I'm not apologizing for it, it's satisfying as fuck. I feel like a five-year-old going after the girl who stole her crayons, but nothing beats the sensation of hearing Alyssa shriek in surprise before she lands with a heavy *oomph* on the ground beneath me.

"You freak!" she shrieks as she bats her hair out of her face and realizes it's me.

"I thought I was a slut?" I ask, cocking back my fist. "Don't go changing the insults on me now—you know my poor little brain gets confused."

I clock her in the nose, and blood pours from her nostrils. *Ha. Try being all high and mighty with a broken nose, you stuck-up brat.*

Alyssa screams bloody murder and scratches at me, trying to get her hands around my throat. But I twist out of her hold and spring to my feet, backing up several paces.

Her voice is shrill enough to shatter glass as she scrambles up, screaming insults about me, my mother, my parents' marital status when I was born, and all that usual nonsense. I wait until she's on her feet again, and then I unleash a sonic boom right at her feet.

She flies backward, landing just outside the lines of the arena. A little worse for wear, she pulls herself up to sitting—and her face falls when she realizes where she is.

Halle-fucking-lujah.

*That's an amazing feeling. Well worth the price of admission, I'd say.* I saunter away, and for a second, I completely forget everyone else around me is still fighting like we're gladiators in Rome.

That is, until a tall guy with blond hair charges toward me with a war cry on his lips.

*Oh, right. Battle royale.*

My sonic boom is instinctive—it's always been a defense reflex when I'm attacked—and this time, I don't direct it toward the ground. It explodes out of me, sending about ten people flying out in all directions, knocking into other people and messing up spells, a domino effect that causes a whole wave of new chaos.

*Oh, hell yes. Hey, I might actually get pretty far in this!*

Then someone tackles me from behind.

My nose recognizes who it is before the rest of me does, and a surge of heat fills me as I register the scent of cloves and honey.

Dmitri.

I twist, kicking out—we spar in almost every fight class together, and I know his fight moves like the back of my hand.

Problem is, he also knows mine. He catches my ankle, forcing my legs apart so he can move closer to me, and for a wild second, I can't help but imagine what it would feel like to have him on top of me like this, spreading my legs under very different circumstances.

*Oh, God, so fucking hot.*

Ripping myself out of the badly-timed fantasy, I focus in again and headbutt him, sending him stumbling back while I scramble to my feet. I'm surprised he's not using his magic on me... but then, I'm not using my magic on him, either. I don't want to risk hurting him.

But Dmitri would never be bothered about whether or not he hurt me, would he?

I mean, he's not a total asshole; I don't think he'd ever want to actually *injure* me. Enough to knock me out of the fight though? Yeah, I think he'd hand me my ass with no qualms. The man is hugely competitive, and he tolerates me at best. Sure, we've gotten used to each other because I spend so much time with him and the guys. We get off on fighting each other, and I think he likes bantering with me, but he's made it clear we're not good friends. There's no reason for him to be considerate with me.

And so help me God, if he's going easy on me because he thinks I can't take it...

"Come at me!" I yell, letting out just enough of my sonic boom to throw him back a little.

Dmitri stumbles but keeps his feet, glaring at me. "What did you think I was just doing?"

"Holding back, that's what you're doing," I shoot back. "Don't be a cock."

"Did you just call me a cock?"

"Well, I'd say pussy, but we both know which is really the weak one."

Dmitri growls and launches himself at me.

With a feral grin, I neatly step to the side, grabbing his arm and twisting it behind his back. But he uses the momentum of my movement to yank me up and over his head so it's my turn to go flying.

No way am I letting goddamn Dmitri of all people beat me.

I yank him down so he's on top of me, then I roll so I'm on top of him. His hands are everywhere, his body hard and solid beneath mine as we grapple together. It's a lot of touching, and no body part is off limits for either one of us. My heart rate speeds up from more than just exertion, but I long ago got used to the fact that I get a bit turned on—*okay, fine, a lot turned on*—by sparring with Dmitri.

He clocks me with a left hook, and I retaliate. We go rolling in the grass, punching and kicking, but he's still not using his magic. He could be phasing and duplicating like crazy, and it would definitely give him a leg up on me. What the hell is he playing at?

There's an odd hush around us, but I don't really notice it since the ringing in my ears is so much louder. I lose track of everything, including strategy, just fighting with everything I've got to beat him. I don't care if I go out next—Cam or Asher will win, or at least I hope so—just so long as I can rub it in Dmitri's face that I beat him fair and square.

I see an opening and take it, slipping around behind him and twisting his arm behind his back. Pressing my hand to the back of his head, I slam him face-first into the dirt, my knee digging into his back. Dmitri struggles to get up, but he's got no leverage, and he can't buck me off.

"Say yield," I growl, tightening my grip.

Dmitri gives a vicious grunt in response, like we're more animal than human at this point. Victory is coursing through my lungs, my blood, and I don't know whether I want him to say he yields or for him to grab me and pin me down and fuck me right there on the grass like this really is some weird mating ritual.

Yeah, I'm a bit messed up, but that's how it gets where Dmitri and I are concerned. Aggression and sexual tension tend to collide.

"Yield!" I repeat, raising my voice.

He could get out of this hold, feasibly, I think. Right?

"Fine," Dmitri snaps, "I yield, okay? You happy?"

"Damn right, I am," I reply, grinning savagely. Hell, yes. I'm never letting him live this down.

*Even if he could get out of the hold?* that little voice in my head whispers to me.

But if he could have, he would have. Dmitri doesn't like me all that much, and he sure as hell doesn't like losing. There's no way he'd let me

win.

As I let go of him, I become aware of something else. That weird quiet sound I wasn't paying attention to because I was busy kicking ass?

It's turned into absolute silence now.

I look up and around, and my heart skips a beat.

*Holy shit.*

Everyone around me is on the ground, or tangled up in some magic that keeps them from moving, or outside the arena. In short, everyone else is... is incapacitated.

The crowd stares at me, and I stare back as I realize...

I'm the last one standing.

The silence stretches on. I don't think anyone expected a first-year student to win, especially not me.

My stomach churns. Are people angry I won? Do they want someone else to represent the school? Should I give up, concede to Dmitri?

"Yeah, Elliot!" someone yells.

It's Cam.

"Elliot!" he starts yelling. "Elliot! Elliot!"

Other people start taking up the chant. I'm pretty sure I can hear Asher's voice among them. "El-li-ot! El-li-ot! El-li-ot! El-li-ot!"

*Holy shit.*

## CHAPTER 8

Everyone chants for a full minute until Hardwick gets them all to settle down.

*Fuck.*

I might throw up.

No fucking way. I'm the last one standing? *How?*

I didn't even do this to win, exactly—I just did it to rub it in Alyssa's face that I might not be the strongest mage in this school, but I can sure as hell kick her ass if I feel like it. And how did I defeat Dmitri, of all people? He's one of the best fighters at our school, no question, whether it's with magic or just hand-to-hand.

That little voice at the back of my head won't stop theorizing that Dmitri threw the fight, but that's impossible. Even if he did like me that much, and he doesn't, why would he do that? Why would he throw away his chance like that?

It doesn't make any sense.

I'm hustled into Hardwick's office. I've only been in here a few times before, and I always have the strangest urge to speak in a whisper as soon as I step through the door. It looks about as fancy and intimidating as you'd imagine, and the whole room smells like the leather of the wingback chairs in front of his desk. I sit down in one gingerly.

Hardwick settles into his seat across from me. "Miss Sinclair. You know, I wondered if it would be you."

"A first-year who can't control her magic, right," I reply, my nervousness coming out as sarcasm like it always does. "The best possible candidate to represent the entire school in a cutthroat competition."

Hardwick chuckles in a fatherly sort of way. My stomach twists into a knot. I'm not really good with the whole "people who try to be your father figure" thing. No guesses as to why.

"Your work against Raul was admirable." He leans forward, resting his elbows on the desk and pressing his fingertips together. "And your strength is unmatched. Raw power is a great gift, Elliot, don't scoff at it."

"I'll scoff at whatever I want, thanks. So, how do I concede?"

The dean frowns at me. "Concede?"

"Dmitri should be the one advancing to the Trials, not me," I say flatly. "He's a second-year, and he's got way more experience, especially at fighting—"

"But you beat him," Hardwick cuts in. "And *you* were the one who defeated Raul, not him. I can't stop you if you decide not to accept this opportunity of course, Miss Sinclair, but I really wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Why?" I demand. "Because from where I stand, this is just a chance to humiliate myself and the entire school when I fail."

"You won't fail," he assures me. "We won't just throw you to the wolves, Miss Sinclair. The full support of Griffin Academy will be behind you. You'll be taking extra lessons, and we'll modify your coursework to reflect the different areas of study you'll need to learn. You'll get the same class credits, never fear—we'll just have to shuffle around your coursework a bit, and you might have to skip some classes next year and retake others from this year."

This sounds like way more trouble than it's worth. "Look, I—"

"Why don't you think about it?" Hardwick suggests. "We're not going to force you to compete if you don't want to, so if you decide not to accept the nomination, we'll choose someone else to represent the school. But I'm not going to announce anything yet. Take a couple of days and then come back, and we'll talk some more. You might change your mind."

I chew on my lip. I don't want to seem rude or ungrateful. At the assembly, Hardwick seemed so damn excited by this whole thing, and I don't want to rain on his parade.

I can pretend to think about this for a day or two and then come back and respectfully decline. Dmitri will love to be the school champion, getting a chance to fight and compete. He's almost as competitive as I am, so I know he'd enjoy it. Hell, it might actually put a smile on his face for once.

“Fine.” I dip my head in a nod. “I’ll think about it.”

“Excellent.” Hardwick smiles at me, and it’s not some fake, pacifying smile. It looks warm and genuine. “I sincerely hope you choose to compete for us, Elliot.”

I nod, then get up and leave.

As I push open the door of the admin building and step outside, my thoughts tumble around in my head like clothes in a dryer.

*Maddy. I need to call Maddy. She’ll know what to do.*

I know she’s my younger sister, and I’m usually the one taking care of her, but she was the one who convinced me to go to this damn school in the first place instead of giving up my magic. She’s the one who convinced me to stay last semester when I thought I’d fucked everything up. Maybe she’ll have some perspective on this.

Mads is my pride and joy. If she wants me to do this, then I’ll do it. But if she agrees with me that maybe it’s not the best idea, that maybe it’s not even something I deserve—

Absorbed in my thoughts, I run smack into a very solid chest and stumble back. “Whoa, sorry—”

“Hey, Sin, I’ve been scouring the campus for you.” It’s Cam. He smiles gently at me, his hands at my shoulders to steady me. “You okay? You don’t exactly look like someone who just won a big competition.”

“I’m... I’m okay,” I lie.

Cam chuckles, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and guiding me into walking alongside him. “Sure, you are.”

“You can’t really think my being champion for this school is a good idea.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Cam asks, leading me down a path toward the woods. The woods are kind of our special place—we go running and hiking in there together several times a week. Asher is a swim guy with a major fear of spiders, so he never comes with us. And the one time I asked Dmitri if he wanted to join us, he told me he’d rather jump into a piranha-infested tank, so... it’s just something for Cam and me.

I like that. That I have something special just with Cam, for the two of us. I hope I’ll find something just for Asher and myself.

God knows what Dmitri and I have. If we have anything.

Ugh, there I go again with these stupid, gooey, emotional thoughts. *Bad, Elliot, bad!* Especially with all the shit Alyssa’s been saying about me, I do

not need to feed the rumor mill and then break people's hearts in the process. God knows I'm way too cranky and sarcastic for someone as sunny as Cam, anyway—even though I know about the darker spots he hides from most of the world.

“You're seriously asking me why it wouldn't be a good idea for me to represent the school?” I huff a laugh. “Did you hit your head in the fight back there?”

We enter into the woods, heading up our usual running path. “Don't deflect, Sin, come on. You saved the school once already—”

“—I had help.”

“Hey. *I* didn't take down Raul. None of us did, even if getting down there was a joint effort. *You* took him out. I think you're the exact kind of person we need in this competition. You're already a badass.”

I kick at a small rock on the trail. “Yeah, sure. A badass who can barely do magic.”

“You raised your sister all on your own, Elliot.” Cam stops walking and puts his hands on my shoulders to turn me to face him. “Look, my parents dying? That was shitty, and I had to learn how to fend for myself. It was bad enough that I had only myself to worry about; you had yourself *and* your sister. And you did it. You took care of everything. I think that's incredibly badass. You came here not knowing much about magic. Most of us have been part of the magical community our whole lives, so we've got a leg up on you. And you're still giving it your all. *And* you won the fucking battle royale!”

“Yeah, using just one trick and then no magic. Dmitri would've crushed me if he'd used his phasing or duplication powers.”

He shakes his head. “If you weren't using magic then Dmitri wouldn't either. He wanted to beat you fair and square. So since you only used fists, he only used fists. Otherwise it wouldn't feel like a fair fight to him.”

Huh. I've never thought of it that way. It explains his behavior, which I was wondering about. Since Dmitri going soft on me is about as likely as pigs flying.

“Okay, but still—”

“That means you beat him fair and square.”

“Right, but, Cam.” I reach up and take his hands in mine, squeezing gently. “That doesn't mean I'll be able to do the magic I need to so I can win this thing. I don't even care about winning it, not really, but—I'm not



going to be a damn joke. I won't get up there and represent the school by failing miserably. I just won't do it."

Cam lets go of my hands to brush my hair back from my face. I haven't even had a chance to change or shower since the battle royale ended, so there's a good chance I've got a bunch of grass mixed in with the strands, but he doesn't seem to notice.

"That's an understandable fear, Sin." His bright blue eyes shine with openness and honesty. "But I know you won't fail."

"How can *you* know that if *I* don't?"

He gives me a small, crooked smile, then wraps his arms around my waist. My palms settle against his chest, and it feels like something in my heart clicks into place. I feel safe in his arms, like this is how it's supposed to be. It feels right.

"That's my job." His body shifts against me as he shrugs. "If you don't have faith in yourself, then I'll have it for you."

That's one of my favorite things about Cam. He's a joker, but he's also genuinely so kindhearted, just like Asher. He really cares.

"Will you be disappointed in me if I don't compete?" I'm surprised by how small my voice is. I really care what Cam thinks, what all the guys will think.

He shakes his head. "Hell, no. You couldn't disappoint me with something like that. I promise. It's your choice and your comfort level. I just don't want you to say no because you think you can't do it. You can."

"What if I'm not the right person to represent the school?"

"You are literally the personification of Unpredictable magic," Cam points out with a crooked grin. "You're not someone with a lot of training or who grew up in the magical world. This came at you out of the blue, but look at you. You're doing your best to control it. I can't think of someone who could better rep the school."

His heartbeat is strong and steady beneath my touch, and the feel of it against my hands tames my own thrashing pulse even more than his words do.

"Besides"—he gives me a gentle squeeze—"it's about time we have someone who's a 'random nobody' represent a school. All the people from powerful families have a leg up because they get tutors and learn theoretical spell work and history and all of that before they even step foot inside an academy. Sure, their magic might not come in until later in the game, but

they already know so much that they're prepared for it. So they usually end up being picked for things like this. We've had enough of that. I mean—no offense to Asher and Dmitri, you know I love them—but it's time people like you and me got to be the faces of our schools, don't you think?"

He has a point. I really do care about Dmitri, sometimes in spite of my better judgment. But if he's the champion—and he will be if I step down, since he got second place—then it'll be another man from another powerful legacy family representing Griffin Academy. I don't know a whole lot about Dmitri's past or his family, but I know he works his ass off and has since before he got into school, studying magic. His family's old world, from what I hear, and absolutely steeped in both magic and money.

If I represent the school, maybe it'll be easier for Maddy. For Cam. For everyone else who didn't have a powerful family giving them every advantage growing up. It'll show that magic belongs to everyone, that anyone can have it and make use of it.

I can't believe I'm about to say this, but...

"Okay."

"Okay... what?" Cam looks unbearably hopeful and excited.

"I mean, okay, take me to the goddamn dean so I can tell him I'll do it."

"Yes!" Cam picks me up and whirls me around, sending me into laughter as I cling to him for support. He kisses my temple, my cheek, then my mouth, soft and enthusiastic, as if we do this all the time.

My heart skips a beat in my chest, and even though the kiss was quick, I feel it through my entire body, all the way down to my toes. I pull back, startled but trying to hide it.

"C'mon, we have to be quick, I have a tutoring session to get to."

If Cam's noticed my reaction, he isn't saying anything. He looks perfectly normal, but my heart is racing like it's going for the Triple Crown.

*What just happened? What does it mean?*

I don't quite know where Cam and I stand. We made out once, and it was hot as hell. We do technically live together, and he made it clear he wants to date me, but I've never really given him an answer.

That was a very couple-y thing to do though. In fact, everything that just happened feels the same way. Cam encouraging me and supporting me, bringing me to our special place to talk out an issue, him holding me, whirling me around, kissing me like that without a second thought...

I'm a little bit elated but also fucking terrified. I didn't sign up for this. I've been trying to avoid it. I'm not—fuck, I'm not good at the whole relationship thing, and it's the last thing I need to worry about when I'm apparently also representing my entire school in a major competition.

*Oh Jesus, what if I screw this up?*

“Hey, Sin, it's gonna be fine,” Cam says in a soft voice, apparently misunderstanding the look of panic on my face. “We'll tell Hardwick, and it'll all be fine. You'll get time to prepare for the tournament. It's not like it's tomorrow.”

“Right. You're right.”

I shake my head to clear it, nodding quickly. I do *not* want to have a talk about our not-relationship right now—so yes, pretending I'm panicked about the competition it is.

He grins proudly at me then slips his hand into mine, lacing our fingers together.

“Come on, champ. I'll take you to the dean.”

## CHAPTER 9

**H**ardwick is absolutely delighted I've decided to enter into the competition—and that it only took me a few hours to reach my decision.

I'm surprised, honestly. I would've thought he'd prefer someone like Dmitri. But the whole school would know Dmitri was the second place contestant and that I'd turned down the offer, and that wouldn't look good for anyone.

So I guess it makes sense.

The competition will start in a couple of weeks. That gives me only fourteen days to prepare to get my ass kicked straight to Saturn and try to improve my skills enough so I at least lose by a close margin—or look good doing it, anyway—so I won't one hundred percent embarrass my entire school.

My one condition?

Nobody's allowed to mention that I'm the student who “saved the school”.

As far as I know, the magical news outlets kept the names of the students involved out of the press. Hardwick and the rest of the academy administration wanted us to be able to live “normal” lives and not have reporters hounding us. Given the whole top secret nature of the artifact housing deal in the first place, I'm not surprised. But I can see why there would be temptation to out me as the girl who defeated the psycho student if it'll bolster my image in the competition.

If you ask me, it just sets me up to let people down even more. I'd rather just be a random, anonymous student, thanks.

Hardwick agrees to my condition without putting up a fight, probably recognizing the same pitfall I do—if I’m billed as some big savior and then fail in the competition, it’ll just make me and the school look worse.

It also makes me look like I was chosen because of my prior actions, because I was the school savior, and I want it known that I got this position fair and square.

Or at least, that’s what I tell myself. That it *was* fair, and that I did earn it.

Cam gives me a reassuring hug before I go to my next private training session with Tamlin a few days after agreeing to compete in the Trials. I’m grateful for his support, but I also sort of wish he wasn’t offering it. We’re not in a relationship, and I feel almost like I’m stealing these touches, this time with him, that I’m using him like Alyssa said.

It makes my stomach twist uncomfortably. But I don’t know how to say any of that to him without it turning into a talk about our relationship where he inevitably asks me to date him.

I don’t... I don’t want to have to turn him down.

Cam’s got a great future ahead of him. I know he doesn’t have family connections anymore, but he’s got powerful friends like Asher and Dmitri. I’m nobody, and I’m not going to drag him or the other men down. I’m not going to cause drama. And I’m certainly not going to set myself up to get my heart broken when Cam and Asher move on and leave me.

That’s what people always do. Through death or circumstance or choice. They leave.

Always.

Tamlin’s waiting for me when I enter the large, empty classroom, but she’s not as calm and put together as I’m used to. Her energy is anticipatory, charged, tense.

“That was strong work in the battle royale,” she tells me, smoothing down her turquoise tank top as she walks over. It looks gorgeous against her dark skin tone and perfectly complements her charcoal gray pants. “Your physical fighting skills are admirable, and you did good work with your sonic boom. I also saw you using your wall walking power creatively to reach Alyssa—well done.”

“Well, I’ve only been working on this with you for weeks,” I grumble. “Some of it had to sink in eventually.”

“Mmm.” She folds her arms. “And you used emotion to do it, didn’t you?”

That takes me by surprise. “How would you know?”

Tamlin cocks her head at me. “Do you think professors are blind? I’ve seen how she treats you. You had a lot of anger against her, and I can understand why.”

I suppress a snort. “Sure you can.”

“*Of course* I can.” Her face and voice gentle. “I know what it’s like to be judged. Especially by insecure women with internalized misogyny.”

“Really?”

She drops her arms, sighing. “Yes. When I was in school, I was rather the same as you.”

I look her up and down—her smooth, dark skin, her perfectly styled hair, her coordinated outfit, her makeup. “Yeah. Sure you were.”

“Fashion isn’t innate, it’s taught. I worked hard to learn how to do my hair and makeup. And I like to look like this, but as a college student, I certainly didn’t have time for it. I don’t judge anyone who chooses to live one way or the other so long as they’re doing it because it truly makes them happy.”

I blink at her. That’s an awesome attitude to have, and one that several people in this school—*cough cough*, Alyssa—are missing.

“I came from nowhere,” she continues. “I had no connections, no family name to trade on, and no training. My family is non-magical, so I had no clue what I was doing, and when I came to Griffin Academy as a student, I caught the attention of the most popular guy in my class. He was handsome, powerful, wealthy, all the things a girl could want—all the things that the rich girls *did* want.”

She doesn’t say his name, but somehow, I know she’s talking about Roman. My mouth dries out a little, but I keep my face impassive.

“I got him, and they hated me for it.” Tamlin shrugs. “I wasn’t even with him because of any of that. It wasn’t for his wealth or status or anything. I just loved him.”

Her voice is filled with such open, honest affection that my stomach twists. I feel sick, almost, because that tone is just too warm for someone who doesn’t have feelings for the person they’re talking about.

Does Tamlin still have feelings for Roman?

I know they dated, but I don't understand exactly why they broke up. I'd always assumed Tamlin dumped him, since she's so stunning and amazing I couldn't imagine him voluntarily ending things with her. But according to Roman, their breakup was his idea.

*Why would he pass up on someone like Tamlin? And then start up a relationship with me, of all people?*

"My point is that people are always going to resent you, and usually it's for stupid reasons that have to do with their own insecurity and prejudice," Tamlin finishes. "But I understand, and if you ever want to talk, I'm here."

"Glad to know my professors all know the details of my social life." I roll my eyes.

Tamlin just looks amused, like she knows I'm trying to push her away and it's not going to work.

"Now," she says, changing topics smoothly, "we need to switch your focus a little given that you'll be competing in the Trials soon. It's more important than ever that you rely on your mental strength and not your emotions since your adrenaline will be wreaking havoc with you in the heat of the moment. I think..."

She launches into her plan of attack for my training, and I nod along absently, but I'm pretty distracted through the remainder of our session.

I just can't stop thinking about Tamlin and Roman, and their old relationship. Tamlin still has feelings for him, I can tell, and she doesn't seem to be hiding them. I don't think she realizes I've put together that her college boyfriend was Roman—so she probably sees no reason to hide the fact that she's still got feelings for this old flame.

Thank God my relationship with my stoic, handsome professor is still under wraps. I don't want to like Tamlin, but I do, and I don't want to hurt her. If she's still harboring feelings for him, I'd hate for her to find out about the two of us and be hurt.

But at the same time, I feel this strange possessiveness, like a pacing tiger in my chest, growling and starving, hungry only for Roman.

Maybe it's because I don't understand why he'd choose me when someone like Tamlin is right in front of him.

The moment our training session is over, I go straight to his room. Classes are out for the day, so I know he's not teaching right now.

I wouldn't normally be this bold; we're usually super careful so we won't get caught. But right now, in this moment, I don't give one tiny little

flying fuck.

He's conveniently lying on his bed, reading up on some obscure math-based magic that I can't even begin to comprehend, when I barge in and close the door behind me.

He sits up at once, setting the book aside. "Elliot? Is everything okay —"

I cut him off by walking across the room and grabbing his face, kissing him fiercely.

