

HOUSE *of* MARIONNE

J. ELLE





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Dedication tk



HOUSE OF MARIONNE

SPECIALTIES OFFERED



ANATOMER

Transfigurer of anatomy



AUDIOR

Transfigurer of sound



SHIFTER

Transfigurer of matter



RETENTOR

Remover of magic



CULTIVATOR

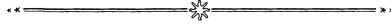
Transferer of knowledge



DRAGUN

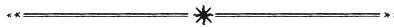
By invitation only

Sanguis electorum dives est.



*The surest measure of our stewardship
will be in our elasticity as one body,
for the weight of responsibility magic requires
would fracture divided shoulders.
Thus, I sign this Sphere Commissioning Pact,
on this 14th day of June in the great year of 1781,
and gird the yoke of burden in the maintenance of unity
and faithful duty to each other.
This endeavor shall either be
the greatest achievement of the living world
or the perpetual ruin of us all.*

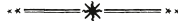
*Westin Alkomae,
Upper, Seven of Twelve, First of Blood,
The Prestigious Order of Highest Mysteries
1740–1781*



MAP SPREAD TK

MAP SPREAD TK

THE DRAGON



Yagrin ran a finger along the blade and sucked in a deep breath. He hated this part. The scent of dumpster trash wafted under his nose, and he pulled his coat tighter around himself. He stuck his head out between the bauble shop and pastry bar he was lurking between.

“Memento sumptus,” he chanted to himself as if that would slay what felt like eels wriggling in his stomach. His gaze sifted between the traffic.

And there she was.

A pink striped beanie sat tucked tight on her head, curly locks blowing beneath. She wore slender jeans beneath a bright green sweater with kimono sleeves. His nerves lodged in his throat. His foot wouldn't stop tapping.

But his fingers tightened on the dagger in his pocket.

It was a nimble weapon, its opulent metalwork sculpted to fit the curve of his palm. His fingertip moistened. He rubbed the blood on the lining of his pants, waiting for Pink Beanie to pass so he could blur into the crowd behind her. He would be patient. Careful. That's why he'd put off doing the job for weeks. *To be stealthy.* The House name, after all. He had to keep up the House name.

First he'd have to get her alone. Isolated.

You're not a killer, Yagrin. The voice inside his head argued, but he tamed it with recitations written on his heart. *Secretum.* Pink Beanie was a direct threat to their way of life, whether she knew it or not. And for it, she must die.

She strode by. He tidied himself in the window across the way before hopping out the shadowed alley of the bustling retail district to stay on her tail. Her hat bobbed through the crowd; her face pressed to a phone. He couldn't quite make out her expression, but she strode slow and easy, greeting each person she passed that made eye contact.

His fingers twitched as he replayed his plan over in his head. The magicked dagger would be cleaner. Quieter. He pulled out a round coin, flipping it in the air. *Tails. Give me tails, dammit.* He shouldn't be superstitious; superstition was pretend magic, and he didn't need to pretend. He had the real thing. The coin glimmered in the sunlight and landed on heads in his palm.

"Rats," he muttered. Whatever his endeavors were for the day would be favorable.

If it weren't him it'd be one of his Dragan brothers, he told himself. His insides sloshed. He clenched the coin in his hand. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and he stepped aside at an intersection to let a dog walker with a collection of tangled leashes swish by. Pink Beanie stopped for a coffee, and he let her, careful to stay out of sight.

While she folded over a chair sipping a cappuccino, he tapped his phone, standing a little taller as if this moment of mercy somehow made it better. Made him better. Redeemable for this life that had chosen him. She liked it with cinnamon and extra whipped cream. She loved it cooled all the way down, too.

His finger hovered over "Mother" in his phone, not the one who bore him; the one he was sworn to. He gulped, tapping, and it rang. He tapped again, hanging up, knowing what she would say. *Duty is the honor of the willing.*

He scanned the area for witnesses, grazing over the crowds in and out of shops. A pair of lovers sat with arms pretzeled around one another sharing a muffin. A curly-haired girl with freckles on her face sat at a bus stop, tugging at a key chain.

He felt a chill sweep through him. Today did not feel like a day for killing. A little girl waddling by faced off against a triple scoop of ice cream

about as tall as she. It toppled in her fingers, and he reached to steady her hand. She smiled at him in thanks, and his lips split in a smile. But he wiped it from his face. He didn't deserve the joy it brought him.

He gulped, clenching his fist. *The more he did it, the easier it would get.* But he'd never found any of it easy. Not when he accepted the task. Not when he was inducted into the Order. It was pretending that got him through it then. He'd done the motions, worn the silk-lined tux, donned the mask, held the dagger, pressed it into his heart. Bold he might not be. But clever. Always clever.

The cracking of dagger against bone had been something he'd perfected. Tricking the ears, transfiguring the form and notes as sound moved in the air came easily to him. Making Mother and the rest of them think he'd stabbed himself was simple. If it made the sound and looked as it should, it would appear he'd completed Third Rite. No one needed to know he was truly a coward.

But pretending wouldn't work today. He had to kill the girl.

And then another, and another. It's beyond time he got used to the gig. He searched for the pink beanie, but found her table empty, except for her mug. His heart leapt in his chest as his eyes skimmed the crowd, brimming with conversations. Briefcases swished between legs.

"She was just here," he said to himself.

Loitering near a rim of hedges of the café's patio, he smelled her before he saw her. Vanilla and cinnamon, a garden of jasmine. A tiny hill of whipped cream on her lip.

"Sorry, I was just . . ." She switched up her feet trying to get by. Her eyes were deep ebony and yet somehow as bright as the sun.

"No, excuse me, sorry."

"Have we—?" She smiled, tucking a hair behind her ear. "You look familiar," she said, finally working her way past him.

He walked in stride with her, hand tucked in his pocket, firmly gripping the metal.

"Oh?" He smiled. "I mean . . . I'd like to believe we've met . . . or that we were supposed to."

She blushed and it tugged at him in ways it shouldn't. But this was a job, so he stuck to the plan: *Earn her trust*. They walked, and he hung on her words, dotting in responses with smiles and head nods. She talked a million miles a minute, warming up quickly. He dropped details he knew she liked . . . like teacup puppies, cable knit sweaters, anything apple flavored. Each deepened the creases around her eyes.

"It's like kismet," she said.

"Must be." He felt sick. "If you have a moment?"

"For?"

He shoved down his quivering gut and let the monster he was bred to become take over. "There's this really quaint cafe off the beaten trail, that way, with the best beignets you've ever had." He pointed toward an alleyway nearby, past the crowds, past the noise. "Should we maybe grab a bite?"

She hesitated, checking her phone. *Put her at ease, Yagrin*. He forced his lips in a kind smile, making sure he showed his teeth, pushing his cheeks up so creases hugged his eyes.

"They're really delicious."

Her lips pursed in consideration. The twinkle in her eye shifted from curiosity to anxious excitement. "Okay, for a moment. Sure."

He led her away from the bustling crowds of lunch patrons and down an alleyway, laser focused. "It's just down here."

She nodded. The deeper they walked, the more the shade shifted into shadows.

"Is it much farther?" she asked, hugging herself.

He could hear her heart pumping faster. "Just a little farther. Down this way."

She craned to see. Yagrin felt the familiar grainy heat blustering through him, his magic, warming up. He'd grown to hate the feeling. But now it burned him with the courage he lacked, reminding him of who he was. Twelfth of his blood, magic was strong in him like his father and grandfather before him. Twelve generations of his family, all Draguns.

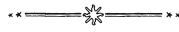
He took a breath and let muscle memory take over, like he'd learned in training. Then he opened his hand, drawing on an icy chill in the air. He held still, the chill clawing its way into his hands, up through his arms. He tingled all over with magic, turned into himself, and disappeared into a cloud of black.

She gasped.

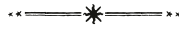
He saw his House sigil on the back of his eyelids and gulped down the dregs of his regret. He pressed into her. She screamed. He tightened from his center, grabbing hold of the Sun Dust coursing through his veins, and plucked invisible threads from the air. Her shrieks of terror turned to laughter, his warm magic bewitching the sounds, note by note. It seemed somehow sweeter that way. He closed his eyes, imagining her smile, the way she smelled.

