

The Spells We Cast

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ONE

I've been expecting something big to happen for weeks. I just didn't think it would be getting dumped.

"I'm breaking up with you," Jeremy says while his mouth is still full of taco, a Torchy's "trashy" taco, so the extra queso it came soaked in dribbles down his chin while he stabs the knife in my back.

My fingers itch to drop the tortilla chip frozen in midair over our shared guac and put a curse on him right then and there. Maybe I'd make that dribble of queso un-wipe-away-able, or, I don't know, turn the jalapenos poking out of his corn tortilla so spicy that no amount of milk drinking, tongue wiping, or praying would ever make it go away.

But no . . . Meema always says to be a Barrett means to never do harm with a spell. So instead I set the chip back in the basket, put my hands out of view below the table, and tug on my leg hair sharp and quick to send a jolt up my shin that distracts from the constricting in my heart.

"Say something." Jeremy's deep brown eyes are round with worry, but not like he's afraid my feelings are hurt. More like he's concerned that I haven't reacted the way he wants me to. Maybe he wants me to beg him, or thinks I should burst into tears.

"Why-y?" I ask, and curse my freaking throat for catching. Not *literally* curse it, of course, but I'm convinced if I let one tear fall, I'm going to lose it. The last place I want to have a meltdown is a crowded

restaurant with an audience of frat boys chugging a pitcher of margaritas one booth over.

“It just makes the most sense.” Jeremy starts ticking reasons off on the thick fingers that, until thirty seconds ago, felt like the only place my hands belonged. “We just graduated, you’re taking a year off and I’m going to Duke, you said you thought you’d be busy with work this summer. It just seems like we should end it now. Long-distance college relationships never work out, right?”

“So you’re just going to throw away the past fourteen months?” My hands are shaking now, and it’s taking everything in me not to use them to pool magic in my fingers and make devil horns sprout from Jeremy’s forehead.

“I thought you’d be relieved,” he says. “Like, you’ve been so busy lately, you’ve hardly had any time to hang out. Weekly taco dates aren’t really enough for a whole relationship, you know?”

“I haven’t been busy,” I snap, but as soon as the words leave my mouth, I know it’s a lie. In between cramming for Calculus and US History tests so I could just barely graduate from Lake Travis High, Meema was teaching me how to create air pockets that would protect her hair from Texas humidity, or to turn the coyotes that like to shred her chickens into harmless armadillos. Ever since high school started she’s made me treat magic like a whole other class—like six other periods of class, actually, every day for the past four years. I think she feels like she has to redeem herself after her last student completely failed. Especially since he hovers around the house like a beer-soaked reminder of how she let him down, watching us—his mom and his son—cast spells while he’s forced to relive the moment his magic was

stripped away from him.

“Okay, maybe I have had to spend a little extra time at home. But you know how Meema gets about me working around the ranch.” It’s the excuse I gave him all year, conveniently leaving out the fact that I was mucking stalls with magic or gathering eggs from the chicken coop while my nose was shoved in some ancient elven text.

Jeremy gives me those adorable puppy dog eyes, likely perfected while spending hundreds of hours washing dachshunds and Pomeranians at his family’s dog grooming business. Only this time he really does seem concerned, and I instantly feel bad for suspecting the worst of him. “I wouldn’t trade the time we had together for anything, Nigel. You and I had so many firsts, and nothing can take that away. But honestly, I kind of thought you’d be relieved. Like, you’ve been so stressed out this entire year. I thought, you know, I’d be one less thing on your plate.”

I always knew that being a Barrett would be a lot of work. It’s a big reputation to live up to, being a descendant of the first human granted elf magic, a man who created a weapon so strong it defeated the most evil monster this country has ever seen. You’ve got to be the strongest, cleverest, fastest magician of your generation. But I wanted that *in addition* to a boyfriend. Who wouldn’t want a partner who’s adorable, dog-grooming, piano-key-tinkling, soccer-playing, all-around perfect? Meema always warned against dating, saying that relationships never work out for apprentices once they start studying for the Culling. But I couldn’t just magic away my feelings. I couldn’t cast some spell to get rid of the hope when Jeremy asked me out that maybe I could have this slice of a normal life, too.

“Is there anything I can say to change your mind?” The words sound pathetic even to me.

Jeremy reaches across the table, palms up. I give in because this might be my last physical contact with a guy, let alone a guy I really like, for who knows how long. Over the past few months, Jeremy’s even graduated to saying the L-word. Though, I’ve never said it back, and it hits me now how heartless that must have been. How can you not love the person who was your first kiss, your first *everything*? Who asked you to prom by lining up five Goldendoodles painted with pet-friendly purple dye to spell *P-R-O-M-*? in their curly tan fur. But I was too distracted becoming the next great magician to fully give my heart to a relationship that I guess I always knew would end. Even still, I don’t want it to.

Jeremy’s warm, large hands completely engulf my own, a feeling I’ve always adored. He held my hands like this that first day we talked, when I passed out from the sight of my own blood after a scalpel accident during frog dissection. I’ve always had this inexplicable phobia, and it’s always embarrassed me. So imagine my surprise when it led to my first boyfriend. Jeremy helped me off the floor, and as he walked me to the nurse’s office he told me he’d always had a crush on me. I don’t know why, since I pretty much kept to myself, never quite able to connect with anybody or relate to their normal human lives.

“If we stayed together, I think we’d just be delaying the inevitable,” Jeremy says. “You’re amazing and you always make me laugh. Except it only happens when I get to see you, and that’s too few and far between right now. I understand you have to work hard, but if we keep this going, it’s only going to get worse. I want my relationship to be more

than just texts and the occasional taco.”

The defensive part of me wants to tell him that we only do tacos because Torchy’s is *his* favorite spot, but I know it’s a weak comeback. Without tacos, our relationship *would* just be texts, and I can’t expect him to hang on until after the Culling. Because if I succeed and make it into the Guild, how much of my time will be filled with missions, stopping demons and the Depraved from wreaking havoc?

The intercom usually used to announce orders ready for pick-up squeals to life, making both Jeremy and me cringe. “Uh, is there a Nigel Barrett here? Nigel Barrett? You’ve got a message.”

Jeremy frowns. “That’s weird.”

I shoot up so hard my knees knock against the table. Tendrils of pain throb up my legs, but they barely register. It’s hard to feel anything over the pounding of my heart. And at least now it’s not due to the abrupt breakup.

“I should get that,” I breathe.

Jeremy nods, or at least I think he does; I only catch the movement in my peripheral vision. My eyes are focused on the college kid at the intercom looking around for Nigel Barrett to come get their message. For *me* to come get it.

