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A Longer Spoon: A Novel

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A LONGER SPOON: A NOVEL

by

ELIZABETH MACDONALD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in the Major Program in English in the College of Arts and Humanities and in The Burnett Honors College at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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Thesis Chair: Professor Susan Hubbard
ABSTRACT

The intent of this thesis is to create a novel-length narrative based around a premise conceived in a workshop setting. The novel, while containing elements of fantasy, will be character-driven and feature psychological character development as its primary goal. Lawrence Caligny, a young cook newly instated at a castle, is coerced by his mother, an infamous witch named Mallory, to concoct a sleeping potion for the country’s crown prince, beckoning comparison to the “Sleeping Beauty” fairy tale. As Lawrence prepares for his opportunity, he unwittingly befriends the prince and his sister and stumbles across an assassination plot. Being thoroughly inept at witchcraft himself, Lawrence fails to put the prince to sleep when he gets the chance, knocking out the entirety of the castle inhabitants and staff instead. The story concludes with the revival of those in the castle and Lawrence being fired from his (ignominious) position in the kitchens, but otherwise pardoned in acknowledgement of his help in stopping the assassination.
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Chapter 1

The three women gathered on the side of the hill when the mosquitoes were out and the moon was high. Their ages ranged from young to old to approaching middle age, and all of them wore black dresses and tall black hats. Two had broomsticks swung over their shoulders. The three converged, then moved as one group, shadows through the tall grass, up the hill, to the cottage at its zenith. The one approaching middle age cursed and swatted a mosquito, then she opened the door to her home for the other two.

They’d decided on Mallory’s cottage for the meetings. It had long been accepted that Mallory disapproved of Vivienne’s home for its inoffensive, rose-patterned wallpaper and cozy little “Welcome!” mat with a bee instead of a dot for the exclamation mark. Vivienne had never taken the initiative to alter her decor to something more austere, citing old age, so Mallory wouldn’t let them use it when they convened. Cassandra’s was out of the question by default because it was barely habitable by one person, let alone three. Every surface was commandeered by stacks of books or a bundle of scrolls. While Mallory’s cottage had fewer than two dozen books and lacked any cheery touches, it at least had a proper sitting room and a stove for the kettle. It was there that they came together every month.

It took over an hour to work the conversation around to its main subject. First the tea needed brewing, then the cake Vivienne had baked needed to be sliced into precisely equal portions to prevent squabbling, then Cassandra received a premonition that rain was coming and therefore it would be prudent to put a rainwater bucket out under the eaves. All this occurred among the discussion about who had traveled where and which family’s ewes had given birth
this past spring, all the idle village gossip that always happened at these meetings. By the time everyone was satisfied, the grandfather clock next to the front door had chimed midnight.

Mallory took her napkin out of her lap. “So.” She sat back in the old paisley armchair, steepling her fingers. A large, scaly snake was coiled at her feet. None of them paid it any more mind than they would have paid a Labrador. “I’ve been giving several matters due consideration since we last met.”

“Is that wise?” Cassandra was gazing at a jar of beetles set out on the windowsill to dry. Her hand cradled her chin. “We wouldn’t want you hurting yourself, Mal.”

Mallory ignored her. “The two of you will be leaving in the fall again, correct?”

“Oh, yes, love,” Vivienne said. “So many people expecting us, and Werint so lovely that time of year. We may linger a while.” She poured Mallory another cup of tea. Steam drifted up into the air. “Fortune permitting, I shouldn’t think we’ll be back too long before the snow starts.”

Mallory let the cup cool and twirled her fork with her fingers. “Enjoy yourselves, then. I’ve got a project in mind for harvest time that I thought I would endeavor while you two were gone, but I needed to be certain. Preparations will have to happen well in advance.”

She tapped her fork against her plate. It still had cake crumbs on it. “You’re sure you two are leaving?”

“We always do, dear.”


Cassandra watched the fork. “We might not linger. We could come straight back.”

“No. Well. It’s fine, obviously.” Tap, tap, tap.

“We’d hate to leave you by yourself for too long.”
“It’s not a problem.”

Cassandra opened her mouth to say something else, but stopped when Vivienne nudged her with a knee. “We’ll send you a postcard,” Cassandra said instead.

Mallory made a noncommittal hmmm sound.

“Marvelous. Then that’s all our business settled?” Vivienne rose from the sofa with a creak and a groan. “I must be getting to bed. I’ve things to do in the morning.”

“You always have things to do,” Mallory said, but she stopped hitting the plate.

“There, Mallory,” Vivienne said soothingly. “Fall’s a ways off yet. And you’ll have your project to keep you occupied, hm? Why don’t you tell us what it is before we go?”

She told them.

***

The Royal Academy of Retborough, located in the west end of Videria’s capital and sporting a wealth of curlicue architecture, had a reputation as the best school for a young magician to get their start in. It boasted other divisions as well—the engineering school had graduated some of the most brilliant mathematicians of the century, and anyone who received a military degree could expect officer candidacy at the castle—but the Magic and General Potion-Making division was the most famous, as well as the most difficult. Only six students in the senior class had passed the final exam the previous year, while the rest either dropped out or repeated their coursework. Of the six who graduated, three had gone on to work for the royal family, two had left the country, and one had remained at the Academy for its research opportunities. She now spent a great deal of time reclining in a favorite seat at the dining hall, looking superior whenever an undergraduate passed her by.
The magic students were easy to pick out. They were the ones who took up beds in the nurse’s office, complaining of stress headaches and tunnel vision. They could be found behind crenellations of textbooks in the library as they tried to figure out what Owlswick’s Theorem actually was for that eight-page essay due tomorrow. The professors in the literature department were used to books and pen knives crashing through the windows whenever a levitation spell went wrong, and rainbow explosions that shook the candlesticks out of their perches were known to only make the tenured scholars shake their heads before turning to the next page. Magic school was never easy, but for a wizard or enchantress of steel nerves, the rewards often outweighed the years of study hell.

Lawrence Caligny was slightly famous for being head of his class. There were rumors that he was descended from a line of witches, back in the days before witchcraft had been outlawed. It wasn’t a compliment, and he always denied it when someone brought it up. His more sensible friends knew him well enough to take his word for it. By and large, though, the whispers had collected in dusty clumps and now stuck to his back wherever he went. In his second year, he’d caught the alchemy instructor surreptitiously directing some measuring device shaped like a foghorn at him, which he had whipped behind his back as soon as Lawrence looked around.

For his part, Lawrence didn’t know where the rumor had come from. He was at peace with the knowledge that he didn’t have enough magical talent to fill his little finger. He was, in fact, in the Culinary Arts division.

He had applied when he was thirteen, a year before most applicants were accepted, but lying about his age on the form and having a mildly terrifying mother had granted him early
access. At orientation, he’d been the only one sitting in the incoming class whose feet didn’t quite touch the ground. One of the parents attending had said he must be very proud of his brother or sister for having been accepted into the Academy. At the time, a teacher had assured him he would shoot up soon enough, that all boys did in time. Four years later, he was still shorter than some of the freshmen. People loved to remind him of it.

He had become resigned to his height, but sometimes, such as now, his hands and nose full of grated orange peel while his classmates clattered and chopped on either side of him, it came back in full force. The girl to his left, Regina, was a full head and a half taller than him, her knife hitting the cutting board with a sound like a Gatling gun. To his right, a boy named Emmanuel beat furiously at a bowl of eggs and milk. Too much; the mixture was beginning to froth.

“Fifteen-minute mark,” the adjudicator called. He was sitting at a small table against the far wall, a pocket watch ticking in front of him. Beside him, another man was keeping a close eye on each of them and writing something into a notebook. Every few minutes, he would turn the page and begin afresh.

Lawrence dumped his citrus shavings into a mound on a square of wax paper, and hurried to the row of burners behind the long counter. A bowl sat inside one saucepan filled with simmering water, the butter and chocolate inside turning into a warm, thick puddle. The sheen wasn’t yet quite right, so Lawrence settled for scraping a wooden spoon through it. His wrist objected and was overruled. It hadn’t yet recovered from two hours of frantic scribbling for the essays they had been given, but there was no time to rest—his dough would need at least half an hour before it went in the oven.
A week ago, the head of the Culinary Arts division had told the seniors the details of the cumulative exam: after the written section, there was a tasting and identification test, and after that, the practical that made up half of their grade. Unlike the other two, there was no set rubric for the practical exam, and the rules it did have were simple. The students had two hours to make the dish of their choosing with the materials they were given—usually a dessert—and the head had blandly stated that the more difficult, the better. Everyone had filed out of the room in a grim state of mind. It might not have been on par with the magician final, but the last ten years had still only seen a fifty-percent average pass rate. Lawrence had spent many a sleepless night flicking through a beaten notebook filled edge to edge with recipes, its pages stained and corners dogeared until they were in danger of falling off. He decided on a type of continental cookie and practiced it until his hands were sore and his back ached.

Lawrence ran the spoon through once more, judged the chocolate complete, and picked up the bowl, leaving the gas on for later use. Behind him, Amanda Malik dropped something and swore, but he had no time to see what the problem was. He threw the orange shavings and general mix in with the chocolate before it could harden.

“Thirty minutes,” the adjudicator said, bored. The dough went onto a baking sheet, which Lawrence ran to the giant freezer off to one side. His notes had said that he would do better to let it chill rather than freeze, but there was no time. He still had to make the top part of the cookies, and presentation counted for points as well, so he needed to factor preparation time in as well.

He had just returned to his place at the counter when Regina hissed at him under her breath. “What happened to my apples?”

“Um,” Lawrence said.
Regina had been the first person to ask Lawrence outright about his heritage, halfway through freshman year. She’d had the arms of a professional boxer even back then, but she had been very gentle about lifting him off the ground when she asked him to stop dodging her in the hallways like a nervous ferret and also to please answer her damn question. When he’d told her he hardly knew who his great-grandmother was, she had graciously set him back in his chair and glared at the onlookers. No one else in the culinary division had brought the subject up again.

Lawrence counted himself as fond of Regina ever since, but she was currently holding a knife and looking very tense.

“I didn’t take them,” he said.

Regina rolled her eyes. “I know you didn’t, but I left them right here. I’ve got the crust ready and waiting, too.” Her gaze flicked to the watch by the adjudicator’s desk. “I’d grab some more but the pantry’s out, and the pie needs an hour in the oven.” She took a deep breath. “I am not repeating the year. Old Nerien hates me enough already.”

“What about changing it to blueberry?” Lawrence was trying to cut some more chocolate with his left hand in order to spare his right. A splinter went flying and narrowly missed Kristopher Hirsch’s eye. He switched hands.

Regina tapped a finger against the counter. “I don’t know all the measurements for blueberry. I know there’s less flour, but that’s it.”

“Lemon zest, too, if you’ve still got the skin, and no nutmeg. A little butter helps, if there’s any in the—oh—” He scored a deep cut in his finger.

Regina elbowed him aside. “I got this. You go and fetch everything.”

He paled. “Is that allowed? Will we get in trouble?”
“Grow a spine, Lawrence, would you?”

He knew better than to argue the point. He ducked under a tray Amanda Malik was holding and scuttled to the pantry. The apples were indeed all gone, as were most of the strawberries, but there were still plenty of oranges, blackberries, and blueberries, as well as a couple fruits he didn’t recognize and an enormous watermelon with a wedge cut out. He grabbed a measuring cup and scooped up the blueberries, then took the remaining strawberries as an afterthought, comfortable in the knowledge that sliced strawberries on the side was never a wrong choice.

By the time he retrieved everything, Regina had not so much chopped the chocolate up as pounded it into dust. He spilled everything onto the counter and gave her hasty instructions on what to do with the ingredients she had already gathered.

“What about the cinnamon?” she asked, hands flying around the counter. “Is the cinnamon still a good idea?”

“When isn’t cinnamon a good idea?” he said distractedly. His wrist wasn’t feeling any better.

“I’m trying to do ten things at once here!”