"I'm sorry," he muttered to her, limp in his arms. And he was.

But duty was the death of freedom.



PART ONE



ONE



I used to believe that magic was glittering, fanciful pretend.
Then I realized magic *is* real.
But it is dark and poisonous.
And the only way to hide from it
Is to not exist at all.

“Quell, are you listening?” Mom squeezes my hand as our car jerks to a stop outside the French Market on North Peters.

“Yes, get my pay for the week, in and out.”

“That’s my girl. Hurry now. I’ll circle.” She brushes my loose curls from my cheek with a cautious smile before I slip out of our ’99 Civic, a junkyard find, its blue paint dry and peeling. Before this car, it was an old yellow truck. And before that truck, it was the bus, everywhere. But Mom didn’t like not having a way to get up and go—*run*—at a moment’s notice. So she made sure to get really good at fixing up old finds.

Really good at hiding me.

Fourteen schools. Twelve years. Nine cities.

Every place is the same: a backdrop I blend into. Anytime Mom gets suspicious someone might know about the poison running through my veins, she stuffs our entire life into a tiny yellow, hard-shell suitcase. It’s perplexing that my entire existence can be tucked into something so small and shoved into the trunk of a car. At first, I’d stuff everything I could into my bag. Now, I just grab my tennis shoes, a phone charger,

and my lucky key chain. The countless places we've moved and the blur of faces I'll say goodbye to are the white space between memories, ellipses strung between unfinished sentences. I stopped asking where we're going a long time ago.

Because running's been a destination all on its own.

Humid air, thanks to the roaring Mississippi nearby, assaults me, sticking to my clammy skin. The back end of our rusted hatchback blares red before disappearing around a corner. With only three weeks of high school left, I'm trying to work as much as I can to save up enough for the big plans Mom and I have.

To finally move somewhere and *stay*.

If a caged bird sings of freedom, and a song can be a wordless utterance, a wish, a burning desire, then I sing of salty air and sand between my toes. Of a home that's not a moving target. After graduation, our plan is to find some small beach town, a real beach, not like the muddy water we've been around these last six months in New Orleans, and blend in with the sand.

Only three more weeks.

I graft myself into the afternoon commotion of the congested Market, and it's like slipping into a worn pair of shoes. I disappear into the throng of shoppers in the outdoor pavilion with my chin to my chest, hands tucked in my pockets.

Be forgettable.

Mrs. Broussard should have my money for my shifts last week. She is a local confectioner whose family has been in the business of pralines since there was such a thing. The market buzzes with an energy that slows my steps. Too many people. The usual spot where Mrs. Broussard sets up her table of goods is taken up by a person peddling various levels of heat—hot sauces. My pulse ticks faster at the hiccup.

I weave in and out of the crowd, avoiding curious eyes and looking for a bandana covering a head of pinned gray hair. My fingers prickle with a cold ache, a familiar sign that this curse in my veins—my *toushana*—is

stirring. I swallow, urging it back down, pleading with it to calm. It's safer to be invisible, it's safer to be no one.

"Quell?"

I flinch at the sound of my name.

"That you, girl?" Mrs. Broussard waves me toward her and the line snaked at her table parts. My skin burns, feeling her customers' stares. *No eye contact.*

"Tonta'lise got here before me, yeah. Had to set up my whole show ova here. She know damn well I use dat spot eva day. But here she come, tryin' to get my customers." Her hand rests on her hip. "You come for ya money?"

I nod and Mrs. Broussard pulls an envelope out of her apron. This is the first job Mom ever let me have, because we need the money and Mrs. Broussard doesn't ask a lot of questions. She pays me in cash and has only ever asked my name once.

"You gone do extra hours for me next week?"

"Not until school's out."

"Very good. Don't linger 'round these parts, che. Gone get outta here before it get dark, ya hear?"

The thick envelope in my hand soothes my nerves. I count it. Twice. My lips curl as I thank Mrs. Broussard and turn to go. The crowd has thickened like a nice roux. *Be unpredictable.* A cluster of tourists lodge the entryway and I scan for another exit. Away from the vendors, near an abandoned pop-up tent, full of fleur-de-lis candle holders, is a sign for the bathrooms. A red exit sign blares next to it and I head that way. Mom will worry if I take too long.

The winding hallway toward the bathrooms twists and the light bulbs overhead flicker. Small exit arrows glow red, urging me farther down the hall. I expect to spot the bathrooms but don't see them yet. The market pavilion is open to the outdoors so there should be sunlight up ahead. The fluorescents flicker again and I walk slower. This doesn't feel right. Worry bites at me and I turn to go back the way I came.

But there's a wall there.

A shape of something, like a shadow or trick of light, forms a fleur-like shape on its stuccoed surface. I blink and it's gone. My heart stumbles, my toushana unfurls in my bones, dancing with my panic, threatening as it does in warning that it might rise up in me soon.

I turn, but in every direction the walls have shifted or closed in. There are no bathroom signs, no blaring red light pointing toward an exit anymore.

"*Memento sumptus*," someone says. The voice is coming from a narrow door that blends seamlessly with the wall. Caution tugs at me like a tether. Pressed carefully to the door, I listen, hands hooked behind myself just in case. Strained voices tangle around each other in a whispered argument. There are a pair of men, it sounds like. I listen again and hear several more. I teeter forward on my toes ever so slightly, pressing my weight against the door to ease it open a sliver.

Inside, dark-robed men encircle another bound to a chair. Around them are rows and rows of stacked drum sized barrels marked with a thorny branch coiled around a black sun and words in a language I don't understand.

"Go on, Sand," one says after topping up one filled with a pale liquid. "We'll clean up."

A blond fellow lassos his arm in the air and the dozen barrels tremor. A haze fills the air, rippling like rain on a window. It clears and he does it again and this time the drums disappear. I squint, my heart lodged in my throat.

I glare at my hands in confusion, and I can still picture the wisps of darkness that bleed through my fingertips when my toushana shows itself, destroying anything I touch. When I was little, I'd called it "the black." Then as I grew to know its nasty nature, "the curse." Mother finally corrected me a few years back after someone overheard me complaining about it. Toushana is its name. Some genetic malfunction, Mom had said. She's lying. But Mom does that. I've heard her mutter to herself about this poison I have.

She called it magic.

But whatever these men are doing appears quite different. My nails dig

into the door's frame as I peer harder into the dimly lit room. I've never seen magic that isn't my own.

"What was the order, Charlie?" asks Sand. The others in the room watch from the shadows.

"No prisoners. Not today." Charlie plants his hands on his knees and glares at their captive, now at eye level. "May Sola Sfenti judge you fairly."

"Screw you and your Sun God," the bound man spits as Charlie pulls deep from a fat cigar. He blows a cloud of smoke into the captive's face. Then does something with his fingers, too fast, and too far away for me to make out. The bound man throws his head back, choking and contorting in pain, his wrists and ankles rubbed red from their hold on him. The cloud of smoke from Charlie's lips hovers like a cloud around his face, consuming and suffocating. The man gasps for breath and in moments, his writhing stops. His head lulls and I stumble backward, lacing my fingers, trying to slow my hammering pulse. *He's . . . dead. That man, they . . .*

"*Fratris fortuna.*" The voice comes from behind me. I turn and there is a man in a dark suit, same as the one the men I just saw were wearing. But unlike the others, a gleaming dark mask slopes across this man's brows, over his nose, its ornate carvings tapering off into his high cheekbones. His expression hardens at my silence.

I step backward, my back hard against the wall. There's nowhere for me to hide. His brows knit with intrigue and my heart patters faster. My toushana's ache deepens, my hands growing colder. I have minutes, maybe, until it will rip through my fingertips, angrily like a spewing burst pipe. Pressure swells in my chest. *Run.* I step aside. His hand latches onto my wrist, but I feel it around my throat.

"What are you doing back here?"

My envelope from my job slips from my fingers, and I try to dash for it as it tumbles to the pavement.

"Ah, ah. Hold still." His long coat is tightly buttoned all the way up to his neck and a round piece of silver gleams at me from his throat. An image is engraved on it, a Roman-style column, with a jagged crack running

across its front as if it's been broken in half. I squint, trying to remember if I've ever seen that symbol before. Thick brows shade his narrowed expression. "Answer the question."