“You do that,” Jeremy says, placing his perfect big hand on my shoulder when he stands. “It’s been fun, Nigel, and I’m going to miss you. I know whatever’s next for you, you’re going to be great at it. But some advice? Wait to charm somebody else until you’re fully ready for a relationship.”

I know I should meet his eyes, I know I should acknowledge the hurt in his voice, I know I should regret all the times he asked me to

come over, but I couldn't because I was making it rain over Meema's tomatoes or breaking my pinkie to see if I could mend a broken bone. (I could, by the way, but I fixed it at an angle, so I had to break it *four more times* until I got it straight again.) But instead of saying good-bye to Jeremy, I walk like a spell has been cast over me—somehow both numb and aware of every nerve-ending in my body—toward the cashier holding up an immaculate gold envelope. Only for him it's probably been spelled to look like something else entirely.

"I'm Nigel Barrett," I whisper.

The cashier, whose nametag says RICKY, hurriedly hands me the envelope. "What took you so long? I've been calling your name forever. Just to hand you a phone number on some salsa-soaked napkin." Yep. I knew it. "You better get some serious action from that."

Ricky moves on to take the order of a mom wrangling a group of middle-school baseball players while I turn the envelope over in my shaking hands. A navy-blue wax seal is on the back, the five-starred symbol of the Guild shining up at me, representative of the five ancestral races of all magicians: elves, fae, goblins, nymphs, and sprites.

I swallow and look up. Jeremy's gone, which dampens my excitement for a second. I didn't even tell him goodbye. But it's not like I could actually share with him that I have magic powers, that if I really wanted to I could turn him into one of the Shar-Peis he washes. Not only is it against the rules to tell Jeremy (or any human you're not married to), but I'm certain he'd run out the door faster than you can say *My boyfriend lost his mind*.

Ex-boyfriend, actually.

I take a deep breath and tap the wax Guild seal. Just like Meema

said it would, the stars light up gold, responding to the touch of the envelope's recipient. The seal pops off and the flap opens, a blank piece of parchment sliding out all on its own. I quickly look around; I've never been in the presence of actual working magic in such a crowded place. But not a single face is pointed in my direction. The frat boys still chug their margaritas, a toddler cries as a cascade of soda spills on their lap, and the middle-school baseball team cruises by with only one of the players looking at me like I've gone completely bonkers. Not because of the magic, but because I'm treating what they see as a dirty napkin like it's the Holy Grail.

This parchment might as well be that legendary relic. Because the words that are now appearing on it in bright, curling cursive will determine the direction of the rest of my life. They'll kick off the journey where I'll end up a magician or a bitter, powerless ghost of a man like my dad.

No pressure, right?

Greetings, Magician—

You've been selected to participate in the Culling.

This tradition keeps our power alive, our members from death.

Succeed and enter the Guild.

Fail and you will be stripped of all magic.

Participation is not optional. The first trial will begin shortly.

Sincerely,

The Guild

TWO

The Culling. An annual tradition that's gone on for almost four hundred years (since 1648 AD, to be exact) in which thousands of magically gifted eighteen-year-olds are whittled down—*culled* down—to just hundreds. Three trials in just a matter of days that will make or break you, that will let you join the Guild and continue your life with magic running through your veins, or have your power snatched out of you like the last PS5 at a holiday sale.

Why only hundreds? When the Depraved got out of hand and Ancestral races first decided to stop hoarding their power and share it with humans, folks quickly learned there were problems when too much magic coalesced in one place. People died. Humans, magicians, *and* Ancestrals. Animals and plants, too. Meema always says to think of magic like water. It's needed for life. But too much of it and you'll drown. Every last magician in the Guild would drown in their own power if the Culling didn't take place, and every human, plant, and animal would be consumed by its energy. It's why we dwindle our numbers each year and why Ancestrals have kept to their own kidden city ever since. With magic dispersed more evenly throughout the world, we were finally able to use these powers for good. Because it's not just magicians who need our magic. Humanity needs us, too. The Ancestrals aren't the only magical beings out there, and many of them mean to do harm. So while we may have powers greater than

humans will ever know, we don't just keep them to ourselves. The Guild protects humans from all those that prefer evil and chaos to light and love. It's a privilege, and a fair price to pay for our gifts.

If you asked my dad, though, he'd call it all a load of shit. I can practically hear him say as much as he glares down from his bedroom window while I park outside our Texas Hill Country estate. It's all pristine, cream-colored limestone that Meema made me spell to prevent any black mold from growing in its crevices and steel-lined windows similarly magicked so that moisture doesn't leave streaks. That last one took me a minute to figure out. The first time I tried it, I broke every window in the family room. Meema wouldn't fix them, either—said we could live without windows until I could clean up my own mess. And it was the middle of August, so everything in the room was soaking wet with humidity. The couch squished when you sat on it. Worst month of my life, and it certainly didn't make Dad warm up to me.

I meet his eyes and wave. Like an idiot, I choose to use the hand that's clutching the invitation—that he must see as a napkin—and mouth, *The Culling*. Wrong move. Dad scowls and turns his back, making me cringe. Sometimes I get this instinct to treat him like he's a made-for-TV-movie dad who will root for me in anything I do. Even though my brain knows he's never, ever been that, my heart still holds out hope.

Instead of bringing us closer together, though, I've just made Dad relive his own trials and his failure in the final task. He was that close. His own dad, my grandpa, disowned him for it; and to her credit, Meema divorced my grandfather for turning away their only son. Grandpa died a few years back, in a Depraved battle gone wrong, a

reminder that membership in the Guild is literally life or death.

Dad apparently handled his magicless life well at first, living with Meema and trying his hand at becoming a lawyer to represent kids who, for whatever reason, had to be put into the foster care system—sometimes because of a dad like his who decided they never wanted to see their child again, other times in spite of a parent who wanted so badly to provide for their kids but couldn't. Dad might not have had magic anymore, but he still had a heart. Until it was ripped away by my mom. She gave birth to me and then left the hospital in the middle of the night with Dad asleep by her bedside. Not a word from her since. Meema says she'd never seen two people more in love, or another person more heartbroken than my dad after she left. I mean, she can't have been *that* great if she would just up and ditch her newborn son, right? But apparently I look just like her: tall and stocky, the same deep green eyes, a flash of red in our chestnut hair under the sun. It's yet another reason Dad can't stand to look at me.

Anyway, at least there's Meema. The goofy sound of the Southern title for grandma is ironic, considering she's one of the most powerful Guild members there is and the sole remaining member repping the Barrett family. The name Barrett literally means "mighty like a bear," and Great-Grandpa Barrett had a way with them. He could use his magic to communicate with them, to turn himself into a bear, or to create magic ones to fight alongside him. Barretts have had a way with animals ever since.