“Sorry! Just use half what you would’ve—no, actually, a quarter—and it should be fine.”

“Forty-five minutes,” the adjudicator said.

“Shut up,” Regina muttered. Lawrence gave a strangled giggle.

It took a minute to measure the cream and sugar and add them into their own bowl, and a couple more to slice up the orange and strawberries, but after that there was no putting off the inevitable. They hadn’t been provided with electric mixers, of course. There was no guarantee
that future employers would use kitchens modern enough to have electricity. Lawrence tucked
the bowl in the crook of his arm, picked up a whisk, and went to work.

By the time a faint buzzing sensation had replaced all other feeling in his fingers, the
repetitive motion was almost pleasant. He liked the sound of a whisk swishing through the bowl.
Tendrils of scent were floating out from the ovens as sugar caramelized and dough rose, and the
buzz of talking was soothing white noise. The bones in his arm felt like they were being scraped
over a cheese grater.

“One hour.”

He slung the bowl onto the counter and joined several people in bolting for the freezers.
His dough was cool and, bless it, didn’t melt into fudge at the first touch. He held the baking
sheet before him like a grail and, on his knees, crawled out through a gap between two boys who
were fighting for the right to retrieve their work first. Lawrence ran a knife through the dough in
scallops and came out with over two dozen tiny flowers. He arranged them in careful uniformity
on another pan and slid them into a free oven at the end of the line, until ten minutes were up and
the cookies had baked into firmness, and then it was time to let them cool on a rack. One hour
and fifteen minutes, then one and thirty rolled around. The cookies transferred onto a two-tiered
china plate stand selected from the crockery table.

The thick, sweet cream dolloped neatly onto the cookies, and a fraction of an orange
topped each off. The sliced strawberries arranged themselves in an artful spiral around the
cookies, and it was the work of a few moments to melt the waiting chocolate and use the wooden
spoon to drizzle it over the strawberries as well.
He stepped back and examined his finished piece. He allowed himself a couple minutes to fuss with the placement of the cookies and to clear a spot off one plate.

“Fifteen minutes remaining.”

Dishes and pans clattered as everyone rushed to clear up their spaces. A clean station was worth points as well. As Lawrence scrubbed his section of the long counter, he saw, to his left, that Regina had a pie with latticework in the shape of a rose on top of it. He glanced at her, and she raised a thumb in salute. He grinned and busied himself with his washcloth.

Only a couple people were still scrambling to finish when the adjudicator called out again. “Stop. No time remaining.” He waited until the stragglers had given up and dragged themselves back to their stations before he continued. “Please wait by your work while we fetch the judges. They will sample your work and we will adjourn to a separate room where we will decide upon a score for each of you. You will be told your score in private.”

The man with the notebook was the one to leave through the doors in the corner. Lawrence leaned against the counter, but he had to straighten up regretfully not two minutes later when the doors opened again.

Three judges were sufficient for the taste testing. They were all supposed to be famous chefs within the borders of the capital, but Lawrence didn’t know any of them by sight. The woman had sharp eyes, and one of the men was a friendly pear of a face while the other was aggressively thin. They crowded around the student at the far end, a boy named Yuri who was rigid with attention and who had in front of him an enormous pudding. After the judges had examined the pudding in silence, each of them selected a spoon off the counter and scooped a portion of it out. They spent some time rolling it over on their tongues. Then they swallowed,
made a note on individual clipboards, and moved on. Lawrence supposed they couldn’t be expected to eat the whole thing, but he wondered what would happen to the rest of the food. After making the same thing day after day, he didn’t think he wanted to eat it himself anymore.

The judges didn’t dawdle, and it was his turn sooner than he would’ve liked. They took a couple seconds to examine his presentation, which was long enough for him to feel sure the strawberries were too much as a decoration.

“Petit fours?” the woman asked him.

His throat was too dry to speak. He nodded.

Each of them took a cookie twice the size of a coin between their fingers. The woman and the pear-faced man ate theirs in a couple bites. The thin one plucked the orange and ate that first. He licked the top off, which Lawrence watched with polite, morbid interest, then cracked the wafer in half. Both halves crunched under deliberate chewing, one at a time. He did an odd thing with his eyes that involved narrowing them and drawing his eyebrows low over them as he stared at Lawrence. Neither of the other judges appeared to find anything out of the ordinary with this behavior. Perhaps, Lawrence thought dryly, it was his version of an encouraging smile. They each made a note on their clipboards and moved on to Regina, who cut a slice from her pie with unshaking hands as they watched.

The rest went even more swiftly. The judges reached the other end of the counter and made their final notes before joining the man who had come to fetch them at the door. The other adjudicator went with them. The doors shut. The room breathed a collective sigh, soon blending into a murmur.

“What did you think?” Regina asked Lawrence. “I thought I was going to die.”
Lawrence thought about it diplomatically. “They were very professional,” he said.

Regina gave him one of her looks that indicated this was not the answer she had wanted from him, but she said, “Not the one who looked like someone threw skin on a coathanger. He was ready to bite my head off.”

“Maybe he doesn’t like sweets.”

She sighed. “That sounds like something you’d say. Have you never disliked someone?”

Lawrence considered again. “I’m rather annoyed at whoever took your apples,” he offered.

“Well. Thanks.” She looked down at her pie. “Speaking of, if I never see a pie again, it’ll be too soon. I don’t want a single piece of this. Do you?”

He wrinkled his nose. She barked a laugh.

“Let’s go get something. You look dead on your feet.”

“Can we leave?” Lawrence looked around, fingers threaded tight together in front of him.

The question had occurred to several other people who were now wandering uncertainly towards the doors. “Will they get upset, do you think?”

“Screw them,” she said, amiable. “And if we don’t pass after all that, screw them twice. I’m hungry and they’ve got chicken sandwiches for lunch today. Come on, we’ll get our scores at the front office tomorrow.”

She strode off through the doors, brushing Christina Bullard out of her path, and Lawrence scrambled to catch up. “How do you know?” he said.

“Asked the dean. Hurry up.” She took them through the halls, where the windows overlooked seniors who were finished with their tests had sprawled out on the lawns, and past
the libraries, where the seniors who weren’t had their noses buried in books. She also took them through the labs, a shortcut Lawrence rarely used because it wasn’t often he had need of the dining hall. The labs had the pipettes and microscopes local to the chemistry and biology departments, but included cauldrons and a locked cupboard which contained whatever mysterious powders the magic division needed for its potions.

The Advanced Potions Lab was on the other side of campus, so it was only a group of huddling underclassmen that were gathered around one of the cauldrons today. They were worrying at it with ladles because it was starting to smoke. Lawrence opened his mouth to say something as he passed by—he didn’t know what, some piece of advice that might have at least prevented it from exploding in their faces—but he changed it when he spotted a black tail twitching on top of a single white paw in the corner.

“Ess,” he called.

The cat roused herself disdainfully. She padded after him into the corridor outside, where she leapt onto his shoulder and settled around his neck. Regina spared only a glance for the feline. It wasn’t uncommon for Lawrence to wear his furry collar outside of class, and sometimes people even cooed over Ess and stroked her, for which she always tilted her head back graciously. She had still been a kitten when he arrived at the academy, fostering an acceptance of her as the school pet, so that now it was the odd person who hadn’t seen her on campus at some point.

Ess wasn’t hungry today, or maybe nothing at the dining hall appealed to her, because she did not meow when Regina retrieved a tray of plastic-looking food for herself and Lawrence. They sat at a table.
“Cheer up,” said Regina, pushing his sandwich at him. “At least it’s not casserole day.”

While she descended upon her meal, Lawrence picked his apart, eating one little scrap at a time. He had to admit it was better than eating anything he’d made recently, but he couldn’t really taste it.

“What do you think you’ll do after graduation?” he asked her.

She swallowed. “Probably go help Dad with the bakery. Can’t wait to see his face when he hears I’ve passed. He didn’t think I could do school. He said it was a waste of time. We’ll see what he says when he’s got an academy-approved chef.” She speared a piece of lettuce on her fork and pointed it at Lawrence. “Expect you’ll be working for the castle, right?”

“No unless I’m top of the exam.” He stared at his own salad, haphazardly arranged and containing far too much onion. “I don’t think I am.”

“Yeah, sure. Just remember to write me and tell what kind of work it is there. I heard they’ve got ovens big enough to fit the king in, though I’m damned if I can figure what use that would be.”

Lawrence smiled as Regina went on, first on the virtues and drawbacks of comically large ovens, then on her opinion of each of the judges, which tied into her opinion of their teachers. He enjoyed talking to Regina. She did all the work in a conversation and expected little input from him. Ess dripped off his shoulders and curled on the empty seat beside him as the girl went on.

“But it’s not as though he cares how much pepper it has,” Regina said, then, “What’s wrong?”
Lawrence looked blank until she nodded at his hand. He could feel his fingers again, but they were shaking the fork he was holding. “Oh, um. I think I’m just tired. I’ve been doing a lot of practice.”

“Well, say something next time. Go lie down, will you?”

He gathered up Ess. The dorms weren’t far from the dining hall, so he let the cat ride like a queen in his arms on the way.

The back of the cafeteria, paneled with windows, opened out onto the central lawns. Two teams of students, divided into girls and boys, were running and throwing a discus all down the length of the green. A breeze blew the wooden disc past one player’s outstretched fingers and it turned into a free-for-all on the manicured grass—but a tall girl was the one to break free of the pile-up and make a run for the far end of the field, to the cheers of her teammates. Lawrence gave them a wide berth. He passed another group playing cards in time to hear half moan in frustration when one laid down his hand.

The cheering turned to shouts. Two boys had caught up with the running player and she twisted to send the prize to a girl further down the field. Another gust started up and sent the discus further than it was meant to go, to loud dismay and excitement from the respective teams. The flat brown blur sailed above their heads. One player made a leap to catch it, and it was at that point the discus caught on fire. The fire was blue and tasted, distantly, like coal to Lawrence.

The discus hit the ground, blooming vivid plumes of blue fueled by grass. The fire had reached about three feet in diameter when three students who hadn’t been on either team rushed in from the sidelines. They made sweeping motions with their hands to quench the unnatural glow with water conjured from thin air (but really taken from the pond, Lawrence was sure,
because creating water with magic was much more work than just stealing it). Then one, a girl called Maria Wellington, reached over and pulled the charred discus from the ground. She brushed the ash off, and (Lawrence had to squint to be certain) it was good as new, bright and shiny instead of dark and crumbling. She and her friends handed it back over to the players who by then had caught up to them. They made some apologies. The teams waved them off so they could resume their game before the wind picked up again.

It had taken less than a minute. Although Ess had climbed onto Lawrence’s shoulder for a better vantage point, nobody else on the lawns had watched past the initial surprise. Another spell gone wrong, and not interesting enough to have hurt anyone. Lawrence wondered if it would have been so much trouble for the magic students to play someplace where they were less likely to injure bystanders, but no one would tell them so. A couple of the players were even turning the discus over with interest to see how it had changed when it was put back together.

No one was upset. No one would think to report them.

Lawrence pinched the bridge of his nose until his headache went away.

The A Dormitory was for seniors and the closest to the center of campus, making it the easiest to go in and out of, but the single rooms were on the top floor. It took four flights of stairs to reach them. Lawrence’s legs, having already done enough work for the day, felt like wrung-out cotton by the time he finished climbing. He took his key from his pocket and unlocked his door.

Years ago, some enterprising designer had set out to make the smallest possible space a single human being could live in without subverting the laws of physics. They had failed, but only because the desk necessitated a few extra square feet. Ess wriggled out of his arms and
started rubbing up against everything in sight. Lawrence opened up the blinds, letting light
stream in, and sat on his narrow bed, which met him with a rustle instead of the usual creak of
springs.

He felt underneath him and came up with a white envelope. Black wax sealed it shut. He
turned it over. On the front of the letter, written with a calligraphy pen, was a curly M.

“Oh no.”

Ess jumped onto the bed and saw the envelope.