"I got lost trying to find the exit. I thought it was near the bathrooms." I tug against his grip, but he doesn't let go. He glances just past me at what was a door, but is solid stone wall, now. My heart hiccups. "I—I didn't go in there, if that's what you're thinking."

"In . . . *where*?"

"There was a door, but I could tell it wasn't the bathroom, so I turned around to leave. I *swear*!" A lie is too risky. People believe half-truths much more easily.

"What's your name?"

"I—"

The answer sticks in my throat, magic fluttering around in me like a moth searching for a place to land. Mom changes my name each time we move, cycling through the same three or four. Quell *Jewel*. Not Quell *Marionne*. Who lives at 711 Liberty Street. Born in a small town outside the city. New to the area. Whose dad's job requires him to travel a lot. Two parents means fewer questions. My script, the drill Mom has run through my head year after year, hangs on my lips. All lies seasoned with enough truth, the proper inflection, the warmth of a genuine smile, to make them feel true. To make the veneer of a life we've lived, I've lived, for as long as I can remember, real.

"I'm Quell."

His mouth bows in suspicion.

My fingers hurt as my toushana yawns like a cat, stretching itself awake from a nap. Its claws run underneath my skin, sharp tendrils of ice scratching my bones. My breaths quicken. The mask on his face fades into his skin, seeping into his pores like dry soil soaking up rain. I blink and stuff down a gasp. But he doesn't even flinch.

"Your heart is racing. Your pupils are dilated. And if you move, that bile in your stomach might come tumbling up your throat. Something

wrong?" He peers harder at me as if sussing out a question, but after a moment the crater between his brows disappears.

"No, nothing's wrong. May I go?"

He releases me.

"Better get a Retentor out here to take a look," he mutters to himself before smiling at me. "My apologies. I thought I knew you from somewhere. The exit is there, behind you."

I turn, and sure enough behind me where there was a stone wall is now an arched exit that opens up to the avenue. That was *not* there a moment ago.

"Right. Thanks."

He smiles, turns, and I book it onto the street, grateful to put more distance between me and whatever that was. But my breath hitches.

My envelope.

I turn back, but stone has reformed where the archway just was. Some mangled mix of irritation and sorrow burns through me. That money was supposed to feed us for a week!

"Hey, let me back in, please?" I beat on the wall and the icy chill of my toushana, already on edge from this whole tirade, seeps into my bones in a fury, rushing into my fist before I can pull it away. I groan at the burn of what feels like daggers tearing through my skin. The stone blackens under my touch, its facade crumbling with rot, brick by brick, inch by inch, until I'm standing before a decayed expanse of building that looks singed. *What have I done? What have I done!*

Muscle memory urges me in motion. I run. Back up Ursulines, right on North Peters. *Blue, Honda*. A horn blares and Mom is waving behind the steering wheel. Seeing her is a balm to my toushana. The chill in my bones retreats as I dart between traffic, yank her door open, and duck inside.

"Go!"

"Did you get the money?"

"Go, Mom, just drive, go!"

Mom slams the gas, and the French Market grows smaller behind us.



I'M STILL GRASPING for my next breath when Mom tosses me one of those cheap disposable hand warmers and my rice pack. We keep one in the car and two at the motel. My toushana has worn off but the throbbing ache that comes before and after lingers. *Those people. They used magic. They killed a man!*

"What happened?" She eyes her duffel bag on the back seat and white knuckles the steering wheel. Creases hug her eyes. Her pulled-back hair has grayed in spots, like threads of silver in a bushel of black wheat. Memories are buried in the folds of her skin, mysteries I'd give anything to understand. Like why I have magic and she doesn't? Who are we running from? But the curve of her lips as she merges into the thoroughfare tells me precisely what she's worrying about—whether it's time to leave again.

I bite down and find something outside the car window to look at so Mom cannot see the frustration on my face. I'm so close to graduating, which means some semblance of freedom. No more truancy checks. No more teachers breathing down my neck. Mom and I will just be able to *be*, hide in plain sight, much more easily in three short weeks.

"Well?"

"It was nothing." Those men at the Market didn't see me watching. And the one who caught me let me go. He didn't actually see my toushana destroy that wall. I'm not adding fuel to her fire.

"Do not lie to me." Her stare burns.

A shiver skitters up my arms. I'm just *so* tired of running. Mom exhales and snatches up a box of cigarettes from her purse as a string of museums I've only seen from the outside rush past us in a blur.

"You know that everything I do is to protect you?" Her expression softens. "We do not have very much, but we have each other."

I look away. A house swallowed in flames flickers in my memory. I can still taste the smoke. We left our last place after this guy's house was burned down because he and I'd hung out afterschool. Even then, Mom

offered no explanation. I know she loves me. But that's not the same as understanding. I could have been killed back there. If I knew more, I could be smarter. If I knew more, we could be safer. Maybe she thinks I'm too young to get it. She reaches to rub my shoulder, and I want to pull away. But I don't. I sit there and smile, so Mom feels like her best is good enough.

We continue the rest of the drive in silence and I try to lose myself in one of the library books in my bag. But the car jerks to a stop in the parking lot of the motel, the latest spot Mom was able to secure for us and I hurry out of the car.

Once inside our room, I can't hold it in anymore.

"Mom, I want to understand my magic. To understand why we're doing this."

She takes off her shoes, after setting her duffel bag right beside her, and for a moment I wonder if she heard me. "Quell," she takes a deep breath and the weariness carving her expression deepens. "I'm not even sure where to start, how to—"

"Just tell me the truth. I can handle it."

"You assume."

"I *can*. I'm seventeen, not a child anymore." My tone grates with irritation. "Please," I say, softer. She stills and sighs again. A long moment of quiet passes between us. And I sit in it because this time there's more than silence in response to my questions.

"Your grandmother is a very powerful and influential woman, Quell, in an entirely different world than we live in now."

My chest tightens with anticipation hearing Mom mention Grandmom. I hadn't thought about her—seen her—since I was little. Hope bubbles up inside me at finally getting some answers. "Does she have magic, like I do?" Mine must have come from somewhere. Maybe it skips generations.

"Growing up, our house was a training ground for a magical secret society." Mom wraps and rewraps herself in a blanket. "The Order." A smile wafts between us. "And life there at Chateau Soleil even in the off season was . . ."

“Chateau Soleil?”

“Grandmom’s estate.”

“*Estate*? How big does a house have to be to have its own name?” We lived at my grandmother’s until I was five. I can’t remember it, really, or picture it. I have one cobwebbed memory. I was little. She pulled me up onto her lap. She smelled like birch and juniper. Sunlight poured in the room and everything seemed to glitter. She handed me some toy to play with. I felt safe. But Mom came thundering into the room, snatched it out of my hand and me out of her lap. The rest is a haze.

“Their magic is different than yours, Quell. They move in the world in a way that you never will because of your *toushana*.”

My shoulders sink.

“All that glitters, darling—”

“Isn’t gold. I know.” Another question pokes my thoughts. “Does Grandmom know about my *toushana*?”

“No.”

“Then why—”

Thunder claps quietly in the distance and the lights flicker. The suddenness silences both of us. Mom’s brow pinches as if she’s focusing hard on something. I know that look in her eye. That spark that won’t die.

“Pack your things.”

“Mom?”

“I need you to tell me everything that happened at the Market, Quell, right now. *Please*.”

She grabs her duffel and something inside me fractures.

I tell Mom everything, about how I got lost leaving and saw them kill that man, that I ran into a guy with a mask that bled into his skin. How I dropped the envelope, and how my *toushana* rotted a hole in the stone trying to get it back. The longer I talk, the more her grip on her duffel tightens.

The far-off sound of thunder rolls again and her expression darkens. Mom stuffs the few clothes she has into her bag and my resolve falters.

“Mom, please.” Hot tears sting my eyes.

I can't. Not again. We're so close. Three weeks.

She hands me the blue savings jar we'd made six years ago when we settled on our beach plan. I can practically see the house I'd built for us in my dreams. Two stories, a plain square shape, cozy with shutters. Salted air blowing through an open window.

"One more time, I'm sorry." She tugs on her coat.