Roman makes a startled noise against my mouth, then grabs me, helping me as I climb onto his lap. I'm not usually like this, desperate, clawing at his clothes to get them off, kissing him like there's a timer counting down.

Sex between us gets intense, sure, but not like this. Not like I'm trying to crawl inside of him.

I can't begin to explain what's possessing me right now. It's like I'm not even a person anymore, I'm a hurricane, fueled by a singular, desperate emotion that I don't dare name. I could say it's jealousy, or possession, or fear, but those are all just an offshoot of something else, something bigger, and I'll be completely lost if I even *think* that word.

Roman doesn't seem to care, giving as good as he's getting, touching me back with just as much hunger. It makes me wonder if he's been holding back on me somehow this whole time, if he's relieved I'm showing this much... passion, I guess you could say.

His shirt is somewhere on the floor behind me, and his pants are hanging open. He keeps trying to undress me, but I won't let go of him long enough for him to pull my shirt over my head. My open mouth trails greedily over the sculpted muscles of his chest and neck, licking, sucking, biting. He gives up on my clothes for the moment and drops his head back, giving me better access, as a growl rumbles up his throat. He's already rock hard for me. His hands grip my hips, pulling as me down against his erection, grinding me against his cock.

It's not enough. *It's not enough.*

It's not making this feeling go away. This need—this insatiable hunger. This longing.

I tear myself away from him just long enough to scramble over to his nightstand and pull out a condom. I toss it on the bed and then tug my own shirt off before shoving my pants down my legs. I kick them off, along with my shoes, and Roman's cobalt eyes flash with fire as I stand before him in



just my bra and panties. When I unclasp the bra and slide it down my arms, his broad chest rises and falls with deep breaths, and he hooks his fingers in the waistband of my panties and pulls, tugging me toward him.

His arm wraps around my waist as he drags his nose up the plane of my stomach, like he's trying to absorb me. He presses a kiss between my breasts, and my whole body shudders, my pussy clenching hard around nothing. His fingers slowly work my thong over my hips and ass, and when it falls to the floor, he moves backward on the bed, shucking his own pants quickly.

Without a word, I follow, grabbing the condom and tearing the wrapper open with my teeth. I watch as he lays back, his hard cock jutting out, long and thick and heavy, and he watches me right back as I roll the condom down over his shaft. I keep one fist wrapped around him as I straddle his hips, and then, because I can't wait any fucking longer, I line him up with my entrance and sink down, impaling myself on his length.

*Oh... God.*

I don't speak, and neither does he as I begin to ride him. We've had sex numerous times by now—slow, fast, soft, hard—but this isn't like any of those times. There's something hovering in the air between us as we move wordlessly, finding our rhythm, synchronizing our breath. It's there in the silence, in the words we're *not* saying. And when my orgasm crashes over me and his follows soon after, I drape my body over his and kiss him deeply.

Afterward, I stay, even though I know I shouldn't.

Even though I know I'm already in way too deep.

I stare at the ceiling, Roman's arm casually flung over my waist as he naps—and God knows he needs a rest, with all the running around he's been doing preparing for the Trials, on top of his teaching and administrative duties.

I want to deny it. I really do.

But I can't.

Even if I don't name anything, label anything, even if we never talk about it... this is getting serious.

And I have no idea the hell what I'm supposed to do about that.

## CHAPTER 10

**O**ne tiny, itty-bitty little thing everyone apparently forgot to tell me about the Trials?

We're hosting them.

I guess since we're the new school in town, we have to prove ourselves a bit by hosting everyone else. Personally, I think it's some political bullshit—the rest of the academy heads and the magical world are hoping we'll fail and land flat on our faces—but that could just be my dear old pessimism raising its head.

Everyone is caught up in a flurry of preparations over the next week. It's not just the competitors who will be here, but people coming to support and spectate, professionals in their fields who want to scope out the burgeoning talent at the academies, and people who want to record it for the livestream—which is apparently something that's only happened in the last couple of years. *Hooray technology.*

They're not all staying here, thank God. I assume they're getting hotels or something nearby, but they'll be here for the few days surrounding each of the events.

Classes are being rearranged, food is being prepped, and through it all, I'm getting my ass handed to me by Roman, Tamlin, and every other professor I've got as they try to train me for this damn thing in time. Everyone seems to have been caught a little flatfooted. I'm a first-year, and I don't think any of them expected that. They probably thought they'd be training a third-year, or maybe a tenacious second-year. But nope, we've got an amateur on our hands, folks.

*Fun, right?*

To add to the excitement, my magic—the sonic boom especially—has started acting up on me. It’s becoming harder to control, more difficult to call up when I need it. I’m sure it’s directly related to the whole “emotions versus mental strength” thing Tamlin’s been telling me about, but *knowing* that doesn’t exactly fix the problem.

I’m so full of nerves I can barely eat, and I feel like I’m going to throw up half the time. I know the guys are concerned about me, but I try and wave it off. I don’t want to worry them. This is just a stupid competition. I’ll get through it. I’ll probably make a spectacle of myself while I’m at it but damn it, I *will* get through this.

The day the other schools arrive is... interesting.

The Phoenix Training Program, which governs all the schools for elementalists, sends a representative from each of their top academies—one for each element. I’m proud to learn that the water mage representative is from Maddy’s school, Neptune Academy; the training there must be top notch.

There’s also a fire mage, an earth mage, and a wind mage from different elemental schools. Then there are the three other types of magic users: illusionists, enchanters, and potion brewers.

The seven pillars of magic.

I’ve learned in my History of Magic class that seven is a hugely powerful number in magic. And unfortunately, Unpredictable magic kind of screws with the beauty of that harmony, according to a lot of people—which is just another reason why regular magic users tend to fear and resent us.

I watch from the sidelines as the contestants, spectators, and administrators from the various schools are greeted by Dean Hardwick before being directed to the guest dormitories where they’ll stay while they’re here for each Trial.

The more I watch, the more I start to realize how... *alike* everyone seems to be.

The fire elementalists from Vulcan Academy, for instance. Jesus Christ, talk about extroverts. They’re in the middle of everything, full of energy, and honestly, it’s a little intimidating. They’ve got so much passion and aggression. They’re excited and happy right now, so it’s kind of a *good* aggression at the moment—but, oh man, I wouldn’t want to get on their bad sides.

The illusionists all seem a bit out of it. Spacey. Like they're high, or their minds just... aren't here right now. Think of the hippie stereotype and you've got a pretty good picture of the students from Houdini Academy.

The potion brewing students from Blackburn are all very serious, quiet, and focused. The earth elementalists are laidback, the air elementalists flighty. It's almost disconcerting how much their magic seems to define them.

It makes me realize for the first time just how diverse our school is. Everyone here's got a different personality. There's no one set group dynamic. We're not all bubbly and vivacious or arrogant and calculating or thoughtful and poetic. I don't think I could nail down the "dynamic" of our school if I tried.

We're not all cut from the same cloth, that's for sure.

And to my surprise, I'm... grateful for it.

I like that we're all different. When I'm feeling shitty about something, it always gives me a pick me up to remember that nobody else is like me. Not that I'm this special snowflake or better than anyone else—but I'm the only person who's lived my life and been through *my* experiences, so that makes me the only person who can be me.

For the first time, I find myself glad I'm an Unpredictable. If I have to have magic, I want it to be the kind of magic that doesn't make me a part of a crowd. My sonic boom, my spider crawl, those are all mine and mine alone.

*I'm me.*

And hopefully, that'll be enough.



The morning after everyone arrives and gets settled in, there's a huge ceremony. Asher wakes me in the soft gray light of pre-dawn so I can get ready. Ugh. I hate waking up early.

"Why did we have to host this stupid thing?" I whisper. The other men are getting up too, Cam yawning and Dmitri looking like he'd slaughter someone for a cup of coffee, but the rest of the dorm is probably still asleep so we're trying to be quiet.

“I’ve only seen the Trials once, but from what I’ve heard, some of the challenges can get... destructive,” Asher notes. “If there’s going to be damage to a school, they’d probably prefer it was our school.”

Great. So it’s a way of adding pressure, just like I thought. What the hell is it going to take for other academies to stop seeing us as lesser?

“Don’t worry about it,” Cam tells me, springing out of bed. He’s gone from half-asleep to chipper in two seconds, sans coffee, which makes sense since he’s the early bird who always drags my sorry ass out of bed for a jog through the woods. “You’re going to kick ass.”

“Just don’t burn down our dorm,” Dmitri grumbles, still in bed and hugging his pillow like it’s his tether to this realm of existence.

For some reason, I can’t work up too much indignation that our school is being set up to fail—or at least to get saddled with a large repair bill. I’m feeling oddly proud about having Unpredictable magic today. Nervous as all hell about this opening ceremony and the Trials, but proud.

I wish I could feel this way about myself all the time.

The four of us make our way to the auditorium. I have to sit up at the front with the other contestants, so I can’t join the guys in what’ve become our usual seats. Asher and Cam hug me and tell me good luck, while Dmitri just grumbles at me not to die.

“Why, you’d like that privilege for yourself?” I cock an eyebrow at him.

“Maybe, Princess,” Dmitri shoots back. “Or maybe I just don’t want you to make an embarrassment of the school.”

“Oh, and because *you* should be the one up there, right?”

It’s a bit of a low blow for me to say that—I must be more nervous than I thought. Ever since the battle royale, I’ve been expecting Dmitri to bring up the fact that he’d be up there if it wasn’t for me. It seems like something he’d want to needle me about. But he hasn’t mentioned it once, hasn’t given even a single sign that he feels slighted or screwed.

It’s... odd.

“Come on, kids, play nice,” Asher says mildly. “The ceremony’s going to start soon.”

Shit, he’s right. I hurry up to the front of the massive room and find a seat right at the end of the row, next to the competitor from Syren Academy, the school for enchanters.

My cuff reminds me that unlike the other seven people lined up with me, I’m not allowed to do magic whenever I want. Surreptitiously, I pull the

sleeve of my shirt down to hide the metal brace.

*Jesus. It's so fucking unfair.* I'm not going to just unleash my magic on the unsuspecting contestants, any more than the fire elemental is going to set the podium ablaze. But I guess some people can't stand even the possibility that one of us could start a ruckus or something.

The opening ceremony seems to be steeped in tradition and involves a bunch of dry speeches, some recitations in Latin, and a parade of school flags. It's all tedious and makes zero sense to me, and honestly, I wish I was still in bed.

At the end of it, Provost Johnson, the bigwig head of the entire Phoenix Training Program, calls each of us up to the podium.

I'm last, and my stomach flip-flops when he intones my name.

"And finally, representing Griffin Academy, Elliot Sinclair."

I'm not surprised to see a few raised eyebrows as I walk up to the podium and the crowd realizes I'm a girl. I know my name is typically a boy's—don't ask me why Mom chose it because hell if I know, but I like it.

Johnson shakes my hand. He seems about the same age as Dean Hardwick, and he's got that same fatherly look going on, with a round face and a receding hairline. He has a few large rings on his fingers, which are the only really notable thing about his appearance. He nods at me solemnly, then I shake the hands of the other deans before moving stand with the other Trial contestants again.

Provost Johnson wraps everything up with a final speech about how this will build camaraderie and provide opportunities, foster friendships, and build community. I'm not entirely sure I buy all the feel-good vibes though; this isn't an ordinary year of the Trials, and everybody in the auditorium knows it. I feel a bit like it's the other magical academies against us, and I'm ready to stand up for Unpredictable magic.

They've all probably come here thinking I'm going to fail, or that our school is going to be shoddy and won't live up to the standards they expect. They've probably come here thinking we're nothing.

Well, I'm going to prove them wrong.

For once, I'm proud to be who I am, to have the magic that I do. We're the underdogs, and I'm used to that, and I'm ready to do whatever I can to—as Cam put it—kick some ass.

"Let the Trials begin!" Hardwick says, and the crowd goes nuts.

I drag in a deep breath.

*All right. Here we go.*

## CHAPTER 11

**T**here's a short break after the ceremony, and I get a text from Maddy right before the first competition starts.

**Maddy:** *Good luck! Wish I could be there! I love you!*

I smile to myself and quickly type out a reply, then hand my phone in. I'm not allowed communication with anyone during the competition.

Maddy was pretty worried when I told her I'd been chosen for the Trials. She feels bad that she's not coming to observe, but only a few students from each school are allowed to attend, and she wasn't chosen. I told her not to worry about it, that it's more important for her to focus on her studies.

And there's another reason I'm sort of glad she's not allowed to come. If I fail miserably, I don't want Maddy to be here to see it. I know I'm not a superwoman, but I've tried to set a good example, to be brave for her, tough for her. I don't want to disappoint her—and if I *do* let her down, I'd rather it not be right in front of her.

After the staff member assisting with the Trials sticks my phone in a little baggie, we're all taken out to the quad.

My brows pinch together. *What the...?*

There are eight small structures sitting on the grass, each about the size of a port-a-potty.

*Weird.*

I'm guided to stand in front of one at the end, and I stare at it. Nerves flutter in my stomach. Am I supposed to—what, go in there? Or is something going to come out instead? Like some monster bursting out of a tiny cage, and I have to defeat it or something?



“Contestants!” Hardwick announces, his voice magically magnified so we can all hear him. “You will each enter the room in front of you. The rooms are escape rooms, enchanted to be bigger on the inside. Once you enter, the door will disappear. Your goal is to find a way out of the room before the timer runs out. You have one hour.”

*Ah shit. Um, okay.*

I’ve heard of escape rooms before. Maddy went to one once, for the birthday party of a friend. She said they had to solve clues and puzzles to figure out how to escape. It’s probably the same thing here. Which seems simple enough, but this isn’t just your ordinary escape room. They’re going to want us to use magic to get out, or maybe the puzzles themselves are magic-based. Maybe we’ll need to know specific types of magic or be able to do certain spells to even find the clues.

*Oh God. I am so fucked.*

“On your mark,” Hardwick says, “get set. Go!”

There’s nothing for it.

I dash into my room as the other seven contestants disappear into theirs, and the door slams shut behind me then vanishes entirely.

My heart thrums in my chest, and I peer around, my eyes adjusting to the dim light inside the large space.

*Holy shit.*

These things really are bigger on the inside. It’s a simple enchanting spell, or so I hear, it just takes a lot of time because you have to layer it all over every aspect of the building or something...

*Wow, I sound like a nerd. I guess I’ve been learning something in my classes after all.*

Shaking my head to focus my thoughts, I take a deep, steadying breath.

*Okay, okay. All I have to do is find a way out of the room. Easy enough, right? You can do this, Elliot.*

I’m in what looks to be someone’s private office. There are bookshelves on two walls, a large desk in the middle, a map of the world on the third wall, and the fourth wall has a bunch of paintings hung on it. There’s a rug on the floor, a globe on a stand, and some papers on the desk, along with some miscellaneous nonsense, including a paperweight shaped like an elephant.

Up on the wall above the map is a timer. It’s steadily counting down from 60:00.

Great.

*All right. So, how do I get out of this?*

I could maybe try to sonic boom my way out, blow a hole in the wall—but honestly, the thought of trying that scares the shit out of me. I'm sure the walls are magically reinforced, and if I try to unleash a sonic boom strong enough to break through those enchantments, there's no guarantee that the blowback wouldn't kill me. Especially with my powers acting up like they have been.

Spider climb? Maybe if there were an exit on the ceiling, but I don't see anything. I climb up the map wall and along the ceiling just in case, but nope, there's nothing that'll help me get out.

I end up back in front of the desk, hands fisted as I chew my lip thoughtfully.

*Well, they wouldn't have put all this shit into the room if they expected you to just blast your way out or melt the concrete.*

There has to be some other way I can get myself out of here.

I start by searching through the papers on the desk, and sure enough, spread out over several sheets of paper, there's a riddle—almost like a set of instructions, but with annoyingly vague aspects.

*Okay, great. I can do this.*

As I gaze at the papers I've laid out in order on the desk, I catch sight of tiny security cameras in the corners with their red lights blinking. My face flushes. Great. I'm being watched and probably laughed at by all the spectators.

I sarcastically salute one of the cameras and get to work on the riddle. Maddy told me after her escape room escapade that this is kind of standard, so I'm not too worried. Apparently, I have to find a keypad, and then find the code I'll need to enter into that keypad to make a hidden door open.

*Hmmm.*

Okay, so, where would someone hide a keypad? Probably in the wall. But the walls are smooth concrete, no give to them.

I start methodically pulling out the books on the shelves to see if any of them are a secret lever that might reveal the keypad. One of them *is* a lever, thank God, but all it does is make the bookshelf slide to the left, revealing a hidden room.

Huh. That's... not exactly what I was hoping for.

Inside the room is a flashlight and a blank wall. I pick up the heavy metal flashlight and turn it on, realizing as I do that it's not a normal light; it's an ultraviolet one. It also doesn't work very well. Before I can direct the beam anywhere, the bulb flickers and dies.

*Damn it.*

I'm pretty sure we covered light manipulation in my Theory of Magic class, but knowing how it works and being able to do it are two different things. It's not one of the tools in my arsenal, and I can't see how my sonic boom or my spider climb is going to help me here.

Now would be a *really* great time for that strange burble of magic I felt last semester to manifest as some awesome new power that would help me out of this, but even though I close my eyes for a moment and will something to spark, nothing does.

I sigh, opening my eyes again. It was a pretty dumb idea anyway.

*Looks like this is all I've got to work with right now.*

Gripping the heavy flashlight in one hand, I smack it against my other palm, trying to jar it back to life. I'm sure there are magical ways to get out of these rooms, but I just can't see how to do it with *my* magic. I feel useless. Normal.

After several attempts, I get the flashlight to turn on again. Quickly, I shine the beam on the blank black wall and see that it's covered in various words and symbols. Okay, now, these I do know—the symbols are hieroglyphs from the Mayans and the Egyptians, and the words are in Latin. I know that thanks to my History of Magic class, where we've been learning about ancient spells and languages.

*Well, at least I'm not entirely useless.*

I use one of the pieces of paper from the desk and a spare pen to write everything down, stopping every few seconds to shake the flashlight back to life. It's tedious going, and my palm is red from where I've repeatedly bashed the flashlight against it by the time I'm finished, but I get everything written down. Then I shuffle my notes around, trying to get them into a working order.

It's literally three different languages I'm looking at here, but they have to combine in some way that makes sense, right?

Sheesh. If this were an actual escape room, I'd buzz the bored front desk worker for a clue right about now.

I glance up at the clock. *Not a lot of time left. Fuck me.*

Working quickly, I translate all the languages into English, which leaves me with a jumble of random words, but at least they're all in the same language. I put them in order—and realize it's a list of descriptions and unfinished phrases.

But descriptions of what?

*Land of ice...*

*We'll always have...*

*Don't cry for me...*

There are several more, and my gaze scans over them as I try to sort out what they have in common. My heart jumps in my chest as I read them over for the third time. *Oh! They're places.*

I look up at the map.

Land of ice. Iceland. We'll always have... Paris. A quote from the film *Casablanca*. Don't cry for me... Argentina. It's a song from the musical *Evita*.

I search the desk and find a bunch of red pins. I start placing them over the places mentioned, or the capital city of the place if it's referencing a whole country. Paris, Reykjavík, Buenos Aires, Tokyo, Mumbai, Cairo, Washington D.C., Cape Town...

Once the last pin is in place, they all light up, emanating a bright white light.

The map rolls up in on itself—enchanted, I'm guessing—revealing a large, rectangular keypad.

*Fuck yes!*

My excitement flares but dies out almost as quickly. I've found the keypad but not the code, and time is running out fast. Where would the code be?

I look around. There's nothing else in the room. Just the paintings on the walls, the books, the shit on the desk...

*Wait.*

I look at the books again. *Biography of Claude Monet*.

Swiveling my head, I peer at the wall. One of the paintings is *Water Lilies* by Monet.

My nose wrinkles. Good thing all the paintings have the signature of the artist at the bottom of them or I'd be sunk. Art history isn't my strong point. I grab the books that reference the artists who have art on the walls. How is this a code though?

I flip through each book, but find nothing—literally. They’re all blank inside. Am I supposed to somehow make the code appear inside them? There are potions that can do that; I’m sure the potion brewing contestant isn’t having a problem. Damn it, why am I so useless?

I turn the books so their spines are all facing me. Then I look at the keypad.

*There aren’t just numbers on there, but the whole alphabet. Hmm.*

Mind whirring, I order the books so they’re in the same order as the paintings on the wall, then read off the first letter on the spine of each book.

*L-I-B-E-R-T-A-S. Libertas.*

Latin for “liberty”.

A huff of laughter falls from my lips. I guess making the code spell out “jailbreak” would be a little too on the nose for everyone.

I punch the word into the keypad, my breath catching in my throat. What if I’m wrong? What if I just triggered some kind of tripwire that makes the whole room self-destruct or something?

But nothing explodes.

The keypad beeps, a green light comes on, and the wall in front of me dissolves.

*Holy shit, I actually did it. And without any magic!*

Normally, I’d be pleased that I managed this all the normal way, but the goal of this whole competition is to use magic, and I didn’t. Even though I technically completed the challenge, I feel like a failure, like I’m just scraping by.

Gathering my courage, I step out. The bright sunlight blinds me a little, and I have to shield my eyes with my hand and blink a few times before my vision adjusts.

Amidst the gathered spectators, people from our school are cheering and clapping. I can see Cam and Asher grinning, the blond-haired mage whooping and pumping his fist in the air as his more reserved friend applauds. Dmitri’s got his arms folded, but I swear his lips are tilting up at the corners.

I look around, and it slowly dawns on me... I’m the first one out of her room.

*Wait, really? Did I really just manage that?*

As I watch, another person steps out of his room—Jack, the fire elemental contestant. His room looks a little, uh, singed.

Damn, that was close. I might have won, but only by about thirty seconds. And this is just the first trial. How am I supposed to make it through all of them, especially if they keep getting more difficult?

The other contestants all emerge over the next few minutes, and I can see from the destroyed state of the rooms that they all used magic of some kind to get themselves out of there. A part of me wonders if the judges intended for us to use magic or to use normal means, because I feel bad for whoever set up all those clues only to have seven of the eight contestants pretty much ignore them to tear the place up with spells.

Doesn't matter, really, in the end. I got out, and now I can focus on the next challenge.

"Holy shit, Sin! You did it!"

The voice makes me turn, and a second later, Cam's large frame barrels into mine, his thick arms scooping me up and whirling me around as I laugh.

"I can't believe you won!" Asher says, pulling me away from Cam so he can hug me too. "That was amazing!"

"We could all see it on the videos," Cam says, pointing up into the air. "We got to watch the whole thing."

There are four huge screens floating above the quad, each one displaying a split-screen image with the interiors of all eight rooms. Some of the spaces look a *lot* worse for wear.

"We got a front row seat to your panic," Dmitri drawls, walking over to join us.

"I'm gonna assume you're just pissed that you finally have proof I'm smarter than you?" I shoot back. "If you'd been in there, you would've just phased through the wall."

His lip curls. "No, because they have runes preventing that, and it would be lazy. I'm not lazy. Unlike some people."

"Are you saying my not solving the puzzle with magic was lazy? You're one to talk—you don't get out of bed before noon if you can help it."

Dmitri doesn't smile, but I swear I see a gleam of pride in his eyes. "Yeah, well, I guess your whole magic avoidance thing paid off. The announcers were talking about how you were the only one who followed the logic all the way through instead of creating a shortcut at any point using magic. I think that was the point of this first competition—to focus on

your logic and scholarly skills instead of just relying on the brute force of your powers.”

That makes sense. Our professors are always lecturing us about how a big part of magic is knowing not just how, but *when* to use it. We have to be logical in our approach to spell casting and make the magic work for us, not the other way around. So I guess I ended up accidentally completing the challenge the right way?

Something makes the back of my neck prickle, and when I look out into the crowd, I catch sight of Roman. I knew he’d be watching me, even if he can’t come over to congratulate me in person like the other three men.

But unlike Cam and Asher, Roman doesn’t look elated. He has a small smile on his face, and I know he’s pleased with me—I recognize his stern looks way too well to mistake them for anything else—but there’s worry in his dark cobalt eyes too.

The other three might be a year ahead of me, but they’re also still students. Roman’s my professor. He knows more about magic than we do, possibly more than anyone else on campus besides Hardwick. The announcers might’ve lauded my clever strategy, but Roman knows better. He saw that I didn’t *choose* not to use magic—but that I couldn’t. That I didn’t know enough, and of the two tricks I could do, one didn’t get me anywhere and the other would’ve been too dangerous to use in such a small space.