Meema's no exception, a bull being her animal of choice. As the only Barrett left in the Guild, should an evil mega behemoth ever awaken, she's the only magician who'd be able to find G-pa Barrett's

enchanted bear claw and end it. Gramps did the same thing centuries ago to the Knife, one of the worst Depraved in history. He used the claw to send the monster into an enchanted sleep. The Knife's snoozing form still lies under Mount Rainier where it can do no harm, and let's just say you'd better hope it stays there. If I make it into the Guild, I'll share the responsibility with Meema, which I'm sure will only piss Dad off more. He's literally the *only* Barrett ever to have had his magic taken away.

I guess I've got to give him credit for trying to make the best of it at first. Wish I could have known that guy instead of the flannel-and-Levi's-wearing ghost whose gaze makes me feel like he's trying to melt me from the inside out. But if I get in the Guild, I'll be out of his sight for good. Not only does Guild membership come with magic powers, it brings in a nice paycheck, too. Hello, rent on my own place; good-bye, depressing dad.

I put my hand against the iron front door with its Texas Longhorn door knocker. With a flash of golden light, the door opens. Magic can be a lot less exciting than humans think it is. Descendants of elves, like my family, can perform magic with concentrated thought. No fancy words, no wand waving, just *wanting* it to happen. Most elven texts are about learning to slow your thoughts. Once your mind is calm, you can feel the magic in your blood, and elves pull on it and mold it to do what we want, its expenditure emitting gold light that only magicians can see. Emotions are a part of it, too, confidence and courage making spells stronger, while sadness, fear, and angst make them weaker.

From there, it's practice makes perfect, a lot like working out a

THE SPELLS WE CAST

muscle by starting small before graduating to the heavy weights. You see if you can gather enough magic to get a spoon to move, then a full water trough, then your grandma's shiny magenta Ford F-250, that kind of thing. But just like in weight-lifting; you can tire out. You can't use big amounts of magic over and over without taking a rest. When fully charged, though, it's pretty legit what we can do.

But for a human, it would look very anticlimactic. Like if you encountered me on the street trying to make it rain, one second you'd be dry, the next you'd be drenched, and you'd have no indication that I was the one to let loose the storm, except maybe that I was staring *really intently* at the sky and moving my hands around a bit. But for me or any other person with magic powers, they'd see a little light show blast from my hands and know I was the guy who'd just soaked them to the bone.

Fae descendants, on the other hand, have more of a tell, since they can only cast spells verbally, usually in rhyme or by singing specific notes. There's more of a musicality to their work. Sprite descendants use effigies to cast spells on certain people or things. Most carry a knife in their back pocket and a bit of sprite wood to carve an effigy on the fly. Also, they can disappear with a snap of their fingers. It's where the word *spritely* comes from. Back in the day people used to think some sprite descendant was a super-fast runner, when really they were disappearing and reappearing in the blink of an eye.

Then there's goblin descendants, who can only shape-shift. I say *only* like it limits them to not be able to cast spells on others, but just imagine the things they can do by changing into a dragon, or a literal fly on the wall, or your favorite celebrity. You've got strength, secrets,

and seduction alone right there.

Last but definitely not least, there's nymph descendants. They're probably the most exciting of all of us. You watch cartoons or listen to Greek myths and you think nymphs are, like, green or blue humanoids who wear togas, are attached to a tree or a river somewhere, and perform plant or water magic. I mean, apparently that's pretty close to how real nymphs look, wherever they are now. Nymph-born magicians, however, look just like anybody else but can perform spells representing one of the elements: fire, air, earth, and water. They can blow flames from their fingers, or create hurricane level winds, or make a cactus grow to the size of a sequoia.

The front door swings open at my magical push and reveals Meema waiting right behind it. She's in her usual denim-on-denim outfit: tight, perfectly clean blue jeans and a denim shirt tucked in with a red blouse underneath. Cinching her waist is a brown leather belt with a massive, angry gold longhorn belt buckle staring up at me like it'd like nothing more than to gore me right through the middle. It's actually the inspiration for her favorite spell, in which she magics a golden bull to defend against the monsters of the world. Meema always says her "Texas pride" is what keeps her alive and kicking.

"Darlin', I've been waiting all day," she says. "I know you've been spending time with that boyfriend of yours, but this is the Culling we're talking about here. Show me your invitation."

It's not a question of whether or not I have it. Just like it's not a question to her that I was with Jeremy despite never having mentioned it—although she doesn't know that he's not my boyfriend anymore. The hurt is too fresh to tell her. Besides, she'd just say it was better that

I'm not attached before heading off to the Guild, and just because she'd be completely right doesn't mean the hollow feeling inside of me would be any less aching.

Meema—known to the Guild as Senior Magician Adela Barrett—gets to know when things are happening before most everybody else. Things like the Culling. For all I know, she's the one who spelled that dirty napkin at Torchy's to become my invite. Being in on and getting to decide all of the Guild's moves are perks for any member who makes it a couple decades without being killed by a Depraved magician or clawed to death by an owl demon. Death isn't uncommon in the Guild, but between having magic and dying young or living long enough without magic to become Dad, I'll take the former.

I flash the golden envelope at her and she claps her hands, her expertly manicured, bright red nails catching the light from the purple rhino demon horn chandelier overhead. Her nails perfectly match her cherry lipstick and go with her flaming-red hair (she magics the color over the gray in her roots every morning, but she'd smack me upside the head if I ever said that out loud).

Meema snatches the envelope and holds it reverently, like it's the last known tube of her Fiery Soul lipstick. "This is it, hon," she coos in a voice made raspy by all the cigarettes she smoked until she quit five years ago, the old-fashioned way. (Weird how we can have spells for almost anything, but not to get rid of the addiction to the world's most disgusting habit. I guess that explains why she couldn't magic Dad out of drinking.) "You are going to hog-tie the rest of those apprentice magicians. They won't know what hit 'em until you're sauntering off into the sunset, the latest member of the Guild."

Her eyes gleam with pride just thinking about it. My stomach squirms; I hope I can live up to her expectations.

“When does it start?” I ask.

Meema motions for me to follow her into the massive great room. The living room section runs into the dining room and butts against the kitchen, all of it decorated in a cowboy-magician hybrid aesthetic. A dragon skull hangs beside a pair of longhorns on the wall, a cow print rug lies atop a much larger demon alligator hide (imagine a gigantic rotting reptile with three times as many teeth) covering the living room floor, and the polished wood kitchen buffet is lined with a rope of braided griffin hair. All flanked by floor-to-ceiling windows that look out onto the expanse of bright blue sky and rolling hills surrounding our estate, two hundred whole acres with dozens of cattle grazing around it. Any human who walked into our house would just see the Texas-themed stuff, but those with magic in their veins would gawk at the paraphernalia that Meema has accumulated over fifty-five years of Guild membership.