It's always one more time. "I don't believe you!" I hate this. I hate it so much. How do I convince her I was careful at the Market? *I got away!* We'll be fine, like we always have been, for a few more weeks. I lock my knees and try to find a big voice.

"No."

"What did you say to me?" Her tone is sharp, but the grip on the bed rail says it's fear that strains her words, not anger.

"I said *no*, Mom." My tone is stronger this time, my song rising up in me. Magic prickles my fingertips and I tuck them away to warm them, unsure of what it could do. I've never had it flare up when I'm this upset. The anger in her flickers then morphs into something else, her eyes red with tears. She puts out her cigarette, then leans in so close I can taste it on her breath.

"You want the truth? That isn't thunder. It's magic."

My heart stumbles. "I don't understand."

A tear steals its way down her cheek. She wipes it away so fast I almost miss it.

"Those *Draguns* you saw . . ."

"*Draguns?*"

"Assassins for the Order. They're in charge of executing anyone with toushana." Her nails dig into my arm. "If anyone finds out your secret, they will *kill* you, Quell!"

Her words knock the wind out of me. I try to steady myself on a wall as the world sways.

Someone would *kill* me for a magic I don't even want or use.

"What if someone saw you at that Market?" She shakes her head. "We

can't take that chance. One more time, Quell, *please?*" She curls her hand in mine as if holding on to it keeps her world in orbit. I know what I have to do but that doesn't make it easy. If she's right, if this is the one time this so-called Order actually has found us, I have no choice. I empty the beach fund jar onto the bed and whatever pieces of me are left, crumble.

"Okay," I breathe, taking on the yoke of her sorrow and blinking away my own. One more time. "I'll go to the convenience store and grab the necessities. Give me five minutes."

"That's my girl. And—" She lifts her skirt. Strapped to her thigh is a gold-handled dagger, covered in scrollwork and flecked with gems. She shoves it in my hand. "Just in case."

I blink in disbelief. The metal of the blade is twice the length of the handle, but somehow as light as air in my hand. Its ornate handle gleams gold and sparkles with jewels. I had no idea Mom even carried a weapon, let alone something so . . . exquisite.

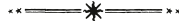
"If I'm right and one *Dragun* has found us, there could be more."

I glare at the weapon in my hand. It's cold, like her words. Easily the most beautiful and dangerous thing I've ever seen. I meet Mom's eyes and finally, to some degree, understand the weight that hangs there.

"Five minutes," she says again. "No more."

I tuck the dagger away and hurry out the door.

TWO



Outside the sky is dim but clear. Thunder or something made to sound like thunder rolls in the distance, and I hug myself tighter as I hurry next door to Stop ‘N’ Save.

“You’re okay,” I mutter. My fingers feel for the dagger tucked in my waistband. Just in case. I skirt bikes laid out in front of the store on my way in. Inside, the shop owner is behind a newspaper. He looks up and disappears back behind it.

There’s no way to know how long it’ll take Mom to find a new place. I grab the entire row of tuna cans, a loaf of bread, two tubs of peanut butter, canned beans, a bag of Skittles, and six bags of sour cream and onion chips, which Mom would tell me is a waste.

“Doesn’t stick to you,” she’d say.

But greasy chips make me happy. And with everything going on, I deserve some happy.

The bell attached to the door dings as more people enter and I check my watch. I loop a roll of duct tape on my wrist and grab a tiny bottle of rubbing alcohol and one of vinegar. A line has formed at the register. The clock on the wall ticks and I feel it in my chest. I need to get out of here. *Fast.* I spot a familiar head of moussed blond hair, summer-tanned skin, and bright eyes in line behind me. A kid from the school where I’ve spent the second half of senior year. He catches me staring and waves. I groan.

“Hey, Quell, isn’t it? It’s me Nigel, Nigel Hammond, from English Lit class.” The Nigel that tries to bum all my answers because he’s never done

any of the reading. He's so close I can smell his brand name cologne. "You need a hand?"

"I'm fine."

"You sure?" He grabs the bread, which I'm balancing perfectly fine on top of the stacks of canned fish.

"Really." I step away from him, and the line moves forward, thank goodness.

"Suit yourself." He hops in the back of the line even though his hands are empty. Maybe he wants something from behind the counter. I move forward a few spots before glancing in the mirror again irked by the distinct feeling that someone's staring. But when I look up, Nigel is flipping a coin and cursing under his breath.

The line moves forward and finally I'm at the register. My foot taps. It's been seven minutes. This is taking too long. The cashier swipes everything and piles it into bags.

"Thank you." I reach for my money when my elbow bumps Nigel's chest.

"Really, let me help." He grabs one of my bags.

I pull it back. "No, really."

"I insist."

Dread finger-walks down my spine. I've watched Nigel at school. He surrounds himself with admirers. Once, a freshman dropped her books in front of him and he just rolled his eyes and kicked them out of his way. This is . . . odd. I pay the cashier and grab my bags.

"Thank you." I hurry to the door. But I can feel Nigel following me. He holds the door. I walk more quickly.

"I just want to talk to you." His footsteps echo mine, and I pick up to a run. I glance back to see if he's still there, and in the tinted floodlights of the parking lot, Nigel's face shifts. His slick blond hair morphs into a short dark cut, his face twisting from the comely countenance of Nigel Hammond to someone else I've never seen before.

He grows a few inches, soft craters dent his sunken cheeks, and long

hair shields the glossed mask on his face. Something broken burns in his dark eyes and it unsteadies my steps. He approaches, fists clenched, his clothes shifting, too, their illusion wearing off. He flips his coin once more, and it snaps to the cinch of his collar like a magnet. On it is a familiar image. A column cracked in half. My heart squeezes. The man who I had a run in with at the Market wore the same symbol.

Fear pins me in place. *Magic*. I reach for my weapon.

“Quell, is it? I’ve had orders to find you for *months*. You’re quite hard to find, you know that?” He smirks and my insides quiver. His lips smile though his eyes do not. “That’s your name, isn’t it?”

I brandish Mom’s dagger at him.

“Easy.”

My foot nudges a pile of bikes belonging to those still inside the store.

“I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to talk.”

I drop the groceries, snatch up a bike, and take off. I risk a glance backward. He is blowing air between his fingers, and more thunder rolls overhead. I swerve across the intersection where traffic has doubled at the promise of rain. My calves burn, pushing the pedals faster as I dash between rows of cars packed like sardines at a stoplight. Once I reach the motel parking lot, I dash up the stairs.

“Mom!” My fist connects with the door.

“Quell?”

It opens and I hurry inside, shove it closed, and lock it.

“Someone was at the store. And his *face*! Not the same guy from the market. But another one. Another what did you call them?” I can’t breathe. “Dragun.”

“Slow down. Start over.” Mom peeps out the curtains.

“At the store, there was someone I thought I knew. But then his face *changed*.” I look for shock on Mom’s face, but there is none. “He had a coin at his throat,” I manage. “Like the guy from the Market.”

“What was on the coin?”

I close my eyes, and the way his face shifted slithers through my mem-

ory. Outside, thunder booms, rattling the windows of our tiny room. The Dragun is here. He has to be. I shudder, trying to focus on Mom's question. "A column. A cracked column was on it."

"Not a talon?"

"No."

"Beulah."

She shakes her head, tsking.

"Mom—"

"Quiet! Let me think." She peeps out the window again. "That traffic outside came out of nowhere. It's stop and go, backed up all the way down the street. We can't even get out of the parking lot if we wanted." She paces, the lines in her face deepening.

Knock. Knock.

"We have to get out of here." I tug at her.

"No, *you* do." She unshoulders her bag. "You go on. I'll get them off your tail."

"Mom, no! It's both of us, always." The rest of my words die on my tongue. She's right . . . Usually she flits, I follow, that's how it goes. But she has no reason to run.

She doesn't have poison coursing through her veins.

I'm the reason we've had to do any of this.

"Guard these things as if it's your life," she says, opening her duffel. She pulls out a journal and tears out the last page, where there is an address hastily written. "Go here. Hopefully, the safe houses are still intact." She digs out what I'd thought was a makeup compact and a tiny vial of glowing powder. She spreads it into a smooth shallow circle in the silver dish of the compact, tipping the vial all the way upside down until its empty. "Not much left. But it should be enough." She hands it to me. "Whisper the place you want to go, then blow. It'll take you there."