He knows I struggled.

Our gazes lock. I know he’s seeing his worry reflected back at him in my own eyes, and I imagine he’s thinking the same thing I am.

*If I barely got out of this one, how am I going to make it through the next challenge?*

## CHAPTER 12

Over the next week, my magic doesn't improve.

Each of the Trials will be spaced a few weeks apart, so I've got a little time to figure out my shit before the pressure's on again, but that only makes me feel like I have a ticking doomsday clock hovering over my head.

I don't know what the deal is with my damn magic.

It feels... I guess the best way to describe it is *slippery*. Like I'm trying to grasp a snake covered in oil, and it keeps slithering out of my hands before I can get a good grip on it.

I just don't understand. My magic seemed so strong when I first came here. It was uncontrolled and chaotic, but it was definitely there. Now it feels like it's drifting away from me, falling through my fingers like sand no matter what I do.

Since the end of last semester, I've had a few more weird blips—that strange, slightly terrifying feeling of my magic settling or expanding or something inside me. I don't know what it means, but I sure as hell hope it's not related to my weakening control over my powers.

Now, of all times, I need to be *improving*. Not actively getting worse.

My professors all notice something's wrong. Tamlin keeps shooting me concerned glances when she thinks I'm not looking, and she's been going much easier on me in class and in our private sessions.

Roman, God love him, is a cranky bastard with a stick up his ass, so of course he does the opposite and gets harder on me.

We hashed this out once already last semester, and we'd gotten to a really good place where he treated me like any other student in his class—no better, no worse. But now he's at it again, harping on every little mistake



I make, calling me out in his deep, stern voice, and riding me into the ground. And as much as I secretly love when Roman tells me what to do in the bedroom, I sure as hell don't appreciate it in class.

Last time he got like this, I confronted him, demanding he ease up and treat me like any other student.

And he did. He's been doing really well about it—until now.

So I wait until after class to confront him for the second time.

“What the fuck is your problem?” I hiss, striding over to his desk a minute after the last student walks out the door and slamming my palms down on the dark wood.

Okay, so maybe I could've been a bit more tactful than that. But I don't care. I'm a bundle of nerves these days, just waiting for Hardwick to summon me into his office and tell me I'm being removed from the Trials because I'm too damn weak.

I couldn't handle that. I think the humiliation would honestly kill me.

“My problem,” Roman says stoically, dropping the book he lectured from in class, “is that you are not ready for the next Trial.”

“Oh, and being an asshole to me is really going to help,” I blurt. “You don't think maybe you could try some gentle encouragement? A pep talk? Positivity?”

“Like that would get me anywhere with you.” He braces his own hands on the desk, leaning toward me, his dark blue eyes flashing. “Face it, Reckless, you respond best to adversity. When people compliment you, you don't trust it. When they try to help you, you don't listen. How else am I supposed to get through to you?”

“Treating me like a failure in front of my entire class sure as hell isn't going to do it! You're making yourself look like a jerk, which I know you're not, and you're making me feel like crap, which I know you don't want to do, and we're not getting anywhere!”

“Then tell me what to do, Elliot. By all means, tell me how to help you tap into your magic!”

*“What if I don't have any?”*

I realize I'm yelling, my chest heaving and my face hot, and I take several deep breaths to try and calm down. Getting into a yelling match with any professor isn't very smart, but if Roman and I get into a fight, and people overhear and figure out what's going on between us...

I won't be the reason he loses his job or the respect of his colleagues, and I'm sure as hell not ready to deal with the reaction of my fellow students.

"What are you talking about?" a third voice asks.

I whirl around.

*Motherfucker.*

Dmitri is standing in the doorway, a perplexed look on his face.

I'm guessing he heard everything—or at least enough.

"She giving you a hard time?" he asks, cocking an eyebrow at Roman.

*Um... excuse me?*

Roman sighs. "She's giving *herself* a hard time, and I don't know how to help her."

I raise a hand, glaring between the two of them. "Hello? Right here."

Dmitri's dark eyes narrow, and he casts an assessing gaze between Roman and me. Then he closes the door behind him and prowls slowly toward me, glancing over at the other man as if communicating something without words.

Roman straightens and comes around the side of his desk so he and Dmitri are now an equal distance from me. It's almost like they're sharing the space—sharing me.

A hot thrill zaps down my spine, landing straight in my clit, and I curse my stupid brain. This isn't the time, and my cranky-ass roommate, of all people, isn't going to be interested in that with me.

Although the two men *are* very similar, I realize. Not just in looks—although Dmitri's got a broader frame than Roman, and his eyes are deep brown, not blue—but in temperament. They're both slightly grumpy, private people, hard to get to know, perfectionists to the core. They both like to be in control, and they're both very... dominant.

Another zap of lightning streaks through me, making my nipples harden.

*Jesus Christ, Elliot. Focus!*

"What were you talking about when I walked in, Princess? You *do* have magic," Dmitri says, as if that should be obvious to me. "If you didn't, you wouldn't be here."

"Yeah? Then how come I can barely use it lately?" I demand. "I can't do any of the things in class the rest of you can. And when I try it's like—it's like sand, just sliding through my fingertips, and I can't fucking do it!"

“Elliot Sinclair telling us she can’t do something,” Roman murmurs. “Must be raining hellfire outside, because I’m pretty sure that’s a sign of the apocalypse.”

“Even I’ve got my limits,” I snap, too annoyed to be impressed that the stoic man just cracked a joke.

“No, you *don’t*,” Dmitri snaps right back. “I’ve never seen you back down from a challenge, and we’re not about to let you quit now.”

I scowl at him. “I’m not quitting—”

“Maybe not literally, but in your head? Yeah, that’s exactly what you’re doing. And it’s bullshit. You can be just as good as the other competitors if you just believe in yourself.”

“Oh, like *you* believe in me?”

“You don’t know anything about what I believe.” His lip curls.

I step toward him, the hot anger in my chest prompting me to get right in his face, to make sure he knows I may be weak, but that doesn’t mean he can push me around, doesn’t mean—

The scent of cloves mingles with the scent of leather in the air around me, and as I suck in a deep breath, the twin aromas flood my senses. With a start, I realize he stepped forward when I did, and now he’s standing almost directly in front of me, Roman behind me.

I’m surrounded.

Strength radiates from their bodies, making me warm all over, and their combined energy is so dark and masculine it makes me shiver.

Maybe I should feel scared, but I know neither of them would hurt me. Roman has shown me how much he cares for me, and even if Dmitri sometimes seems to hate my guts, he’s not a psychopath or a bully.

As the two men move closer, each one’s actions perfectly mirroring the other’s, my pulse kicks up, my heart throbbing hard in my chest as goose bumps prickle my skin.

But it’s not because I’m afraid.

No...

It’s because I’m turned the fuck on.

“Your magic will improve when you start *believing* in it,” Roman murmurs from behind me, the heat of his body seeping into mine even though he’s not touching me. “And when you start taking better care of yourself.”

“Yeah, staying up till all hours trying to kill yourself with homework is not helping things,” Dmitri growls, his voice lower than before. Rougher.

“You realize you two can’t tell me what to do, right?” I shoot back, resorting to bluster while I try to get my focus back. Blood is rushing in my ears, my lower belly dissolving into a pool of liquid heat. “You can’t boss me around.”

“I thought you liked it when I did that.” Roman chuckles darkly.

My clit spasms, and I turn around to glare at him. “That’s in the bedroom, and it’s different, and you know it.”

“Why am I not surprised you like it when he orders you around in bed?” Dmitri’s voice is hard behind me.

I whirl again, still boxed in between the two of them. Before I can stop myself, I spit out, “Yeah, well, I wouldn’t mind if *you* did either, but seeing as you’re so determined to hate me, I guess that door’s shut for you, isn’t it?”

Everything freezes for a moment.

Dmitri stares at me, surprise flickering over his features. His pupils dilate, making his already dark eyes appear almost black, and I realize what I just said.

*Oh my God.*

His expression shifts, and he takes a step toward me. I move back instinctively, but only make it a half-step before I bump into Roman, my back pressed against his hard chest.

“You think I *hate* you, Princess?” Dmitri murmurs, his gaze hot and dark as it slides down my body. “Then you really don’t know me at all.”

I swallow, my mouth dry, my stomach fluttering like a butterfly on speed.

*Holy fuck, what the hell is happening right now?*

I knew these two men were starting to get along better, bonding over their shared moodiness, but when the hell did they get *this* close? They’re moving in tandem like a well-oiled machine—or a pair of predators closing in for the kill.

Roman’s hands grip my hips, pinning me against him, and my pulse thrashes wildly in my veins.

I don’t think Dmitri locked the door; we’re still in a classroom, and if anybody were to walk in right now, they’d find the three of us in a very

compromising position. But it's hard to get my rational brain to register that thought when my body is sparking, aching, coming alive.

"You only like it when I tell you what to do during sex, Reckless?" Roman breathes, his mouth right at my ear, his lips brushing against my hot skin. "Fine. We can make it about sex, if that'll get you to listen to us."

He rolls his hips shallowly against me, and I can feel him getting hard. My pussy clenches as a wave of arousal crashes through me. *Holy motherfucking shitballs*. I moan a little, helpless, and I feel Dmitri shudder in response.

"Will you listen to us now?" he rasps, taking another step closer until he's pretty much pressed up against me. I can hardly breathe. His cock is growing hard too, I can feel it, and I'm so turned on I don't know if I can keep standing. My knees wobble, threatening to buckle.

Not that there's any chance of me falling over.

Dmitri slides his leg between mine, and now I'm completely trapped, pinned between the two men. My hands land on his shoulders and Roman takes my earlobe between his teeth, tugging slightly. I whimper.

"You like that." Dmitri's lips curve in a hungry, almost vicious smile. "You like the two of us in charge, don't you?"

*Fucking Jesus. I'm panting like a dog in heat, does he really have to ask that right now?*

My mind floods with images, each more enticing than the last. God, yes, I like this. I want them to do so many things to me. I want them to keep working together like this, want them to make me beg, want to cling to them both as they make me fall apart...

I haven't been letting myself think about how attracted I am to Dmitri, but now that he's made it clear he wants me too, at least sexually, it's like a floodgate opening. I'm so turned on I can barely see straight, and the fact that Roman's here too only makes it hotter.

My breath hitches, and I feel my underwear getting damp, my body slick and aching for them.

"Yes."

The word falls from my lips like someone pulled it out of me, and it doesn't sound as seductive and defiant as I was hoping it would. Instead, it sounds raw and... honest.

Their reaction is immediate. Roman's fingers dig into my hips, and he kisses along the side of my neck as Dmitri hooks one finger under my chin,

tilting my head up. His finger trails slowly down my throat, my chest—oh God, traces my breasts—

“How about this,” Roman offers, his voice rough. “You work on taking care of yourself and going easy on yourself. Giving yourself credit and believing you can do this. And if you’re very, very good...”

Dmitri’s finger reaches the waistband of my jeans. He toys with the button, and I’m so close to begging him to rip them off, so close to begging them both to just lock the fucking door, bend me over the desk, and put me out of my damn misery—

“...we can continue this little meeting,” Roman finishes.

His hands squeeze my hips, and then he and Dmitri step away in unison, leaving me standing alone on shaky legs.

I blink at them in shock, like I can’t quite remember their names.

Or my name.

Or how to speak English.

“Sound like a deal?” Roman asks, a businesslike tone returning to his voice.

“This isn’t just about the competition,” Dmitri says flatly, as if he wasn’t just fondling my boobs two seconds ago. “This is for your own safety. We could give a damn if you win or not. We care about you being happy and safe.”

*Um... excuse me, what now?* Dmitri cares whether I’m happy? He wants me safe?

That’s a new one. I guess maybe it’s because he wants to fuck me, but I’m honestly surprised he’s worried about my well-being at all. I thought I was just a sometimes-amusing, sometimes-annoying distraction he puts up with because of Asher and Cam.

“Well?” Roman’s voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

I nod, my throat like sandpaper. “Deal.”

“Good girl,” Dmitri growls, and my clit spasms again.

*Oh my God.*

When they finally *do* fuck me, I’m not going to survive it.

## CHAPTER 13

All four of the guys help me to prepare for the next trial.

The two weeks in between each event give the admins time to fix any damage to school grounds and set up the next challenge, and for the people competing to catch a breather and go back to classes at their respective schools. Nobody wants to interrupt a student's entire semester just for a competition, as prestigious as that competition might be.

My professors, Tamlin and Roman included, are clearly trying to strike some kind of balance between teaching me normal coursework and also teaching me shit I'll probably need to use for the Trials.

Even after Dmitri and Roman's little *pep talk*, which featured heavily in my special "me time" in the shower all week, I'm still struggling in my classes. I can't stop thinking it should've been my grouchy roommate representing the school. He'd be doing a much better job of juggling all this than I am.

But if Dmitri finds out I'm thinking like that, it'll be my head, apparently.

I'm trying to be kinder to myself, I really am. The guys help me with my homework and test me on my skills. Roman can't do too much without it being blatant favoritism, but he starts tutoring me like Tamlin is. Since she's doing it too, nobody can claim something untoward is going on—unless someone wants to get really creative and say I'm banging both of them.

Hardwick doesn't want the Trials distracting us from the real reasons we're here—gaining control over our magic, getting prepared for a career,

learning more about our culture and history, and showing the world that Unpredictable magic isn't the horrifying freak show they think it is.

But how the hell are we supposed to stay focused when I'm worried to death about the Trials, and my friends are worried about me?

I just wish I knew what the next challenge will be. We're not told anything about it in advance, and neither are the professors, to ensure nobody can tamper with anything or cheat. If I knew, I could at least narrow down my field of study and preparation.

No such luck though.

When the day arrives, I'm so nervous I can't even eat breakfast. Asher coaxes me into having some orange juice and an energy bar, but I can't stomach any more than that. The guys aren't happy about it, and I hate that I'm worrying them—but I'm such a mess that if I try to eat anything else, I swear I'm just going to puke it all right back up again.

The seven other competitors and I are led out into the cool morning air and brought to the quad. Small risers have been set up around the perimeter of the large space, but I don't see any structures like there were last time. The quad looks like it always does, the large space crisscrossed with paths and dotted with trees.

I glance around at my fellow contestants, wondering if any of them are as fucking nervous as I am, and it occurs to me belatedly that I don't even remember all of their names. I've been so focused on myself and my struggles with this whole thing, I couldn't tell you anything about them other than what school they represent.

Actually, I feel kind of bad about that. They arrived a few days ago in preparation for the upcoming challenge, but I've barely seen them. Surely as contestants, we should be allowed to mingle and commiserate a bit instead of being kept so separate, right? Isn't this whole thing supposed to be about promoting inter-school relationships and camaraderie? Maybe the other students who are just here to watch are getting that, but I'm sure not.

Then again, maybe all the other contestants are having sleepovers where they braid each other's hair and paint each other's nails and just haven't invited the girl with Unpredictable magic. Who knows.

"Today," Dean Hardwick tells us, his voice magically amplified for the crowd's benefit, "you will be using your magic to assist in a treasure hunt of sorts—the retrieval of an object specifically attuned to you. Linked to your magic."



Eight assistants walk up, each holding something small. One comes to stand in front of me, and I glimpse a thin silver ring in her palm. She has light red hair, a smattering of freckles, and warm eyes. At least she's looking at me kindly, not glaring or cringing in fear; I've been studiously ignoring the looks some of the visitors from other schools have thrown my way, but that doesn't mean I haven't noticed them.

"Once your rings are attuned to you, they will be hidden somewhere inside the quad. You will have one hour to find them using your magic," the dean continues, gesturing to a large screen set up behind the nearby risers. There's a countdown timer on it bearing the numbers 60:00. "You can use any means necessary, but you cannot use a finding spell—the rings are enchanted to resist such a spell—and you cannot use a spell that will compel the assistants who hide the rings to tell you where yours is."

I roll my shoulders, trying to stay loose and relaxed. *No big loss, seeing as how I don't know either of those spells anyway.*

"Other than that, you can use any means necessary." Hardwick claps his hands together, and the assistants all step forward.

The redheaded girl places one hand over my heart, clasping her other hand around the ring.

A warm glow leaks out from between her fingers, and an echoing warmth blooms in my chest.

"It's attuned to you now," she tells me as the glow fades. She pulls her hand away from me and uncurls her fist, whispering something to the ring.

The silver band vanishes.

"Good luck!" she says brightly.

"Contestants!" Hardwick announces. "Your time starts now!"

*Ah, crap.*

I close my eyes, gathering my focus. The ring is linked to my magic, right? That means even if I can't do a finding spell, my magic should guide me to it—it should be drawn toward the thing it's connected to.

Concentrating hard, I search internally, feeling around for something like a string tugging at me, or a warmth guiding me like that old "hot and cold" game...

Nothing.

I open my eyes to see my fellow contestants all wandering off in various directions.

*Fuck.*

I drop into a crouch, trying to stay calm as anxiety starts to set in. Why don't I feel anything? Is it because my magic is on the fritz? Because I don't *believe* in myself enough? Because I haven't found inner peace and balance?

*Goddamn it, I should be able to do magic without having to read a dozen self-help books first!*

Pressing the heels of my hands to my closed eyes, I imagine the ring, trying to draw a vivid picture of it in my mind. I didn't get a great look at it before the girl sent it away, but I think I manage to create a reasonable facsimile anyway.

*Where are you, ring? Where are you?*

My head starts to hurt from the pressure on my eyes, and I swear my ears are leaking smoke as my brain overheats, but nothing else happens.

*For fuck's sake.*

I stand up, dusting off my pants with angry swipes of my hands. The gathered crowd is observing quietly, and it's a million times worse than in the escape room where I knew they were watching but couldn't see them. If I look out into the stands right now, I'll see Asher, Cam, and Dmitri. And over by the staff section, Roman. I'll see their disappointment, and even worse... their hope.

Their belief that I still might find a way not to screw this up.

Tears burn the backs of my eyes, and I blink rapidly, swallowing hard. I am *not* going to cry in front of a huge crowd of magic users. Not in front of my classmates, and definitely not in front of the visitors from other schools who're just looking for another reason to think less of Unpredictables.

I do another check, mentally canvassing my body for a pull, a tug in any direction.

Nothing.

A knot grows in my stomach. All around me, the other seven contestants are moving around the quad, some more confidently and some with a little hesitation, but they're all doing *something*. It's like everyone else has a sense that I don't have, like I've stopped being able to see in color.

Well, fuck. I'm not just going to stand here like an idiot for the next hour. I can at least show the spectators that students from Griffin Academy don't lay down and give up when faced with a challenge. And Dean Hardwick did say we could use any means besides those off-limits spells.

If my own two eyeballs are all I have to work with, then that's what I'll use.

Clenching my jaw, I cast my gaze over the ground around me.

*Jesus. This quad is huge. And that ring is so damn small.*

I move slowly, keeping my head down and hoping desperately for a glint of light, a flash of silver. My head swivels back and forth as I search the ground, and I hear a murmur from the crowd as people realize what I'm doing.

Shame burns my cheeks, but I refuse to look up. I start at one end of the quad and work my way slowly across it, occasionally crouching down to poke at a promising gleam or to nudge a pile of leaves out of the way. My breath clouds in front of my face—it's unseasonably warm for late February, but still chilly—and my mind empties as I throw all my focus into my search.

It's almost hypnotic, in a way. The steady movement of my head as I peer at the ground, the low murmurs from the crowd, the flicker of shadows on the grass as wispy clouds drift by overhead.

I'm crouched down beside a tree about halfway across the quad, digging into the dirt for what turns out to be the tab of a soda can, when I notice it.

Silence.

The steady murmur of voices around me has died out. My heart skips a beat, and when I look up, I find everyone staring at me—including all seven of the other contestants, each holding a ring.

My gaze drags over to the countdown timer, which has a minute and thirty seconds left on it, and my stomach pitches. How long ago did the last of my competitors find their prize? How long has everyone been waiting for me, wondering if I'll find my ring at all before my time runs out?

Even though my pride screams at me to do something, I can't bring myself to resume my search. There's no point. I've still got over a third of the quad to cover, and that's assuming I didn't somehow miss the tiny silver ring in the part I already combed through.

I'm not going to find it. I'm going to fail.

For a minute and thirty seconds, I stare at the crowd and they stare at me, and with every second that ticks by, my heart feels more and more like a lump of lead in my chest.

Finally, the countdown clock hits 00:00, and a loud buzzer sounds.

"And that... ends the challenge," Hardwick says.

My face burns. I want to sink into a hole and die.

The student from Syren Academy, Nicholas, is declared the winner, and then the rest of us are ranked according to our time. When Hardwick announces my name in last place, I swear I can hear the disappointment in his voice.

Afterward, I just want to go to my dorm room and pretend nothing else exists, that *I* don't even exist, but after the announcements wrap up and Provost Johnson gives little medals to the top contestants, I immediately find myself surrounded by Alyssa and her gang.

*Goddamn it.*

"Congratulations." The Queen Bitch cocks her head, eyes glinting with a mix of cruel delight and anger. "You just embarrassed the entire school. Did you even get close to the ring?"

"This is what happens when they let people without experience compete," Megan says with a sigh. "Honestly, that was child's play. I could've found it in less than half an hour."

"We all could have." Alyssa scoffs. "And yet you were practically on your hands and knees searching for it. You made a complete ass of yourself. You're supposed to represent the academy, and *that's* the best you can do?"

"Do you even care?" Megan asks, while Cristina smirks silently behind her. "About the school, about winning? Are you trying to embarrass us on purpose?"

"I bet that's exactly what it is." Alyssa smirks.

I shove past them. Evil little witches. I don't have to stand around and listen to their bullshit. Even if today it hurts more than usual.

Alyssa calls after me, her musical voice ringing in the air, "Everyone knows you hate this place, Sinclair. Stop dragging everyone else down with you. We'd be better off if you left!"

I ignore her and make a beeline toward my dorm. I don't know where the guys are. They're probably looking for me, but for once, I hope they don't find me. I just want to—

"Elliot?"

I stop, surprised at the voice, and turn.

Kendal stops behind me, fidgeting nervously. She must have broken away from her pack of so-called friends and followed me.

"What, forgot an insult?" I cross my arms over my chest.

“No.” She tugs her bottom lip between her teeth, looking away. “I just wanted to say that was a really hard challenge,” she says finally. “I wouldn’t beat yourself up for losing.”

“It’s not just about me. I let the whole school down,” I point out.

She shrugs, playing with the ends of her auburn hair. “Honestly, I don’t think I could’ve beaten that challenge. And I don’t think Alyssa or Megan or Cristina could either, no matter what they say. So...” She clears her throat. “Anyway, I should go.”

She turns and hurries off, heading after the others who have already disappeared into Wellwood Hall.

*Huh. That was... something.* Kendal’s never actively joined in on taunting me, but she hasn’t ever spoken kindly to me, either. So I guess this is a step in the right direction for her.

In any case, it sure as fuck doesn’t help me. Although it was nice of her to say.

I resume my trek to the men’s dormitory and climb the steps up to our room. The guys aren’t here. *Good.* I flop onto my bed, ignoring the text alerts on my phone from Maddy asking how it went and from the guys asking where I am. They’ll find me eventually, and maybe by then I’ll be in a better mood.

Because honestly, right now? I just want to hide and never be found.

I can’t believe I messed up so badly. That I never even got close to the ring. Or maybe I did, but I just walked right past it. The damn thing could’ve been in my pocket the whole time and I wouldn’t have realized.

Kendal’s words were thoughtful, but while I usually ignore Alyssa... I think this time she was right. I’ve got the reputation of the whole school riding on how well I do in this competition. Sure, I might not get first place. But I’m not supposed to get *last*.

The expressions on everyone’s faces, on Dean Hardwick’s face, the faces of my professors, as I looked up and realized the other seven contestants had all finished... how long did everyone sit in agonized, awkward silence as I combed through the grass like an idiot? How long did it take before everybody realized the Unpredictable had failed so badly?

I remember my worry that Dmitri threw his fight with me in the battle royale, that he let me win. God, I hope that’s not true. He would’ve succeeded in this competition. He wouldn’t be letting the entire school down.

My phone rings. It's Maddy—I can tell by the ringtone I picked out just for her. If I don't answer, she'll know something's wrong.

With a sigh, I swipe the screen to answer. "Hey, Mads."

"Hey. How's it been?" Her voice is careful, like she already knows something's up. Maybe word has already gotten back to her about how the competition went. Maybe she watched the livestream.