*Excellent, she said.*
Chapter 2

Lawrence had never told anyone about his mother. It was not that he disliked her; he just wasn’t sure where to start.

The truth of the matter was they had not spoken much over the past four years. She sent money for expenses directly to the school as a matter of routine. He chose to stay in the dorms for the holidays and attended extra lessons over the summer. He’d sent her a few letters in his first year, but her replies had been short. Eventually, he hadn’t received any at all. Now he mailed her his grades at the end of each year and, mindful of the fact she had an aversion to any serious cooking, sent her the odd care package full of food he’d made that could stand to travel a couple hundred miles. In return, she mailed him a present each birthday and some pocket money as a reward for his grades.

When he thought about the classmates who received weekly letters from their parents and went home for the summer, his did not seem an ideal arrangement, but when he thought about the students who burned their letters and never spoke of home, it didn’t seem so bad either. Actually, once he’d become accustomed to his autonomy, it became something of a relief. A great deal of time had passed since he’d felt the need to compulsively check where he walked, a reflex born of his mother’s unfortunate habit of doing things like leaving tacks on the floor of his room and rigging doors with buckets of frog spawn.

It was therefore with some trepidation that he approached the King’s Thumb café. The sun was going down, casting a rosy glow on the cobblestones that looked quite homey to Lawrence on other days. The King’s Thumb did a nice little business for itself, spending mornings serving coffee to those who were hungover in the wake of a nightly visit to the King’s
Head, and afternoons attending to anyone putting their feet up after hours spent in the shops lining the street. The stream of people always dwindled toward nightfall unless there was some event like a coronation going on in the city, but Lawrence had never seen it totally empty before. In fact, the entire street felt muted. Only a few people ducked between buildings, there were no criers or vendors roaming about, the sun glared red off deserted shop windows. He could hear the sound of his own footsteps hitting one of the busiest streets in the capital.

Ess was unconcerned by all of this, trotting ahead of him with her tail held high, and so Lawrence felt obliged to follow her lead. The lights in the café were off except for the dim glimmer in one of the windows, possibly from a lantern. The door swung open when Lawrence touched it. Ess disappeared inside. After a moment to collect himself, Lawrence went in after her.

As expected, there were no customers. There wasn’t the kindly woman at the counter who sometimes gave Lawrence a spare muffin at closing, declaring each time he was too small by half, and there was no manager flitting in and out of the back with a clipboard. Hardly any natural light lit Lawrence’s path except the orange glow from outside. There was a faint green illumination from one corner of the café, casting long fingers of shadows from stools and chair legs. The light tasted like moss, fighting to get under his gums, and made him long for a toothbrush. Lawrence thought it was all rather gilding the lily.

The table in that corner was Lawrence’s favorite, though this was almost certainly coincidental. It had been chosen for effect. Under a green lamp suspended in the air without any visible support or strings, there sat a figure in a black dress stirring a cup of tea. The dress was very definitely black, so black not even the colored light could reflect off it, and it had wide, sweeping sleeves that could have swallowed moons. The sole reason the figure’s hair was merely
raven was, Lawrence knew, because it tended to fade over time if it was dyed any darker. An aged, twiggy broom had been leaned against the wall. Ess was crouched on the floor nearby, lapping at a saucer. The midnight figure set down her spoon as Lawrence approached.

Her skin was many shades paler than his, her fingers longer, her nose more knife-like. She had bonier hands and a slimmer mouth. Her eyebrows were thin where his were thick. Their hair was one of the few characteristics they had in common, and their eyelashes, and the sharpness of their chins. When Mallory Caligny regarded her son, it was with ice-blue eyes that were further removed from his own than any other feature.

They looked at each other.

“You’ve not visited for almost a year,” she said, reproachful.

“Sorry. I had school.”

“You might have written.”

“So might you.”

Mallory tipped her head, allowing this, and Lawrence sat opposite her. “Where’s Nid?” he asked.

“Nidhogg is exploring the facilities.” Mallory traced a finger around the rim of her cup. “It isn’t often he’s in a city. And . . .”

The two of them glanced down at Ess. If it was possible to look smug with milk dripping from one’s whiskers, then she contrived to look extremely smug. Mallory’s enormous snake familiar had been terrified of the cat since their first meeting.

“I do not think he will be joining us this evening,” Mallory finished, all smoothness, and Lawrence found himself suppressing a smile. “Are you hungry? I can ring for some food.”
“I’m all right, thank you.” He wasn’t sure who she intended to call, but he had no curiosity to find out and the chicken sandwich was still sitting heavy in his stomach. “Is there time, anyway? You did want me to come as soon as possible.”

She waved a hand. “No need to hurry. The spell will last another hour at least. I thought it might be pleasant to catch up a bit first.”

“You really needn’t have troubled yourself over the spell. We could have just met in here with all the other customers around us like regular people.”

She sipped her tea. “How is school?”

“It’s fine. I got a ninety-five percent on a test last week.”

“Mm. You’ve taken your final exam?”

“Er. Yes.” Lawrence hadn’t expected her to know the date of the exam. They never talked about school face-to-face except in passing. “A couple hours ago.”

“And how did it go?” She examined the pattern of her teacup.

“Well?” he ventured. “I had to help someone in the middle of it and they helped me, so I’m afraid we may have been docked points for that.”

His mother sighed. “Really. I thought you would have exercised a bit more caution than that.”

“Sorry.”

“Oh, well, the deed is done. What were your results?”

“I don’t know yet. They don’t tell us until tomorrow.” Her interest was bewildering him more and more by the moment.

“Indeed?” She set her cup down. “Do you think you passed?”
He thought about Emmanuel beating his eggs until they frothed and Regina switching her recipe at the last moment. Regina was above average in their class. Emmanuel was only slightly below. “I think so,” Lawrence said.

“Then that is enough to be going on.” Mallory steepled her fingers and treated him to one of her thinnest smiles.

He froze.

“Do you think you’ll work somewhere in the capital after graduation?” she asked, the velvety smoothness back in her voice. “I can’t imagine there isn’t a restaurant in town looking for someone who’s recently graduated from the Academy itself. You’re welcome to come home, of course,” she added, “but I shouldn’t think the country would appeal to you at this point. And such a waste of your talents, too.”

“Um,” Lawrence said.

“Why, in fact.” Mallory ran a long nail along a whorl in the table’s grain. It was painted red. Distant memory whispered she had always had trouble preventing black nail polish from clumping. “In fact, I think you mentioned how the top students were often recruited by the castle itself. That would be quite the experience, wouldn’t it?”

He did not remember mentioning that particular detail.

“And you wouldn’t need to stay there forever, of course. A couple years’ experience as a royal chef? Why, the other lords and ladies would be begging you to work for them!”

Lawrence was only half listening now. He was trying to discover if it was possible to scoot the chair back along the wooden floor without making any noticeable scraping sounds.
“But royal chef certainly does have a nice ring to it, doesn’t it? Yes, that should do quite well. And I’m certain they would provide your lodgings and wouldn’t even think of objecting to Ess.” On cue, Ess leapt onto the table. Mallory scratched behind her ear. Ess closed her eyes and purred. “You’ll be wanting to keep her with you, of course. I can’t imagine you’d ever want to part with your first familiar.”

“She’s a normal cat,” Lawrence said, giving up on the chair, which felt curiously fixed in place.

None taken, Ess said, cracking open an eye to stare a dagger-thin pupil at him. Normal cat. Will you hark at the child.

“You are. Except you haven’t caught a mouse in years.”

Familiars don’t do mice.

“They do hairballs.”

“The castle,” Mallory interrupted. “It’s decided?”

“Mother, I don’t even know if I have the grades to get accepted there.” The hovering green lamp had drifted closer to his head over the course of their conversation. He swatted it away. “I was thinking I’d try a smaller place in another city. Maybe a manor in Trisdale?”

“By the ocean? Lawrence, dear, you’d catch your death. You already know people in the capital. I’d feel much better knowing you were safe and sound here.”

Lawrence knew his mother well enough to know this was a bald lie, but he said, “Even if I do stay here, I’m not sure they’re hiring at the castle—”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” Mallory flicked her hair back over her shoulder. “I asked around, they have quite enough room for one more in the kitchens.”
“But I—”

“That’s settled, then!” She clapped her hands together. “What a relief to have that off my mind. Now, since you’ll be at the castle anyway, I thought I might ask a favor of you.”

“I really don’t—”

“Now I know I promised you I wouldn’t involve you any further in the witchcraft question.”

“—yes, you did—”

“But something urgent has come up,” she said, “and I’m sorry to say I can hardly be expected to handle it on my own. I am getting on in years, you know.”

“—you’re thirty-seven—”

“It’s a simple draught—”

“—this is a terrible idea—”

“—you’ll have to make it yourself, naturally—”

“—that’s even worse—”

“—and all you need to do is administer it to the prince!” she concluded loudly. “It shouldn’t be so difficult, especially if you’re making his food. Oh, don’t look like that, you won’t need to do it right away. I’ll send you a letter when it’s time. Just prepare the draught and keep it on hand.”

Lawrence took a deep breath. “Mother,” he said. “I can’t do any magic.”

“Don’t be silly, of course you can.”

“Not well! Remember the time you wanted me to hex old Hodges’ cow so she wouldn’t make him any milk? It was all cream for a week! He sold buckets of it!”
“This is different,” said Mallory, who’d bought one of those buckets. “Potions aren’t so
dissimilar to cooking, and you have plenty of practice with that. Besides, Ess will help you.”

Ess drew herself up. A drop of milk clung to her whisker, ran to its end, and fell to the
floor.

“But I don’t want to poison a prince,” he said. “I don’t want to poison anyone!”

Mallory sighed. “Really, Lawrence, to hear you talk, you’d think I was sending you off to
the gallows.”

Lawrence opened his mouth to point out the definition of and penalty for treason, but she
spoke over him. “Ah, ah. It’s a perfectly reasonable request. After all the work I’ve done raising
you and paying for your education, the least you could do is show a little gratitude. And you
won’t be poisoning him, if that’s what you object to,” she added. He shut his mouth. “Not fatally.
It’s a sleeping potion. Here we are.”

She drew a roll of parchment from one of her sleeves, where he was sure it hadn’t been a
moment before, and flourished it before him. It was yellow with age and tied with a red string,
and looked like the hundred other scrolls he had seen piled in the linen closet at home, which
never had any actual linen in it. She shook the paper under his nose and he had to take it in hand
or else endanger a nostril. The scroll was rough and itched at his hand. It tasted of moss more
than even the lamp. She looked satisfied as his fingers closed over it.

Once unfurled, the recipe for the potion looked quite ordinary. He might have found the
same directions in any cookbook he cared to name, except for the fact that the cookbooks he
would have cared to name did not require a half moon in the sky or the fur of a muskrat. It was
some comfort that there was little actual spellery involved, only a brief chant near the end which he was unlikely to get wrong.

He ran a finger down the list of ingredients at the top. “I don’t know where to get half of these.”

Ess padded over and peered at the letters. *Don’t be stupid. We can break into the cupboards in the magic lab, they have everything in there.*

“Lovely,” said Mallory. “Well, that should be everything.” Her spoon clattered into an empty teacup and she reached for her broomstick. “Don’t concern yourself with writing to me. I shall send you a letter in a month or two, and I’ll be much obliged if you get a head start on that draught in the meantime.”

“Wait, wait.” Lawrence hastened to rise as she did, though with far less majesty. “I can’t do this.” She cocked a thin eyebrow at him, and he quickly added, “I mean, I’ll get it wrong. What if I really do poison him by mistake? Or—or if I can’t get him to drink it? Or if I get caught and thrown in jail for witchcraft?”