"What about you? I can't—"

"Do you have your key chain?"

I pull it from my pocket.

She pulls out one just like it and squeezes. Mine glows. “Let me know you’re okay by squeezing it. I’ll do the same. It’ll send me your location. So I can find you wherever you are.”

I squeeze mine, and sure enough Mom’s lights up.

The compact is chilly to my achy fingers, my toushana stirring with something that feels like recognition. *Come with me*, I want to say, but the words won’t form. I can’t bring myself to ask her to put herself in danger.

“I’ll sort this out here, get rid of the Dragoon and come for you, tonight.” She zips my bag and nudges me to go.

“But—?” Tears swallow my cheeks. Running without Mom doesn’t feel right.

“*Quell*.” She shakes me. “Get a hold of yourself!”

Knock. Knock.

“Open up, ma’am.” It’s the hotel manager. “I have someone here with me to see you. Says it’s urgent.”

“Just a minute!” Mom says in her plastic cheerful voice. To me, she whispers, “Buckle down. You know how to stick to the shadows.”

I nod, saltiness on my lips as she presses her own to my forehead.

“Mommy, *please*. I’m scared!”

“You’re a *Marionne*,” she says, her chin rising ever so slightly. “You can do this.” She gives my hand a squeeze. The door handle jiggles, the lock clicking.

“Now, *Quell*!”

My heart hammers. Fear kneads my insides. I glance at the safe house address again. “Twelve Aston Lane,” I whisper into the powder and blow. The world tips sideways. A rush of pressure latches onto me and I feel it like a weight on my chest. Breath sticks in my lungs, and I lurch forward as if I’ve been punched, a thread of cold winding me tighter in its clutches. I blink, but the world fades into nothingness.



GRASS MUSHES UNDER my feet. The air is thick with the scent of woodsy pine and wet moss. Trees surround me like a thousand sentries. Between the rustle of foliage meddled by the wind is deafening silence. I move through the forest toward a break in the canopy up ahead. Though, there is no semblance of a roof or porch.

My foot catches on something, and clanging rings through the trees. I swallow a dry breath holding still to see if anyone heard. Nothing moves but the broken lantern cracked under my shoe. *I'm close*. I hustle to a clearing up ahead where I find a house.

What's left of it.

My hopes for safety shatter like the wreckage I see: crumbled foundation, furniture in pieces, collapsed walls, and broken windows. Mom's given her whole life to keep me safe. This time, it's on me. I have to figure this out. For both of us.

"Watch it; that's my foot, you klutz," a whisper breaks through the forest. I wedge myself in the thicket between the trees.

"If your feet weren't so big, they'd be easier not to step on," someone else says. "Honestly, how do you even find shoes for those things?"

Two girls in long black cloaks lined with thick red fur pass, hoods slung over their heads.

"Dancing with you is probably like trying to woo a bear."

"Brooke, shut up!" She shoves the other girl, playfully. "Keep talking, I'll turn your bones to metal. See how you like that."

Brooke laughs. "You think you're something special all of a sudden with more than one trick up your sleeve?"

"Mother says I could be."

"Ha, you wish."

"Enough, all right? Come on. Mother said, make sure." She gestures at the rubble. "So get in there, make sure there's no traces we've been here. Draguns will be all over this place inspecting by morning." The girl's hand hovers above a small pile of rubble. Air ripples beneath her fingers and the pile shifts, stretching, twisting until it's turned into a heap of forest brush. I blink as she moves on to the next.

Amidst the wreckage, a cloud of black fog appears like a summoned ghost. The Dragun who is after me emerges from it. I gasp. *How did he track me here? Mom . . . is she okay?* The pair of girls raise their arms as if they intend to defend themselves.

"Identify yourself," he commands.

"You first." Brooke flashes the Dragun something shiny. His fist hits his chest.

"Memento sumptus."

The girls lower their hands. *"Non reddere bis."*

"I'm looking for someone," he says. "A girl. I'm on orders from Mother herself. I had a lead that she might be traveling with someone older. But that ended up being a monumental waste of time."

I bite into my fist. *Mom got away.*

"Have you seen anyone come this way?" he asks, and the one with big feet inhales deeply.

"The levels of Dust in the air *do* suggest someone other than us recently traveled here," she says.

I swallow, pressing deeper into shadow. I need somewhere I feel safe. *But there's nowhere I can . . .*

Chateau Soleil . . .

Grandmom.

I turn the compact in my hands, which thankfully have warmed.

"Sssh." The Dragun raises a hand, and all three heads rotate in my direction.

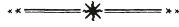
She's my grandmother. Family. A kind woman from what I remember. And Mom said she doesn't know about my toushana.

"She's here." The Dragun rushes in my direction.

I flip open the compact. *Mom will come for me soon. Tonight, she said. I can hide my toushana for a few hours.* "Chateau Soleil," I whisper and blow, the last of the glowing powder dissolving into the night.

Hands reach for me as I disappear.

THREE



The powder transports me to the middle of a patch of dead trees. I latch my hands together to stop them from shaking. A gust of cool wind grazes my skin, and the earthy scent couldn't be more unfamiliar. There's no sight of the city in the distance. No neighborhood of houses. Only dense thick woods and musty blackened trees.

The buzz of barely getting away unsteadies my steps as I wander through the grove for some sight of Grandmom's house. The glow of evening has deepened by the time I spot a road that halts at a pair of iron gates. Attached to it is a stone guard house, where a line of cars waits to enter. The barrier towers there like hands raised in worship to the dusky sky, the words Chateau Soleil on its front. I swallow. Gates like that exist to keep people like me out.

I force my fidgeting fingers still and tap my dying phone to call a ride. It's linked to an account that probably has a few bucks in it. The wait drums my pulse faster. Will this actually work?

The driver rolls up after not too long and considers me with smooshed brows.

"You want me to give you a ride *through* the gate?" He twists his lips.

"I can pay extra." I flash him the money I have left from the store.

"Get in."

I slide into the back seat. The car juts into motion as the guard gestures for us to pull forward. I have nowhere else to go. I need to get through this gate. My grip on my bag tightens and I give my key chain a squeeze.

A second later, it glows in response. *Hurry, Mom, please.* Guilt hooks in my stomach.

We slowly roll forward to the guard whose appearance is as approachable as his body language. His lips tilt down in scowl as if they're just permanently that way. The high collar of his shirt is bound by a circular metal emblazoned with a single hooked claw much like a dragon talon. He plucks it from his neck, turning it in his hands like a coin. *A coin.*

"Is he a Dragun, too?" I mutter too loudly. I study the image on the coin again. Not a cracked column . . .

The driver's brow bows in confusion in the rearview as he eases to a stop. My window comes down, and I press back into my seat. I feel the gate guard's stare like a knife between my ribs. But it doesn't flicker with recognition. *The talon.* He isn't affiliated with the Dragun after me. He doesn't know my secret.

"Your name?" The Dragun's lips purse with irritation.

"Quell."

"One moment." His words slither from his lips. Beyond the grates, sweeping willow trees arc over the street, cloaking the already graying evening into deeper shades of gloom. I squint for a glimpse of a rooftop or building. But the road twists out of sight.

"I'm not seeing a Quell." The guard says. "Who are you visiting exactly?"

"I'm here to visit Mrs . . . Mrs. Marianne."

"*Mrs. Marianne?*" His eyes narrow, and I swear it's squeezing my throat.

"Y-Yes, sir."

"Another moment, please."

I try to sit up taller. I don't know Grandmom's first name. She's always been Grandmom Marianne. The guard returns and gestures to the gate. I exhale as it folds in on itself.

"Do you happen to have the house number?" I ask. "Like, which house is it?"

"It's the only house."

"Right, thanks." The car lurches into motion. The road winds through

a tunnel of trees. I tighten my grip on the handle of the dagger mom gave me, firmly, desperate for some sense of assurance. Some sense of control.

“Where do you want me to let you out?” the driver asks.

There’s still no sign of a rooftop or anything besides brooding foliage and foreboding sky. “Just beyond these trees?”