*Oh shit, I hope she didn't.*

"It's been fine," I reply, keeping my tone neutral.

"How'd the competition go?"

"Crappy." Those fucking tears sting my eyes again, and for a moment, I can't say anything. Then I force my voice to sound light as I add, "It's okay though. It's not like I expected to win or anything."

There's a pause on the other end of the line. "Would you like to... um... watch something on Netflix together?" Mads asks. "Some stupid comedy? Or a bad horror film?"

"That... would be really nice." It's been ages since we did something like that together.

It doesn't make things completely better, but watching something with Maddy, even if it's just over the phone and we're still miles apart—just getting to be a *sister* again— helps. It makes me forget about the world outside for a little while.

Even if I fail at literally everything else, I'm good at being a sister. I might be a disaster in the rest of my life, but Maddy's the one thing I know I've done right.

## CHAPTER 14

**I**t's been a week and a half since I... well, for lack of a better expression, tripped and fell flat on my face, metaphorically anyway. I've been handling the whole thing with the grace and poise for which I am known.

That is to say, I've been hiding in our dorm room for fourteen days.

I go to classes, of course, and take my stupid midterms. But every second I'm not in class, I'm holed up in the room I share with the guys. Dmitri doesn't seem inclined to tell me to get out, although he doesn't look pleased at my hiding, either. Cam's been doing his best to try and coax me outside, even just for a run through the woods on the west side of campus. But I really don't feel like being around people right now.

I *liked* being anonymous, you know? Back in Portland, I was a nobody, and I didn't exactly like not having friends or connections—but Jesus, at least there wasn't this massive fucking pressure. People didn't talk about me, people didn't care who I was, what I did, where I went, or who I hung out with. I could just be myself without looking over my shoulder constantly wondering if I was going to be judged for every action or decision.

Now everyone's watching me. Not just my classmates and professors, but the visitors from other schools as well. I can't stop wondering what they're thinking.

I never would've thought it before, but I *want* to do well in this competition and make my school look good. I want my classmates to see me compete and feel proud, to know that we're just as good as any other magic users out there.

But as it stands right now, I'm just going to be another example of why Unpredictables are so looked down upon.

I'm lying in bed and generally feeling sorry for myself, wondering if I should marathon a few more episodes of *Law & Order* so I can at least pat myself on the back for not getting murdered in some back alley, when Asher walks in.

He's been very sweet this whole time, bringing me food, making sure I shower, and not letting me turn into a total depressed lump.

When Asher sees me lying there like Bridget Jones, he stops short. "Um, Elliot?"

"Yeah?"

"Why aren't you getting ready?"

"For what? My expulsion?" Okay, so that was a little dramatic. Sue me.

He frowns. "No. The Inter-academy Ball is tonight."

*Oh, fuck me.*

I'd forgotten about it until right this second, but part of the whole "schools intermingling" thing is that there's a big ball after the first two trials. People can supposedly use the chance to network and get to know one another; it's all to promote that fun, friendly atmosphere. If you believe the brochure, anyway. Personally, I think it's a big invitation for people to hook up with students from other schools so they don't have to worry about running into said hook-up in class every morning for the rest of the semester. Awkward.

Then again, I'm banging my teacher. I probably shouldn't judge anyone.

The point is, this thing is huge. The whole school is invited, but as one of the contestants, I'm required to be there.

"Fuck!" I yell, because I'm so full of dignity. Launching myself off my bed, I race into the bathroom and slam the door behind me.

Some of the bathrooms in the men's dormitory are shared between rooms, but we're wedged in a corner of the building, so we get a bathroom all to ourselves. It's a good thing too, because even though my living here is pretty much an open secret among all the guys on our floor, it would be harder for them to ignore me if we had to share a bathroom. And it's an extra good thing today, because it means nobody except Asher has to hear me yell about eyeliner for twenty minutes.

I don't normally care all that much about how I look. I actually don't even wear makeup. Not that I've got anything against it. Tamlin's makeup



is amazing; I don't know how she does it. It's just never been something I cared about. I don't find it fun, and it's not like I'm trying to impress anyone besides myself.

But right now?

I'm trying to salvage what little reputation I have left.

"Um, Elliot?" Asher knocks on the door. "Can I help?"

"You can bring me the dress hanging in the right-hand side of the closet, the green one, and no matter what I look like when I come out of here, you can tell me I look pretty."

"Uh, okay."

There's rustling, and then the door opens a crack and Asher hands me the dress—and my phone. "You've got a few texts. From your sister."

"Oh, thanks."

I can't text while my hands are busy doing my hair and makeup, so I just call Maddy. Maybe this'll be good timing. She can calm me down.

*I hope.*

"Hey, Mads!" I say, infusing as much false cheer into my voice as I can.

There's a pause on the other end, and then Maddy says, "You're flipping out about something."

"What? What would make you think that?"

"Your voice gets all high-pitched when you're panicking."

Maddy hasn't seen me panic often. I recall freaking out once when I couldn't find the three-day-late rent check—it turned out to be underneath a plate on the coffee table, of all places. And there was another time when I lost my phone on the train. We crisscrossed all over town searching for it, and I still can't believe we actually found it. I don't really do panic—or at least, I never used to. Not when I had a younger sister around and wanted to be a good example for her. But we're all human, so despite my best efforts, she *has* seen me lose it once or twice. And Maddy hasn't gotten this far in life by being stupid.

"It's this fucking competition," I admit, stripping down to my underwear and grabbing the razor. "I flunked the second trial like an idiot, and now I have to make a good impression at this damn ball, and you know those aren't my thing—"

"Um, maybe breathe or something, Ellie?"

Only Maddy can get away with calling me Ellie. Other people have tried and paid for it dearly.

I take a deep breath. Having my sister on the line helps. I'm used to keeping it together for her, and even though miles separate us right now, her voice in my ear helps me put on my game face.

"Look, don't worry about me, Mads. I know it's going to be fine. It's just... a lot. I didn't expect to care this much about it. But I'm representing the whole school, and I'd like to remind the world we're not freaks."

"You've never let anyone look down on you," Maddy points out. "People treat Unpredictables like they're liabilities, right? You never liked it when people treated you like that because you were taking care of me. And you hated when people would pity us. This is kind of the same thing."

*That's fair. I hadn't thought of it that way.*

"Maybe if I get permission from my professors, I can come watch one of the competitions?" she asks hopefully. "Cheer you on?"

"I'd love that. Don't you have schoolwork and stuff though?"

"Yeah, but I can make up my classes. I've been doing really well, and I won't let myself fall behind in my homework. I promise."

It's so weird to be in school at the same time as Maddy. Ever since our mom died, I've been doing adult things like paying bills while she's been in school, and now we're having the same experience with classes and finals and study groups. It's kind of crazy.

"Then, yeah. If you can... I'd love to see you. Of course I would." After spending so much time with her—practically every spare moment—in our tiny one-bedroom apartment, not seeing her every day still feels odd and unsettling. I miss her like crazy.

"I'll do whatever I can," she promises. "But hey, even if I'm not there, you're not alone, right? You've got people. Cam and Dmitri and Asher and that teacher you're hot for."

"Please don't sing the..."

"I'm hot for teacher!" Mads sings, off key on purpose.

"You're a real laugh riot."

She chuckles evilly. "I'm serious though. How are they doing, anyway? Has Dmitri warmed up to you?"

*Jesus. You could say that. He practically incinerated my panties, does that count?*

"He's... uh, I don't know. We're working things out."

There's a long silence on the other end of the line as I struggle to get my damn eyeliner right, then she asks, "Umm, *how* are you working those

things out?”

“I’m not sure that’s any of your business, missy,” I tell her with a hefty dose of sass.

“And what about the teacher?”

“Roman?”

“Yeah, is he okay with you... hooking up with other people?”

“He’s actually the one who brought it up. He seems... I don’t know, he seems cool with it. He told me straight out that he wouldn’t mind sharing me.”

“Holy shit, that’s great!”

I pause, mascara halfway to my eyelashes. “Uh. *What?*”

“That’s so amazing! I mean... clearly you care about them.”

“What gave you that idea?”

Her eye roll is practically audible over the phone. “I saw you with all of them when I visited right before break. You can’t fool me, Ellie. You like them.”

My cheeks flush. “I... sure, we’re close, yeah, but it’s not...” I take a deep breath and try again. “Asher and Cam have been really supportive of me. They have. And we’ve had some good heart to hearts.” *And crazy-hot make-out sessions.* “But it’s just—we’re friends.”

“Doesn’t sound like it,” my little sis says softly.

I give a snort of laughter. “Maddy. Come on. *Me*, dating four men? That’s insane.”

“Is it? Plenty of people are polyamorous. I read up on it; there’s a whole community in Portland...”

The eyeliner slips from my hand as my jaw drops. “You’ve been reading up on this!?”

“Well, yeah, gotta read up on my sister’s interests, right? But seriously, Elliot. You’ve never let what other people think stop you from being yourself before. You do what *you* want.” There’s a beat, then she adds, “Or who you want.”

*Oh. My. God.*

Since when has she been the wild and crazy one? Between the two of us, I’ve always been the one more likely to take risks, to blow off steam, to have one-night stands. Maddy’s very cautious, and maybe that’s a result of our mom dying or of my protectiveness toward her, but she’s the last person I’d expect to be telling me to date four guys.

“Mads...”

“Hey, listen, Ellie. Just think about it. You guys seem to be getting really close, and they all like you. I bet even Dmitri does, even if he doesn’t like to show it.”

Yeah, if only she knew.

“I’ll think about it,” I concede, partly because I’m not sure how much longer I can have this conversation without freaking out. “And you think about coming to see me, okay?”

“Okay. I love you.”

“Love you too, Mads. Bunches and bunches.”

I hang up and finish doing my makeup, then stare at myself in the mirror.

Did that conversation really just happen?

Am *I* the crazy one here, or is it everyone else? Why are the guys—and my sister—acting like it’s all so simple, like I’m the one who’s lost her mind for resisting this? Can it really be possible for me to get everyone I want, to not have to choose just one of these men and shove down my feelings for the others?

I’m almost scared to find out.

But now definitely isn’t the time to think about it.

I have a ball to go to.

## CHAPTER 15

When I step out of the bathroom, Dmitri and Cam have joined the party. All three of the guys changed into suits while I was hogging the bathroom and having a mini nervous breakdown, and they look... wow.

Dmitri's in a black suit, because of course he is. Asher's in a dark green suit, with a slightly brighter green tie. It goes perfectly with his eyes, and it'll get people's attention for sure, since it's outside of the normal colors. Cam's wearing a dark charcoal suit that highlights the lines of his broad shoulders and lean waist and makes his golden-blond hair seem to shine even brighter.

I stop short and gawp a little, unable to stop myself.

They always look good, but they've definitely kicked it up a notch tonight. And I like how well each of their outfit choices reflect who they are. Dmitri's classic and sharp, Cam looks like a blond Clark Kent, and Asher is stylish with a hint of fun. Damn. I hate to admit it, but all three of them... I want them to have their way with me in those suits.

Maybe it's because I'm too busy staring and dreaming up dirty scenarios, but it takes me a full minute to realize the guys are staring right back at me.

"Holy shit," Cam croaks, never one to hide his emotions.

I don't have a lot of money, or a real reason to go out, which means I don't have a lot of clothes. I have one dress on standby in case I ever need to go to a wedding or something, and then another dress for going out to a club or a dance like this. I'm not a fan of the barely thigh-length, tight, strapless, saran wrap style club dress. I like a bit of flair if I'm gonna go to the trouble of getting dressed up.

So the dress I have on this evening is a deep blue-green. It falls nearly to the floor but has a leg slit that goes up to my thigh, and a corset bodice with straps. I think I look pretty good in it, if I do say so myself, but not good enough to warrant the absolutely saucer-eyed looks the guys are sporting right now.

“You look like you’re about to have a heart attack,” I point out to Asher, my brow wrinkling.

“And you look... amazing,” he murmurs back, his gaze warm and appreciative.

I blush, feeling my face heat up. I’m not really used to genuine compliments. Men drunkenly hitting on me at the bar where I work, yeah, sure. But something like this? Not so much.

“You guys don’t look so bad yourselves.”

“We should get going,” Dmitri says brusquely, always one to ruin the fun. His gaze is hot on me, though, and I feel like I’m burning from it. He might not say it, but he showed his hand the other day with Roman. I know he’s attracted to me, even if our personalities still clash.

Cam offers me his arm with a playful bow, and I laugh, taking it. Asher leads the way, with Dmitri in the rear, like he’s making sure nobody’s going to sneak up on us or anything. Which is sweet, I can appreciate it, but Dmitri’s paranoia ever since Raul’s attack kind of makes me want to get in his face and remind him that I don’t need protecting, thanks. I’m perfectly capable of handling myself.

When we reach the ball, I’m immediately relieved that I futzed over my hair and makeup for so long. Everyone is dressed to the nines, clearly hoping to impress the professionals who are here—and who could get them jobs once they graduate. And also probably hoping to score a hot hook-up for the night.

It’s all out on the quad, where a massive white tent has been erected. Inside, it’s like stepping into another world. The Academy of Unpredictable Magic admins clearly want to prove we’re just as good as anyone else, and Hardwick must have given orders for the staff to decorate to impress, because there are fountains of flowing chocolate, magical bubbles that chime like bells when you pop them, and softly glowing jeweled candles that float in the air over our heads.

It’s the fanciest party I’ve ever been to, that’s for certain. For a moment, I’m speechless, just staring, and I wonder if this is how you’re supposed to

feel at prom, or at your bat mitzvah, or some other special event that says *hey, you're growing up now*. One of those nights you're supposed to look back on with a fond smile as you recall all the crazy things you got up to and how magical it all felt.

I never had anything like that. I was a loner in high school and never went to prom, and birthdays were a small affair at home since we never had much in the way of friends or money.

For a single moment, I'm a kid all over again. Just standing in awe, wondering if fairies could possibly be real.

Cam gently nudges me. "C'mon, Sin, it's time to party." His words are joking but his tone is soft.

Asher squeezes my hand. "I'll go get us some drinks."

Dmitri just rolls his eyes and stalks off. *Huh*.

"Don't mind him," Cam says. "He hates stuff like this, but he has to come because everyone knows his family. It'd look bad if he didn't put in an appearance."

I admit, at this point, I'm dying of curiosity about Dmitri's family. They seem to be the reason for so many of his moods, for his determination, for his hard edges, and I can't help but want to understand. But it's none of my business unless Dmitri wants to tell me, and while he seems like he'd be perfectly happy to sleep with me—and trust me, I'm not complaining about that—he's sure as hell showing no interest in opening up to me.

Which, hey, is just fine by me. Last thing I need is to develop pesky feelings for Dmitri as well as the other three. My damn head is in a whirl enough as it is.

"Wanna dance?" Cam waggles his eyebrows, gesturing toward the dance floor.

I shake my head vigorously. *Nope. Not yet. Or maybe not at all*. I should probably put in some kind of effort, since I'm representing the school at this celebration as much as in any of the challenges. And that means I should... talk to people and mingle and stuff. But I need one or two doses of very strong liquid courage before I can even think about that.

"I'll wait for Asher to bring a drink," I tell him. "You go on, though, if you want."

Cam looks doubtful, but then Professor Hartley comes up and asks if she can borrow him from me to introduce him to some colleagues, and I say

of course. This is all about connections, right? I want Cam to make good ones; he needs them.

I find a spot off to the side a bit where I can watch everyone else. That's one of the things you get good at as a bartender: reading people.

The professors are kind of hanging out on one end and the students on the other end. It makes me chuckle, reminding me of those middle school dances where the parents and teachers got roped into chaperoning.

Some people are already dancing, getting into the mood, while others are breaking off into groups in order to chat—or network, more like.

Over in one corner by the food table, I see Roman. He's chatting with someone I don't recognize, probably an administrator from another academy. I run my hands down the front of my dress, wondering if I should go up to them or not. I'd feel more comfortable talking—or schmoozing, let's be honest—with someone I don't know if Roman's there too. I feel safe with him, just like with the other guys, and I know he'll step in and guide the conversation if it's needed.

But before I can make up my mind one way or another, I notice Tamlin walking over to Roman.

*Ah, great. I'll just stay here, then.*

I know it's stupid, but I can't help the twinge in my gut, the hot, guilty feeling of jealousy as she walks over. Tamlin's a great person, and I wouldn't blame Roman or anyone else for dating her. And I know I've been keeping Roman at a bit of a distance while I figure out my shit. If he were to decide I'm not worth the wait and go back to Tamlin...

The rest of that awful, stomach-churning thought is cut off as the other school representative wanders away, leaving Tamlin and Roman alone. She's clearly flirting with him, smiling, touching his arm, and she gestures toward the dancers.

*Oh fuck. She's asking him to dance.*

My heart starts to sink, but then Roman shakes his head. He gently but firmly takes Tamlin's hand off his arm and says something that makes her face fall. I can see hurt in her expression, but because she's classy and put together and a way better person than I am, she just smiles sadly and nods.

I feel bad for her. I can't help myself. I want to hate her, sure, it would make my damn life easier, but I can't. She's a good person, and I just wish she had feelings for someone other than Roman so I could root for her



instead of feeling this awful combination of elation and guilt as I watch her walk away.

Damn it, I wish I could go up and say something to him. Show him just how much I appreciate him turning Tamlin down. Tell him how much I like him and promise I'm really working on not being so... so *me*. But there's no way I could get away with that in such a public setting. So I just watch him until my stare draws his attention, and when he turns to look at me, I try to put everything I'm feeling into my eyes.

I don't think I'm entirely successful—I'm feeling *a lot*.

But maybe he picks up on some of my emotions, because his cobalt gaze softens, and an expression crosses his face that makes me think if we weren't surrounded by people, he'd wrap me up in his arms and kiss me until we both drowned in the sweetness of it.

Then another visiting professor claps him on the back boisterously, and the moment breaks.

I sigh and turn around to look for the rest of the guys. Dmitri's in a literal corner, brooding like he's Batman or something. *Seriously, what the hell?* But before I can move toward him, I hear a woman's voice saying, "So, is Cam short for something? Like Cameron?"

Spinning in place, I spot Asher and Cam a few yards away from me, the former holding the drinks he promised, surrounded by about five girls from Zephyr Academy—the air elemental school. Cam's a charmer by nature, and Asher is polite, so none of the girls can tell the guys want nothing to do with them.

*Well, too bad for you, ladies. I can tell. Because I actually spend time with these guys and I know them pretty well by now. They're not interested.*

Asher's shoulders are stiff and he's got his head lowered, and Cam's smile is too wide, too fake.

I can't do anything about Roman. I can't tell him how much I appreciate him choosing me, even if I'm not sure what it means yet or how to handle it. I can't go over and request a dance with my professor.

But I *can* do something about these two men.

Something hot and possessive rises up in me before I can stop it—before I can even name it—and next thing I know, I'm striding toward them.

## CHAPTER 16

The girls don't notice me at first, but Cam and Asher do as I slide between them. I can feel both men relaxing, which tells me how stiff and uncomfortable they were until I showed up.

"Hey!" I take Cam's hand and slip an arm through Asher's, tugging them both a little closer. "I've been looking for you two!"

Cam glances down at me, startled, and the girls finally notice my presence. I shoot the five of them a wide smile—well, maybe it's more like a baring of teeth, but it conveys exactly what it needs to.

"Hey, Sin... how's it going?" His brows draw together. He's looking at me like he can't quite figure out if the real Elliot got abducted and I'm her double.

"I'm great. I was just thinking I might take you up on that dance you offered." I flick my gaze back to the Zephyr girls. "Thanks for entertaining my guys until I could get here. I don't think we've met. I'm Elliot."

A couple of the girls splutter out their names, but their leader just blinks at me. I squeeze Asher's arm, gesturing with my chin to the drinks in his hand. "Is one of those for me?"

He smiles and lifts the glass of whiskey. "Yup. Got your favorite."

Then I do something I've never done before, in public anyway: I lean up and press a kiss to the corner of his mouth, breathing in his citrus and lemongrass scent. "Thanks, Ash. You know me so well."

The poor guy looks like lightning just hit him. His cheeks flush, and he blinks slowly. I bite my lip, hiding a grin. He kissed me in front of Alyssa and her crew once to prove a point, but this is the first time I've initiated a kiss between us in public.

Like it's no big deal.

"Sorry..." one of the girls says, drawing out the word as if she's watching an elephant lumber into the room and isn't sure what the hell to do about it. "But are you three all..."

"Together?" My heart thunders in my chest with a mixture of feral possessiveness and reckless abandon as I nod. "Yeah. They're mine."

Asher inhales sharply and Cam almost chokes, and they both turn to look at me at the same time. It feels like someone cranked the heat up to a million degrees in here, and butterflies flap wildly in my stomach as I feel their heated stares burning into me.

I tighten my grip on the two men but keep my focus on the Zephyr girls, flashing them the look I used to give drunk customers at The Den who got a little too handsy—an expression that clearly says *I wouldn't touch that if I were you*.

The girls all back up as if they share a single brain, and I see fear flitting through their eyes. They probably have no idea I can't unleash magic on them, thanks to my cuff, and that I probably wouldn't be able to do it successfully even if my cuff was off. But that doesn't matter. I've still got my words and my fists, if they don't back off, I won't hesitate to use either.

"Well... we'll leave you three to it," the leader finally says, and then they all scuttle off, whispering amongst each other.

Well, fuck. So much for keeping a low profile. I know there's zero chance this won't end up being the big gossip of the night. *One of the contestants is dating two guys at once! One of them's from a huge, important family! And she nearly bit our heads off for daring to talk with them!*

Super.

I don't regret it though, honestly. Let the gossip happen. I wasn't lying when I told them the guys were mine. I might still be dealing with some pretty severe abandonment issues, and all of us might still be feeling our way through this crazy thing that's developing between us. But I am so *not* okay with standing by and watching other girls flirt with them. And if I have to step out of my comfort zone to make sure everyone knows that, well, fine.

I watch the girls until they disappear into the crowd, then look between Asher and Cam, a twinge of embarrassment shooting through me. "Um... sorry about that. I didn't mean to get so territorial."

Cam lets go of my hand and grips my hips, pulling me into him. His bright blue eyes flash, and a rush of heat shoots through me.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he growls in a tone of voice I’ve never heard him use before. It’s deep and intense, and it mirrors the crazy possessiveness that just rose up inside of me. “That was...” His hold tightens, and he shakes his head. “Do you have any idea how fucking sexy that was, Sin?”

I shiver, goose bumps prickling over my skin. Cam’s gaze is making my whole body tremble, and when I glance over at Asher, he has the same expression on his face. Like he wants to get on his knees for me, like he wants to worship me. And I’m not sure what to say to either of them except *yes, please*.

“Do you want to get out of here?” I ask breathlessly, in a moment of pure recklessness.

The two men look at each other, conspiratorial smiles on their faces. And then Cam grabs my hand and tugs me across the tent floor toward the entrance so fast I can barely keep up. Asher is right behind me, his hand on my elbow, steadying me as the three of us make a break for it. We hustle into Wellwood Hall and head down one of the quiet, abandoned corridors, and my heart feels like it might explode as Cam opens the door to an empty classroom.

The moment we’re inside the room, his mouth is on mine. The door closes with a soft thud behind us, and I whimper as his strong hands grip my back, my ass, hauling me to him. He kisses playfully, teasing me—which totally fits his personality but is also damn frustrating when it feels like my body is on fire.

“What do you want?” he whispers. His voice is hoarse and he sounds like he’s asking not just for this moment, but for much, much longer than that. “Elliot...”

He so rarely says my name that the word sends a jolt of fresh, slick heat through my body. Another pair of hands slide up my legs, following the slit in my dress, pushing the fabric up out of the way. Slim fingers dive between my legs and I realize Asher is doing just what his eyes promised—kneeling for me. His fingers brush the fabric of my panties as his lips move over the bare skin of my thigh, and a moan pours from my lips into Cam’s waiting mouth.

“Is this okay?” Asher asks, always a gentleman, his voice a soft rush.

“Yes,” I whimper.

This is more than okay, with Cam hot and playful and nipping at my lips, and Asher earnest and deliberate, each touch well-thought out, like everything else he does. I want them both so badly, and I don't care who knows it.

My hands skate over the large, defined muscles of Cam's arms and shoulders. Even through the fabric of his suit, I can feel them bunching under my touch. His large palm cups the back of my neck as he finally stops teasing me and kisses me like he means it. Like he's been dying to do this ever since we made out in the woods that day.