Mallory put her broom aside and stared down her knife-like nose at him. “Lawrence Rodolphus Caligny.” (He flinched.) “You,” she continued, “are the son of Mallory Caligny, most feared witch in Western Videria. You are the grandson of Herodotus Khorasani, master warlock and renowned scholar. You are the great-grandson of Esmerelda Nethienne, the single most powerful magician of this age and the last, the witch to end all the witches, the only person to be recognized as High Sorceress before her exile. You are not some swineherd’s spawn. I have every confidence that you can complete the task at hand.” She inclined her head. “Await my letter.”
With that, she swept out of the cafe, taking the green light with her and plunging Lawrence and Ess into total darkness. They sat in silence for a moment. Ess began to purr once more.

*Your mother should visit more often,* she said. *Why the prince and not the princess, do you think? Putting a princess to sleep would be more conventional.*

“Why anything, with her?” Lawrence rolled up the scroll. After speaking with his mother, he was always left feeling as if he’d been measured against something and found wanting. It did not distress him unduly. Mallory used a snakeskin where other people used a ruler. “Can we go? I don’t want to have to explain to the manager why his lights aren’t working anymore.”

It wasn’t much brighter outside. The sun had already lowered itself past the horizon and only a few street lamps had been lit, though the street was completely devoid of people this time. Lawrence took the opportunity to sidle under a lamp. He brought the scroll to his nose and studied it as best he could.

“I don’t think the lab cupboards will have some of these. I don’t think most shops will have some of these. It’s illegal to take the tooth of a dog for purposes of magic, isn’t it?”

*Shame, too,* said Ess. *Never fret, I can find us a back-alley dealer. Or, if you’d prefer, I can think of some animals who might benefit from a few less teeth.*

“Don’t you dare. I’ll ask the dealer on Artisans’. Perhaps he has one about.”

*What, old Newt? He’s weird!*

“He’ll do. I draw the line at cruelty to animals.”

*Oh, yes, thank you very much,* she said. *Cruelty to sweet, innocent, lovable dogs? Dear me, no.*
Lawrence scanned the street. Some distance away was a man, a lamp-lighter going by his long metal torch with a hook on the end. A ways behind him, in one of the backstreets that coiled all through the city, Lawrence could make out a green glow and what might have been either an exceptionally dark shadow or the hem of a dress.

“We’d better go back to school,” he sighed. “She won’t be able to leave until we do. It’s too embarrassing to come out.”

*What do you mean?*

“She left her broomstick in the cafe.”

***

It had been a long day. After he came home and gave Ess something to eat for dinner, Lawrence went straight to sleep.

Having neglected to close the blinds, he was woken by gray light creeping in through the window before dawn. The only sensible thing to do was to roll over and go back to sleep, but a hammering at the door put a hold on sensibility. Lawrence kicked off the covers, displacing a consternated cat, and went to stop the noise. He fixed on his most polite look before he opened the door.

“Good morning, Benjamin,” he said.

“You planning to sleep the day away or what?” Benjamin demanded.

Ben Clarkson was a powerfully built boy in the engineering department who liked to filch the occasional bowl of soup when he caught Lawrence in the kitchens. Lawrence had set aside additional portions for the boy, and it had earned him a loyal friend as well as a dependable alarm clock. He made up fifty percent of Lawrence’s conversational acquaintances at school.
Benjamin usually didn’t rouse him at dawn, however. “Is there a special occasion?” Lawrence asked, wiping grains of sleep from his eyes.

“They’re handing out grades in the main office. Get your shoes on.”

Lawrence felt his spirits drop as if it were a physical act. “Sorry. One minute.” The clothes he was wearing were rumpled, but he could tell from the look in Benjamin’s eye that it would be a poor choice to ask him to wait while he changed. He found his shoes left in a pile on the floor and pulled them on.

“I’ll be right back,” he said to Ess, combing hair out of his eyes with his fingers. “Stay in here, all right? I’ll bring some tuna.”

“Meow,” Ess said, and curled up on the bed.

The main office was in the very center of the school, right behind the welcoming area for visitors at the front. It was quicker to cross the lawn and circumvent the fountain (from which five stone torches gushed water instead of fire, which they had been told the symbolism of on orientation day and which Lawrence had promptly forgotten) than to go through the labyrinth of halls and stairs inside the academy. Despite the fact that Benjamin was only a few inches taller than him, Lawrence found himself jogging to keep up with the other boy’s pace. They arrived just as the sky was turning from grey to a fluffy pink.

The office itself was all marble and mahogany, an elegance borrowed from courtrooms and banks designed to make whoever stood in it feel unwelcome. The place was empty except for the front desk. The day was too young for anyone else to be up and about. Benjamin strode unabashed to the man sitting at the front desk, who was one of nature’s born clerks. The man looked over the top of his square glasses at Benjamin.
“Exam results?” he said.

Benjamin told him his name and division. The man opened a drawer in his desk, flipped through a few papers within, and extracted a slender, tall envelope which he handed over without ceremony. He looked to Lawrence.

“Ah, Lawrence Caligny. Culinary Arts.”

Another flip through the drawer resulted in the same envelope, but with a note pinned to the front. The clerk took the note off and read it, then he opened another drawer and shuffled through that as well. He came up with a stiff piece of paper which he folded, crisped the edge with his thumbnail, and inserted into the envelope before handing it all over to a puzzled Lawrence.

“Thank you,” Lawrence said. The clerk waved them away with a flick of his fingers.

Benjamin held in his impatience all the way out of the office and down the lawn until they were by the fountain again. He ripped open the envelope and yanked out a sheet which had been folded into thirds. He crowed. “Eighty-one! Pass!”

“Oh, congratulations.” Lawrence meant it. He knew the engineering exam was nearly as difficult as the magic one. Benjamin had mentioned it a dozen times over the past month while eating Lawrence’s study projects.

He continued reading over the statistics. “Let’s see, that puts me at nineteenth in the class, sixty-third in the nation. That’s probably enough to get an apprenticeship with Fawles and Company, do you think? I mean, I know they’re tough to impress, but an Academy graduate!”

“Of course they’ll take you. I bet you could get your head to write you a recommendation, too.”
Benjamin beamed. “Go on, open yours.”

“Oh, no, I’ll wait until I get back—”

But Benjamin snatched the envelope before Lawrence could hide it behind his back.

“Come on, you know you passed, stop being modest.” He ignored Lawrence’s fretting and took out his scorecard with a flourish. He whistled when he saw the big black numbers. “Shoot, I see why you didn’t want to show anyone. They might strangle you if they saw this.”

The paper changed hands. Dread settled in Lawrence’s stomach as he looked at the numbers across the head of the paper. Ninety-seven.

Oblivious to Lawrence’s silent horror, Benjamin’s hand burrowed around in the envelope and came up with the stiff paper the clerk had inserted. He laughed when he read it. “Blast. Of course you don’t have to worry about an apprenticeship. You got an invitation to the castle.”

Lawrence had never been so unhappy to see a grade.

***

Graduation day should have been a muted affair, but the auditorium was packed from wall to wall. Lawrence had spent the week leading up to it dragging the tail of his misery after him like a cape. Regina had also passed, and cheerfully confided in him that Emmanuel had accidentally knocked over her apple slices while she was away and thrown them out before she could see. Judging by Emmanuel’s black eye, she had given her requisite punishment and no longer felt the need to draw out the matter. Emmanuel had not passed and was only attending the graduation as a guest, but he was more philosophical about it than Lawrence had expected and was in almost as much good cheer as everyone kicking the dust of the academy off their feet. Benjamin was among the happiest of the dust-kickers. He was making regular rounds about the
auditorium and talking to anyone who would listen about what he was going to do next. Nobody seemed to mind, because they were all eager to talk or complain about the same thing.

“I don’t even know where I’d teach,” a girl from the general education division confided in Lawrence. He’d never spoken to her before. “I was thinking I’d like to look after children, but then I started thinking that maybe I should apply for a position as a teaching assistant at a university to start with, but that means years more of school.”

“That does sound unfair.” Lawrence nibbled at a triangle sandwich as she spoke. The bread was a good, light kind, and the cheese and ham inside were fresh, sliced to the thinness of paper. He wondered which unfortunate underclassmen in his division had been set to compose hundreds of the things early this morning. The peach gelatin was its own monstrosity, set square in the middle of the buffet table where family members congregated when they didn’t know what else to do with themselves. Lawrence didn’t even want to think how long all the crenellations of fruit and stiffened cream must have taken. He had not set foot in the kitchens since the exam.

“After you’ve gone through all the tests, too.”

“You see? And that’s not counting—oh, hells, there they go.” The girl broke off to watch the magic students shuffle themselves into a line at the edge of the polished wooden stage. “Huh. They don’t have anything to worry about, of course. Even if they don’t get hired they can just conjure up whatever they need and live on their own. Make money or food out of thin air, whatever.”

“That’s true,” said Lawrence, who knew for a fact that conjuring edible food from nowhere was impossible, and alchemizing currency had been outlawed long before anyone had thought to bring witchcraft before the courts.
The girl clearly wanted to go on, but one of the deans clinked a spoon against a champagne glass and the talking subsided. He began a long, winding speech about how the new magic class was the pride of the school, centered around this graduating class being the largest in the last thirty years, and how the top students were guaranteed a bright future in society. The crowd dutifully applauded when he was finished. The students at the edge of the stage, circles under their eyes, stepped forward to receive their diplomas and handshakes from first the dean, then the headmaster. One of the students looked as if he had forgotten to comb his hair.

Lawrence felt a pang of sympathy for those onstage.

The pang vanished when, after the magic students had left, the headmaster unrolled a scroll of parchment and announced that all formally recognized students would be joining him when called. Lawrence was called fifth, and went to join the four others already standing onstage. The magic student who had forgotten to comb his hair, Jasper Cunningham, was called after Lawrence and came to stand next to him. He was at an average height, which meant that even slouching he was the taller of the two.

Once Maria Wellington was called, the headmaster rolled up the list of names and began another speech about the academy’s history of excellence and the trend of its students going on to assist the royal family in its noble endeavors and keeping the peace of the country. Lawrence’s stomach lurched a bit at the mention of the king and his retinue, but he ended up missing most of the speech. The Jasper student was brooding at the crowd from behind black curls and a square set of spectacles. Beyond him, a girl with freckles and red hair was standing stiff at attention, hanging off the headmaster’s every inflection, and two boys were staring straight ahead as they tried to stand on one foot and kick each other under their graduation robes. Some people in the
audience had noticed and were muffling an encouragement of laughter—but the headmaster had stopped speaking. Lawrence snapped his eyes forward before he could be caught being inattentive.

To his surprise, he and his classmates only turned and filed off the stage without a word. Nothing was given to them, not even the handshake, just everyone watching them as they traipsed down the stairs and back to their seats. The murmur of the crowd started up again, and some people began to inch towards the doors in the back. He was interrupted from his confusion by someone slapping him on the back and almost knocking him over.

“Come on, everyone’ll beat us there.” Regina steadied him with a hand on his shoulder.

“You all right? Didn’t think I hit you that hard.”

“Wasn’t paying attention,” Lawrence gasped. “Where are we going?”

“Banquet. Get it in gear.” She seized his collar, apparently deciding that she wasn’t willing to wait for him to get it in gear, and towed him through the flood of people out into the hall. He managed to pry her fingers off once they had made it to the frontmost trickle, then he caught the flash of a black tail again.

“You go ahead,” he said. “I, ah, have something.”

“Your parents?”

“Sort of.”

Regina shrugged and marched on. Ess slipped off of her sunny spot on the windowsill.

About time. How can it take so long to give a bunch of kids some pieces of paper?

“There are a lot of speeches. It’s tradition.”
Lawrence started down a hall, Ess at his heels. *Tradition, shmadition. How long do we have? You look ridiculous in that, by the way.*

Lawrence took off his cap and pulled the gown over his head. The tassel had kept bonking the side of his head, anyway. He had ordinary clothes on beneath it, since he’d never spent his pocket money on anything nicer and it hadn’t occurred to his mother to concern herself with it. “At least an hour, I’m sure. Listen, about all thi—”

Ess darted ahead before he could finish. They left the main building and took a trip through the gardens to get to the extracurricular section of campus, she sliding through bushes with ease and he stepping around them, sometimes catching a leg on a thorn. She was far ahead and waiting by the door of the labs when Lawrence arrived to open it for her. The main doors unlocked for graduation day so parents could wander where they pleased and see what their children had been up to. It was a simple matter to get into the magic lab itself, but an experimental jiggle of the cupboard handles showed them to be locked.