Hair rises on my neck. I shouldn’t be here. Memories play in my head on repeat, from times Mom and I have been in even more dire straits. My *toushana* is quiet at the moment, and I try to settle better in my seat. *We may not have much, but we have each other*, Mom says all the time. And it’s always true. Until now. I peer out the window at the trees rustling, waving.

Are they saying welcome?

Or run?

As we exit the tree tunnel, the darkness lifts like someone pulled back a curtain. The ashen clouds have rolled on, and the evening’s sky is a regal shade of pink. I press the button on the door, and wind whips inside the car. I inhale deeper and the knot in my chest eases.

The road curves around a sweeping cobblestone courtyard dotted with sculpted shrubs and statues like the garden of a fancy castle. Wispy grass sprouts between wide pavers and a stone fountain which gushes water a whole story in the air, its droplets glinting in the evening sun. I press up to the window, taking in the majesty of it all, and my grip slacks on the dagger’s hilt. A steeply pitched roof is a speck in the distance buried in lush green and tall woods.

“It must be that way,” I say, craning for a better view. The street snakes to a cul-de-sac, and that’s when I see it: another iron gate with an *M* on its front. “There.” I point. It’s all so grand, like something I’d see on a postcard, a picture in my history books. Not a real place I could set foot into. Something twinges in my chest. Something warm, intoxicating, a little foreign. Something that feels like hope.

The car pulls up to the gate, and for several moments nothing happens. There’s no guard tower or speaker box. The dark gable roof beyond it is no more than a break in the trees.

“Lady, I have to get going. I’m not getting paid enough to sit here all day.”

This is it. It has to be. “Okay, thanks.” I tip him and he peels off.

The gates loom over me like an altar waiting for an offering. Wind howls, turning my arms to gooseflesh. Cold seeps into my fingers, then creeps up into my hands. I clench my fists, then reach for my rice pack when my fingers snag on the zipper, seizing up. The ache morphs into a frigid chill, my *toushana* stirring. I wish I knew what provoked it. What wakes it up some moments and keeps it lying silent others.

“Hello?” I set my bag on the ground. They must have cameras. “Anyone here?”

Nothing.

Something swoops overhead, and the world darkens. But above, I only glimpse shadow, like clouds that have moved on but left their shade behind. I blink. It’s gone. The dimness of the evening thickens. Wind grazes my skin, rustling the trees, and the slants of shade draw nearer, stretching across the pavement, reaching for me.

“Who’s there?” I force down the lump in my throat and feel for the flap of my bag, eyeing Mom’s dagger hilt with images of the Dragun after me still on the back of my eyelids.

Suddenly, darkness from above nose-dives toward me, and panic flares in my chest. My fingers graze the hilt of my dagger when a force pummels into my back knocking me forward, ripping away my breath. My knees slam the ground, prickling with pain. I reach again for my bag. The zipper sticks, but I jiggle it open, when a thick fog as black as night surrounds me. I steady myself for the blow, trying to see which direction it’s coming from, but there is nothing, no one, only shadows.

The fog lifts, and my side throbs with the sting of a fresh wound. I hold the spot where it aches as the world tips sideways. The trees sway, watching, in judgment, like the iron gates that wouldn’t let me in. I scan for some indication of where the shadow went, where it will come from next, but only see tricks of light. Splotches of black on the ground that blur and shift.

“Please, stop!” My ribs quake with pain, as if they’re being snapped out of place. I peer harder, grow colder, pins pushing behind my eyes trying to translate the darkness.

I blink, and the world glitches white. That’s when I see him.

An outline of his feet, shaped by only air. He lunges toward me, but I’m ready. I grab his ankle, hold as tight as I can, and tug. He trips, but somehow catches himself before falling. The shadow he was blows away like sand.

What’s left behind is a guy about my age dressed much like the gate guard with a glare that is a dagger of its own.

I gulp. *Another one.* A gleaming mask covers the top half of this Dragun’s face as well. But it’s much more ornate than the others I’ve seen, intricately carved along its edges where it fades into his skin. His dark coat and loose-fitted top are lined with red embroidery, much finer than any of the other Draguns wore. But the cinch at his neck where I expect to see a silver coin is only fabric.

“The gate guard already cleared—” But before I can finish, he’s on his feet, nostrils flaring, before disappearing into a cloud of black.

“I—” I start, but I’m engulfed in a dark fog as cold as death. A fog of . . . *him*. Sharp pain pricks me all over like slashes with a fine blade. I blink, but everything is black. And red. I wail in pain. My *toushana* roars in me, a blanket of ice wrapping around my bones so insistent it burns. I bite down, trying to focus, and force my eyes open, looking for an outline. Some sign of where the Dragun’s striking from. The fog shifts, rippling around his shape. I swing out my arm, as cold as a frozen log, slamming it into the back of his knees. He stumbles but recovers swiftly, as the shadows lift and he reappears.

His green eyes narrow.

I pull myself up and snatch the dagger, thrusting its tip straight at his face, Mom’s warnings about Grandmom and this world haunting me.

“Touch me again and I’ll slice you in half.” The world frays at the edges, red rivers running between my fingers, down my arms.

My threat doesn't garner a response, but his gaze fixates on the blade. Warmth soaks my side and whatever he did to me makes it feel like something is ripping apart my insides. But I hold my dagger arm higher, firm. He won't touch me again. Tiny cuts stripe my arms, hands. Blood, there's so much blood. The mask on his face vanishes.

"Where'd you steal that?"

"It's *mine*."

He shakes his head with disbelief. "*Who* are you?"

I blow out a shaky breath. Words I've been forbidden to say my entire life rise like bile in my throat. "Marionne. Quell Janae Marionne."

FOUR



He holds out his hand and I consider my blade but tuck it away. My legs, scratched and worn out from the scuffle, feel like lugging lead. I stagger and he steadies me with a rough shake before wrapping his arm tightly around my back, pulling me to him. I stiffen against his hard chest as he leads me through the gate, wincing as his closeness presses against my wounds. A sprawling house not unlike a castle gazes down at us, lit up like a star in the distance, a blanket of rolling green between us and it. Like a manor in a world all its own.

“Hold on to me,” he says, pulling me along faster. But the pain radiating all over my body sharpens and I can hardly keep up. He latches my hand on his arm and my heart thuds in my ears. His grip on me is somehow both gentle and tight. Closer to him the fabric at his throat is easier to see. What I thought was bare fabric is a stitched image of a hooked claw, a replica of the one the gate guard had on the coin at his neck. However, his is sewn in black thread. *A talon . . . Not a cracked column.* I try to exhale but can’t because nothing about his hold on me says I’m safe.

“I’ve done nothing wrong. *Where* exactly are you taking me?!”

His grip on me tightens, his jaw working. “Do not let go of me.” It isn’t a request.

The world spins around us, and in moments, we’re at the foot of the estate where pointed arch columns line the front. Along its stone triangular pediment, the word *marionne* is etched. My insides slosh. *My* name. Beneath it is some sort of symbol, a fleur-de-lis and talon wrapped in words

in a language I can't read. I catch a glimpse of myself in the window, and despite my bloodied clothes, I tie up my hair and dust off my freckled cheeks, but my hands sting, chafed from the pavement.

He pushes open the doors, tugging me along. Inside. The ceiling towers above, a masterpiece of gold leafed rosettes and crown molding like in the fancy castles I've read about in history books. Arches appear to be ripped right into it, reminiscent of an old, haunted church. He leads me through the entryway, past a maze of portrait-lined paneled walls, to a grand foyer where a giant sphere hovers midair like a black moon. Tiny speckles shine like constellations inscribed all over its glassy surface. Beneath them, darkness swirls violently.

"What is tha—" I reach to graze my fingers along its low-lying belly as we pass, but my hand goes right through it as if it's no more than an illusion. I rub my eyes, warming all over with awe.

He pulls me along, and I fidget in his grasp. "I can walk just fine on my own."

He holds me tighter, his jaw working. Music croons between a pair of towering carved doors as we pass. I crane for a glimpse inside. Bright lights illuminate an audience arched around a stage, some wearing masks, others with gold or silver tiaras on their heads. On the stage, a girl dressed quite fancily raises a dagger high above herself. I gasp.

"Eyes ahead!" My captor snatches me along before I can see more.