“You know I can’t tell you that,” Meema says as she reaches into the refrigerator to grab a pitcher of her world famous sweet tea. (Her secret? She spells it so it only tastes sweet without any extra calories. As she says, she’s got to maintain her feminine figure. Even among magicians you’ll find outdated gender and body tropes.) “Nepotism is frowned upon in the Guild.”

“Uh, the whole Guild is built on nepotism. We’re literally *all* descendants of humans that magical beings gave their powers to. How bad would it really be if you told me what the first challenge is?”

Footsteps stomp down the stairs, and it’s like a dark cloud sweeps

over the kitchen.

Dad.

Even though he had his magic stripped away, he's still got a power all his own to bring the mood down. My heart drops; I feel nauseous. Even more so when he catches my eye and his scowl furrows deeper. I taste something bitter, metallic, like Dad's resentment is trying to claw its way into my throat to choke me.

"Finally deciding to grace us with your presence," Meema says, looking at her watch. "Jesus, Reggie, it's almost six o'clock." She gives him an up-down, taking in his wrinkled flannel shirt and dirty Levi's with a blotchy stain on the knee. "You haven't even taken a shower."

"Get off my case, Ma. You should be focused on wonder boy over here, anyway, 'stead of worrying about me, right?" Dad claps his hand on my shoulder, but by how hard he squeezes anyone could tell it's not a supportive father doting on his son kind of movement. It's an I-would-pulverize-you-to-dust-if-I-could kind of grip. It's for sure going to leave a bruise, and even though I could spell him so his fingers feel like they've been shocked, I don't have the heart to do it. I'm sure that Dad hates me—he's never said "I love you" or given me a birthday or Christmas card that would hint at the fact—but I don't hate him back. I feel sorry for him. No magic, no partner, no friends. Just memories of when he thought his life might turn out different.

Sometimes I wish Meema would erase his memory so that maybe he'd be a normal person. A normal father. But Meema says a person can never grow if they just forget the bad things that happened to them. And he was born into this world of magic, its rules forced upon him, just like I was. So I'll let him be. Hopefully, I can get out of his

crushing sadness once and for all through the Culling.

Dad finally lets go of my shoulder and pours himself a bowl of cereal. He adds milk but spills it over the sides, most of it splattering onto Meema's krakenhide boots. She jumps back and he stomps upstairs like he didn't leave a mess—literal and emotional—in his wake.

"That boy, I swear," Meema mutters.

I gather magic in my hands and pull it into a square. A magic hankie. I wipe it over Meema's boots and relax into the familiar tingle of a spell well-performed, this elation in your blood that makes your heart soar and your chest puff with pride.

"Don't pay your father any mind, you hear? The best revenge is doing well, and when you're a member of the Guild, all he'll have is decades' worth of regret and a beer cozy. You're gonna be something, darlin'. Now, as for telling you when your first trial is going to start, I can't. But just think about everything *I've told you* and you'll be right as rain." She slows her voice down—slow as molasses, she'd say—when she says *I've told you*. She follows it up with a wink. Way to be subtle, Meema.

"You've told me?" I repeat, and she nods.

"Yes. Think of everything I've told you about concentrating the mind, about casting spells, since you were knee high to a grasshopper. You know I've never stopped preparing you for this. Think of what I've said *today* even."

There she goes again, laying it on thick.

"Today?"

Her eyes practically bug out of her head. "Jesus, boy, have you got wax in your ears? Just think of all my lessons, all my statements about

magicians.”

My brain must still be slowed down by thoughts of Jeremy because I can't get my head straight. His goodbye echoes more in my mind than anything she mentioned since I got home.

But who am I kidding? Mom and Dad didn't work out, Meema and Grandpa neither. Coming from a mother and a grandfather who both ended up abandoning their family has to be some cosmic sign that Barretts are cursed when it comes to romance, so I just need to *focus*. What has Meema said today? That nepotism is frowned upon? She's doing a poor job of sticking with that if she's willing to give me hints. Not that I'm complaining.

“Nigel, I'm just gonna have to tell you again, aren't I?” She takes a deep breath, probably questioning whether she should really be giving me this clue. But she takes one look up at the ceiling, through which we can hear Dad stomping around his room. Just as badly as I want to be out of this house, out of range of his sulking drunk hauntings, I know Meema wishes she could turn back time and get her son back. But, just like magic can't cure addiction or heartache or being a miserable asshole, magic can't turn back time. I'm her last shot at making up for her perceived mistakes, so she says again, nice and molasses slow, “You are going to hog-tie the rest of those apprentice magicians.”

I mean, to a human, hearing the phrase *apprentice magician* might seem weird, but that's a title Meema has brought up literally every day since my magic first manifested. I was angry when Dad took the remote from me to switch my cartoons to some college football game, and I stewed and stewed about it. I thought of what it would be like for that remote to come flying back into my hand, and in a burst of

light it did just that. I'd never heard Dad yell like that before, and he locked me in the pig pen. Even in my little six-year-old heart I knew his anger had more to it than just being mad about a remote.

When Meema got home and found me crying in the pen, she magicked Dad to the barn—the first time I'd seen her use her powers in front of me—and dunked him into the trough, holding him down with her power until he nearly drowned. She placed a spell so he could never touch me out of anger again, then made Dad check into rehab.

It should have been a really depressing time, but while he was gone for three months, Meema showed me the basics of magic and how I could help out with the animals around the farm without breaking a sweat. Cows, chickens, horses, pigs, and whenever they'd get rowdy, she'd tell me to “hog-tie 'em” with my magic. Find ways to bind their legs so I could safely put them back in their pen or stall or coop. She only ever used that word when I had to wrangle up an animal on the farm. And said I could “hog-tie” Dad if he ever got out of hand again, too.

“Hog-tie?” I try.

Meema's Fiery Soul lips break into a grin. “That's a smart boy.”

“What? Am I going to have to like, hog-tie a pig for my first trial?”

“Don't be ridiculous, Nigel, of course not. The Guild wouldn't waste its time on pigs. On farm animals of any kind, for that matter.”

“But . . . there will be some kind of animal, right? Maybe a demon?”