“These will be magic-proof, won’t they?” Lawrence extracted a bit of paper from his pocket covered in his own handwriting. “I’m not sure which ingredients we’ll be able to find.”

*I told you to stop worrying about it. You’ve got me here.* Ess leapt onto a shelf and, from there, the top of a cupboard. He heard a faint click of the lock as she landed and felt a telltale twang in his hand as if he’d turned the key himself. The door opened, smooth as butter. Ess flicked her tail and rolled onto her back, thoroughly satisfied with herself.

“I can’t believe they don’t have better security for this.” He ran a finger over the labels of the bottles of powder. “What if a student broke in?”
It’s not set to guard against a familiar. Ess set about washing her face. It’s only witches who usually have proper magic familiars, remember?

“Usually,” he muttered, and selected his first bottle. “I suppose if I hang, no one will bother themselves terribly about the details.”
Chapter 3

Lawrence had seen the castle before. It was hard to avoid even at the edges of the capital, the five cotton-swirl blue towers spiraling up to the clouds over chimneys and smokestacks. It didn’t look like what he felt a real castle should look like: a big wind-worn structure built to protect rather than to pamper, an ash relic of three or four hundred years around which an economy had sprung up.

It was a cake of a castle instead, all shimmering white in the day and warmly lit windows at night, proud black gates rather than a drawbridge, crawling roses instead of a moat. The crenellations were rounded, the roof was the color of the sea, the windows were tall and fearlessly wide. Along the grounds ran a light peach-paved path that had not a speck of dirt on it. The towers were so slender that it looked as if a giant hand could reach down from the heavens at any moment and snap one in two.

All this was because the castle had been rebuilt in the city about a hundred years ago, a finishing touch for the capital of a country that was not concerned by threats of invasion. Videria was a peninsula nation, locked in by mountains on one side and an ocean on all others, and it had no vast tracts of natural resources to recommend it. The real threats had always been from within, and it was difficult to justify building a stout, ugly fortress when a circle of witches could bring it crashing down like so much gingerbread.

The history books from the academy recounted this happening quite literally a number of times during the Locke Wars, citing the distressing statistics of people killed when the ground and roof crumbled around them. The buildings had been replaced in a hurry, of course, since there was no greater hurry than the kind court sorcerers could manufacture, and no one became a
court sorcerer without having a flair for the dramatic. After that, Lawrence supposed, the cloud
spires and romantic gardens had become fashionable. Royalty had done it, so everyone else had
followed the leader, and fashion faded to tradition.

Lawrence’s mother, surprisingly, had never liked the gingerbread-castle stories, even
though he thought she would have appreciated the irony and grandiosity of the maneuver. She
said the only things more clichéd than gingerbread and spindles were the apple stories, as if
anyone these days would accept so much as a cherry from a mysterious stranger who happened
along the same forest path. No, she said, those lofty days were gone. Witchcraft now was work,
and hard work, harder than any street magician would have you believe. She always sounded
proud about that. Lawrence was never certain why, except that it perhaps gave her an excuse to
feel grander than her ancestors. It wasn’t hard to feel grander than them, he thought. They’d
managed to get themselves banned.

So Lawrence had seen the castle, but he realized, even as he lagged behind the chattering
members of his group of twenty or so, he had never experienced it. Their carriages had brought
them to the gates and left them there, among the two parallel stretches of elms that lined the main
entrance. Climbing the stone steps to the top and using the knocker were the bolder members of
the party, one of the magic students and the red-headed girl from graduation day. The only other
people Lawrence could recognize were Jasper, who was behind Lawrence and directing a sulky
stare at the ground, and Maria Wellington, who was near the middle and had no expression to
speak of.

The doors swung open. A crisp butler, whose only betrayal of his annoyance was a twitch
of his jaw, directed them and their trunks to the servants’ entrance around the back, which
proved to be less romantic than the front. Another man was awaiting them there, clipboard in hand and severity in the lines of his face. Behind him stood several men and women with their hair combed back or tied up in buns. One of the men had a familiar squint in his eye and curl to his lip.


This was to those who were fussing about and trying to figure where in the alphabet they went, and whether they qualified as artisan or servant. Lawrence, under no illusions, found a place near the right end of the back row. When the hissing and clamoring had ended, the man with the clipboard called out each of their names and divided them into further lines. A man with a rather impressive beard stepped forward to claim the three apprentices in the front row, and strode off magisterially with them following him like a line of ducklings. A woman in a simple brown dress took the tallest boy of the group, an elderly man trundled away with the two who had been fighting on the stage at graduation, and once the second row had been stripped away, most of the adults had left.

“Fletcher,” the severe man called, and Lawrence stepped forward. He’d never used his real last name on the school records lest the witch rumors ever become substantiated. He’d decided from the start that he wouldn’t be using it now, either. “You’re with Mr. Streisand.”

The man with the pinched eyes looked down his narrow nose at Lawrence. Lawrence could not have actually felt any further dread than was currently occupying the space where his legs should have been, but his stomach gave a sad little flop when he recognized the sour man as
the judge whom Regina had disliked. The feeling appeared to be mutual between Mr. Streisand and the entire world.

“Come,” Mr. Streisand said, and Lawrence felt another pathetic flop when it became apparent that no one else would be joining them. Lawrence gripped his suitcase and followed the man who could only be the head of the kitchens.

As soon as they were alone in a narrow hall, Mr. Streisand spoke in clipped tones. “Today, you will familiarize yourself with your living space and work space, as well as your expected schedule. You will be living in the male half of the servant’s quarters, which are located in the attics of the south wing. Tomorrow, you will be roused at six o’clock and work will end at eight in the evening. Lights are out at ten o’clock. Inquire after the other servants as to where to put your laundry, receive candles, and fulfill your other domestic duties. You have one half-day a month, and you may receive up to a week of vacation per year. Do you understand?” He had said it all in one breath.

“Yes, sir.” They ascended a staircase. It must have been a staircase specifically for servants, because it lacked any of the elegant accoutrements the castle’s outside promised. The wooden steps lacked any carpeting and a long patch of baseboard appeared to have been misplaced. Lawrence had some difficulty carrying his things without thumping them against each step.

Mr. Streisand took no notice. “You will receive a beginning servant’s salary, to be given at the end of each month on your half-day. To start, you will be set to work under the more advanced apprentices, where you will assist in the scullery, with the servant’s food, and whichever minor tasks they deem fit for you.” His shoes hit the stairs in a precise rhythm, rising
and falling like clockwork. “The difficulty and responsibility of your future work will depend upon the diligence with which you complete your current work. Disobedience will be punished, and negligence will be handled in kind. Do you understand?”

Lawrence nearly lost his balance. “Yes, sir.”

“Refrain from activity that might bring you into contact with any members of the family or their guests. If there is a ball or a large dinner, you may be required to wait upon guests instead of assisting in the kitchens.” Mr. Streisand reached the top of the stairs, to Lawrence’s profound relief, and walked on. “You will spend most of your time in the kitchens, but you may be called upon to run errands. Use the servants’ entrance to come and go. Never the main doors. Avoid going out on the grounds during the day. Be sure to memorize the layout of the castle so you may efficiently do your work and know where not to tread. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

The hallway that the staircase opened onto was narrower than the one before, and branched off into even narrower ones. They lacked the comforts of the corridors below. The floor was still not carpeted, but made from old wood, and there were only a few windows. Lanterns hung from hooks every so often along their route, evidently the only things to see by when the sun went down.

Mr. Streisand turned into one of the back hallways, lined with doors, and took Lawrence to one door that looked identical to all the rest. Mr. Streisand spun on his heel, curt and sharp-eyed, to face him. “This is your room. Because I requested only one apprentice this year, you have no one to share it with at the moment. If you have further questions, ask one of your overseers or a peer. I am too busy to attend to your adjustments, which I trust will be without
significant issue. You may spend half an hour unpacking, and then I will send someone to bring you to the kitchens so you may learn what is expected of you there. Do you understand?”

Lawrence opened his mouth to answer in the affirmative, but Mr. Streisand cut in. “And what the hell is that?”

His gaze was fixed on the floor some distance behind Lawrence. Ess had appeared somewhere along the way in her customary fashion and trailed after them. Mr. Streisand was looking at her as if deciding whether to put down traps or poison, and Ess was looking back at him as if deciding how best to trip him down some stairs.

“My cat,” Lawrence said. “She won’t cause any trouble, and I heard we were allowed pets. Sir,” he added.

Mr. Streisand’s lip lifted minutely, but all he said was a clipped, “Just be sure to keep her in your room,” before he spun and left. He brought his sleeve up to his face as he turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

Ess’s tail twitched. Don’t tell me we have to deal with him.

“I’m afraid so.” Lawrence shouldered his way into the room. He found it to be a pleasant surprise. It was bigger than his dorm room, if just as bare, had two narrow beds and wardrobes mirroring each other on both sides of the room. A small window marked the arrangement’s meridian, allowing in some sunlight and a view of the southern part of the city that was generally reserved for birds alone. Ess curled, businesslike, around the legs of one bed. Lawrence sat on the other.

He unlatched his trunk and lifted the lid. “What’ve you found out?”
This place is a labyrinth. I started at the south side and it took me nearly an hour to get to you. She rubbed her cheek against the corner of a wardrobe. Did you know they have an entire room to keep shoes in? Just rows and rows of shoes on a shelf. Nothing else.

“It doesn’t surprise me.” He began unfolding his shirts. He didn’t have many. He would have to use his first paycheck to buy some necessities.

I thought I would go mad. I haven’t even thought of looking for where the royals sleep.

Another brick of worry laid itself into the wall. “Are you not going to be able to find your way around?” he asked. “I have to be able to, well, obviously I do, for work, but I thought perhaps you might—”

You really worry too much, she said, flopping onto her back and squirming. Give me a week and I’ll know this place like the back of my paw. You just keep your head down and do what you’re told.

This was one thing Lawrence was good at.
Chapter 4

By the end of the first week, Ess had determined their room’s major defect.

There are always loose floorboards! How can there not be loose floorboards?

“The maids like to keep everything in perfect working order,” Lawrence said. “Everyone takes it very seriously.” He put a hand over his mouth and failed to mute a yawn. “Would it be a tremendous hardship to discuss it some other time?”

Ess paced up and down the floor. We need somewhere to hide it all. How are you going to explain having a bottle of powdered frog lungs to the maids when they come around to clean?

“Bad influences and poor life decisions?”

She looked at him sourly.

I hate it when you’re tired, she said. You get all passive-aggressive when you’re tired.

Lawrence did not contest this, rolling onto his back. He’d thought a day at the castle would be about the same as a day preparing for finals, just with the additional spice of some people shouting at him. He’d been right about the shouting, but the work had left him sore and shambling even though he hadn’t been allowed anywhere near an oven. The older apprentices, the ones who had been around a couple years already, handled the cooking for all the servants. Lawrence and the three apprentices who had come the previous year were delegated grunt work and assisted in the scullery when there was nothing else to do (but there was always, always something else to do). Lawrence went to bed at the end of each day with fingers like raisins and lead in his shoes. One of the young apprentices, however, a gangly boy named Tyrone who had his hair tied back in a series of dreadlocks, was quite kind to their new member. He had assured
Lawrence that the place wasn’t so bad, really, and he would be used to it within a couple of months. Lawrence had thanked him and asked for a turn with the steel wool.

The only positive was that he didn’t have any time to fret about the sleeping draught, though sometimes he caught himself thinking yearningly of how restful a dungeon must be.