We go up one grand staircase, then another. Next, a long hall. Sweeping windows gaze out to a speckled sky hung over a sea of grass and sculpted plants. My wet shoes squeak, skidding on the polished floor. He urges us along faster, my mouth gaping, head swiveling at it all. How could a place so dangerous be so beautiful?

"Wait here." He says as we approach a pair of guarded double doors. He speaks briefly to a guard who also wears a talon-marked coin at his throat. The guard eyes my injuries with disinterest before letting us inside.

On the other side of the doors is a sitting room where fire crackles in a fireplace next to more tall windows swathed in fine fabric. I ball my hands

into fists and exhale, grateful my fingers are warm, my touthana quiet.

A chandelier hangs from ornamental molding, giving everything a warm glow. The ceiling is so high, I have to tilt my head all the way back to see it. My mother grew up here. The wedge of guilt that's burrowed a hole in my heart widens. I took her from all this.

"Headmistress Marionne will be out in a minute," the Dragun guarding her door says. I squeeze my key chain, noting the tick of a pendulum clock on the wall. My captor puts the entire room between us without a word to me, irritation set in his jaw as his mask retreats back into his skin. Indoors, with better lighting, I can make him out fully. He perches in a corner of the sitting room like a Roman statue, broad-shouldered, looming like a god, perfect and poised. Pretty, even. Sculpted cheekbones and long lashes set off his deep green eyes. His nose curves ever so slightly upward above a pair of full lips that appear permanently puckered. He'd look as if he was pouting if it weren't for his cutting, broody glare. It's sickening how gorgeous he is. I smooth my threadbare shirt and finger the holes in my jeans that aren't supposed to be there, which only makes them worse.

He catches me staring and his edges sharpen. Something's under his skin. And that something, I suspect, is me. A knock at the door makes my back straighten. A girl with a petite frame and face, carrying a tin case enters. Dark hair curtains her warm expression. She wears a simple dress in a breathy fabric, and on top of her head is a thin silver tiara: coils of metal and stringy bits of silver stacked on top of a headband. It shines radiantly as her head moves, the silver bits catching the sconced candlelight. It's dainty and elegant, much like her.

She gestures at my arm, slick with red. "May I?"

I nod and set down my bag. For several moments, she works sharply focused over my wounds, smoothing her fingers over the cuts along my arm until they are new again. I glare at my hands. I really am broken.

My side cramps in pain as she finishes up with my arm. I wince, leaning on my other elbow, which is dug into a chair cushion that looks fancier

than anything I've ever seen, let alone owned. The girl pulls her hair back into a bun. When she leans over my wound fully, I can see that her tiara is not sitting on her head—it's coming *out* of her head. I swallow my shock.

"Does it hurt?" I ask.

"Me?" Her brows touch.

"Yes, I mean the—" I gesture at her tiara.

Her cheeks dent with tiny craters. "Oh, you're serious? No, of course not." She works her magic around my wound as if she were pulling apart delicately small invisible threads until the skin on my arm is all healed. "This must be all so new to you. You can only see diadems"—she indicates the thing I called a tiara—"and masks if you have magic in your blood." She smiles. "Still, I can hide it at will, if I choose." Her diadem disappears.

"Whoa."

"It takes a little bit of control to learn how to do that."

I gaze up again at the show of magic arced above her head. "Wow!"

She blushes. "Was there anywhere else you were hurt?"

I lift the edge of my shirt.

"Okay, this one might sting a little." She cuts a glance at my captor, the Dragoon, who picks dirt from his nails, his expression still rigid with annoyance. He could be a piece of furniture in this ostentatious sitting room with its silk lined walls and paneled wood. His mask, the one he'd shed outside, sits on his nose again, glistening in the sconce light.

My skin tugs and I brace for the pain.

"Hey," the girl says, pressing my shoulder down. "Try to relax. Here." She sticks out a hand. "I'm Abby, Primus, second of my blood, Shifter candidate, healer type." She dips her chin.

"Quell, uh . . ."

"You're a Marianne, yes?" she asks, tossing a glance at the guarded double doors. "I heard."

I nod stiffly.

Jordan purses his mouth in disbelief.

"There have been five Headmistresses since this House's inception,"

she says not seeming to notice. "Which means magic can be traced back that long in your bloodline. So you'd say *sixth* of your blood."

"Right."

She grins and for some reason, I do, too.

"Nice to meet you. I should have you all fixed up in a few." She moves my shirt out of the way, which had worked its way back down. "Try to breathe normally, okay? The magic works better when you're relaxed."

"Thanks." I force an exhale and set my eyes on anything across the room other than my skin being put back together. Books line the far wall secured in glass cabinets, affixed with a fleur-shaped padlock. I search for meaning along their spines. But other than a talon, or fleur, here or there, none of the terms or symbols are familiar.

"Almost," Abby says, and I glance back at her work.

The slice of red flesh zips closed and I inhale through my nose, swallowing the nausea back down.

Creases hug her eyes as she cleans up the blood staining my clothes and limbs. "There. Good as new. Could you put in a good word for me with Headmistress Marianne about how I've done?"

"Sure."

She thanks me three times, before gathering her things and disappearing behind the double doors we'd come through. Just myself and my captor now. Feeling stronger, I rotate to face him. He stares into the roaring fireplace. I slip my hand into my bag and feel for my dagger, keeping my eyes on him and the door.

"How'd you do it?" He stuffs a hand in his pocket, his back still to me.

"Excuse me?" I tighten the grip on my dagger.

"Seeing me as I was cloaked. How?" He twists in my direction. His jaw clenches like the words are rot on his tongue. I scowl at the man who attacked me, then dragged me in here like a criminal. He shifts his posture and the light from the window cuts across his face. He isn't affiliated with the Dragoon after me and yet he dragged me in here as if . . .

"You thought I was *trespassing*?"

He tilts his head in agreement. Flecks of blue glint in his green eyes, and they remind me of a lake lapping a grassy shore. Heat rises on my neck.

“Well, I’m not.”

“That remains to be seen.” He turns his back to me dismissively. “The estate doesn’t receive unsolicited visitors when Season is in, as a security measure.” He is silent a moment. “And you didn’t answer my question.”

I rotate away in my chair when, to my great relief, the door to Headmistress’s suite clicks open. A woman whose skin suggests she’s no older than twenty-five glides in.

“Grandmom?” I stand.

Her hair shines like polished silver, swooped backward and pinned in an updo, held together by a pearl comb. The diadem on her head is much taller than Abby’s, not unlike a crown. It’s encrusted with pearls and pink gems in a variety of sizes, all blindingly glitzy. Chunky stones are pressed to her ears, and matching ones hug her knuckles. The corset to her gown is shiny like silk, woven with a fleur-de-lis pattern. She is majestic.

“Quell.” Her voice is soft and warm. A smile is pressed into her velvety skin.

I stand, hands clasped, not quite sure what’s appropriate to do.

“Close your mouth, dear. You look like a trout.”

I snap it closed. She moves toward me, and I’d swear she’s gliding on air.

“Jordan,” she says, addressing my captor. “This isn’t how we welcome guests here.”

“It’s my understanding she wasn’t invited.”

Grandmother’s nostrils flare, but her tone comes out measured. “Yes, but this is my *granddaughter*.” She faces him fully, and his mouth parts in disbelief before he snaps it closed and it hardens.

“And,” Grandmom goes on, “I would have liked her greeted properly. You might have debuted from your House, but you are *still* a Ward of mine until the end of summer.”

His glare hits the ground.

I pull at my shirt. A Ward as in this isn’t his House. As in he *could*

know Draguns outside of the ones here. The Dragun after me . . .

“ . . . you will abide by our way of doing things or find your duties overseeing security on these grounds revoked.”

His cavalier posture stiffens, arrogance rising off him like steam. “You would do that? You would—”

“Do I strike you as a liar, Mister Wexton?”

Wexton? As in the luxury hotels?

“I . . . No, Headmistress.”

“You might not be under my direct authority, but this is *my* House.” Her stern demeanor melts back into a smile when she turns to me. “Afterall, we wouldn’t want to give her a bad first impression, would we?”

“Thank you, Grandmom. He was—”

“You haven’t been addressed to speak, dear.”