Fuck, I know *I* have.

Asher's pushes aside the fabric of my panties and traces my entrance with one finger. I'm wet, and the soft groan in his throat lets me know he likes it. I shift my hips, wanting more pressure, more friction as Cam's kisses steal my breath.

Suddenly, Asher's fingers disappear, and his lips pull away from the sensitive skin of my thigh. I groan in disapproval, missing his touch, needing his hands and mouth back on me.

Then I yelp as I'm suddenly being picked up in Cam's strong arms. He carries me over to the back corner of the room and deposits me on one of the student desks. I perch on the edge of it, the skirt of my dress riding up a little, showing most of one leg through the slit, my chest heaving in the corset top. The two men stand in front of me, and for a second, we just drink each other in. Their gazes roam over my mussed, disheveled appearance as mine bounces back and forth between the two of them, so different and yet each so perfect, stunningly handsome in their tailored suits.

Asher keeps his focus on my eyes as he drops to his knees again, and I get the feeling he's been waiting a long time to do this. He runs his palms up my legs, pushing the fabric of my dress up even farther until he's exposed my soft, light blue panties. I already gave him permission once, but his eyes still ask the question as he hooks his fingers into the fabric. I nod quickly, swallowing hard, and shift my weight to let him tug them off me.

He sucks in a deep breath, and I can barely handle the look on his face, it's so sweet and full of hunger. Slowly, carefully, taking his time with every movement, he puts his mouth on me. My head tilts back as a shockwave of sensations explodes through me, and I see Cam watching from a few feet

away. Writhing against Asher's mouth, I hold my hands out, silently begging the blond mage to come closer.

He doesn't hesitate, stepping in to claim my mouth in another kiss that practically lights my hair on fire.

Between their two extremely talented tongues, I'm panting, moaning, clutching for some kind of handhold as I hurtle toward a cliff. I fist Asher's dark, shaggy hair, barely resisting the urge to clamp my thighs around his head, as my other hand works its way down Cam's stomach to the fierce, hot bulge in his pants.

Fuck, he's hard. His cock seems to strain toward my touch, and he makes a satisfied humming noise as his hips jerk. I work my palm over the fabric, jacking him off through the material of his trousers.

"Oh shit, Sin," he mutters into my mouth, his breath growing uneven. "I can tell Asher's driving you crazy."

He's not wrong about that. I could swear the dark-haired mage somehow managed to get his cuff off, because he seems to be reading my damn mind. Every lap of his tongue, every swirl and flick, seems perfectly attuned to the needs of my body. He's not rushing, and the slow and steady build of pleasure in my core is like a rising sea threatening to drown me.

I lose track of how much time passes as Asher pushes me right to the edge then backs off over and over again, working me a little higher each time. My lips are swollen from kissing Cam, and his hands are tangled in my hair—my attempt at an updo completely ruined by now. Tugging his shirt from his pants, I work to undo his belt and fly, and when I slip my hand inside, he grunts into my mouth. Asher hears it, or maybe he feels the reaction in my body, or maybe he just can't fucking wait anymore, because he finally locks his mouth around my clit and sucks.

The orgasm that's been threatening, hovering just out of reach, slams into me, nearly bowling me over with its intensity. I've been on the precipice for so long that once I start coming, it goes on and on, pleasure quaking through every muscle. My grip on Cam's cock tightens, causing him to groan again, while my other hand clenches in Asher's hair.

"Fuuuuck."

The word starts as a cry and ends in a whimper as the last few tremors shake my body, and I let out a long breath. Is it possible for a person's bones to actually dissolve? Because I think that's what just happened to me.

I blink, looking at the guys. Asher's still kneeling in front of me, his sweet smile beaming in the darkness, and Cam's biting his lip as he gazes down at where my skirt is bunched around my waist. He looks like he wants a turn down there, and to be honest, I don't hate that idea one bit. But it's hard for me to focus when I've got their mouths on me—as evidenced by my sloppy, half-assed attempt at giving Cam a hand-job.

And whatever fears and hesitations I might have about making a real go of this relationship thing, never let it be said that I'm selfish in the sack. These two men just took me apart at the seams and put me back together again. The least I can do is return the favor before I get my round two.

I withdraw my hand from Cam's boxer briefs and slip off the desk, wobbling a little on unsteady legs. Asher rises quickly to catch me, and I press my body against his, kissing him long and deep. I can taste myself on his lips, my essence mingled with his; it's one of the hottest fucking things in the world.

Cam's hand slides around my waist, and he presses closer to me too, kissing my bare shoulder, enclosing me between the two of them. But when I hike my skirt up a little and drop to my knees, they both look down at me in surprise.

I grin up at their shadowy faces in the darkness. "What? Don't I get a turn?"

"God, you're so fucking hot," Cam murmurs.

Well, with encouragement like that, what's a girl to do?

His cock is still trapped in his boxer briefs, but it's straining against the fabric, so I do the decent thing and set it free. He's long and thick, the skin velvety soft in my palm, and his low groan makes my heart swell. I like touching him like this. Making him feel like this.

Not wanting to neglect Asher, I make quick work of his buckle and fly, pushing his pants down enough to slide my hand into his briefs and retrieve his cock too. He's hard as a rock, a dab of precum glistening at his slit, and butterflies dance in my stomach as I realize how much eating me out turned him on. Then again, the thought of having his cock in my mouth is making my pussy clench, so I guess it works both ways here.

I glance back up at their faces, my fingers curled around each of them, and find them watching me with intent stares. *Holy shit*. I might come again just from doing this. Dropping my gaze back down, I dart my tongue out to collect the bead of precum gathering on Asher's cock, then slide my lips

over the soft skin. He sighs, his hand lightly stroking my hair, as I suck him deeper into my mouth.

This isn't my first blowjob, but it's my first time with two guys, and it takes me a little while to figure out my strategy. I work one in my hand while I pull the other into my mouth, alternating between the two of them until their hips are moving, pushing back against my strokes, and the noises pouring from their lips become more strained and guttural.

My clit throbs, aching for more already, and I'm tempted to drop one hand down there and take care of myself, but I worry I'll lose my balance if I don't keep a firm grip on something solid. I'm still a little new at this.

And I wasn't kidding—their sounds alone are pushing me toward the edge, the heady feeling of power as I kneel before them making my breath come faster.

When I swirl my tongue around Cam and hollow my cheeks, his whole body shudders.

"Fuck, Sin. Fuck fuck *fuck*." He clutches at my hair, grabbing a fistful close to the scalp. "I'm gonna come. If you keep doing that, I'm gonna—"

I pull him in deeper, relaxing my jaw and drawing as much of him into my mouth as I can. He curses and grunts, and his cock swells before salty wetness spills into my mouth. I keep sucking, swallowing every bit down as my hand works Asher harder and faster.

"Elle..." There's a warning in Ash's voice. He's close too, I can tell; I can feel the tension gathering in his body.

We're all still dressed in our fancy formalwear, and we'll probably have to rejoin the party after this. I don't want him to ruin his suit or my dress.

Or maybe I'm just a greedy bitch.

I release Cam with a final lick and slide my lips around Asher again just as his thick length pulses. His release hits the back of my throat as his body shudders and jerks, and a shaky groan falls from his lips. My pussy clenches hard, a slow wave of pleasure rolling through me. It's nowhere near as intense as my first orgasm, but I feel it all over my body.

After licking his cock like a lollipop to clean up any last drops, I slowly draw back.

We're all breathing hard, the harsh sounds bouncing around the big, empty classroom in the dark.

*Holy fuck.*

*That was... wow.*



I've never done anything like that in my life, and I honestly feel bad for past me, because she had no damn idea what she was missing.

## CHAPTER 17

The ball is waiting, and I know we shouldn't stay away too long—I still haven't done any of the schmoozing I'm supposed to. But in a post orgasmic haze, the three of us end up collapsing into a pile at the back of the room, my body sandwiched between theirs.

Cam's idly drawing patterns on my thigh. I think they're runes, but I'm not sure. They could be nonsense. Either way though, it feels good. Grounding. Comforting. I'm not surprised that even after something like that, he can't sit still. He's always got a bit more energy left in him.

Asher is silent, but the way he's looking at me—it speaks volumes. His eyes are soft, the forest-green so damn beautiful in the dim light from the windows, and he doesn't flinch away when I meet his gaze.

I almost don't know what to do with him, with this, with Cam, with myself. I want to flail around like an idiot, and I'm torn between conflicting impulses to rush out of the room and to grab on tight to both of them and never leave. We're all just getting our breath back right now, but any moment one of them is going to start talking—probably Cam—and then I'm going to have no idea what to say in response.

The man in question kisses slowly, softly up my neck, making me shiver. “So, Sin finally admits she likes us, just a little bit. Should I call all the papers?”

“Host a party?” Asher adds. “Throw confetti?”

“Oh, shut up,” I reply, craning my neck to look at him, but a grin is stealing across my face without my permission.

“You're going to just vanish into the night now,” Cam says with fake, melodramatic mournfulness. “You'll never call or write, and we'll just have

to remember you fondly in our dreams... as we think of what could've been..."

"You're an asshole." My face is barely an inch from his, and I know I've still got that stupid grin on my face, so I don't blame Cam at all for responding by kissing me.

Just as he pulls away to suck in a breath of air, Asher's hand gently grips my chin, turning my head, and then he kisses me as well, his tongue sliding into my mouth with all the thorough, deliberate care he takes with everything. I feel myself melting all over again as they teasingly take turns, kissing me, kissing my neck, Cam biting a little, hands starting to wander again...

"The fact that she's still in the Trials at all is unacceptable."

All three of us jump.

There are voices just outside the room, growing louder—I think headed for this very classroom.

*Shit!*

We scramble to get ourselves in order, and then Cam grabs both Asher and me, dragging us into a dark corner and shoving us behind a desk.

Fuck, it's not nearly big enough to cover all three of us, even with Asher and Cam plastering themselves to me like they might have to shield me from attack.

Hinges squeak, and I peek over the lip of the desk in time to see two people illuminated in the light from the hallway before the heavy door swings shut again.

*Holy shit.*

I recognize the two people who just stepped into the room. They're mages from two of the visiting academies: Syren and Houdini. Syren is the college for enchanters, and Houdini is the name of the college for illusionists. The fact that Harry Houdini didn't believe in real magic and was annoyed at people like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who thought Houdini was actually using real magic is the whole reason the school was named that—it's a massive in-joke that I honestly don't really get.

Anyway, I recognize these guys. They're both upper level administrators. Not the deans, but pretty high up on the food chain—I think one of them is in charge of student life. I remember thinking when I first saw him that he had the kind of face a hawk might have if it were turned into a human, and now he looks even more like a bird of prey, his sharp

features almost menacing in the dim light. The other, from Syren, is a short, squat kind of guy and looks almost jovial, relaxed. Not the type you'd expect to be making dark plans in a quiet classroom with an accomplice.

"She failed the previous Trial, Adelson," the hawkish one from Houdini informs his companion. "She'll fail the next one too."

"But she shouldn't even be in the next one!" the shorter one from Syren complains. Adelson, I guess.

"Perhaps, but consider this: the longer she remains in the competition, the more opportunities there are for her to be humiliated in front of everyone. Isn't that what we want? If she just loses, that's one thing—but we need her to fail in front of everyone, to show the world that Unpredictables don't belong in the same league as the rest of us."

My blood runs cold, and Cam's grip on me tightens so much it's almost painful. As if I didn't already suspect they were talking about me, that just about seals it. *Fuck*. The other schools want me to fail—or at least these two do. I should've known. Anger and shame and frustration chase each other in circles inside my chest, making it hard to breathe.

Would it really be so bad if an Unpredictable did well in the competition? Not even winning it, but just doing well? Would that be too damn much to ask?

I guess so, according to these two assholes.

"That's too risky, Merrimer." Adelson shakes his head adamantly. "She embarrassed herself by not using any magic in the last challenge. What if she tries to compensate in the next one? Her magic could do serious damage. She's too powerful, uncontrollable—"

"You could say that about a lot of Unpredictables. It's why this is so important. If we can make sure she goes down spectacularly, we can discredit the whole school. They'll never compete in the Trials again. Maybe they'll even get shut down."

*Holy shit*. I glance over at Asher and Cam. Cam's mouth has dropped open, and Asher's is set in a grim line. I wish I could take his cuff off so he could read their minds and figure out more, listen in on what they're not saying aloud.

"The loss is more important," Adelson insists. He seems genuinely afraid as they discuss me in hushed tones, and that actually makes me hate him more. "We can't risk her causing harm. We need to remove her from

the competition as soon as possible. Every day this farce continues is a disgrace to the magical community.”

“No argument there,” Merrimer says grimly, swiping a hand down his hawkish face. He looks more disgusted than scared.

“Besides,” the shorter man continues, “if she makes it to the final round, you know he’ll be pissed, and I’d rather not have to deal with babysitting his temper.”

“He’s not that bad.”

“He wasn’t that bad, you mean. He’s gotten worse in the last few months.”

He? Who’s *he*?

It sounds like these two have someone else they’re working with or reporting to. I strain my ears, hoping to hear a name, but no such luck.

Merrimer sighs. “Look, just stay calm, and we’ll take her out in the next Trial. All right? There’s no way she can make it through that.”

A chill works down my spine in spite of the anger churning in me. “Take her out” could have several different meanings, and I can’t tell by his inflection exactly what he means.

How far would these men go to stop me? Would they go so far as to—to hurt me? Really hurt me?

*Holy shit, would they try to kill me?*

I’m still trying to process that thought as the two men leave, slipping through the door after peering out into the corridor to check for passersby. Cam immediately springs to his feet, like he wishes he could run after them and give them a goddamn piece of his mind.

Or his fist.

“What the fuck,” he growls. I’ve never seen him so worked up before. The man has depth, I know, and he’s had a lot of pain to deal with in his life, but he’s generally laidback and always eager to see the positive side to a situation. Seeing him furious like this—it’s hot, I admit, it’s really hot, but it’s also concerning.

“That was...” Even Asher’s normally calm facade is broken, and I can practically hear the gears grinding in his brain as he tries to figure out the best way to handle this.

I cast around for my panties and slip them on when I find them, working them up under the fabric of my dress.

Neither of these guys should have to deal with this mess, and the school sure as hell doesn't need more bad publicity. And I'm having a hard enough time in the Trials without bigots actively trying to bring me down.

*I've fucking had it with this shit.*

I'm going to go out there and give those two mages a piece of my mind, and God help them when I get my hands on them. Because maybe they can do magic and I can't, especially with my dampening brace on and activated, but I've still got two fists that work just—

Asher and Cam each take one of my arms as I move to storm after the mages.

"Oh, no, you don't, Sin," Cam tells me, his voice a little calmer than before.

"I don't think that's a great idea." Asher squeezes my arm gently. "I know you want to confront them, and I get it. But this isn't a situation you should deal with on your own, Elle. There are too many ways it could backfire."

"Well, what do you suggest I do then?" I don't try to pull out of their grip, but my body is still taut with tension. I hate this so much. Asher's right though, and I know it.

The two friends look at each other over my head.

"I think we should ask Dima what he thinks," Cam says slowly. "His family's high up and has connections. He might understand the whole... diplomacy of this better than we do."

"Dmitri wouldn't know diplomacy if it bit him in the ass," I snort.

"Well, who do you think we should tell?"

"Roman," I blurt out. I don't even think about it, but once I say it, I know it's true. I want him to know about this. He's a professor who understands the administration side of things and how it all works. And as he proved with the whole Raul situation, he knows a lot of things that go on behind the scenes—if anyone can give us some good advice, it'll be him.

Asher nods. "Roman's had a hell of a past. I don't know much, but I'm sure he'll know what to do."

Cam shrugs. "All right. I trust him."

"I'll get Dmitri," Asher says. "If you two get Roman."

The three of us sneak back to the giant white tent in the quad, keeping an eye out for any sign of the Syren and Houdini admins, though I don't see them. I don't know what corner Dmitri is hiding in, but Roman's playing

chaperone over by the drinks table when we grab him and drag him out toward Wellwood Hall.

“What the hell is going on?” Dmitri demands as Asher leads us into a different empty classroom. We’ve relocated, just in case.

Roman opens his mouth, probably about to ask the same thing. As briefly as I can, I explain what happened—and that Cam and Asher wouldn’t let me go after the two mages, damn it.

The two darkly handsome men look a bit amused at this, and I scowl at them. *Hey, not funny, guys.*

“And why are you bringing us into it?” Dmitri grouches when I finish my story.

“Oh, no, I’m in trouble and I came to you for help, just like you seem to want me to do, how awful for you,” I shoot back, my irritation at this whole situation spilling over onto him.

Seriously though, if we *hadn’t* told him what was going on, I’m sure I would’ve gotten an earful about that later. I just can’t win with this guy.

“Damn it. This is not good,” Roman growls, and we all snap back to attention.

Ash squares his shoulders. “I say we go to the dean.”

His vote doesn’t surprise me. He’s a rule follower and comes from a well-adjusted family, so it only makes sense that he’d trust authority figures more than I do.

Roman shakes his head. “No. Hardwick’s hands are tied enough as it is. He can’t do anything, and he won’t be able to interfere without it looking like we’re just sore losers. Our position is delicate enough already.”

“And if we tell any of the admins, how do we know the wrong person won’t hear about it?” Dmitri points out, his dark eyes glinting.

“For once, I agree with you,” I admit. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. And we don’t know who this third guy is. It could be anyone. It could be... Hardwick himself.” It’s not likely—and God, I *hope* it’s not Hardwick. I like him. But I’d rather be safe than sorry.

“What do we do, then?” Cam rakes a hand through his hair.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do.” It feels like sharks are circling in my chest, hungry for blood. “I’m going to keep competing in the Trials, and I’m going to make it to the end. Screw those guys and everyone else.”

When this whole thing started, I didn’t care so much about winning; I just wanted to do well enough to make my school proud. But I’ll be damned

if I'm going to let three prejudiced assholes take me down like this.  
I'll show them. I'll prove them fucking wrong.  
Somehow, some way, I'm going to *win* this damn thing.



## CHAPTER 18

The next several days, as I prepare for the third challenge, are intense.

The guys agree it'll look better for the school, and save us problems with the administration, if I beat the Trials on my own without Hardwick or anyone else knowing about the sabotage attempts, and without the two mages knowing I'm onto them.

"If you go to Hardwick, the other school representatives will spin it so you sound like you're looking for an excuse if you fail. Even the ones who aren't actively conspiring against you will likely jump on the opportunity to claim Unpredictables don't belong in the Trials," Roman counsels me. "But we *cannot* let you get hurt."

I want to win this fucking thing, but the guys all seem much more concerned with my personal safety. It's actually very touching—and understandable, given my recent struggles—but goddamn it, I want to kick ass and take names, not just make it out by the skin of my teeth.

Cam trains with me in the mornings before we go to class, and then I have private sessions with both Tamlin and Roman. They each give me homework, which Asher helps me complete, and I spar with Dmitri on top of it all.

"Come on, Princess. You can do better. You have to be so on top of your game that you don't even think about it," Dmitri growls at me after pinning me in one of our sessions.

I glare up at him. "What about taking it easy on myself? Trusting in my abilities? Isn't that what you and Roman said I should do?"

His expression hardens. "That was before your life was in danger."

Even the sexy edge to our fighting has gone, because he's just so focused on getting me to win, to be the best.

Exhaustion and worry hang on me like heavy weights, and even though the guys do their best to make sure I'm sleeping enough and eating well, I lay awake for hours every night, running through drills and scenarios in my head. I'm strung out, and I know they can see it.

Tamlin notices too.

"You look beat," she tells me when I walk into the Combat classroom. It's our last practice before the next challenge, and I'm nervous as fuck. I want so badly to win, but I just don't know if I'm good enough.

Forget sabotage, what if I lose just because I'm incompetent?

"That's one way to put it." I set my bag down and start stretching. "It's been a long week."

Tamlin gives me a weak smile. "Yes, it has been."

That makes me pause.

I look over at her and take in her expression more closely this time. If I didn't know any better, I'd say Tamlin looks... sad.

Professor Tamlin isn't the kind of person who shows her emotions easily. She's very put together and always has a poised and confident air about her. I sometimes think she could have a hurricane raging around her and still manage to smile serenely and get on with her business.

But not today.

Her eyes aren't quite meeting mine, her clothes look slightly ruffled, and there's a slowness, almost a weariness, to her movements.

"Are you okay?" I ask. I can't help it. Tamlin and I aren't exactly friends—I don't even call her by her first name, Josephine—but she's a good person, and she's making an effort to help me. And I think Roman hinted to her that it was more important than ever that I'm ready for the next trial, if the way she's been drilling me is anything to go by.

Tamlin startles a little. I didn't think I was capable of surprising her, so that tells me a lot. "I'm fine." She gives me a wan smile. "Just had a long weekend."

"Are you sure?"

She sighs. "It's personal, and I'd rather not—you're a good person, Elliot, and thank you for asking, but you are my student, and I'd like to try and keep our relationship boundaries in place."

“You’re not much older than I am.” I’d say about five years. Same as Roman.

She rolls her eyes, but she looks fond of me, pressing her lips together to hide a smile. “I had a talk with someone—I felt one way about our relationship, they felt the other way.”

“Most of us eat a tub of ice cream and wear sweatpants for a week when that happens, so I’d say you’re doing pretty well,” I reply, even as butterflies erupt in my stomach.

So Tamlin *did* want to get back together with Roman. She must’ve said something after the dance, or maybe it was her behavior then that convinced him to sit her down and have a proper talk with her.

Either way—he said no.

*He picked me.*

She doesn’t know about that, obviously. I doubt she’d be quite so friendly with me if she did know. And given what she just said about professor-student relationships, she probably wouldn’t approve of me and Roman one bit.

But it’s true. He picked me. He told me he wants to be with me, that he’s okay with sharing me, and he doesn’t want to get back together with her or anyone else.

I almost want to cry, stupid as it is.

“Thank you,” Tamlin tells me, and what I really want to say is *no, thank you*, or maybe *I’m sorry*, but she wouldn’t understand that.

So I just nod, powerful emotions churning in my chest. “Of course.”



**O**n the way out of Wellwood Hall, I run into Professor Goldstein, my History of Magic professor.

“Elliot! Do you have a moment?”

Shit. Her class was my easiest subject last semester, but right now, I’m barely scraping by. Who has time to learn about Salem when they’ve got a massive, terrifying competition to win? My heart sinks as I trudge after her to her office, expecting to be berated for falling behind in my work.

Professor Goldstein is the opposite of what you’d think a history teacher would be—not stuffy or stodgy at all. She has short, white-blond hair and a

sort of manic energy in everything she does. She has us do reenactments where we role play as historical characters and will rant for hours about how terrible the Renaissance period was for women's rights.

She's kind of awesome, actually.

Goldstein closes the door and frowns at me over her cat-eye glasses. "You've really been struggling since the Trials began. You were one of my best students last semester."

That's because even if I'm useless at practical magic, at least history is something you can learn whether you can cast a spell or not. It was one of the few courses I felt I actually could do well in.

"Sorry," I murmur. And I do feel bad. It's not like I want to be failing here. "It's just..."

"I think it might be easier on you if you had some help."

"I have the—"

"Ah, yes, I've noticed the entourage." She smiles at me, and I feel my stomach flipping over. Even the professors have noticed the three guys and our... I don't even know what.

But instead of making me nervous, it makes me weirdly *happy*. Knowing that people know. That most people don't seem to question it or judge, that they look at it with humor and lightheartedness.

The more things like this happen, the fewer reasons I can come up with as to why I'm still holding back.

There's still my fear of loss, of betrayal, but it's so much harder to remember those fears when all four of the men in my life have been so supportive and good to me—even Dmitri, in his hot and cold way. I couldn't quite tell you what he feels for me, but I do know that he's put as much effort into helping me as the other three have over the past few days.

"But I think that you could use the help of another woman," Goldstein goes on, which doesn't surprise me. She's all about lady power. "And I know someone who's had quite a lot of competitive training. I think she could help you."

"Dmitri's good at battle magic."

"I'm talking about someone who's been going to competitions like this since she was a child," she explains. "Her family had quite high expectations for her before her Unpredictable magic sparked. They're very well known in the magical sports world, and competitions similar to the Trials are common there."

I blink. Every time I think I'm getting more acclimated to the magical community, something else throws me for a loop and reminds me how much time I spent away from this world. I had no idea that was even a thing.

"Who?"