Ess leapt onto his front, and he found himself faced with whiskers and pink nose. It was a decidedly non-threatening sensation. *It’s a half-moon in five more days. You do realize what that means.*

“Not really, no.”

*The potion!* she fairly yowled. *The potion is what that means! The instructions say to start it stewing on the night of a half, you nitwit!*

“Oh, Ess, can’t we wait for the half-moon in another two weeks?” He rolled again and she was forced to scramble off him. “It doesn’t say we need waxing or waning specifically, does it? Mother hasn’t even sent us a letter, so she can’t want it done yet.”

*It takes two months to finish it. Two months. What if we need it ready on short notice?*  
“We don’t even have all the ingredients,” Lawrence said, voice muffled by his pillow. “My half-day isn’t until the end of the month, and I can’t go with you to get them until then. And I’m not risking sneaking out at night when I can barely climb the stairs all at once.”

This stroke of logic earned him two whole minutes of silence.

*Fine,* she said. *Next half-moon. But you’re not putting it off any later than that.*

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he muttered into his pillow.

***
Six o’clock came too early as usual, light not yet cracking over the rooftops beneath the window. Lawrence rolled out of bed and washed his face in the basin in the corner of the room, then muddled his way into his uniform. The cloth was thick and practical, meant to protect the person who spilled boiling water on themselves, although Lawrence thought the length of the sleeves was a bit ridiculous since anyone who was doing anything had to roll them back to their elbows. Contrary to popular belief, there was no hat for the uniform, at least not for underlings, but there was an apron (white), though the only use it saw was keeping suds off his clothes (also white). The ones who had hats were the senior chefs, who often bustled in and out of the kitchens talking loudly and looking important, and Mr. Streisand, who was more often out of the kitchens than in them and who had the tallest hat of anyone. And that hat, too, was white, white, white like an enormous mushroom had exploded from his scalp and no one had been brave enough to tell him. White was an utterly impractical color for someone meant to spend all day up to their arms in sauces and spices, but it looked very neat and professional.

At six-thirty, Lawrence ate breakfast at a long table with forty other people, in between Tyrone and a solemn, quiet woman who disapproved of Tyrone on the basis of his existence, and who Lawrence tried hard not to annoy. At the other end of the table, the maids had gathered around to discuss something in the newspaper. A ruddy-cheeked one, chewing on her cuff, pointed to the heading of one column, and the rest craned in as one. Someone made a comment that sounded wry, and laughter rippled through them.

Tyrone leaned over as Lawrence passed him a basket of rolls. “You haven’t heard what happened last night, have you?” he asked, plucking the bread out conspiratorially. Tyrone loved
to hear gossip almost as much as he loved to pass it onto anyone who would listen, and
Lawrence happened to be a very practiced listener.

“No,” Lawrence said. “It’s a shame. You’ve no choice but to tell me every remote detail
or I shall writhe in curiosity for the rest of the day.”

A practiced listener wasn’t the same as a willing listener. No one except Ess ever noticed
when Lawrence laced his words with irony, though, particularly not Tyrone, who was at the
moment a man on a mission.

“Well,” said Tyrone, breaking his roll in half in the manner of a man rolling a cigarette,
“you know the new magic students who came in last week? The ones from your school?”

“Certainly.”

“One of them got arrested.”

Plates and forks clattered around them.

“You’re joking,” Lawrence said. “A magic student?”

Tyrone looked delighted. “Cross my heart. It was the girl, I heard, Mary something-or-
other.”

It took a moment for his memory to wave a flag. “Maria Wellington?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. You know her?”

“No, er, that is. Not personally.” Lawrence inserted his fork into a bit of egg. “I only saw
her around. Do you know what happened?”

“Sort of. No fine detail,” Tyrone said. “I heard she got caught working a spell she
shouldn’t’ve done. But there’s only a couple reasons you’d get arrested working magic right
after you come to the castle, right?”
“What do you mean?”

“I mean she was probably trying to off someone in the family.”

Lawrence remembered after a moment that he was supposed to eat the egg. He did. “I’m sorry?”

Tyrone popped some bacon into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. “It happens more than you’d think. We get a lot of people coming in who just want to work for a year or two and then they leave, you know, because working at the castle always looks good, so we’re always hiring replacements. It’s tough for security to screen ‘em all, but they always get caught in the end.” He swallowed contemplatively. “First time it’s been a wand-waver, though. Don’t think anyone saw that one coming.”

Lawrence suspected that Tyrone only thought this because he had never looked in a history book. “It’s almost seven,” he said instead.

“Oh, crap.” Tyrone gulped down the rest of his orange juice and jumped up. “We better hurry, I hear Snotnose is on the warpath today.”

Mr. Streisand was indeed in a sore temper, though Lawrence wasn’t sure how anyone could tell the difference between this and his regular attitude. It turned out that Mr. Streisand was merely contemptuous and bitter when outside his natural habitat, but he was a veritable monster at work. He also appeared to have caught a cold, which put him in a worse mood than ever, and he was taking it out on anyone who ventured too close.

“Late!” he snapped as the two boys passed him. His imperiousness was somewhat spoiled by his stuffed nose. “Miller!”

Tyrone stiffened to attention. “Yes, sir.”
“You’re wanted in the scullery if you aren’t too busy tripping over your own feet. Fletcher!”

Tyrone left, shooting a grimace over his shoulder. Lawrence looked blandly at Mr. Streisand. “Sir?”

“You’re on fetch duty, assuming you can handle being taken away from the counters for two hours. Get the list from Ms. Marrows and be back within the hour, is that clear?”

“Sir.” Lawrence ducked under the tray someone was carrying and heard the chef bark out, “Joon, I understand it is a difficult thing to remember, but most of us choose not to mix in the eggshell with the rest of the egg!” behind him. Julia Marrows, a round woman who was one of the only other people in the kitchen high-ranking enough to receive an honorific from Mr. Streisand, paused in giving instructions to a higher apprentice and retrieved a slip of paper from her pocket when Lawrence approached.

“Hurry back quick, love,” she said, handing it over to him along with what looked like a small wallet. The work day had begun at four in the morning for her, and she was already beginning to flag. “He’s like to bite the head off the king himself today, an’ I got enough to be getting on about with the visitors tonight. Show whoever’s at the counter the stamp in here,” she tapped the not-wallet, “and they ought to give you everything on credit. Get a receipt, mind. Address is at the top here—you do know your way around town?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.” Lawrence paused. She drooped where she stood, gravity pushing and curving her spine with an invisible hand and dragging fingers down the puffs under her eyes. “You don’t need anything, do you, ma’am? I’m sure I could call Mrs. Stonewall to
relieve you if you need a few minutes.” Mrs. Stonewall worked the night shift in the kitchens, but she could be roused from her bed with some coaxing if they were short of help.

“Oh, aren’t you sweet,” she said distractedly. “No, I’ll be well enough, thank you all the same, and Mrs. Stonewall has earned her rest. You get used to days like these. Get on, now, before—”

“FLETCHER! NO ONE IS PAYING YOU TO STAND AROUND AND CHATTER!”

“Remember the receipt!” Ms. Marrows called after him as he bolted for the door, committing one offense of nearly knocking a bowl out of someone’s hands and two of stepping on people’s feet.

Lawrence could still hardly find his way back to his own room, but the servants’ exit was easy enough to find, since there was always someone coming or going through it. When he got out onto the grounds, he felt a furry weight drop onto his shoulder from somewhere above.

_Fancy running into you. I thought you stayed in the kitchens all day?_

“Supply run.” He slowed to a fast walk as he approached the east gates, examining the address crowning the top of the list, mostly filled with spices. “And before you ask, there’s no time to go down any side streets, I’ve got less than an hour. This place is close to Artisans’ Way, isn’t it?”

 Ess arched her back. _Dull. I’m not saying deciding to be a cook wasn’t basically the most boring choice you could’ve possibly made—_

“I appreciate it.” He turned a corner and dodged a woman with a stroller.
—especially when you consider the options that were available to you from birth, which, I should point out, are far more interesting than cutting up carrots for a living and which I shall not go into—

“Sorry, pardon me, miss.”

—but I thought the purpose of all that studying was so you didn’t have to be someone’s fetch boy.

“That is an excellent point,” Lawrence said under the clatter of passing carriage wheels, “and one I would be more willing to concede if I had, in actual point of fact, been the one to choose the castle as a place of residence. As it is, I’m afraid my education was spent getting past the entrance.”

Her tail swished. You could still show a little initiative. I know, line of succession applies, right? Why don’t we break someone’s legs?

He kept his eyes fixed on the ground as her tail brushed his nose. “Because it’s immoral?”

She gave the cat equivalent of a sneer, which was pretty much indistinguishable from how a cat normally looked. Oh, morality, heaven save us from morality.

Possibly the worst thing about that statement was not how little it surprised him, but how it was without even a trace of irony. “We’d also have to break an awful lot of legs. I’m bottom of the ladder, you realize.”

Not a problem. We’ll knock over the ladder.

“Would you please be quiet? People always stare when they see me like this.”

You be quiet, I’m not the one talking to his cat, Ess said, but she allowed Lawrence to focus on the task of not tripping over the apron flapping around his ankles. The streets were busy
with people walking to breakfast or their jobs, none of them too concerned about who was in
their way. The sun had not yet gotten high enough that the day was too warm, and it was pleasant
to breathe in the fresh air which was in such short supply in the kitchens.

Artisans’ Way was a particularly welcome distraction. It was one of the oldest streets in
the city, from back when “Artisans’ Way” had translated into “a couple scribe hovels and an
unnerving amount of pottery.” In salute to this decorated history, a bookstore and a potter’s shop
marked the midpoint of the street. The years had seen the street grow, on either end, a weaver, a
tailor, a tanner, a glassblower, a butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker, until it wasn’t even one
street anymore but a sprawling city within the city, almost a square mile. The combined smell of
the livelihoods therein was horrific if you didn’t visit Artisan’s Way on a daily basis, as
Lawrence didn’t, because your olfactory system had not yet gone in for an early retirement.
Lawrence, however, had a cat’s tail settled over his nose, and he knew there were worse fates.
He still held his breath when he walked past the tanner’s.

The grocer was accessible through a side street off the way, its front carved out of white
stone and shiny glass and a door that rang a bell whenever it was opened. The old man at the
counter critically examined Lawrence’s list and the stamp within his not-wallet before stumping
off among the shelves and selecting a variety of jars and small bags. He shoveled it all into two
large paper bags, the weight almost buckling Lawrence’s legs when they were foisted
unceremoniously into his arms. Lawrence remembered belatedly to thank him, which went
unacknowledged, and used his back to push open the door on his way out.

He started off.

After a while, Ess took enough pity to jump off his shoulder and walk beside him.
Need some help with that?

“That’s all right,” Lawrence gasped, stepping around a cart.

Once, when he’d been about seven years old, his mother had sent him out to fill a sack full of apples and told him not to return until he could barely lift it. Their cottage—a true witch’s cottage inherited from his great-grandmother, thatch roof and chimney and wooden shutters, an iron latch over the door and everything—was on a steep hill overlooking their village. Mallory claimed she liked the hill because plenty of flowers grew on its side, but Lawrence suspected that witches just liked looking down on people.

It’s just that you look like you’re going to keel over before you get halfway.

“I’m fine.”

At the time, climbing up the hill with the apples slung over his shoulder had been the hardest thing he had ever done, his breath coming shorter and shorter, his eyes stinging with the effort. His arms had trembled for an hour afterwards, but Mallory had been shocked that he’d brought back so much and he’d been allowed to rest as long as he liked. He didn’t think any such courtesy was going to be extended to him this time. He wasn’t looking forward to scouring a pot when he could barely hold the sponge.


“No. Thank you all the same.”

He was able to reach the castle’s south wall, one thudding step at a time, before he had no choice but to set his load on the ground or drop it. He sat heavily. Small blessings: there was some shade on this side of the wall in the morning. The cobblestones felt cool. “How are we for time?”
You’ve got about seven minutes. Are you going to be able to pick all that up again?