It's one of the two main functions of the Guild. First, kill demons before they can kill you. They're not scary beings from the underworld, or hell, or anything like pop culture would make you believe. Demons are made from human souls, literally. All those years ago,

when humans thought they didn't have magic? They were wrong. Their hate and cruelty can make spirits, bad ones that need to possess a vessel and use it to create fear in human hearts, because that's what feeds them. We call those spirits the Depraved. Void of any love or compassion. And they like to possess creatures that could do damage, like alligators, elk, and mountain lions, warping them into grotesque Depraved Monsters, or demons for short.

But all the damage demons can do is nothing compared to when a Depraved spirit gets so strong that it becomes its own physical form. They're humanoid, with elongated, freakish features, rotten green skin and eyes, and they smell like death. We just call them Depraved, and when they're fully formed, they love to fight, causing fear and panic to feed on. Their favorite targets are other magical beings.

In fact, the rise of the Depraved is the entire reason the Ancestrals shared their magic with humans: to fight the Depraved. When settlers first came to America, cruelty was on high, as you can imagine. Genocide of the Native populations, enslavement everywhere you looked. The awful beginnings of our country created Depraved in numbers the Ancestrals had never before reckoned with. And that's to say nothing of the Knife, a Depraved so huge, it towered over mountains. Those ancient magical species decided to give magic to humans—of all races and from all walks of life—who were willing to unite and fight to keep the world from total Depraved destruction. So that's the second duty of all Guild members: finding and killing the Depraved before their numbers get so big that the rest of humanity doesn't stand a chance.

It's a mission I'm proud to be a part of, and have been ever since I first saw Meema fight a Depraved on the ranch. It was that same day

Dad went off on me when my powers developed. Before Meema had a chance to throw him in the water trough, a thick, greenish sludge coated Dad's arms, leaking from his pores before coalescing into a mottled mass that floated in the air. A Depraved spirit.

Meema ended the Depraved quickly, magicking a life-size golden bull into existence to kick its head so hard its neck snapped. As the years went on, just how important Meema's work is became increasingly clear. I watched her as she decimated the Depraved, or the skunk, bull, and coyote demons Dad's hovering hate would create. I learned how she used her magic to end those monsters quickly so they couldn't hurt more humans. I vowed to help her in that work as soon I could get into the Guild. And the time has finally come.

Meema mimes zipping her lips. "I told you I'm not saying a word. But a little studying wouldn't hurt. Perhaps, I don't know, at the library."

For as long as I can remember, Meema has taken me to the Perry-Castañeda Library at UT Austin to get extra studying in beyond her elven texts of meditation, concentration, and emotional manipulation. You'd be surprised how many humans have studied up about magicians and monsters and folklore, thinking it's all myth, but really a lot of their academic analyses can be helpful. And I guess by the way Meema is looking at me, the library is the place I've got to go to make sure I pass this first test. That, or she's really got to get that eye twitch looked at.

THREE

From the outside, the Perry-Castañeda Library doesn't look that inspiring. It's made of thick gray cinderblock reminiscent of a prison. And honestly, the inside isn't much better. Old beige bookcases form row after row across unremarkable industrial carpeting. All that's to say, studying up for the Culling isn't, like, poring over ancient tomes in drafty castles where generations of magicians have studied before you. It's kind of the least magical experience you could imagine.

As I walk into the building that night, the rush of cool air from the AC is a relief. It's practically eight thirty, but outside it's still wet and in the nineties. Now, though the shirt clinging to the sweat on my back is finally starting to dry off, my insides are melting. Flipping through old-smelling books in the near-empty library just really hits home Jeremy's point that I'm never available to do normal things. I should be outside right now, enjoying my one summer break after graduating high school, going to Barton Springs with Jeremy and splashing around at sunset until I fall in his arms and his wet hair tickles my face while we kiss.

He was so right to dump me. He should get to enjoy his last summer before college, too. Maybe he's already found some new guy to swim with, someone else to kiss in the cool waters. My heart squeezes just thinking about it, and even though I know sweet, puppy-dog-grooming Jeremy deserves to have that, I can't help thinking that if I cursed the water into mud nobody else would get to enjoy those lips and that slightly gap-toothed smile.

“Oh my god, did you see that?” A guy decked out in Longhorn orange runs down the aisle to the windows. He gets so close his breath fogs the glass. “What the hell is that?”

A stampede follows. Well, more an excited rush of the only other students—three, total—from this floor. It could just be some stupid college antics, but there’s enough commotion that I can’t help but see for myself.

“No way,” I breathe.

All this time I should have been studying on the ranch. Not reading about snake monsters, but corralling *horses*, of which we have plenty on the estate. Because down in the square—galloping and whinnying so piercingly it stings my ears four floors up—is a Crystallos, a magical, horse-like ice creature from the far reaches of Antarctica. Its hide is made of shockingly blue ice, and it stands twelve feet tall on massive hooves that come to a point. If that thing stomped on you it’d spear you right through, right before it ripped you apart with the fangs slashing out of its muzzle.

Something slips out of the book on fairy lore dangling from my hand. It’s an old-school checkout card from the 1950s that turns into a shining gold envelope with the five-starred symbol of the Guild when it hits the ground. I quickly glance at the college kids, but their faces are all pressed to the glass in wide-eyed wonder.

As I snatch the envelope off the ground, the blue seal snaps off, and that bright cursive font of the Guild writes itself into a set of instructions.

THE SPELLS WE CAST

Greetings, Magician—

Welcome to your first trial of the Culling.

This beast has been released by the Depraved to cause havoc and fear.

Subdue it.

Succeed, and it will lead you to the Guild for your remaining tests.

Fail, and you will be relieved of your powers.

Best of luck for the former.

Sincerely,

The Guild

Subdue it. Seems simple, but I'm sure it will be anything but. I've done this a thousand times on the farm, with animals ranging from squirrely pigmy goats that refused to get back in their pen to irate emu who'd rather peck out your eyes than see you take one of their massive eggs for Sunday morning breakfast. But I've never wrangled a magical creature alone. Either way, step one on the ranch has always been to assess our animals' energy and figure out the best way to get them to do what I want, so I take a good look at how the Crystallos is behaving surrounded by so many humans.

Just moments after its arrival, it's pretty calm. Students and tourists walk around the square staring at the Crystallos in awe. The way the setting sun flashes off its icy skin is really pretty, actually. But then it gallops right toward a small group of cheerleaders practicing a routine, so engrossed in their choreography that they haven't noticed the stunned silence. When the Crystallos gets within feet, they finally look up, just

in time to see a cold blast of air burst from the whinnying critter's mouth. And when that air touches the three cheerleaders, it covers them in frost and ice, freezing them in place in a perfect split-lift, looks of terror carved into their expressions.

The awed silence lasts for just a heartbeat longer while the crowd takes in the cheerleader ice sculpture. Then the screams start. Just like the Depraved wanted. The cowards are probably off somewhere soaking up the fear and chaos to feed their evil magic.