"Miss Chaucer."

My jaw falls open a little. "*Kendal?*"

I'm not at all thrilled with the idea. But I do need help. And there are times when it seems like Kendal isn't happy with her friends, and like she's not happy with how they treat me.

Not that she's ever stood up for me or anything. I guess that would be too much to ask.

But on the other hand, what do I have to lose?

Surely the fate of the whole damn school is more important than our petty rivalry, right?

After my last class lets out, I go looking for Kendal. I find her on the third floor of Wellwood hall, in the large school library—which I have to admit makes me like her, or at least respect her, a bit more already. Alyssa wouldn't be caught dead in a library.

Kendal's bent over some books, copying passages into a notebook next to her, and I tap her on the shoulder.

She squeaks in surprise and nearly drops her pen, then looks up at me. Her eyes go wide. "Oh! Um... hey, uh, Elliot."

"Hey." I take a seat next to her. Maybe it's a good thing I found her here. You have to be quiet in a library, and it's a public space, so the combination of those two things should keep this from turning into a fight if she's feeling hostile. "Professor Goldstein suggested I ask you for help with the Trials. Apparently your family's big into competitions like this?"

Kendal nods, setting her book aside and tucking a lock of auburn hair behind her ear. "My sisters are really well known. I've got two of them. One older, one younger. My parents hoped I'd be the same. They had me doing preliminary competitions—ones for people who don't have their powers yet—but after my Unpredictable magic surfaced... well, that pretty much disqualified me from all future events."

I lean back in my chair. "Oh, damn. That sucks."

She grimaces. "A little. My parents were heartbroken, and my sisters still can't get over it. But honestly, I was a little... relieved. I'm not

competitive the way they are. I get all nervous and shaky, and I don't like the pressure."

That doesn't surprise me. Kendal's not the slightest bit confrontational. "But you know how competitions like this work."

"Oh, yes, I have the training." She hesitates. "But—but would you really want to work with me? I mean... given..."

"Look, do you want the school to do well?"

Kendal nods vigorously. "Of course I do! If I don't have this school, I'm nothing."

*Well, that's... holy shit.*

We don't have time to unpack all of that right now, but then again, I'm pretty sure that's how most of us feel about this school. We're Unpredictables. This is the one place we're welcomed without question, the one place set up to train people like us. It's not like we've got a ton of other choices.

"Then you'll help me?" I ask, leaning forward again.

Her blue eyes narrow warily. She doesn't seem very excited about the idea, and I admit, I'm not all that fond of it either. But I'll do whatever it takes to win. And if that means a temporary alliance with Kendal, then sure, why the fuck not?

My classmate seems to be thinking something along the same lines, because after a moment, she tentatively sticks her hand out for me to shake.

"I'll help," she says. "For the school's sake."

We shake on it and that's that.

I just hope it's enough to get me through.

## CHAPTER 19

**T**hat night, I can't sleep. Despite my best efforts to relax, I lie in bed staring at the ceiling and wondering what the hell's going to happen at the competition tomorrow. Wondering what the challenge will be. How it'll go. If I'll fail on my own, or if someone else will make me fail.

But I can't. I *can't* fail.

When it was just my own mistakes or my lack of control bringing me down, that was one thing. But someone actively working against me? Fuck them. If I lose something fair and square, sure. Okay. I lost. But to lose because someone's messing with me? Because someone can't handle a "freak" like me winning? That shit isn't okay.

I *have* to beat them.

The guys are all asleep, but I can't lie still any longer. I get dressed silently and slip out, sneaking into Wellwood Hall. It reminds me of when I snuck around the building back when I was trying to figure out who was attacking students, and how I ran into Roman in a dark hallway.

Heat floods me.

*Mmm.* That's a pleasant memory... or at least, the Roman part of it is.

But unlike that night, when the school felt eerie and fraught with danger, when I worried a secret attacker could be lurking around any corner, I feel safe now. The jerks sabotaging me clearly want to do it in full view at the competition, so I doubt they'll jump me in the dead of night. Plus, I'm much more confident navigating the school itself now. I know my way around.

It's like *home*, I realize with a jolt.

Somewhere along the way, somehow, I came to feel comfortable in this place.

Huh. It's... it's kind of terrifying. I haven't thought of anything as a home besides my little apartment with Maddy, and even then, I never knew when we might have to move in a hurry if the rent got too high.

I make my way to the Combat classroom and start running some drills. I have no clue what the next trial is going to cover, so I have to be prepared for literally anything.

"Burning the candle at both ends, Sin?"

Even without the nickname, I know it's Cam by his voice. I let my fists drop and turn to face him.

He's slouching against the door frame, hands in his pockets, grinning softly at me. Cam doesn't ever just smile—he's too energetic for that. He always *grins*.

"And here I thought I'd snuck out successfully." I wrinkle my nose.

He shrugs, walking over. "We know you too well by now."

My brows shoot up. "Oh, really? Is that so?"

"Yup. Sorry to break it to you." His grin fades as he looks around, seeing the evidence of the magic I've been practicing. "You should be sleeping."

I shake my head. "No. I have to practice—"

"You've *been* practicing." Cam gently places his hands on mine, his thumbs rubbing back and forth across my knuckles. "You've done everything you can do. Last-minute cramming isn't going to do anything except leave you too tired tomorrow."

"I can't sleep," I blurt out. "I can't stop thinking about—I need to win this, Cam. I *need* to. And if I can't sleep, if my thoughts are just spinning around in my head... then I might as well get some more practice in, right?"

He steps closer, and I know what he's doing, I can see it in the gleam of his eyes, but I let him as his hands move to my hips and he gently nudges my head back with his nose.

"What you need is to relax," he murmurs. Slow kisses are being planted down my neck, and I shiver, my vision blurring a little.

"Cam..."

"The more you push right now, the more you're going to feel frustrated and doubtful of yourself tomorrow. Let it go for tonight, Sin." He kisses right below my ear, squeezing my hips and pulling me flush against him.



I can feel him getting hard against me, his cock swelling, and I can feel myself getting wet in response. We didn't go as far as we could have the other night with Asher and God, I want to. I want Cam inside me, want to know what it feels like to be surrounded by his sunshine.

"You're going to do great," he promises in a soft whisper that stirs my hair. His fingers have found their way under my t-shirt and are rubbing small circles on my skin, making my breath hitch. I want those fingers all over my body, worshipping me, torturing me, teasing me like I know he will. "You're working hard, and you're brave and stubborn as all hell. It's gonna be okay. Right now, you need to let go and trust that you've got this. You need to distract yourself, relax, and rest."

His words don't make my fears go away—I don't think anything could do that—but they do draw a smile to my face. I tangle my fingers in his golden-blond hair, dropping my head back as his lips trace the line of my neck. "Hmm... You have any ideas about how to distract and relax me?"

Cam's hand moves to my ass, squeezing and grinding me right up against where his hard cock is pressing through his pants. I whimper before I can stop myself, my breath hitching. Oh God, yes, *please*.

"You bet your pretty ass I do."

I tilt my chin back down, meeting his bright blue gaze. "Then help me, Cam. Please."

He doesn't need more invitation than that. His mouth lands on mine, and where his kisses up and down my neck were teasing and light, this kiss is hot and fierce. He lifts me into his arms, and I wrap my legs around him, crushing my body against his.

Cam is a good fucking kisser. Our mouths were fused together the whole time Asher went down on me in that classroom, and not to take any credit away from Ash's wickedly talented tongue, but I might've been able to come from Cam's kiss alone. He doesn't hold anything back, sliding his tongue against mine in quick, hungry strokes while his hands squeeze my ass.

He walks me over to a pile of mats stacked in one corner and sets me down on them, his body covering mine. I scoot backward a bit and he follows me so we're both lying on the mats, which form a kind of makeshift bed and are way better than the floor. Now that he doesn't have to hold me up, his hands make quick work of my shirt, tugging it over my head before

his mouth attacks my breasts, sucking and biting at my tender flesh through the thin fabric of my bra.

I arch up into his touch, moaning as my nipples pebble. I'm aware that at some point I should probably stop having sex in public places, but it's after midnight, and hey, at least we're in a room with a door, right?

He breaks away from my boobs when I tug on his shirt, allowing me to pull it over his head before he unclasps my bra. He slides it off my arms, and for a second, we just stop and stare at each other.

*Jesus Christ. He's fucking perfect.*

His skin is lightly tanned, and his muscles are sculpted and defined in a way that makes it clear he takes his workouts seriously. His chest is smooth, and a little trail of hair runs from just below his bellybutton to disappear beneath the waistband of his low-slung jeans.

I lick my lips, so turned on by the sight of him that I barely notice he's staring at me the exact same way until he speaks.

“God, Sin. You're so beautiful.”

His voice is rough and honest, and the sound travels straight to my clit, making me squirm beneath him. I reach up and pull him down to me, kissing him hard as I rub my body against his. We're skin to skin for the first time, and it feels so amazing I want to stay like this forever.

Somewhere in the midst of our kiss, my hands find their way to the button of his jeans, and I'm about to get rid of the rest of our pesky clothes when it hits me.

*Condom.*

Ah, fuck.

I don't have one, and seeing as how Cam just snuck out to follow me across campus in the middle of the night, I'm guessing he doesn't either. *Goddamn it.* I'm almost far gone enough not to care, to go without one and let him finish on my stomach or something, but... we haven't talked about this with any of the other guys. I know they're okay with sharing me, and I know they're aware that includes sex, but taking this step without discussing it with all of them feels like it would be super shitty.

Regret and thwarted desire burn through me as I put my hands on Cam's chest, gently pushing him away from me.

His blue gaze immediately finds mine, concern in his eyes. “What? What is it, Sin? Is something wrong?”

“No!” I slide my hands up his chest, then grimace. “Well, yeah. I mean, what you were doing was amazing, but we... we should probably stop. I don’t have a condom, and I—”

A grin spreads across his face, and I blink in surprise. That wasn’t the reaction I was expecting.

Before I can question him on it though, he reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a foil-wrapped packet from his wallet. He must notice my eyebrows drawing together in surprise, because he flushes slightly, still grinning.

“I’ve... been carrying it around ever since the Inter-academy Ball. Sometimes things with you happen a little spontaneously, and I wanted to be prepared. Just in case.”

A strange wave of emotion crashes over me, too many feelings hitting me at once for me to sort them all out. I’m relieved we don’t have to stop, amused that he’s such a damn Boy Scout, and touched that he knows me so well. That he wants this with me—has been hoping for it.

Inexplicably, tears prick my eyes as words I should absolutely *not* say dance on the tip of my tongue.

I don’t want him to see my expression, and I need his lips on mine, so with an inarticulate noise, I haul him back down to kiss me.

Now that we know we won’t have to stop, there’s nothing holding either of us back. In a few moments, we’re both completely naked, and when Cam finally sheaths himself and slides inside me, I find a new definition of heaven.

*It’s this. It must be this.*

His cock stretches and fills me in just the right way, and his skin is warm against mine, his sandalwood scent tickling my nose.

And I was right. Having sex with Cam is like being surrounded by sunshine, by every good and happy thing in the world. His strokes are steady and even, and he kisses me the whole time he fucks me, delving his tongue into my mouth, dropping sweet kisses to my cheeks, my nose, my eyelids. His hands frame my face, cradling it like I’m something precious, and he only pulls away to look down at me when I come.

I cry out loudly, convulsing around him, and he follows me after a few more strokes, our gazes locked together.

When we finish, he slumps on top of me, breathing hard into the crook of my neck.

My hands run up and down his muscled back as I suck in air too, and I realize that for the first time in days, the part of my brain that's been overloaded with worries, anger, and stress... is blissfully blank.

## CHAPTER 20

**A**s amazing as sex with Cam is—and holy shit, my legs are still shaky for a while afterward—not even he has the power to make the entire competition go away.

The next morning, I have to report for duty.

The seven other contestants and I are put in the middle of the quad once again, with the gathered spectators in the stands watching us. I feel a sudden rush of gratitude that Maddy isn't here. I'd want to do well for her—I always want to do well for her, damn it, to set a good example and make her proud of me—and I don't need that added pressure when I have to deal with goddamn cheaters.

It pisses me off like nothing else, the idea that my fate, win or lose, is no longer in my own hands, but in someone else's.

Hardwick walks up to the podium and announces to both the contestants and the crowd how this challenge is going to go, and I get a rush of adrenaline as I hear him explain what the trial will be.

It's a combat simulation.

Immediately, the knot of fear in my stomach unclenches a little. Now this, *this* I fucking know how to do. I can kick anyone's ass—except maybe Dmitri's, and I even sometimes get the better of him. This is my *jam*.

“None of your opponents are real, although they will look and even feel like it,” Hardwick reminds us. “They are all illusions, run by our gifted illusionists from Houdini University. Please be sure to thank the staff for their hard work in creating these spells for us to use. And now, without further ado...”

All of the contestants are spaced far apart, each in the middle of our own circle. It's like the battle royale: you lose when you're pinned or if you step outside the circle. I'm pretty sure the illusions can't go outside the circle either or they'll disappear. That keeps them from slipping into another contestant's field by accident.

"Begin!" Hardwick shouts.

Immediately, three men appear around me—big guys who look like boxers. *Okay, yeah. I can do this.*

I was pretty scrappy before I came to this school, and I've now had several months of intense physical conditioning and combat training. So I'm no fucking slouch at this kind of stuff, and honestly, I like it. I'm a physical person, and I *may* or may not have some anger issues to work out.

At first, the illusions just come at me one at a time, which I can definitely handle. But then they start coming at me all at once, making me spin and duck and dance around the ring to avoid getting boxed in. Hardwick wasn't kidding about these illusions seeming real—I get clocked in the head by one of the three bruisers, and it fucking hurts.

*Okay, time to pull out the big guns.*

I throw both hands out in front of me, unleashing a sonic boom at all three of them. It's still been giving me some trouble, but at this point, I don't care if I can't quite control it. It's not like these guys are real anyway, so no biggie if I accidentally pulverize them.

But to my horror, they barely react at all.

The magic felt strong when it flew from my hands, but aside from a quick stumble backward, the three huge men aren't even affected by it.

Shit. It's probably because they're illusions. They're not governed by the same physical laws the rest of us are, so my sonic booms don't affect them the same way. That's gonna make this trickier.

Falling back on my combat training, I focus on isolating them as much as I can, trying to lure them away from each other so I can force at least one of them outside the circle.

And then... a new creature shimmers into existence above me.

*Fuck.*

It's hard for me to see what my fellow contestants are doing since I'm a little preoccupied with not getting my ass lit on fire by the goddamn miniature dragon I'm battling, but when I do get glimpses—

*Wait a second.*

Is it just me, or are my opponents a lot harder than the ones they're up against?

The illusion dragon comes at me again—it's much smaller than a real dragon, but it's still fucking deadly—and I have to dodge out of the way, pulling myself up short so I don't slip out of the ring. As I dart under another blast of flame and duck a swinging fist, I glance over at the other circles. *Yup*. Sure enough, nobody's dealing with anything as strong or dangerous as I am. All of the contestants have opponents on the ground and in the air, but the ones in the air don't seem to be doing much but circling threateningly. The dragon over my head, on the other hand, is going after me like I stole his lunch money. And I swear my blows have almost no impact on the illusions I'm up against, as if they've been magically enhanced.

I grit my teeth. I'm not going down without a fight, and if those mages are sabotaging me like I think they are, I'm sure as fuck not going to go out without giving it literally everything I've got.

I land another blow and dodge quickly, but a blast of fire catches me on the shoulder, drawing a yelp of pain. One of the big bruisers charges for me just as the dragon pounces. I duck out of his way, and try to pivot to avoid the dragon, but I'm too damn slow.

The massive illusion slams into me from behind, its sharply taloned feet pinning me to the fucking dirt.

*No!*

I grunt and snarl, trying to wriggle out from under the pin. But I just can't manage it.

From somewhere above me, a buzzer rings, and a second later, the weight holding me down vanishes. I roll over onto my back to see that the three boxer dudes are gone too. Groaning, I haul my aching body up from the ground, frustration making my blood boil.

I suppose I should be proud of myself for lasting as long as I did when someone was making it harder for me than for everyone else—and given that one of those two mages we eavesdropped on was from the school of illusion magic, it makes sense he'd be able to sabotage this challenge for me.

But fuck if I'm not pissed as all hell. I would've won that thing if it'd been fair. I just know it. Combat is my favorite way to use magic, and the thing I'm best in.

Someone's gonna pay for this.

The student from Syren is declared the winner, which only makes me more furious. After the results are announced and the spectators start to clear out, I'm ready to storm right into Hardwick's office and tell him in no uncertain terms just what kind of shady shit some of the other schools are up to.

In fact, I almost march off to do that before Asher stops me and insists I get someone to look at my burned shoulder.

I'm not the only contestant who's sporting an injury, but mine are by far the worst. My wrist hurts suspiciously, like I sprained it, my shoulder's burnt, I've got scraped knees and shallow claw marks on my back from where the dragon nicked me, and my eye is swelling up from a punch I took from one of the boxers.

"You look badass," Asher promises me.

*Uh huh. Sure.*

By the time the nurses take care of my injuries, which are light enough that they'll heal by the time we get to the next trial, I've calmed down somewhat. Which I think was Asher's plan.

I can't just go busting into Hardwick's office, as much as I want to. I have no evidence of the sabotage, just my own suspicions and what I saw happening to me compared to what was happening to everyone else—and that's just circumstantial at best. I'd look like a sore loser, and like hell will I have it getting out that the Unpredictable contestant can't handle losing.

Since it's too late to go to Hardwick, the only other option is to keep pushing myself and make sure I don't lose the next competition.

In the days after the combat trial, I throw myself even harder into my training and preparation. I can tell everyone's a little worried about how focused I am—even Kendal.

Not that she'd ever say anything to me about it. She may have fallen in with a group of pushy mean girls, but Kendal's timid as a mouse. I can't help but wonder if it's because of her family. When parents pressure you to be a certain way, either you become exactly that way to an extreme or you swing the other way, and Kendal, I think, swung the other way. She's so non-competitive that she's scared of even upsetting someone in a discussion.

Fun, how parents mess us up, right?



The guys try to get me to eat regularly and get plenty of sleep, and I know that technically I do, but it never feels like enough. My brain's constantly rushing, trying to figure out what could be thrown at me next and how to overcome it.

Two weeks fly by faster than I can believe, and the weather is warmer by the time the fourth Trial arrives. Sun shines down brightly as the seven other contestants and I head out to the quad in tense silence.

Despite being a ball of nerves and stress, I've managed to learn and remember all their names—Jack, Ryan, Leah, Julia, Nicholas, Eden, and Zachary. I'm oddly proud of myself for that, especially considering they only come to our school for the few days surrounding each trial, and the whole event is usually such a whirlwind that I barely get to talk to them.

I try to focus on all the positive things Cam and Asher said this morning as they gave me a little pep talk, but as soon as Hardwick begins describing the challenge, my heart sinks.

It's an obstacle course.

Under normal circumstances, I could totally handle this. There are plenty of non-magical ways to get around obstacles, even if the obstacles themselves are magic. Just like the escape room.

But with someone sabotaging me... it gives them too many damn opportunities to interfere.

This isn't going to go well.

The course starts in the quad, but goes beyond that into the larger campus too. Hardwick explains that we'll all start at the same point and have to race, using our magic, strength, and wiles, to the finish line. I glance over into the stands, my gaze landing on the two mages. They're not standing together, but I see them share a look that makes my stomach twist.

Hardwick's booming voice almost makes me jump. "Begin!"

And it's on.

There's no doubt in my mind now, as I swing from rope to rope, jump over obstacles, crawl under wire, and avoid mud pits, that I'm being sabotaged. Something large and slimy rears out of the mud pit and grabs me, and I have to use my sonic boom to get away. I don't see that happen with any of the other contestants.

My spider climb comes in pretty damn handy, but spikes emerge from one wall, the goalposts keep moving, and as I push endlessly forward, I feel like I'm in a fight for my life.

Those mages are really so determined to see me lose they don't care if I die in the process.

Maybe that would scare someone else—and maybe it *should* scare me, but it doesn't. It just pisses me the fuck off.

I push myself even harder, running faster, throwing my sonic boom right and left. I don't fucking care if I'm devastating the obstacle course or destroying school property, so long as it keeps everything at bay and I get to that damn finish line first. I'm going to win this thing.

Finally, the finish line comes into sight. I grin to myself, even though it makes my jaw hurt—I hurt all over, actually—and put on an extra burst of speed. I can see other contestants around me, and if I don't give it my all right now, I won't win. I'll make it across the finish line, but I won't win, and I have to come in first. After two losses in a row, I have to. If only I had a little more speed...

*Wait.*

Who says my sonic boom only has to be thrown *to the front*?

I concentrate... feel it in my fingertips, my lungs, my heart...

Then I throw my hands out behind me and unleash a sonic boom low to the ground. The force of it propels me forward, and I fly over the finish line right before Ryan, the water elemental contestant.

I land in a complete heap, hitting the ground hard and rolling, bruising myself all over—as if I weren't banged up enough already from the damn obstacle course—but oh, it is so worth it to see the looks on the faces of those two mages when I stumble to my feet and Hardwick announces I won.

So fucking worth it.

After Provost Johnson hands out the medals, I limp over to the infirmary and get bandaged up. Once the medical staff have healed the worst of my wounds and bandaged the others, I head for the door, expecting Asher to pick me up like last time—but instead, Dmitri barges into the building.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” he growls, dragging me down a side hallway to an empty room. “You could've seriously hurt yourself.”

My sonic boom tends to do just as much damage to me as the person I fling it at, seeing as it sends me flying as well unless I manage to do a less powerful version of it or ground myself against the blowback—which I'm

still working on. Once I get stronger with my magic, I should be able to send it off and not feel such a strong kickback, but for now, it's just something I have to deal with.

And yeah, maybe it was a risk after I'd already gotten some chunks taken out of me during the obstacle course. But so what? Faint heart never won unfair competition.

Dmitri's hand on my wrist is gentle, but I know I won't get out of that hold unless I'm prepared to flip him over my head like we're wrestling.

"You have to be more fucking careful!" he whispers harshly.

"I have to win."

His face hardens. "You can't win if you're dead."

My gaze darts to the door, but the corridor outside is empty. Good. We're alone, which means I don't have to pretend to be polite. I snatch my arm back the moment his grip loosens. "You're not my goddamn keeper, *Dima*. It's my choice, and I can do whatever I want."

I turn to go find the others—or maybe *storm out* is a more accurate description—but before I can make it three feet, Dmitri's in front of me.

I freeze. Then I slowly look back over my shoulder.

Dmitri's standing there too.

My jaw clenches. Dmitri has the power to phase in and out of solidity, but he also has the power to duplicate himself. His magic dampening cuff must've been taken off by Roman. There's no other way he'd be able to do magic right now, and it hits me that Roman must've taken all the guys' cuffs off so they could protect me in case something happened during the trial.

It's... it's very sweet, honestly. But it's also frustrating as hell, because now Dmitri's double is blocking the door.

"Get out of my way," I grit out through clenched teeth.

"You have to be more careful," the double tells me. I literally can't tell the difference between the double and the real Dmitri, but I nickname this one Evil Dmitri in my head.

Squaring my shoulders, I move to push past him, but he sidesteps, not letting me pass. My breathing picks up, my heart pounding hard in my chest with anger and... something else.

"This isn't me *ordering* you like I'm in charge," Dmitri snaps from behind me, walking up to me. I can feel the heat of him against my back as his voice lowers to a rough murmur. "This is me *pointing out* that you're

being goddamn reckless and not taking care of yourself. I can't stand by while you fling yourself face first into danger just to win a stupid competition."

I don't move. I'm staring into Evil Dmitri's eyes as I answer the real Dmitri, and my voice is as low as his. "If you were in my place, you wouldn't think it was stupid. You'd do anything to win."

"Yeah, I know. We're really fucking similar, Princess. I'm not an idiot. I've noticed."

His hands hover near my hips, but he doesn't grab me. His body is so close to mine, his presence so overwhelming, that it feels like he's enveloping me, even though there's not a single place where we're actually touching.

Dmitri's double narrows his eyes, a muscle in his jaw twitching. "It's probably why you're so good at pressing my buttons."

"Why do you even care?" I snap, no longer sure if I'm talking to Evil Dmitri or real Dmitri. Both, I guess, since they're both technically the same infuriating man.

Evil Dmitri looks pained for a second, and I can only imagine the real Dmitri behind me is making the same face.