“Yes.” He rubbed his arms. “Probably,” he amended. Even if he did, he knew he would be spending the rest of the day dropping things and bringing Mr. Streisand ever closer to a conniption. He considered faking a coma. He considered finding a club and putting himself into an actual coma. It was an attractive prospect.

“Hello, hello,” said a voice from somewhere above. “You’re not hurt, are you, boy?”

Lawrence raised his eyes. The man in front of him was twice his size, perhaps a couple years older, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, chest like a barrel and an ingratiating grin that displayed perfect teeth. Beside him, Ess started to purr furiously.

Lawrence had never met the man before, only seen his face in fliers and a few of the paintings around the castle, sometimes alone, sometimes with a sister who was twin to his features. It had looked much more solemn than it was in real life and perhaps had given him a stronger chin, even though this was wholly unnecessary. Lawrence had hoped never to see the face in person, or at least no closer than from the opposite end of the royal dining room.

Vidaria’s crown prince held out his hand. It was smudged with dirt. “Up you go, then.”

Lawrence allowed himself to be hoisted off the ground and his hair to be ruffled like a little kid’s. Ess was curling around the prince’s legs with a proprietorial air.

“Lost your parents?” the prince asked sympathetically, in spite of Lawrence’s very obvious uniform. “I don’t blame you. It’s a big city. What do you say we go inside the castle and I’ll ring up someone to find them for you?”

Lawrence was still coming out of his shock at being confronted by his target as well as being taken for a twelve-year-old by the same. “No, I—”

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“Is this your cat?” the prince asked, having determined that the child in front of him was only too shy to take him up on his offer. “We’ll take it with us. You can leave your groceries here, I’ll send one of the footmen to gather them up later.”

The picture of magnanimity, the prince settled the pleased cat into Lawrence’s arms and steered them to the gates. “I have to say you picked a grand time to visit the city,” he went on cheerfully, deaf to Lawrence’s faint protests. “We’re set to have an enormous party in a few weeks, did you know? The servants are all going crazy getting ready for it. Do you think you’ll be around long enough to see it? I can give your parents an invitation if you are.”

He likes to talk, doesn’t he? Ess was still purring along like a tiny engine. This makes things much simpler for us, wouldn’t you say?

Lawrence wanted to tell Ess that this made things anything but simple, that now the prince knew what he looked like, that he had no idea how to cut in and explain that he was one of the servants currently going crazy, that he was actually seventeen in a month and he’d lived in the capital for years, thanks all the same, but the prince pushed past the gate’s guards and directed Lawrence to the royal quarters without giving Lawrence a chance to say anything at all.
Chapter 5

Princess Leticia of Videria was blond-haired, blue-eyed, and possessed of far more intelligence than her younger brother. This became apparent when, upon her chamber doors being thrown open by the prince, she asked him why he had a tiny cook tucked under his arm.

“Cook?” he said, thrown. Lawrence took his chance to wiggle free and scurry to the other end of the room. It took him some time to do so, because it was a big room. “What do you mean, cook?”

“Well, if he’s not one, he’s done an admirable job finding the uniform in his own size.” The princess laid down her pen and stood from the desk. It had an enormous mirror perched on top of it, although at the moment it reflected only the wall the desk was shoved against. A vanity without the vanity. Lawrence wondered if the window was locked.

The prince paused for a moment as he searched for some fault in his sister’s logic. “But he doesn’t have one of those hats on.”

“Yes, brother, dear,” she said with a forbearance bordering on saintly, “because those are for the head cooks. He’s part of the lower echelons, I would assume. Oh, hello.”

Ess had leaped out of Lawrence’s arms and was batting at the hem of the princess’s dress. The princess scooped her up. Ess took this with good grace and, purring louder still, deigned to allow her to scratch behind her ears.

“But if he’s a cook, why wasn’t he in the kitchens?” The prince folded his arms, eyes alight with curiosity rather than any petulance.

“Aren’t you lovely?” the princess cooed at Ess. “I bet all the gentlemen cats are after you around the clock, aren’t they?”
Too right, said Ess, and tilted her head back to have her chin scratched.

“Cooks usually work in the kitchens during the day,” the prince said, warming to the idea, “so if he’s not in there, he must not be a cook. It stands to reason.”

“—‘Usually’ is the key word, there, Alex—I think I could arrange for a saucer of milk for our new friend. Excuse me.” The princess directed this last at Lawrence. “That window is eighty feet off the ground.”

Lawrence had already discovered this for himself. He carefully lowered the frame back into place. “Sorry.”

“What’s her name?” The princess presented Ess for inspection. Lawrence knew his cat well enough to know she was smirking. “I can’t very well make her acquaintance if I don’t have the pleasure of her name, and I can’t give her any milk if we aren’t yet acquainted. It would be rude.”

“Ess, it’s, uh, it’s Ess.” Lawrence wondered if he ought to point out that milk was bad for a full-grown cat, but it had never stopped Ess before. He wasn’t sure familiars could get sick, even just a would-be one.

“What’s the letter?” A delicate frown creased the princess’s forehead. “How did that come about? Did you name her that?”

Lawrence, in a fumble, opted for honesty. “I was going to name her Socks, actually. She objected, er. We—” He flapped a hand. “—compromised? I suppose?”

Compromised! Why don’t we call you ‘Shortstack’ and see how you like it?

“Well. Fancy,” the princess said, and Lawrence was relieved to see that she was prepared to humor him. “A cat choosing her own name. I’ve always thought it was a pity no one ever gets
a say in choosing their name.” She wrinkled her nose. “I mean, ‘Leticia.’ Am I a salad? I would have gone for Charlotte, personally.”

“‘Leticia’ is a perfectly good name,” the prince announced stolidly, “and can someone tell me who I’ve brought up here? I’m getting confused.”

“Well, with ‘Alexander,’ what have you got to complain about? Do tell us, though,” she added to Lawrence, who jumped. “We never get to meet any of the servants outside the valets and chamber maids. You’re a breath of fresh air.”

“Just a cook,” Lawrence said as fast as the words would leave his mouth. “I have to go. Mr. Streisand—”

The prince pounded his fist into his hand, a thick slap of a sound. He looked as if he had seized a favorite chew toy at last. “Streisand! Is he what’s got you jumping around? Never fear, we’ll send a message that you’ll be running a tad late. Where’s the bell, Let?”

Lawrence fought back the urge to simply run for it. “No, I—”

“It’s no trouble,” the princess said. She had ceased coddling Ess and was now considering Lawrence with a thoughtful expression. “We couldn’t possibly kick you out after Alex was so unmannerly.”

“Rude as a shrew!” The prince had discovered the bell-pull by the bed and gave it a few enthusiastic tugs.

“But—”

“And Mr. Streisand surely won’t bother you,” she added with the air of one moving a king into check, “if we send him our most personal well wishes and request leniency for our new friend, hmm?”
They beamed at him, matching smiles perfected over years of practice. It felt like being cornered by a golden retriever and a remarkably benevolent sphinx. Lawrence checked to make sure the ground had not shot up to window height since the last time he looked. It had not. He swallowed.

“At least tell someone to go get the groceries,” he said. “Please. They’ll get stolen if they’re out for too long.”

“Of course,” said the prince. “Now you’ve got to tell us absolutely everything about yourself. It’s been ages since we talked to someone new.”

At the prince’s insistence, the three of them settled on the floor after Ess’s milk arrived and the relevant orders were given to the valet. He sent a pitying look at Lawrence before closing the door. The princess made a show of smoothing her skirt out over the cream-colored carpet once she sat. The prince plopped down right where he was and placed his hands on his knees, the picture of eagerness. Unsure of the etiquette for a slumber party in a princess’s room, Lawrence sat equidistant from the two of them and let the tide of questions wash over him. He consented at last to giving his first name, which was deemed thoroughly average by the princess (“But in a good way,” she assured him), and gave them his invented last name.

“Fletcher!” the prince said. “I knew a falconer Fletcher.”

Ess rubbed milk off her whiskers. You couldn’t have chosen something a bit more fashionable or mysterious?

“It’s a common name,” Lawrence said, keeping his eyes on his hands.

So is Mud.

“How long have you been here?” the princess asked. “How do you like it so far?”
“A week,” he told them, “and it’s fine. A lot of work. I’m still getting used to it.”

“You’ve got bags under your eyes,” the prince noted.

“Oh, no, it’s just a little insomnia,” Lawrence said, which led to an interrogation about his sleeping habits (fine) and how he was really settling in (fine, really), and where did he come from, was it far away, did he miss anyone at home? (A little village to the west, far enough to make travel inconvenient, and no, not particularly.) His responses were uniformly as exciting as damp paint, yet the two pushed for more information: which village? How inconvenient? Surely he must miss someone. What work was he doing in the kitchens? Had they perhaps eaten something of his yet, no, what was that, he was working in the scullery, what a shame, so then why had he been sent for ingredients, how did he know how to get around, on and on and on for nearly two hours. Lawrence had never spoken so much in his life.

Sometimes he was at a loss as to how to answer without lying (Why had he come to work at the castle? How had he gotten into cooking? ‘Well, my mother is a famous witch who wants me to sedate one of you and she made me start practicing potion-brewing when I was seven or I’d get tacks on my floor in the morning—’). At this point, Ess would prompt him with a half-truth for the questions she had anticipated. This would be easier if we’d come up with some actual lie ahead of time, you know, she said at one point, but Lawrence knew himself to be in enough trouble without getting caught in a falsehood he could not support. He stuck to unimportant details and returned some of their own questions when he could.

Once it was over and Lawrence’s mouth was dry with talking, the princess had taken bouncing her foot. “So I suppose you came in with all the new apprentices from the school. Were you good friends with any of them, perchance?”
“No,” Lawrence said, “I just knew a few by name, that’s all.”

“Any of the ones from the magic division?” she asked, and he knew what she meant.

“You’re talking about Maria?” He moved his hands to allow Ess to climb into his lap. She kneaded his leg for a moment, then curled up in a pile of black fur. “I heard about her. I didn’t know.”

The princess let her foot rest. “Yes, well. She’s in the dungeons now, but she’s put herself under some spell. The guards can’t get her to say a word.”

What kind of spell?

“Who’s Maria?” the prince asked.

“Just another assassination plot, Alex,” his sister replied, patting him on the head. “Don’t fret yourself over it.”

This appeared to satisfy him. He unfolded upwards and rolled his shoulders. “You know, I think it’s already gone lunchtime. What do you two say to getting a bite to eat?”

“That’s a point. I say marvelous. Ring the bell or walk to the dining room?” The princess took more ceremony in rising and dusted herself off as gracefully as possible.

“Dining room. We’ve been cooped up in here much too long. You’re to come along, too, Law,” the prince said.

“We insist,” added the princess.

They insist, said Ess, who was enjoying herself more than Lawrence liked. Against his protests, they pulled him upright and shepherded him out the door. The tower that held the princess’s room contained a wealth of spiraling stairs, marble and echoing in spite of the tapestries lining the round walls. Although the prince had more or less dragged Lawrence up
earlier, now it was all Lawrence could do to keep himself from tripping. They had reached the
ground floor when the three of them almost collided with a man in a pointed hat rounding the
bottom of the banister.

The figure, tall and ostensibly majestic in a long white beard and starry robe, reeled back.
“Watch where you’re—oh, tremendously sorry, your highnesses—”

“Hello, Brunswick,” the princess said sweetly, and Lawrence recoiled. “Are you off to
the telescope again?”

Head Sorcerer Brunswick readjusted his hat, too tall on his head and made from enough
red velvet to carpet the length of the tower stairs. “Yes—well—you know—caution is required
in the wake of such an appalling lapse in security—the stars may lend themselves to some
foretelling of events to come—”

The princess nodded, serious. “The stars, I see. And in the middle of the day. That
demands quite a bit of dedication.”

“Very important,” the prince said, equally grave.