"Did that just happen?" the guy in Longhorn orange asks, glancing at the other students around him. I think he even pinches himself. "Dude, that really just happened. Frozen solid."

I don't stick around for any more of his astute observations. I barrel down the stairway. Students from the lower levels are running up, trying to get as far away from the Crystallos as they can. And as soon as I make it outside, I'm nearly shoved backward by a wave of heat. It's hard to believe that a frozen creature could survive in these temperatures, but that's magic for you.

Students, joggers, tourists, and food truck employees try to dodge or find places to hide, but in the ninety seconds it took me to get from the mythology section to the square, the Crystallos's magic has frozen at least five other people and coated the entire ground in a layer of ice. People run in place, slip and fall on their butt, or land hard on an elbow or wrist. I think I hear a couple bones crack.

The Crystallos gallops in a panicked frenzy, huffing its cold breath on anyone in its path. The poor animal is scared, as much a victim of the Depraved as the humans. It's my job to make it right.

Time to hog-tie this snow blower.

THE SPELLS WE CAST

Growing up on a huge Texas farm means Meema didn't just teach me magic. She taught me how to lasso, too.

I start to mime the act of coiling a rope around my elbow and call magic to my fingers. I have my left arm crooked, my hand held open so that the dip between my thumb and my pointer finger creates the perfect resting spot for the rope I'm going to create. Then, I circle my left arm with my right hand, going from thumb dip to elbow, over and over, while I concentrate on an image of a rope. Pride and determination at beginning my Culling journey fuels my power. Soon, gold light coalesces in my right fingers, then spools from my hand as I trace it in the shape of the coiled rope. It gets firmer with each wrap until I have a bright gold rope looped around my arm. The whole process takes just seconds—fifteen, tops—but it's enough time for the Crystallos to freeze a security guard just after the electric strings of her Tazer bounce harmlessly off its side. Nice try, lady, but even bullets would ricochet off this thing's icy hide.

I quickly tie my magicked rope into a lasso, creating two over-hand knots and looping them through each other to create a space big enough to fit over the Crystallos' head. I swing the loop above my own head, 'round and 'round, readying to let it fly. All I need now is the Crystallos' attention.

"Hey, derp!" I shout, but there's enough commotion from screaming students and approaching police sirens that the horse doesn't hear me.

Fortunately, there's a spell for that. Using my left hand, I wrap my fingers around my throat and think, *Magnify*. A burst of golden light is followed by a blast of warmth that oozes down my neck as my magic takes hold.

“OVER HERE, FUTURE GLUESTICK!” My voice booms across the courtyard. Everyone’s heads turn in my direction. But the gaze locked on me the hardest is the Crystallos’s, and angry bursts of ice billow from its nostrils. For the record, I don’t support turning horses into glue, but magical creatures are proud, and one of the easiest ways to get their attention is with an insult or two.

The Crystallos’s mouth opens wide, blue drool dripping from its fangs. It looks like it wants to eat me whole. Which is exactly the reaction I want.

Rearing up on its hind legs, the Crystallos lets loose another ear-piercing whinny. Everyone not frozen in the square covers their ears, and I’d join them if I didn’t have to keep this lasso in the air.

The Crystallos drops to the ground, ice cracking under the force of its hooves. It gallops at me, ready to trample me flat. But having calmed quite a few bucking bronco, I know this critter doesn’t have anything on me. Sure, it might have four fangs about a foot long each, but I’ve got a rope, and I’m good with ropes.

But then another movement catches my eye. Someone appears behind the Crystallos, like he blinked into existence, running straight for the horse. *Gaining* on it, even. His pale white skin glistens with sweat, his thick mop of dark brown hair flying behind him, and on his angular face his cheekbones stand out even with his mouth set in a determined line. And his dark eyes, focused solely on the Crystallos, are framed by eyelashes so long I can make them out from here. For a brief second I feel like I’m betraying Jeremy for noticing another guy’s eyelashes, but then my adrenaline makes way for a pang in my heart at the reminder of my very recent breakup. The least the Guild

could have done was wait to start the Culling until I had a couple days to mourn the loss of the one person I might one day have connected with. I mean, I haven't even been able to have magical friends. Meema stopped inviting people over after Dad's negativity created that Depraved. Sure, she can vanquish the demons his anger summons, and magician guests could help, but she'd never risk the embarrassment of her peers seeing the monsters her magical failure of a son creates.

The sadness comes on quickly and unexpectedly, and I'm so lost in thoughts of loneliness that by the time I snap to, the Crystallos is practically on top of me. Too close for the amount of energy I've got going in this lasso over my head. If I flung it now, it'd fly right over the horse's body, only to loop around this long-lashed guy running toward danger.

"Hey, you gotta move!" Long Lashes screams. "You got a death wish or something?"

He's right, I'm about to get pulverized and fail the Culling as soon as it started. But Long Lashes is quick enough for both of us. He flings his backpack from over his shoulder and pulls out a toy horse. It's one of those cheap plastic things you'd find at a Buc-ee's gas station, clogging the shelves with all the other sad toys desperate parents buy to keep their kids occupied during the endless drive from one end of Texas to the other.

This really doesn't seem like the time to be busting kiddie bribes out of a bag. I don't think the Crystallos is going to be swayed.

Long Lashes waves his hand over the toy horse and it's bathed in bright pink light. He grabs the toy's left front leg and snaps it off. Inches in front of my face, just before a breath of icy wind freezes me

solid, the Crystallos's left front leg glows pink and breaks away from its body, sending it tumbling onto its side. Its crystal leg flies and crashes into the front doors of the library, shattering the glass into pieces that blend in with the ice covering the square.

"Holy shit," I say to myself, staring in awe at the Crystallos thrashing in front of me, trying to gain purchase with its remaining three hooves. "He's a sprite."

This kid used that toy horse as an effigy, casting his magic over the figurine so that whatever he did to it would also happen to the Crystallos in real life. I've never heard of that before. Sprite descendants usually have to create effigies themselves, their magic binding to an object handmade out of sprite wood. But honestly, I'm glad this guy didn't have to take the time to carve a little horse. If he did, I'd be a Nigel-cicle right about now.

"I know it's shocking to see one of these things in the flesh, but you've got to move or it'll kill you!" Long Lashes is in my face now, giving me a look of concern. Or is it pity? Being a sprite, he has to see the magicked lasso in my hand. He probably thinks I'm not cut out for Guild work if I stand there like an idiot when finally faced with a magical beast.