"You really haven't figured it out, have you?" the double asks, his voice softer than I've ever heard *any* Dmitri sound.

My heart lurches, and I swallow hard, suddenly not sure I can handle where this conversation is going.

I have a sudden strong premonition that he's about to admit how he feels about me, followed by an equally strong realization that it might make my heart stop to hear it.

What exists between me and Dmitri is fiery and explosive, and I'm pretty sure beneath all of our headbutting and traded barbs, there's some kind of true caring. We wouldn't still be in each other's lives so completely if there wasn't—he's not just hanging out with me because he's friends with Asher and Cam. That can't be all it is.

But the arguing? The poking at each other? The sparring and taunting? I know how to handle those things. They make me feel like I'm on solid ground, like it's *safe* to care about Dmitri from behind my wall of snark.

Because if the walls come down... and he's still looking at me like his double is looking at me right now?

I don't know if my heart can take it.

I'll fall in love with him, I know I will, and I'm so scared of that.  
But I want it too.

The three of us stand close together, our quiet breathing the only sound in the small room. Cloves and honey surround me from all sides, and I want to wrap myself up in that scent.

"Dmitri," I whisper, putting my hands on his double's chest, because I can't touch the man himself right now. Not without losing my last shred of self-control. "You and me. We're... I—"

"Elliot?"

Cam's voice comes from the doorway, and I jump about a foot in the air. The two Dmitris and I spring apart like we just got busted plotting to overthrow the government or something.

My pulse pounds hard in my ears as I look toward the open door and see Cam, Asher, and Roman all gathered there.

*Ah, crap.*

How much did they all see?

## CHAPTER 21

**M**y cheeks flame, and I suddenly find the floor tiles supremely fascinating.

It's stupid to worry about being caught doing... I don't even know what... with Dmitri. We all have an agreement, and whether or not anything ever actually happens between me and the moody, dark-haired mage, I know all the guys consider him part of that agreement. So it's not like I'm worried about being caught cheating; if I kissed Dmitri, it wouldn't *be* cheating.

I think it's more that I'm embarrassed about being caught in such a vulnerable state. I've been getting better about opening up with all the men, but it still makes my stomach twist uncomfortably to be so exposed in front of them.

Dmitri obviously feels the same way, because he won't look at any of them either. His double gives me one last loaded look before dissolving and sliding back into the real Dmitri.

There's a moment of silence as the other guys absorb the weird vibe in the room, but mercifully, they don't say anything about it.

"Are you all right, Reckless? Goddamn it. That was definitely sabotage." Roman shakes his head, stepping through the doorway and striding toward me, and his words snap my mind back into focus.

*Right. Trials. Conspiracy. Sabotage.*

"Yeah." I nod. "I couldn't see exactly what all the other contestants faced along the course, but from the glimpses I got, it didn't look as bad as what I was up against."

“It wasn’t,” he says grimly, grasping my shoulders as his gaze roams over me, scanning my injuries. The medical staff are great, and they helped with the worst of it, but I know I still look pretty banged up.

“I still managed to win though,” I point out, stepping out of his hold and straightening my spine. I don’t want the guys to be any more concerned about me than they already are.

“Hell, yeah, you did.” Cam flashes a grin, holding up his hand for a high-five.

I slap his palm, grinning right back.

“Not to take away from your accomplishment, Elle,” Asher says quietly, “but that event was pretty dangerous. And the more difficult opponents you faced in the combat simulation were dangerous too. You’re getting badly injured.”

“If this keeps up, you could end up dead,” Roman finishes.

Dmitri crosses his arms over his chest. The softness has faded from his face, and now he has an *I told you so* gleam in his dark eyes. I ignore it. “What do you think I should do then?”

“Drop out,” all four men chorus.

My jaw clenches, and I shake my head stubbornly. “No can do. I’m not dropping this.”

“Reckless—” Roman begins, but I don’t let him finish. My body aches, and I’m so tired I just want to sleep for days, but I can’t just *give up*.

“Is that seriously what you want me to do? Back down? Let everyone think the Unpredictable couldn’t hack it? Make the school look bad? I’m not a coward. I’m going to represent the Griffin Academy, and I’m going to do the best I can at it.”

“I thought you didn’t care about this place.” Dmitri arches a brow.

“I don’t,” I reply. “Well... didn’t, anyway.”

At some point, I started caring. A lot. I want this school to do well.

The men all look at each other then back at me. I fold my arms. “I’m not giving in on this. I’ve never backed down from a challenge, and I’m not starting now. And if it *does* kill me, then you can use it as proof I was sabotaged and can arrest those assholes.”

I don’t want to die, I really don’t. But I don’t think those two mages—and their buddy, whoever he is—are actively trying to kill me. That’s not to say it couldn’t happen by accident, but this isn’t a guaranteed suicide mission. And besides, this is bigger than just me, and it feels important.

This academy is a haven to those who still aren't completely accepted anywhere else; I won't let some angry, frightened bigots tear it down.

So I'll keep fighting, no matter what happens.

Asher tilts his head, and I wonder if his cuff is still deactivated. Is he reading my mind? If so, he can tell I'm serious about this. I'm not talking a big game just to sound brave or whatever. I really want to give this my all.

"We can't let you go into this alone," he finally says. He looks at the other three. "We know who the two mages trying to sabotage her are. Can we distract them or subdue them somehow while she's in the final competition?"

"We'd have to be careful." Roman narrows his eyes thoughtfully. "If we're seen—it'll look like we started something, instigated a fight, and that could backfire on us badly. They'll spin it so we look like the cheaters."

*Ah, the irony.*

"You guys don't have to do anything—"

My words are immediately cut off by all four men, who make it clear, in no uncertain terms, that they will *absolutely* be helping me, and I'm crazy if I think otherwise.

A warm, gooey feeling blooms in my chest as I relent with a small nod.

We're all a stubborn bunch of idiots, really.

"Two mages, four of us," Cam says, flexing his fingers like he's itching for a good fight, "So we'll team up, and two of us'll each take a mage."

"That still leaves the third man," Roman points out, his voice heavy. "Someone Adelson and Merrimer answer to, by the sound of it. We may not know who it is yet, but it sounds like he's the one orchestrating all of this."

*Fuck, he's right.* We can't keep an eye on someone if we don't know who that someone is.

"I can try to track down who that third player is," Roman says. "I'm a professor, so it'll be less obvious if I make... inquiries. And I'll keep an eye out for any suspicious looking spectators during the last challenge."

"Yeah, but then who can help us with the mages we *do* know about?" Cam grimaces.

Oh, great. I hate that I'm about to say this, but... what goddamn choice do we have?

"Kendal."

The guys all turn to me. Dmitri scoffs, but Asher looks intrigued.



“She’s already helping me,” I add. “She’s not very confrontational, but I think we could persuade her to get a little feisty for something like this. She’s got a stake in all of this too. If the school fails, she’ll have nothing else.”

Nobody is thrilled with this plan, but the guys agree we should talk to her. So I take Asher and Roman with me—Dmitri would scare her, and I think Cam would overwhelm her—and we track Kendal down near the dining hall.

To my surprise, she agrees quickly.

“I started to suspect something too,” she admits. “I don’t think anyone else does, but I’ve been to a lot of competitions like these, and the odds seem unusually stacked against you. Of course, you’re so powerful, and in the heat of the moment with everyone competing at once, I don’t think anybody can really tell...”

I have to hold in a snort. *Me, powerful. Right.* Everyone seems to keep saying that. I think they’re overestimating my sonic boom, honestly. It’s all I’ve got going for me.

Almost as soon as I have the thought, that weird burble of magic pops up inside me again.

It hasn’t happened for a while, long enough that I’d almost forgotten about it.

*What the hell is it? And more importantly, if it’s some weird new magic that sparks during the last competition of the Trials, is it likelier to help me or get me killed?*

The strange feeling settles back down almost immediately, and I blink a few times, clearing my head as I tune back into the conversation.

“...but if you lose or get hurt, then the whole school looks bad,” Kendal is saying. “And my parents have never stood for cheating. They’d be ashamed to learn I knew something was going on and didn’t help you.”

“You can work with me to keep Elliot safe,” Asher says, smiling at her. He’s got a good way with people, putting them instantly at ease. Hell, he managed to draw me out of my shell without me even realizing it was happening.

Kendal looks surprised that Ash is being so nice to her, probably because she knows we’re a... well, we’re something, anyway, and Kendal and her friends haven’t exactly been kind to me.

“And don’t worry, I won’t let you get in trouble for this,” Roman adds. “If any of you are caught, tell them I made you do it. I’m a professor; I’ll take the blame.”

I don’t think that’s fair to him at all, but I know I’d do the same if I were in his position, so I can’t really say jack about it. And his words seem to reassure Kendal. She’s probably never so much as gotten detention in her life.

She smiles tentatively, nodding. “Okay. I’m in.”

A savage grin tilts my lips.

*Adelson and Merrimer, you better watch the fuck out.*

## CHAPTER 22

Over the next week and a half, my wounds from the previous challenge heal.

I train my ass off, but I try to take the guys' advice and go a little easier on myself. There's a part of me that really hopes Roman was serious about him and Dmitri, er, *rewarding* me for being less hard on myself, but I can also see the wisdom in their advice. Being strung out and exhausted really isn't the way to win this thing. I have to think like professional athletes do and take care of my temple or whatnot.

Cam and Asher help keep me relaxed and distracted—Cam in his new favorite way—and Dmitri is back to being grouchy and overprotective, which I appreciate for now. We still need to finish the conversation we started in the infirmary, but it's probably better if that happens after the Trials are over.

I sneak over to Roman's room one night a few days before the final trial; with all this insanity going on, I haven't gotten to do that in way too long. The second I walk through the door, he presses me up against it and kisses me like he's starving, and I kiss him back the same way—because that's how it feels. Like I've been starving for him. I don't work up the guts to mention Tamlin or the conversation I know they must've had, but I try to show him without words how much it means to me.

That I know he chose me, and even if I can't quite say it yet, I'm choosing him back.

The day before the final competition, my professors all excuse me from class so I can rest up and prepare. I want to spend the entire day running drills and training until I can't stand up straight anymore, but I recognize by

now that that's a bad idea. I'm as prepared as I'm going to get, and now I just need to rest up and be ready.

Cam, Asher, and Dmitri weren't excused from classes, but they all ditch anyway, and we spend the day in our dorm room binge-watching old action movies, playing video games, and hanging out.

It's one of the best days I've had in a long time, actually.

Unfortunately, Roman never did manage to dig up any information on the third conspirator, and that thought hangs over my head like a dark cloud as I join the rest of the contestants and head toward the quad on the morning of the final trial. It sucks, and it makes me nervous—but we're doing the best we can.

As always, I don't know what to expect from this challenge, although I've heard the final is supposedly, somehow, a combination of all the previous events. I've miraculously managed to win twice, and Nicholas, the Syren student, has also won twice. So if one of us comes first in the final, we'll win the whole thing. If someone else takes the final, our overall points from all the events will be tallied up as a tie-breaker, with the highest score winning.

At the start of this damn thing, all I wanted was to not come in dead last. To get, I don't know, *third*. That sounds respectable, and it would reflect pretty well on Griffin Academy, especially since this is our first year competing. But thanks to those damn saboteurs, I don't know how well I'm doing on points, since I failed two competitions and barely scraped out a win in the others.

That means if I want any hope of walking away with the grand prize, I have to win the final.

I wish Maddy were here, but I'm also so glad as hell she's not. I want her here because she's my only family, and I love her more than anything.

But what if I fail? Or worse, if I *die*? These mages aren't kidding around. Maddy had to watch Mom die, I don't want her to have to sit there and watch as I'm consumed by a fireball or something.

She did try to arrange time off to come, but I told her it would make me too nervous to have her here—which wasn't a lie. I feel bad for not telling her the whole story about Adelson and Merrimer, but I don't want to get her all twisted up with worry when she's stuck at Neptune, unable to do anything to help. I'll tell her as soon as it's all over. *Hopefully*. Assuming I make it out in one piece.

She called to wish me luck earlier this morning, and that cheered me up. Now I've got to focus on just winning this damn thing.

*Next semester better be a fucking cakewalk, that's all I'm saying, I think to myself as we reach the quad. If there's some freaky dragon riding competition or whatever, I am out. No way, no how.*

Out in the stands, the guys and Kendal are in position, and Roman is watching out for any suspicious activity in case the third man reveals himself. I can't see exactly where they all are, but I know they're there. I need to stay focused on my own fight and trust that they'll take care of the mages long enough for me to get through.

A realization strikes me, and I grin to myself. There's a hell of a difference between now and when I first set foot on this campus, telling myself not to trust anyone I met here farther than I could throw them. Somewhere along the way, I came to honestly trust these men, and to care about them. The thought doesn't scare me quite as much as it used to.

"Contestants!" Dean Hardwick intones, his voice amplified. Once he has our attention, he goes over the rules and explains that there will be an award ceremony immediately following the competition, after we take a few minutes for contestants to clean themselves up and for the judges to deliberate.

Well, at least I won't have to wait long to find out how badly I did.

*If I lose, I remind myself. I have no intention of doing that.*

Before Hardwick has even finished his speech, walls burst out of the ground around us, cutting me off from the rest of the contestants—cutting us all off from each other, isolating us, entrapping us in a maze.

My heart slams in my chest, and for a moment, I wonder if this is really part of the competition. Or have Merrimer and Adelson decided to stop beating around the bush and attack the school outright?

"As this round is a culmination of the previous competitions," Hardwick continues, his steady voice amplified magically, "you will have to escape from this maze just as you escaped from your rooms, using ingenuity and magic, while confronting or avoiding any illusory opponents, overcoming obstacles, and using your magic to locate the golden coin."

An image of the coin appears high above our heads, enlarged so we can see it.

Great. I lost that challenge spectacularly, and now I have to somehow succeed in it while doing everything else too.

“Whoever locates the coin first will be the winner.”

The image of the coin vanishes.

“On your marks, get set—begin!”

I have no idea what my fellow contestants are doing, and I don’t care. This time, I’m going to be ready.

The way I got out of the escape room last time was using my brain. I just have to do the same this time. If the judges are at all logical, then the coin won’t be anywhere random—it’ll be in the center of this maze. And, if I’ve learned anything from playing video games with Cam and Asher, it’s that the more opponents you come across, the closer to the treasure you are. I also remember reading somewhere, I think in a weird history book, that if you want to get somewhere in a maze, just keep selecting the left-hand option.

So, I have a plan. Keep going left, and if I keep running into illusions of dragons, I’ll know I’m headed in the right direction. *Aim for the center of the maze.*

My first problem, though, is to get out of where I’m currently trapped. When the walls came down, they surrounded me on all sides; a puzzle, just like the escape room. Fair enough.

As I begin to move toward the left-hand wall, the ground opens up beneath me into a gaping pit—and then it vanishes as quickly as it appeared, leaving the ground smooth and even again.

I stumble back quickly, but grin as I right myself. Kendal and the guys are doing what they promised and keeping those two mages distracted. They must’ve stopped whatever extra spell that was.

After a little bit of poking around—though much faster than in my first escape room—I solve the clues and find a lever that opens a door in one wall. I slip out quickly and head left, sprinting down the narrow corridor of the maze. I’m not wasting a goddamn second or letting anyone else get to that coin before I do. I run into a few obstacles similar to those in the obstacle course we ran, but I won that challenge for a reason, and it’s easy enough to jump or climb or dodge.

A few times, I notice something flickering nearby, like a spell trying to come to life, but then it dies. Whatever the others are doing to distract the mages, it’s working.

I’m going on instinct as I navigate the maze, but I’m almost positive I’m on the right track. And I don’t have time to stop and doubt myself or

second-guess everything. Like the guys have been telling me, I have to believe in myself.

Calling up my sonic boom, I hold it at the ready, and when I run into the illusory opponents—humans at first, but then a chimera of all things, and giant wolves—I unleash it on them, running along the walls with my spider climb to keep out of range.

The funny thing? About halfway through, I realize... I'm actually having a blast. This is what the competition is supposed to be, right? Underneath it all? It's supposed to be a chance to meet people from other schools and to have *fun*.

Now that the mages who are out to destroy me aren't able to do their thing, I find that's what I'm doing. And I have no idea how my opponents are faring, but I'm doing pretty well. Using my magic and my wits like this, pushing myself to the limit—it's exhilarating. I'm in shape, I'm a good fighter, and I'm smart. And I finally get to show that to the world, to let them see that Elliot Sinclair ain't too shabby.

I round the corner, dodging some swinging axes—*wow, okay, holy shit*—and spy the center of the maze.

Up on a dais in the middle floats the coin.

I start to go race toward it, but a sudden thought has my footsteps slowing. *Is this really it? If this is the big finale, they wouldn't be that obvious about it, would they?*

Another contestant runs into the center from a different section of the maze, and my heartbeat kicks up a notch as he sprints toward the coin. *Shit*. It's Ryan, the water elemental who nearly beat me on the obstacle course. He grabs the coin—and the second his fist closes around it, a strange bubble forms around him, lifting him up and out of the maze. I watch him drift away with wide eyes as he runs his hands frantically over the inside of the bubble, searching for an escape. His hand is empty, I notice. The coin has vanished.

Well, that couldn't have been the real coin, then. If it were, the competition would've ended the moment he grabbed it.

I approach the dais cautiously, examining it. The thing about the escape room was that it would trick me into thinking I'd found a clue when really, I hadn't—I had to look closer to find the real clue inside the fake one.

The floating coin was the decoy, but somewhere around here is a clue that will lead me to the real coin.

My heart pounds hard in my chest, and I'm painfully aware of the seconds ticking by. Any minute now, another contestant is going to make it through the maze into the center, and the more people who make it through, the worse my chances of being the one to find the coin will get.

The dais is made of a gray stone, rough and unpolished. The rubber of Ryan's shoe left a scuff on one side when he jumped up to grab the fake coin.

*Wait.*

Keeping my gaze fixed on the spot so I don't lose track of it, I walk around to that side of the large platform, crouching down to examine the small black mark.

*This didn't come from a shoe. It looks almost like the side of a panel or... or a button.*

Bracing myself for a bubble to scoop me up if I'm wrong, I press my fingertips to the spot on the dais. There's a strange hiss, and the top layer of stone seems to evaporate into smoke, revealing a hidden compartment underneath.

The small gold coin inside glints as sunlight strikes it.

My mouth goes dry, and I blink down at the thing stupidly for half a second before I jerk back into motion, reaching down to snatch it up.

The world stops.

For a moment, it feels like the only things that exist are the coin clutched in my hand and my own harsh breaths.

Then the walls around me shoot back down into the ground, a loud buzzer goes off, and I can hear the crowd absolutely losing its shit.

The remaining illusions fall away as the field clears. I look around and see the other contestants around me, some close by, some at a distance. Ryan's the farthest away, and he stumbles as the bubble around him breaks—it transported him back to where he started, I think. As he regains his feet, he joins the others in gaping at me.

The crowd is going wild, and for a second, I expect to hear booing... but, no. They're screaming and cheering. If anyone's angry I won, I can't hear it over the roar of approval.

Everyone's cheering for *me*.

“Holy shit! Sin!”

Cam whips me up into a hug—he must've busted out onto the field—and whirls me around. I laugh, clinging to him, and then other people are



piling onto the field too, to congratulate their contestants. I'm tugged away from Cam by Asher, who hugs me tight and kisses the top of my head.

"You guys okay?" I whisper.

"I don't think either Merrimer or Adelson saw us," Asher reassures me. "But they were definitely trying to bring you down. Your friend Kendal did a great job."

I want to point out that Kendal's not my friend, and that our truce is probably over and she'll go back to being one of Alyssa's shadows, but... now's not the time to talk about that. And hey, maybe I'm wrong. She did put herself at risk to go after the mages and help me.

"Princess. You didn't die."

Dmitri's voice from behind me makes my stomach flip in a weird way.

I turn to look at him, squaring my shoulders. "No. No, I didn't. Sorry to disappoint you."

He looks at me for a long moment, nostrils flaring and jaw clenched. Then he reaches out with one hand and drags me into his body, wrapping his arms around me. I squeak in surprise, hugging him back. His arms are like bands of iron, and as I bury my face in his shoulder, feeling his solid warmth and inhaling the sweet scent of cloves, I realize he was genuinely scared for me.

"You did well." His tone is gruff and low, his words spoken into my hair.

"Thanks to all of you helping," I murmur.

"No. *You* did it."

I want to ask him if he *did* go easy on me in our fight during the battle royale. Does he think he should've been the one in this competition? Is that why he's been so angry—because he'd be the one in danger and not me if he hadn't thrown that fight? Has his extra crankiness over the past weeks been because he's beating himself up for that?

But before I can say anything, a hand falls on my shoulder.

Disentangling myself reluctantly from Dmitri, I turn and see Roman gazing down at me, cobalt eyes shining.

I know it's not smart, but the crowd is distracted and chaotic, and the other guys are surrounding us, so I hug him.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "I couldn't find the third man."

"It's okay." I tighten my grip on him, feeling his heartbeat thud against mine. That doesn't matter now. We can go to Dean Hardwick after the

award ceremony and tell him everything, and they can do a formal investigation. I survived, that's what matters.

*And I won.* Holy fuck.

"I'm so proud of you, Reckless." He gives me a tight squeeze and presses a soft kiss to my neck, one that nobody can see.

I shiver. "Does this mean I'll get a nice reward later?"

His answering growl makes heat pool in my belly, and I almost wish I could skip the damn ceremony. Who needs a medal when they could have this man worshipping their body?

He pulls away, his gaze shifting to something behind me as he grins. Before I can turn to see what he's looking at, I'm being lifted by Cam and Dmitri. My yelp turns into a laugh as they hoist me onto their shoulders.

"Hold up your coin," Asher says, beaming at me.

I do, and the audience screams and cheers louder.

For me.

CHAPTER 23

**H**o-ly shit.  
I did it.

I can't believe I did it.

I'm covered in dirt and blood and bruises, and everything hurts like a bitch, even breathing, but I'm alive and more importantly—I won.

The goddamn coin is clutched in my hand, held aloft over my head. I found it, I fought for it, I earned it.

The whole crowd is losing their shit. I can pick up a few dirty looks as the cheers finally start to wind down, but as the field clears and a stage is brought in for the awards, all I can see from my fellow competitors is respect. They were in those challenges with me, and they know how hard all of them were.

I've never had so many people looking at me like this, with *awe*, and I've damn sure never had people cheering for me. It's surreal. I keep wondering when I'll wake up.

Part of me wants to run and hide, but there's no way I can do that with my dignity intact—and since the award ceremony will start soon, it's not like I'd have much of a chance to get far.

We're all given time to clean up, get our wounds bandaged, and change into new clothes while the staff finishes setting up the stage, and then we all stand on it in a row. I came in first. Nicholas, the Syren student, came in second. Since no one else actually won a challenge, the scores from the various trials are going to be added up to determine who's in third place, fourth, and so on.

I stand nervously, feeling everyone's eyes on me, as Provost Johnson, the mage in charge of the entire Phoenix Training Program, comes up to the podium. He's the head judge in this whole thing, and he's given out the awards for all the previous challenges, so it makes sense he'd be the one handing out the big medal. Despite being high up in the world of magic, he looks incredibly... normal. He's of average height, with a strongly receding hairline and a round face. He has a few garish pins on his lapels, and the rings on his fingers glint in the sunlight. He doesn't look at all imposing, but I know appearances don't have much at all to do with the magic a person can have inside them.

Hell, some people probably don't think *I* look all that tough either.

Johnson steps up to the podium, his gaze sweeping over all eight of us. It lingers on me for a second, and then he looks down at the large medal in his hands—the one he's supposed to present to me, the one that means Griffin Academy won this entire competition.

I might pass out, actually.

"Greetings," Johnson begins, his magically amplified voice booming out over the crowd. "Today marks the end of the twenty-fifth Inter-magic Trials. Over the years, this competition has come to stand for something—for the strength and unity of the magical community. It's a chance for students from different schools to get to know each other, and to realize that although our magic may be different, we all stand together."

*Huh. That's a nice message.*

Maybe I'm still hopped up on the adrenaline of winning, but I can see now why everyone made such a big deal about the Trials.

"You all here probably haven't seen much of me or my fellow judges as we've tried to keep our distance in order to judge fairly," Johnson continues with a stiff smile. "But every year, it is my privilege to declare the winner and hand out the award to the top-performing student. And for the first time in Trials history, this honor is supposed to go to an Unpredictable."