My insides twist. This is not how I pictured this going. I’m making a fool of myself. She doesn’t seem to like Jordan very much, but I’m not sure she likes me any more.

“Thanks to Abby, you look well.”

I start to speak but nod and smile instead.

“You may go,” she says to Jordan, sitting, somehow without bending her back at all.

Jordan starts to speak but moves to the door instead. He passes so close I expect us to touch. My breath hitches. But he grazes past me with room to spare and opens the door before turning back. He stares, piercing and sharp, his eyes gilded daggers that could cut right through me. My toushana flutters. *Does he know?* I shift in my seat and try to avert my gaze. But can’t.

“My apologies to you, madam,” he says. “Welcome to House of Marianne.” He folds at the waist, his suspicion still fixed on me, before slipping out the door.

“Now.” Grandmom pats a cushion beside her and I sit beside her. “Let me get a good look at you.”

Her stare bathes me in curiosity. She pulls at my clothes, grazes my

hair. Every spot she touches tingles. She glances at my hands, and I flinch. They ache. In seconds, they could turn to ice, burn through all her nice things. Out my secret. I stuff them in my pockets and try to settle. After a moment, she sits back in her chair.

“What brings you here?” she asks. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

In a rush, I tell her almost everything. How we’ve moved around often because Mom’s work was always changing, *not* because we’ve been living on the run. I skip the stuff that happened in the forest and the Dragon on my tail. And explain that my mom told me she had some things to take care of days ago, left me at our apartment, and hadn’t returned. The lie stings. I punctuate my explanation with smiles, the right inflection, enough truth, like I’ve always done. But her face is as stoic as stone as she listens. I smooth my clammy palms on my pants to warm them. I only need her to buy it for a few hours.

“And where is Rhea . . . your mother?”

My chest tightens. “I don’t know.”

“She has a way of making herself seen when she wants to be. Well . . .” She slaps her legs, before standing. “Season has already started,” she says more to herself than me. “But you’re my granddaughter, you can slip in and play catch up. We have *lots* of work to do.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t think you’re going to be on my estate idle, do you? You will enter induction for the Order.” Her eyebrows kiss as if to ask how I could have expected anything different.

“I didn’t need—”

“Did you not come here because you’ve nowhere else to go?”

“I did, but—”

“And I am saying, dear, you are welcome. But you will prove you’re Marianne in more than just name and earn your place, like everyone else.”

“No, no. I wasn’t—” I blow out a breath. “I’m sorry. This is very generous. I wasn’t sure where to go, so I came here.”

She lifts her teacup to her lips, sipping slowly, and I realize I have a fist

full of chair cushion. She stands and walks to the window, her cup clinking against its saucer.

"What do you think your mother's last words to me were, Quell?"

I shift in my seat, reminded of the fine linen beneath me. The obstinate wealth, an entirely different life Mom would have had at her fingertips.

If it weren't for me.

"I don't know."

"Take a guess."

"I love you, but I have to go?" That seems sort of nice, maybe.

"She said nothing," she says, flinching a smile. "Left like a thief in the night. I tucked you in that evening. You liked me to read this story about a bear who lived in secret in the basement of an old house." She chortles. "So I read it twice. You'd insisted."

I have literally *no* memory of this. My throat thickens. A picture of little me on her lap pries its way to my memory. I replace it with one of dead magic bleeding from my hands.

"Afterward, your mother and I had a night cap as usual. And then the next morning, she was gone." She pauses and the silence hovers like a guillotine. "She pretended."

I gulp.

"She lied."

I flinch.

"Despite all I'd given her, shown her." Her lips purse. "Would have given her. She took *everything* from me."

I look around at the scroll-armed furniture, the blanket of green outside. How is she the one with the short end of the stick? Grandmom must read my mind because her smile deepens.

"Don't be fooled by things, Quell. She took from me what no one else could give. My legacy. A daughter to love. A granddaughter."

A chill sweeps over me. "Family."

"Exactly." Grandmom's lip trembles for a split second, her composure cracking.

I hadn't thought about it like that, what it must have been like for Grandmom. I can't imagine just not seeing Mom again. Without a goodbye. Mom lost all this because of me. My grip slacks on the metal key chain hooked on my fingers.

Grandmom sits back down beside me, closing her hands around mine. I hesitate at her touch.

"You coming back here is a dream." She pats my arm. "And I intend to make you as welcome as she was. I do not coddle. I am firm. But there is always love behind my words."

She plucks a book so thick it requires two hands from one of her shelves. Its gold-lettered spine glistens: *Book of Names*. She opens it and turns past countless blank pages to one with a handful of names on it.

"It's our second chance." She smiles, and this time it reaches her eyes. "Sign here." She hands me a pen and indicates the next open space beside four other names, beneath the title: inductee roster.

"I . . ."

"House of Marianne was the second-ever created House in the Prestigious Order of Highest Mysteries to oversee magical instruction of prospects in the southern quadrant." She pauses, taking my silence, I gather, for my needing convincing. "There are four territories and thus four Houses and Headmistresses who rule by Council." She steeples her hands. I'm not sure her nose could rise any higher. "Houses are run like a magical boarding school, if you will. There are no school year semesters here. We have one Season from May to August where debutantes are able to officially join our societies. Since its inception, this great House has held its own study and exhibition of magic as a cut above the rest." She rolls her wrist, unfolding her palm up. "*Supra alios*." Then she snaps it beside her, before unrolling her fingers to lay flat and I realize it's some sort of official gesture. "Don't worry, you'll learn." She smiles and it tugs at something giddy in me.

I slide to the edge of my seat, eager to hear more.

"Since Sola Sfenti unearthed the Sun Stones in the ancient days, the

Order has done what it must to protect and preserve its magic. For centuries, there was nowhere safe to grow or study it. Hiding magic was the only option. *Until* . . .” Her lips curl in a clever smirk. “The world shifted, capitalism boomed, and Britain began to tout itself as a world power. Within those *lavish* shows of disgustingly acquired wealth, the debutante was born.”

“So the Order . . . magic has been around, since forever?”

“If you don’t know *true* history, dear, you *will* learn it here.”

“History is actually the one class I never skipped.” The honesty spills out before I can tug it back, my skin tingling with excitement. I bite my lip.

“We attend *all* our studies here, the intriguing and the mundane.” She raises a brow, and I slink back in my seat. When she returns to my side, kindness has softened her expression, and I sit up a little straighter.

“We adopted the debutante concept, and of course put our own spin on it. But, Quell, those were the years everything changed for us.” She cups her hand over mine. “We’d *finally* found a veneer to exist in the world, one to cloak our wealth, excuse our exclusivity, one to allow us to safely, *privately*, study and grow our gifts.” She exhales. “That is . . . for those of us fortunate enough to be invited . . .” She pushes the Book of Names toward me.

Exclusive. Magic. Wealth.

I swallow. “I . . . I can’t sign that.”

Mom didn’t tell Grandmom about my toushana. Instead, she fled, choosing a life on the run. There has to be a reason for that. I scoot away from her on the couch. “I’m sorry it’s just . . . a lot, so fast.”

Insistence burns in her eyes, and I pull my bag strap closer to me.

“You understand there is magic inside you, dear?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And it *cannot* grow without the careful guidance of a Cultivator. That doesn’t entice you?”

“I think I’m just tired.”

Her stare deadens, and my throat goes dry.

"Of course. Forgive me." She slaps the book closed, her lips thinned. "You're probably exhausted."

"Yes."

"Very well, get some rest." She holds out her hand. "But I will require your phone. They're not allowed on the premises. This is a place of the utmost privacy and discretion."

"I—"

"Your phone, or I am afraid you will not be permitted to stay, dear." She straightens and I dig my phone out of my bag, thankful I at least have my key chain. I hand it over, and my heart skips a beat. It's like breaking off a piece of myself and giving it away.

"I'll have refreshment and fresh clothes sent to a room for you. We'll take up this conversation tomorrow, how does that sound?"

My fingers graze the spots on my arm Abby's magic healed and a tightness unfurls in my chest at what *real* magic can do. I shove off the futile thoughts and meet Grandmom's eyes.

"That sounds good. Thank you."

By morning, I'll be gone.