He tries to push me back, gently but firmly. "Keep your distance. I've got this covered." My chest buzzes where he touched me, probably in desperation to cling to any boy's touch after getting dumped. It's so distracting that I don't pay attention as I step backward on ice, and I slip. My legs fly out from under me, the magic rope flies from my hands. It slides on the courtyard, its gold light reflecting off the frozen surface, and gets tangled in Sprite Boy's legs. We both go crashing to

the ground, me landing flat on my back, him hard on his butt. The wind is knocked out of my lungs, the air so cold from the Crystallos's magic that I can see my breath fan out in front of my face.

"Oh, that hurt." I moan, craning my head up to see how far away my rope is. How long will it take to hog-tie this Crystallos now that it's writhing on the ground?

Only, it's not writhing anymore. That breath of air fanning out in front of me wasn't mine after all. It's a cloud of icy magic that pours from the Crystallos's mouth to hover over the area where its leg used to be. In the blink of an eye, the magic freezes into a new leg. Now, with four legs completely intact, the Crystallos spears its pointy hooves into the ground and hoists itself up in one fluid movement. Its hulking body replaces my view of the twilight sky with the murderous glare of a predator that's ready to devour me.

It opens its mouth to breathe deadly Frosted Flakes over my body, just as Sprite Boy yells, "Hey! Over here!"

He holds out a red BIC lighter triumphantly and flicks it open, its itty-bitty flame flickering to life. The Crystallos huffs again, this time like it's laughing at this guy for thinking that tiny fire could do anything to stop it. I'd laugh, too, if I wasn't on the verge of being frozen to death.

"No offense, but I don't think that's going to work," I say while the Crystallos is distracted. I've got to get to my lasso so I can tie this creature up and cast some sort of calming spell over it. If it keeps thinking we're foes, there's no way I'll be able to get it to take me to the Guild.

"While I *appreciate* the feedback, so far I'm the only one getting anything done." The bite in his tone makes it clear that appreciation is

the last thing he feels. “Just watch.”

Sprite Boy snags the horse toy from the ground—still throbbing in the pink light of his magic—then holds the flame under it. The plastic starts to warp and melt, just a millisecond before the Crystallos lets loose the most ear-piercing whinny yet.

It bucks and writhes and stamps its hooves as a small red glow blooms in the center of its stomach. As I watch, the glow steadily grows, each pulse of red light sending the ice horse into an even greater frenzy.

The flame is burning the beast from the inside out. Water starts to form on its sides, small drops at first that eventually coalesce together and pour down the horse in rivulets. This guy has turned the Crystallos into a living, breathing, panicking fountain.

And if the spell goes on much longer, he’s going to subdue the ice horse before I can, and I’ll be left standing here like a moron, watching him ride off to the Guild while senior magicians strip me of my power. I’ve got to get in on this action or I’ll be stuck at home with Dad, creating twice the number of demons with our combined anger and disappointment.

Sprite Boy gives me a satisfied smirk. “See, I’ve got this in the ba—*oof!*” This smug sprite careens backward as the thrashing Crystallos’s head collides with his. Even if this guy’s fire spell has melted the ice creature to the size of a quarter horse, that means he was still just bowled over by a regular-size equine. As I know from the dozens of times I’ve been bucked off, kicked, and bit, that does not feel good, and this guy isn’t nearly as burly as I am. I can already see the beginnings of a bruise spreading across his left cheek as he picks himself up

off the ground.

“Hang on,” I say. “I got this.” It was one of the first spells I mastered on the estate, thanks to the scars, bruises, and broken bones that came out of the aforementioned horse incidents.

My hands glow with magic, and I hold them out in front of me, palms parallel to each other. My chest heaves with exhaustion and the strength of my magic starts to dwindle. But there’s got to be enough left for me to muster this last trick. I imagine the Crystallos’s head in between my hands, then point my middle fingers inward, resting them on the temples of my mentally conjured horse.

Calm.

Meanwhile, Sprite Boy is anything but chill. He’s slid over to me to put his hand on my shoulder, ready to pull me back. A jolt goes through my body, and I’m not sure if Sprite Boy’s casting a spell on me, but I’m too deep into this calming spell to hold him off if he plans on magicking me so that I fail this task and he wins. “Your magic *literally* tripped me up before,” he says, “I do not need your hel—”

I don’t know what stops him. Maybe it’s the fact that I’m casting magic of my own and he wants to see how it will go down. A warm golden orb appears in the air between my hands, surrounding the imaginary horse head in my mind. The Crystallos immediately stops thrashing. Its whinnying quiets and its breathing slows.

I glance over at Spritey and see that he’s swaying on his feet. His eyelids have drooped, fluttering, and a gentle smile pokes up the corners of his lips. Somehow, his bruise has gone, too. He’s entirely at peace, the human mirror of the look on the Crystallos’s face.

Oh crap. I don’t think I just spelled the ice horse. I spelled this

magician, too.

Sprite Boy, the Crystallos, the entire square is pleasantly quiet. A few grackles lazily squawk in the background. Now that I look around, everyone has that glazed over look on their face. The college students who were previously cowering behind the statue of the university founder, the people who were watching the icy mayhem through the library windows, even the cops who just pulled up on the side of the street. Each person just stands there, looking at me with that dumb grin on their face like they're simply curious—not at all concerned—about what will happen next.

My magic hit each and every person as far as I can see.

This has never happened before. I mean, sure, I have messed up magic in the past, blowing out the windows in our house or accidentally turning all the eggs in our chicken coop to pudding cups. But I've never had a spell's effects magnified to hit every creature in reach. Magic has its limits, and such widespread power usually belongs only to the most powerful and practiced members of the Guild. But I just spelled dozens of people, a few birds, and one ice monster like it was nothing. Even after using up a good amount of power.

Maybe I'm stronger than I thought.

The good news is the Crystallos is completely calm. It stands there, looking at me like it hopes I've got an apple in my pocket that it can eat from my palm. I am supposed to follow—or I guess, ride—this thing to the Guild, so I figure now's as good a time as any to approach. I extend my hand, fingers up, palm flat, and move in slow so the fanged beast knows I'm coming.

“Good horsey,” I breathe, inching closer and closer until my hand

lies flat on the ice horse's forehead. It leans into my hand, letting out a snowflake-filled huff that cools my arm but doesn't freeze it solid. So we're headed in the right direction.

The bad news is I've now got an audience of mind-numbed humans and one dazed apprentice magician to handle. To be honest, the get-them-before-they-get-you attitude of the Culling makes me almost want to leave Sprite Boy here. He was about to tell me he didn't need my help, after all. But if I ride off into the night and let him stand here until my spell fades, senior magicians will find him and take his power away for not completing the first trial. If someone loses magic because of their own mistakes, that's on them. But I'd feel awful being the reason someone had their magic taken. Besides, I'm not sure how easy it would have been to ride the Crystallos if Sprite Boy hadn't shrunk it with his effigy-lighter trick first. This was a team effort.