The stupid grin I've been wearing ever since Cam and Dmitri mobbed me on the field slips, and my brows pinch together. There's something about Johnson's tone that makes unease prick down my spine. And the way he said "supposed to" not "will". It's a little thing, but I've gotten decent at reading people from my time at The Den, and there's definitely something odd going on here.

Johnson looks down at the medal in his hand, then back up at me, and something flashes in his eyes. For an instant, he doesn't look normal and unassuming at all.

He looks dangerous.

And furious.

My breath catches in my throat and my hands unconsciously curl into fists. Oh, fucking hell. *Goddamn it.* Is *this* guy the third conspirator? The head of the Phoenix Training Program?

I don't have any proof of that, but I can tell something isn't right here. I can't signal to anyone for help though. The guys and Kendal are all in the crowd, and I'm stuck up on this damn platform. Any movement I make will be too obvious.

Unless...

*Asher!* Trying to keep my face neutral, I mentally scream at the top of my lungs. Roman removed Asher's cuff along with everyone else's so they could distract the mages while I was competing. I just have to pray he hasn't put it back on yet. *Asher! Help. Something's wrong!*

"Supposed to," Johnson repeats, and this time those words definitely sound bitter. "This award? This prestigious honor? I'm supposed to feel *privileged* to present it to a freak?"

*Holy shit.*

All the air drops out of my lungs. I've been called worse in my life, but for some reason, none of those barbs ever hit me quite as hard as this. Maybe it's because it comes so far out of left field—I wasn't braced for it, I wasn't prepared for it.

My fellow competitors look around at me and at each other, and I don't need to be Asher to know what they're thinking: did he really just say that?

There's a ripple of reaction in the crowd, low murmurs and whispers rising up.

Johnson's hands are gripping the medal tightly, and the veins in his forehead bulge a little. His voice still booms out over the crowd, but it doesn't seem like he's talking to anybody but himself now. "An Unpredictable. An uncontrollable freak of nature, winning something like this? It's absurd. It's unacceptable!"

I can't help myself. Hurt and anger bubble up in my chest, and I step forward. "Hey, I won that damn thing fair and square whether you like it or not."

His head whips toward me, his face turning a blotchy purple color. “No, you didn’t!” he roars. “You cheated!”

*I cheated? Oh, that’s rich.*

“Are you kidding me?” My voice isn’t amplified, so most of the crowd probably can’t hear me. But I just risked my life defending my school’s reputation. I’m not going to let this guy smear it in the mud. “I didn’t cheat! I won it—”

“You had to have cheated!” Johnson interjects, his face red. “That’s the only way. Every challenge was rigged against you! You shouldn’t have won!”

*Oh, fuuuuuck.*

My jaw drops open. The entire crowd is losing its shit right now.

*“Elliot! We’re coming. Just stay calm, Roman’s on it.”*

My heart jumps at the sound of Asher’s voice in my head. It’s the weirdest thing, almost like they’re my own thoughts in his voice.

*Yeah, I hate to say it, Asher, but I don’t know if Roman’s going to get up here in time.* The crowd’s creating too much of a stir, and this guy is literally right in front of me.

“So you were one of the ones trying to sabotage me?” I ask, trying to keep my voice even. I’d rather have him talking than attacking or something, and since he’s obviously gone pretty far off the deep end, maybe I can get him to confess the whole thing in front of the crowd. I tilt my lips up, forcing a smirk. “You know you’re paying me a compliment when you say I won *despite* you purposefully trying to make me lose, right?”

“Shut up! You filthy, unclean little bitch!” Johnson snarls.

My stomach clenches, and even though I’m terrified of this guy, I also hate him so much I contemplate taking a swing at him.

“Okay, so I think we can add ‘bigot’ and ‘misogynyst’ to your list of problems, buddy.”

“Their magic is unclean!” Johnson bellows, turning to the crowd and waving his arms around him to encompass the whole school. “It’s impure, wrong—it goes against all sense of order and balance! There are *seven* pillars of magic, and they are stronger together. There is no room for an eighth! It’s uncontrollable and chaotic!”

A horrible feeling fills the pit of my stomach, and I back up a step, murmuring quietly to my fellow contestants, “Um, guys? I think maybe you need to run.”

None of them move. They're staring at the unraveling man before us with their jaws hanging open.

Johnson looks back at me, and the hatred on his face stuns me. How did no one see this in him before? How did he preside over the Trials this whole time and keep all that crazy bottled up inside? It reminds me a little of Raul, and how he hid his anger and resentment all semester, attacking students and searching for the Brimstone Orb while studying for exams and whispering answers to me in Theory of Magic.

It's like there are two sides to him—two halves that don't add up to a whole.

"You don't deserve this." The provost brandishes the medal in front of him like a weapon, like if he could use it to kill me, he would. "And it's about time someone taught you a lesson, you little bitch."

My eyes narrow. "Wow. Original insult, truly."

You know, Mom always told me I should take a second to think before I speak, and I probably should've listened to that advice. Because as soon as the words leave my mouth, Johnson's face purples and his stance shifts.

Then he hurls a spear of rock at me.

*Ah, fuck.*

## CHAPTER 24

I manage to dodge Johnson's magical rock spear, tucking and rolling. Thank God, the one thing I'm damn good at is fighting; it's the only thing saving my ass right now.

The crowd has lost their minds, chaos erupting around us. I launch myself to my feet and unleash a sonic boom at Johnson as several people—not just my guys, I notice—try to reach the stage to get to us. To help me or to help Johnson, I don't know, but it almost doesn't matter because a war is brewing in the crowd.

To my shock, Kendal's at the front of my fellow Unpredictable students, yelling something. I'm pretty sure it's a battle cry or at least an outraged speech of some kind about how this competition was rigged, or how Unpredictables are treated, or both.

But, damn. *Okay then. You go, Kendal.*

Some of the visiting mages are siding with Kendal and the rest of my classmates, but others are looking pretty damn hostile, and people are shoving and yelling. Then someone from Terra Academy conjures a massive ball of earth and stone and hurls it into the crowd.

Both sides lose their collective minds, and it's an all-out melee.

The Unpredictables will be hugely outmatched, I realize with terror, because of their cuffs—but then Tamlin pulls something that looks almost like a whistle from a chain around her neck. She blows into it, and although I don't hear a sound, it sends out a blast of magic like a wave, and I see all the cuffs on my classmates glow briefly before they tumble off.

She's deactivated all of their cuffs so they can fight fair.

Okay, I *definitely* can't hate her now.



It's heartening to see that a lot of people are on the side of the Unpredictables. It looks pretty evenly divided, actually, between the ones helping us and the ones attacking us, and if that isn't a goddamn symbol of the magical community in a nutshell I don't know what is.

I search the crowd, trying to see if any of the guys are near me, but Johnson sends a whip of fire at me and I yelp, dodging, just barely avoiding the lash. Fuck, that would've hurt. I can feel the heat from it as the thin strand of fire misses my face by inches. *Shit.*

How the hell can he control both ice and fire? That should be impossible for an ordinary elemental.

That's when I notice him manipulating one of the rings on his fingers, and it hits me—those aren't just obnoxiously garish jewelry. They're enchanted objects. I'm pretty sure he's a water elemental, but with the help of all those charms, he'll be able to throw all kinds of other shit at me.

Scrambling to regain my footing, I try to gather my wits. Okay, what do I do? I'm not sure where the guys are, or how long it'll take them to reach me. I have to stop this somehow, and I'd like to get out of this alive, if that's not too much trouble. My magic's strong—or at least some of it is—but this guy's wearing a fuckton of charms, and he has more experience than I do.

Don't *use your emotions*, I remind myself. *Focus. You've been coached by six different people by this point, for fuck's sake.*

I can do this. Or at least, I can hold my own until someone with more actual experience gets here.

Johnson claps his hands together. Some of the charms decorating his fingers glow, and a wave of water hurls itself at me.

I yank my hands up and think *wall*, and my sonic boom emerges, blasting the water backward, keeping it from hitting me and sweeping me away.

*"Just hold on, Elliot!"* It's Asher in my head again.

*Doing my best here, Ash!* I shoot back. What does he think I'm doing, just lying around and letting Johnson walk all over me?

"You were supposed to *die!*" the balding man spits at me. "Just die already!"

Fuck, this guy really has lost his marbles. Doesn't he see what he started? What his hatred has caused? People really could die here today. On the ground below us, my friends are locked in an all-out battle as they fend off people who, until a few minutes ago, were our fucking guests.

I have to stop this. And that starts with taking out Johnson. Once he's not whipping the crowd into a panic, and once I'm not desperately trying to defend myself from him, maybe we can get everyone to calm down so we can explain what the hell happened. That we're not the bad guys here.

Johnson and I have been circling each other on the large platform, and as I pass the display rack holding the remaining seven medals, smaller than the one he was supposed to give me, I snatch them all up. Clutching one in my grip, I stretch out my hand, thinking hard about all the work I've been doing with Tamlin. I focus intently and use mental strength, not emotion, to direct a small sonic boom out of my palm.

It works.

The small metal disc flies out of my hand as if it's a baseball and I'm a world class pitcher. It slams into his chest, knocking him backward several steps. He actually goes down to his knees, coughing and wheezing, and I dart forward, blasting another one at him. My aim isn't as good on the second, and it goes wide, but I'm so close, if I can just reach him before he gets up—

No such luck. He staggers to his feet, twisting one of the rings on his hand and making a beam of bright blue light shine from it.

I hurl myself to the side, knowing instinctively that I don't want that light to touch me. The blue beam dies for a moment, and as soon as I regain my footing, I blast another medal at the asshole enchanter. This time, I nail him right in the hand. I don't have to hear the crunch to know bones break; Johnson howls, cradling his injured hand to his chest. I'd like to say that shot was on purpose, but it was at least ninety percent luck.

Whatever. I'll take it, especially if it means he can no longer use any of the enchanted rings on that hand.

But now he's fucking pissed. He's got charms on his lapels too, and he uses them to send a barrage of attacks at me.

From below us, stray blasts of magic are flying everywhere, and I have to dodge those as well as Johnson's shots. To my surprise, I'm actually handling myself pretty well. This is nothing like the terrifying fight that broke out in the cafeteria when Raul made all of our cuffs burn off. That was pandemonium, and so is this—but now, I'm more in control. I can handle this, I realize.

*I can handle this.*

There's the sound of thundering footsteps and I know that someone, hopefully one of the guys, is hurrying up toward the stage. Johnson doubles his efforts, blasting me again and again. I block or deflect, hurtling energy back at him.

"Stay! Down!" Johnson bellows at me, his face red, his mouth twisted up into a snarl. It's like he's talking to a disobedient dog.

I curl my hands into fists. "Never."

Johnson looks infuriated by my refusal to give in or beg for mercy, as if he thinks all Unpredictables should cower before him. What a fucking asshole. How am I—how are any of my friends at this school—more dangerous to society than this guy? At least we're not fucking unhinged.

As determined as I am to fight Johnson to the goddamn bitter end though, I can't deny I could use a little help here.

The footsteps pound louder behind me. Whoever it is has reached the stage.

"Elliot!"

I recognize the voice. It's Dmitri, and I've never heard him sound so worried before. Johnson sends a blast that I dodge easily, but when I look over my shoulder, I see Dmitri fly backward. He lands hard on the stage, and trails of glittering light fall through the air above him like the last sparks of a fireworks display.

*Motherfucker.*

Panic beats at my chest as he slowly rises, shaking out his dark hair as if to clear his head. That blow wasn't meant for me. It was meant for Dmitri, and anyone else who gets close. I can sense it in the air even as the sparks fade from view—the magic remains, sticky-sweet in the back of my throat, a buzz under my skin. Johnson's put up some kind of barrier to keep us closed off from the others.

Help might want to get to me, but until that spell is disabled, I'm on my own.

*Well, fine.*

"Come at me!" I yell, squaring off against the rogue mage.

It's probably not the smartest thing to do, but I have to keep Johnson distracted until Dmitri or someone can break that damn charm and get through the shield he put up. Maybe if I can get Johnson to use enough of his force on me, he'll break through the shield himself? Weaken it enough for the others to burst through?

I gather my magic, feeling it surging in me, and blast it at him. Johnson whips up a shield around his own body, using his charms to help him. I can't help but glare. *Who's the fucking cheater now?* I'm doing this all on my own, without any charms. And I'm managing to hold my own pretty well.

Actually—that means I'm more powerful than he is, doesn't it?

Johnson makes blades materialize out of the air and sends them hurtling toward me, gesturing with his good hand. I yelp and throw sonic booms out to deflect them, but my aim isn't great. I'm getting tired, and that's making me sloppy.

*Shit, that was close.*

I can hear yelling, but it's muffled, as if it's coming through water or a thick wall, and I can't afford to pay attention. I just have to keep hammering at Johnson until that damn shield comes down.

He sends another whip of fire at me, and this time, I'm too slow. It catches me across the arm, sending white-hot pain flaring through me.

A scream tears from my throat, and I clasp my hand over the bleeding wound. It's deep, I can tell that already.

As if carried by the pain coursing through me, anger floods my body. Ever since the first day it erupted from me, I've worried that my sonic boom is going to hurt people. That I'm going to use it and regret it. I sent Asher to the infirmary by accident once with my boom, and I never wanted to do that to anyone again.

But right now? Who the hell cares if I mess this guy up? He's trying to kill me; he thinks everyone like me, all Unpredictables, are dangerous and unclean, that we're some kind of disease. *Fuck that shit.* All of us—even Alyssa, who's annoying and shallow and sometimes downright mean—deserve to be treated better than that.

I curl my hands into fists and raise them, drawing on every scrap of anger in my chest and every goddamn inch of magic in my body, then I unleash it.

Johnson goes flying back, and the shield around us wobbles and shatters like glass, sparks of magic fluttering through the air before winking out.

The middle-aged man lands in a heap about twenty feet away, off the stage, sprawled in the grass like a rag doll. For once, I don't care if I've really hurt someone. Later, I'll feel like shit if it turns out I killed him, but right now, all I can feel is relief that he's down.

Around us though, the battle is still raging. I turn to get a good look and see Roman crouched at the top of the platform stairs like he was trying to undo the shield. Dmitri is behind him, a trail of blood winding down from a cut at his temple, but otherwise unharmed. But where are Asher and Cam? I swivel my head, scanning the crowd in panic.

*Oh shit.* They're still in the crowd, still trying to help the admins and staff stop the fighting. I need to get down there. If we can explain to everyone what Johnson did, maybe—

“Elliot!”

I don't know which of the men screams my name, just that the next instant my side and head are exploding with pain.

*The shield,* I think as everything starts to swim, fire enveloping my mind, the world going black around the edges.

The shield was keeping everyone else from getting to us, but it was also keeping Johnson and me from being hit with wayward spells from the battle.

When it went down, those spells became a threat again.

My legs turn to jelly, and I stumble. The blackness eats away at my vision, and pain crawls through me like a parasite taking over its host.

*Fuck, it hurts.*

*It hurts so much...*

*Someone make it stop...*

The nothingness is making it stop, the cool sweet darkness sweeping over me, the only thing that can save me from the pain—

I plunge into black.

## EPILOGUE

### Roman

I pace restlessly outside Hardwick's office, my jaw clenching rhythmically.

Patience and self-control are two things I had to learn at a very young age, and the dark memories of my childhood are all it takes to remind me why those qualities are so important. Why I swore to myself I would never let my life be governed by wild emotions.

But today, for the first time in years, I can feel my control slipping.

My patience is hanging on by a thread.

At last, Hardwick opens the door. His gaze falls on me, and he sighs. "All right, Roman, come in. Thank you for waiting."

I stride in, trying to force my body to relax. My hands have been clenched into fists for so long that they feel painfully stiff as I open them, stretching my fingers.

Elliot nearly died two days ago.

She nearly *died*, and the High Circuit's handling of the aftermath has been laughably pathetic. They issued a carefully neutral statement condemning the violence that broke out at the end of the Trials and urging all magic users to embrace and respect one another. No one else was hurt as badly as Elliot, but there were a large number of minor injuries, and the quad was nearly destroyed.

Does our government truly think they can smooth this over with a bland PR campaign, and it will all be fine? Elliot was targeted by Johnson because of her power. Because her performance in the Trials challenged everything

he knew, and his small mind couldn't take it. Is that how we treat Unpredictables—is that how we treat women?

I've been teaching at Griffin Academy for five years, and Hardwick has never once seen me lose my temper. But I could punch my fist through the wall right now, and I'm sure he can sense it. I'm just glad he seems to think my anger is all about the mishandling of the Trials and the prejudice from the outside magical community.

Not about the fact that I'm falling in love with one of my students.

It's the one thing I envy Dmitri and the others for. I've seen the connection Elliot has with each of them, and I'm not threatened by it or angry about it. The light inside her is too bright to be selfishly hoarded by one man, and whether she sees it in herself or not, she's more loving and passionate than anyone I've ever met. I saw it in her that first night at the bar; even then, I knew she was someone special.

She is worth sharing. I told her that, and I meant it. And I truly like the other men in her life, Dmitri especially. He's only two years younger than I am, and we get along well. There's something inside of us that's similar, I think.

But *they* got to go to her when she fell. I couldn't, and it fucking wrecked me.

I had to hold back, even when every instinct in my body screamed for me to run to her, to cradle her in my arms. I'm just her professor in the eyes of the world. And that's how it has to stay, for now at least.

Truth be told... I shouldn't be falling for Elliot.

I don't feel anything but friendship for Josephine anymore; I made my feelings very clear to her after the Inter-academy Ball, when it seemed like she was interested in rekindling our relationship. But when I did end things between us, it wasn't because I'd fallen out of love with her. That was part of it, yes. But it was also partially to protect her.

There are demons in my past—both literal and metaphorical—that I'm beginning to think will always haunt me. And when my past comes rearing its ugly head... I don't want to let someone I care about end up in the middle of that.

But knowing I *shouldn't* love Reckless doesn't change how I feel about her. And it doesn't change the frustration of watching someone I care about fall and not being able to go to her.

At least the others take good care of her. Cam got to her first using his teleportation power and scooped her up almost immediately. Dmitri, despite being unassisted by magic, was by her side only a second later. And Asher, usually the most cool-headed and peaceful of any of us, looked about ready to murder Johnson.

That's why Hardwick called me into his office today, actually.

Something about Johnson.

"What is it?" I ask as he settles in behind his desk. "What did they find?"

Truthfully, I can barely focus on the politics and broader implications of the provost's actions right now. I just want to get to the infirmary. Asher has been texting me to keep me updated on Elliot's condition.

It's... not good.

"Sit down before you wear a hole in my carpet, please," Hardwick replies. He leans back in his own chair, resting his hands on his desk. "I just had it installed."

I stop pacing but don't sit, leveling him with a hard stare. "What do you want to talk to me about?"

He sighs. "You and I both know Provost Johnson was never that fanatical."

"People change. They can surprise you."

"They can indeed." The older man gives me an assessing look, tilting his head.

Hardwick is smart and perceptive. There's a very good chance he knows, or at least suspects, something of the truth about me and Elliot. But he doesn't say anything about it, and neither do I. That's a problem I'll deal with another day—*after* I've made sure she's all right.

As the silence stretches, I finally sink into the chair opposite his desk. "You were saying about Johnson, sir?"

Hardwick shakes his head slightly. "Right. Johnson. The man has an impeccable track record. Before he was let go after the Trials, he was head of the Phoenix Training Program for fifteen years and ran the program well. Although he's never openly embraced Unpredictables, it was still extremely out of character for him to say what he did at the closing of the Trials. You and I both know that. No matter how angry you might be over what happened to Miss Sinclair, I think we can agree Johnson's behavior wasn't in line with the man we knew."



“Maybe not. But it doesn’t change what he did.”

He runs a hand over his hair, which gets a little more gray every year. “True. But it worries me. If someone like Johnson could become so radicalized... what about others?”

A frown tugs at the corners of my mouth. “Perhaps a better question is, who radicalized him? Something like that doesn’t happen in a vacuum.”

“The Circuit investigators told me there’s someone Johnson was in contact with recently. They’re looking into who it could be, but the messages they exchanged fit with Johnson’s changing world view. They were all encrypted and have so far been untraceable.”

*Fuck. Yes, that’s concerning.*

A new suspicion enters my mind, and my brows draw together. “You don’t think it could be the same person who was working with Raul to—”

Hardwick lifts a hand to stop me, shaking his head. “We can’t say for certain whether this is connected to last semester’s unfortunate incident. That was a plot to steal a dangerous, powerful artifact. This was to stop Unpredictables from achieving recognition in the magical community. There’s a difference in motive.”

“And yet both involved this school.”

“There are coincidences in life, you know,” he offers with a weary smile.

“Not in something like this.”

He blows out a breath. “As I said, the authorities are looking into it. But for now, you’re the only one who knows about the possible... indoctrination. As far as the rest of the magical world is concerned, Johnson was the man behind all of this, the sole instigator behind the sabotage. He’s the one who recruited the other school administrators to help him work against Elliot. Understood?”

I know why Hardwick is telling me this. I’m close to Elliot, and I’ve got the training needed to protect her from whatever’s coming.

And something *is* coming. I can feel it in my bones.

Elliot is fierce, determined, and has a level of raw power I haven’t seen in a student in a very long time. But she’s still human. Still vulnerable. She needs backup; people on her side. I will do everything in my power to protect her, and at this moment, I find myself intensely grateful there are three other men who care for her like I do.

It may take *all* of us to keep her safe.

“Understood, sir,” I say. “I’ll keep that information to myself. You’ll let me know if the Circuit investigators find anything about the person Johnson was in contact with?”

“Of course.”

I nod, and Hardwick nods, and the subject’s closed. We’ve known each other long enough that half the time we don’t need words anyway.

I leave the administration offices and head straight to the infirmary. I held myself back from going to see Elliot right away, but as a professor, I can justify visiting an injured student. I’d do the same for anyone in my classes, and if people suspect there’s more to it than that... well, right now, I don’t give a fuck.

Inside the medical building, I walk past the nurse at the front desk, keeping my face an impassive mask even though worry has a vise grip on my heart. I’m one of the youngest professors in the school and was one of the youngest students in Griffin Academy history.

I don’t usually feel young, though. Not until moments like these.

Right now, I feel helpless, and I haven’t felt that way in a long time.

Elliot has a private room off the main wing. It’s not surprising, given what happened. The medical staff don’t want everyone gawking at her. I push the door open, and three heads swivel around to stare. Dmitri even half-rises from his seat, like he’s expecting another attack.

“At ease,” I tell him. It’s half a joke, half serious.

He sinks back down into his seat, looking miserable and on edge. I feel for him. The man’s just as attached to Elliot as the rest of us. But unlike the other two, I don’t think he’s said anything.

I used to be the same way, until I lost enough people to learn that you might as well be open with someone when you have the chance. There are no guarantees, and life is too brutally unpredictable to waste time pushing people away.

That’s the one silver lining I’m clinging to in this horrific mess. Elliot *knows* how I feel about her. I haven’t held back or hidden my feelings out of fear of what might happen—I’ve told her I want to take a chance on us, and that I will share her gladly if that makes her happy.

Asher nods at me in greeting. He looks exhausted. Cam’s holding Elliot’s hand as she lies propped up in the bed, her face too pale and her eyes closed. The spark of light I love so much about her is dim, and she looks more fragile than she ever has before.

“How is she?” I ask, my voice low and raspy.

Asher shakes his head, his gaze still fixed on Elliot.

Cam gestures for me to pull up a chair, and I see that there’s an extra one sitting in the corner. Like they brought it in for me.

Wordlessly, I take my seat and join the vigil.

I’m only a few years older than everyone in this room. Well, five years older than Elliot. I have two years on Dmitri and four each on Cam and Asher, who are both twenty-three. Right now, it doesn’t feel like that much at all.

For the first time, it feels like I could become a true part of this group.

Asher, Cam, and Dmitri are good men, and while they all have contrasting personalities, they balance each other out. And they all give the woman I care about different things she needs. I have to admit though... as close as I’ve gotten to Elliot, there’s always been a bit of distance between myself and these three. Asher and Cam were friends before coming to the academy, and all three of them have been close as brothers since they got here. And I’m their professor, which naturally put up some barriers between us.

But right now, none of that is important. None of our differences in personality or in life matter. All that matters is the woman lying on the bed between us.

We’re all here because we care about her. And if that’s the case, then everything else is just white noise.

I’ll keep vigil by her bedside for as long as I need to, and I know even without asking that the other three will do the same.

We need our girl back.



**THANK YOU FOR READING!**

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