Plus, he looks way too innocent batting those long lashes for me to leave him standing here defenseless.

I give the Crystallos a reassuring pat. "Stay," I say, then saunter over to Sprite Boy and wave like he hasn't been staring at me this entire time. But instead of smirking like I'm sure he would if he wasn't spelled, he just smiles and waves back.

"Hi," he says. He sounds like he belongs on an after-school special, all sarcastic vibes erased.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Orion Olson, but most people call me Ori. What's yours?"

Ori. My eyes pop wide in surprise as I realize I've met this long-lashed smirker years ago. It was before my magic manifested and Dad's hatred got out of control. He came to the ranch once, with his older

sister and his mom, Meema's fellow Guild member. I can't remember their names, but I do remember Ori and I playing with some baby goats. He was much less sarcastic and not so cute. Wait, I did not just think say that. Anyway, that was the last time I ever had a potential pal over.

"Nigel Barrett," I finally answer, "but most people call me . . . Nigel." I wince. Real smooth. If he was his normal self, I'm sure Ori would laugh, or make some comment about how my name sounds like it should belong to some ancient white guy running Downton Abbey. Which is totally accurate, but you hear it enough times and it really starts to get old. With the exception of Dad, who Grandpa insisted be named after him since we took Meema's last name so the All Mighty Barrett Family could live on, all the men on Meema's side of the family were named Nigel. A tradition started by . . . well, ancient white guys.

Anyway, Ori doesn't seem fazed. "I thought so. Nice to see you again, Nigel."

So I was right. It's baby goat buddy Ori.

I hook my thumb over my shoulder. "So, we should probably catch a ride on the Crystallos to get to the Guild. You up for coming with me?"

Ori nods. "Sure!"

"Have you ridden a horse before?"

"Nope! But it looks like fun."

I've ridden horses all my life, and if this were just me, I'd be able to ride bareback, my body moving with the ice horse so my legs won't feel like they're going to fall off after the ride. But Ori is going to have a time of it depending on how far we have to go, so I bring magic to my palms and mold it into the shape of a saddle. Before long, a golden seat is in my hands and I throw it over the Crystallos's back.

“Let me give you a hand up.” I link my hands together to form a hold that Ori steps into amiably, and I boost him up into the seat. I’ll sit in front of the saddle and try to keep the ice horse calm.

The first step to that being giving this beastie a name. Animals are most calm when you speak to them like equals. That’s something I’m used to. Without any friends, animals have always kept me company, so talking with them like people just comes naturally.

“What should we call you, buddy?” I ask, putting a comforting hand on the Crystallos’s neck. They lean into me, and I shiver. Like they can sense my discomfort, the Crystallos warms their icy skin so that I won’t get frostbite. They huff out a breath again, this time warm even though there’s still snowflakes in it.

“You think you can thaw out our friends . . . Frosty?” Frosty and Snowflake are the only ice-related names I can think of. Both extremely unoriginal, but coming up with a good name is not part of the Culling.

Frosty huffs warm air again, but this time their breath billows and builds until it forms a cloud that covers the square. Thankfully, it doesn’t *smell* like horse breath—more like sunshine breaking through a crisp winter day. The cloud glows with a silver light, and then everything starts to melt. The ground goes from a slippery ice rink back to cement, every frozen human thaws and color returns to their skin, and their horrified expressions soften into that same simple calm that’s on Ori’s face.

Leaving them in a magicked stupor might actually be a good thing. Not that there’s a point system in the Culling or anything, but it couldn’t hurt to lend a hand to the senior magicians who’ll come

in and wipe these folks' memories, and surely calming them down ahead of time will be a help. Meema says there's an entire branch of the Guild dedicated to memory altering and technology tampering, making it so that no trace of magical power lives on in the minds or phones of anybody who sees us on a mission.

But there'll be a lot more work for them if I just ride off into the streets of Austin on a mythical horse. I've got to turn us invisible, and I spot a pencil poking out of a side pocket in Ori's backpack that'll do the trick. My magic's waning again; no wonder after I blasted this entire square into sweet serenity. But imbuing real-world objects with power takes less of a toll than crafting something from nothing. I coat the pencil with magic, and it grows so it's about the size of a yardstick and the eraser is near the width of a baseball. That's the part that matters most; I quickly rub the eraser against Frosty's back and my thigh, thinking *Invisible* the entire time. I move to Ori's knee next, and the side of my palm brushes his leg. A warm, tingling sensation cascades up my arm. It's peaceful, almost centering as I run my power-laden finger through the air, drawing an arrow. Then, with the snap of a finger, a little rooster pops up on top. It's a glowing magical replica of the weather vane on top of our barn. I tap it and say, "To the Guild," and it spins in circles a few times before pointing east. With my last bit of power, I snap my fingers again, willing both Ori and my new horse to come to their senses. Ori's eyes flutter and that small smile drops into a frown.

He's back, all right.

I click my tongue and squeeze my knees against Frosty's sides to get going. "Move along, buddy."

Frosty breaks into a trot just as I hear a biting, “What is your hand doing on my knee?”

I snatch my hand back, warmth traveling up to my face, and I’m thankful I’m facing forward so he can’t see the blush lighting up my cheeks. We may be invisible to humans right now, but we can very much still see each other. And I can only imagine what’s going through Ori’s head when he came out of a calm stupor to find some kid he hasn’t seen in over ten years with a hand pressed to his leg. “Chill out,” I say. “I was just making sure you weren’t spelled anymore or spotted by humans. *And* I helped you through the first trial, by the way. I’m not as helpless as you thought.”

“Neither am I, and I told you I didn’t need help.” I peek over my shoulder to see him cross his arms in front of his chest like a toddler. “And you *spelled me*?!”

“It was an accident. I can just put you right back down on the ground and ride off to the Guild without you if that’s what you’d prefer?”

Ori opens his mouth, probably to make some snarky comeback, but then stops. He furrows his brow and mutters, “No, thanks.” He knows as good as I do if he gets off Frosty he only has minutes before a senior magician comes and strips him of his powers. But that smirk returns and, before I know it, he pokes me in the back, hard. “Just don’t magic me again. It’s rude.”

“Ruder than jabbing someone in the kidney? If you keep that up, I’m going to have Frosty buck you off.”

“Frosty?” He scoffs. “That’s original.”

“This is going to be a long ride, isn’t it?”

Ori smirks. “You bet.”