“We wouldn’t dream of keeping you, I’m certain,” said the princess as the sorcerer
sputtered. Her brother took the hint and moved aside to make room for the sorcerer to go past
them. This, fortunately, necessitated his release of Lawrence’s shoulder.

Lawrence struck upon this opportunity to dart around the banister, to the prince’s vocal
shock, and down the corridor, Ess on his heels. He slipped into the first room he came upon.
Shutting the door behind him cut off all calls asking him to come back. He checked the knob, but
it didn’t have a lock. He cursed.
The room turned out to be more of a long closet, filled to the brim with coats, boots, umbrellas, all manner of niceties the valets took off guests’ hands on a regular basis that were sometimes forgotten. What was more important was that the closet had a window at one end to let in some light. It unlocked and slid open without fuss. He clambered through and dropped into the gardenias below.

* * *  
*I was having fun,* Ess remarked. She slid out with far more grace than he had. The window shut behind her. *We didn’t have to leave so soon.*

Lawrence scrambled out of the bushes. “They know what we look like.” He could hear himself chanting under his breath through the fog of horror. “They know what we look like, they know what we look like, they know what we look like, they know our names and our faces and where we live and—”

*They like us. I don’t know what you’re complaining about.*

“They aren’t supposed to like us,” he hissed. “They’re supposed to ignore us so we don’t get thrown in a dungeon with hot nails and thumbscrews for the rest of our lives.”

*You’re so dramatic. It isn’t as if we’re the ones trying to murder them. Where are we going?*

“The kitchens,” Lawrence said, ducking around a corner. “If I go straight back, Mr. Streisand may not decapitate me and we can forget this ever happened.”

*Oh, no.* Ess shot in front of him to block his path. Her paws were spread wide and her tail bushed out. *We’ve finally got an excuse to go off on our own, there’s daylight to burn, and we’re already behind schedule. Don’t you even think about passing this one up.*

“I really do like my head where it is, Ess. It lets me think and breathe and everything.”
She sniffed archly. *Don’t be silly, Streisand doesn’t know you’re not still with the Blonde Brigade. Just pop back in around sundown and he’ll be none the wiser.*

“No, and neither will I, because I will have a slight problem, you see, vis a vis my head and my neck—”

*March, she said, or I’ll turn your hand to snakes for the rest of the day. Would you like to explain that one to your lord and ruler?***

Newt’s Vendor of Unusual Artifacts was called Newt’s Vend by everyone who knew it, due to the sign’s peeling paint and long years spent battered by rain and snow. The shop was, in fact, more of a stall. It had crept forward to take over what space it could at the expense of a narrow alley that ran and twisted off Artisans’ Way. For its part, the Way kept Newt’s Vend at arm’s length, throwing it the occasional hapless traveler to keep it fed. The only reason the police had not yet torn the place down was because powdered weasel lungs, while thoroughly illegal, were known to have certain invigorating properties if simmered in wolfsbane at precisely one-hundred-and-eighty degrees. The Vend thereby kept its head down and ran a merry little business that meant the capital now had its stray animal and rodent population under control.

Lawrence had run across Newt his first week of school after some confusion with a city map and a spilled cup of coffee. Ess had never taken to the place. She leaned against the side of Lawrence’s leg, eyes pooled to wide moons in the shadow of the alleyway. *Here? Can’t we go somewhere else?*

“You wanted ingredients,” Lawrence told her, “and we got most of the legal ones at school. Where else do you propose we go?”
She mewed, plaintive, and pawed at his uniform. He conceded to hefting her up so she could crawl around his shoulders, pushing her ticklish whiskers against his cheek. He stroked her head. “You could wait outside if you wanted.”

_Ha_, she said. _You’ll get thrown in a cauldron the second I take my eyes off you._

Lawrence doubted Newt would risk getting caught smuggling human organs, but she stayed trembling on his shoulder and he left it at that. The shop had no door, a tattered orange curtain draped over the entrance instead as a monument to failed discretion. It moved aside with a tug, and they were confronted by the sight of hundreds of jars of all different sizes, filled with brown dusts or violent green liquids or floating eyeballs, all placed at random on shelves, recycled tables, the floor, and not a single one labeled with even the smallest script. It smelled like rot. Ess pushed her nose into Lawrence’s collar, and he kept a hand on her head. Somewhere on the floor, there was a scuffing sound, then silence.

Gregory Newt was idling near the back. He was a heavy man constructed of hunches and wiry hair, topped off by a pair of thick glasses with a crack running through one lens. His head snapped up and his hands, full of something probably unspeakable, went behind his back. A smile split his face when he saw who it was. “Larry, my boy! I didn’t think I’d be seeing you back here!”

Lawrence inclined his head. “Hello, Mr. Newt. Are you doing well?”

“Couldn’t be better, couldn’t be better.” Newt fumbled to shift something into a box perched on the desk behind him. He shut the lid without turning around. “Had a bit of difficulty with a shipment today, still picking up the pieces. Nothing to worry about, but have a word of advice.” The box shuddered. Newt thumped its side. It went still, and Lawrence thought of the
word lurk. “Always be sure you get the details in a business transaction. There are people out there who would take advantage of their own grandmothers if they got the chance.”

“Oh, I’m sure there aren’t,” Lawrence said politely.

Newt threw a hand up. “Youth! What do you need, Landers? I’m in a bit of a tizzy here—I thought I left a belt on a hook around here but it seems to have vanished.”

“I’ll help you look,” Lawrence said. Something scuffed on the floor again. Ess moaned.

The belt, a leather strap the width of Lawrence’s hand, turned out to be wedged between a barrel and what looked like a massive teacup full of black claws. Newt retrieved it triumphantly and tied down the box, which had begun to rock again as they searched. He pulled the belt tight. “Finite! That should be all of them. Now, if you stopped by to check in on me, then thanks, but I’m sorry to say I’ve got a booked schedule already.”

Here it was. “No, Mr. Newt. Today I’m a customer.”

Newt frowned distractedly as his finger hovered over a row of deeply suspect candles.

“Ah?”

Lawrence dug around in his pocket and came up with a crumpled list. The scroll being too big to carry around, he had opted to copy out what he needed on the back of a discarded receipt, which he now unfolded. “A customer. I’ve come to buy some things.”

“School project?” Newt murmured, selecting a dark green candlestick identical to the rest and setting it in a holder on top of the angry box. “Very good, very good. Important to keep your grades up. Where did those blasted matches go?”

“I do have money, Mr. Newt.”
Newt pulled a drawer out of the desk to rummage through. “Do you? Have a look around, then. See what you see. Mind the rat tails. There we are!” He unsheathed a pack of matches and struck one into life.

What’s he doing? Ess sounded prepared to bolt at any second.

“Don’t ask,” he said under his breath. “Let’s just find what we came for.”

This proved to be about as straightforward as he thought it would be. He had no eye to differentiate between the jars of dog and fox tongues, and Ess would hardly uncover her eyes to look and tell him without a great deal of coaxing. A similar trouble arose with the raven feathers, as well as the alligator eyes. At last Lawrence had an unsavory bundle packed away in wax paper to present to Newt.

Newt stared down at the items. “What kind of project did you say this was for, Laurent?”

“I didn’t, sir,” Lawrence said, too impressed by the fact he had nearly gotten his name right to remember diplomacy. It did not appear to matter; Newt shrugged and pocketed the bills without protest. He hadn’t made his living by pointing fingers.

“Fifteen periats,” he said, an unusually reasonable price from Newt. Lawrence counted out the coins and passed them over. “Here’s a bag for you, laddie. A treat for the road for the girl on your shoulder?”

Lawrence began to say that no, that wouldn’t be necessary, thank you, when the scuffing noise started up again. It was much closer than before. Newt froze.

“Damn. Missed one.” His hand inched towards a hammer on the table. “On your way, Lewis. It may get a little ugly in here.”
Let’s go, Ess said, a strip of hair raised along her back. Lawrence didn’t argue. Her fear was rubbing off on him. He picked his way through the jars on the floor as the scuffling turned to insistent chittering, and dropped the threadbare cloth over the exit after him. He was ten steps away when he heard glass shatter, pursued by loud swearing and a clicking laughter.

“Should we have stayed to help?” Lawrence asked, tucking the wax bundle into his apron and turning onto the main road. The sun had dropped beneath the horizon of rooftops visible from the street.

Not a chance. What do you think he was going to feed me? Rat poison?

Lawrence made a soothing noise in the back of his throat and let Ess crawl into his arms. Her fur settled as he pet it. “There, now. Nothing happened and we won’t have to go back. You’ll be fine.”

She mewed and pushed her head under his chin. I’m hungry. Let’s get something to eat before we go back.

A small deli wasn’t far from Artisans’ Way. Lawrence headed there, counting out change from his pocket. He wasn’t sure how he was going to keep his head down and avoid attention at the castle after today, but it would be a problem for the two of them to face on full stomachs.

Apparently today had been a good day in the kitchens, for Streisand was merely furious when Lawrence returned just before seven o’clock.
Chapter 6

For three days, Lawrence dared to hope that things might proceed as usual. Ess had taken it upon herself to ensure the loose-floorboard scheme would work, so all ingredients sat nestled in a bed of preservatives underneath the leg of his dresser. She was satisfied now to wait until his half-day to begin brewing. He heard nothing further about Maria Wellington in her cell, except Tyrone’s disappointed conclusion that this must mean she still hadn’t revealed anything about her plot. When Lawrence asked him why he was so interested, Tyrone gave an exaggerated shrug. “There’s nothing else that goes on ‘round here, is there? We’re up to our elbows in suds for excitement. Don’t you ever want a little mystery in your life?”

“Sometimes,” Lawrence lied before changing the subject.

The kitchens were in a flurry whenever Lawrence got up in the morning and continued well after he went to bed. The reason for Streisand’s good mood, Lawrence was told, was due to an upcoming ball. The ball itself was no surprise, being traditional around harvest time in the country, but it had been a good year for the crops and now all the food—carrots, potatoes, onions, a dozen different fruits, and enough grain to feed a large army—was due to be shipped into the city by river boat and by carriage. This meant a great deal of fuss for some of the higher-ups among the servants. Lawrence was no stranger to how busy it got around autumn. His mother had spent three years in a row trying to get him to spread a fungus among some of the shipments of pumpkins. All Lawrence had managed to do was surprise the farmers with several storerooms full of mushrooms in handsome condition for selling. His mother had gone to bed with a headache on those nights.
This year, all it meant was that Lawrence’s back learned to stop aching after it had been leaned over a sink for hours at a time. Ess sometimes weaved her way through the legs of the cooks (taking special care to rub against Streisand, who sneezed and kicked at her) and twined around his feet, which somehow helped get rid of the burn between his shoulders. He was getting used to the amount of sleep he was allotted as well, so he no longer dozed off during dinner time. There was nothing to be done for his cook’s callus, however. The rough spot between the first and second knuckles of his right forefinger where he put pressure on knife handles showed signs of fading under the barrage of soapy water, which depressed Lawrence more than anything else had so far. He didn’t know when it would get the chance to come back.

Still, depression did not excuse incaution. Lawrence left the kitchens as little as possible, only breaking away from his post to go to the servant’s dining room or to his own bed. Ms. Marrows was entirely impressed with his diligence compared to the rest on scullery duty and took his meek protests as evidence of a virtuous modesty. Ess called him a little mouse when she discovered why he was performing his duties so eagerly, but this was common from Ess and did not signal disapproval. It might have meant trouble if she had called him a cockroach, and if she ever referred to him as a flea it meant he would not be seeing her for several days.

So Lawrence kept to himself. It was his only skill besides cooking: he’d used his natural invisibility and a name no one could bother themselves to remember to great effect in school. Some of the teachers used to forget to say his name during roll call. Only Regina and Ben had taken much notice of him, and now Tyrone at the castle, all three because Lawrence was a good listener and a terrible talker. It had been an agreeable arrangement for all involved and one Lawrence found he missed when he took the time to think of it. He wondered if Regina had
gotten into one of her famous fights with her father yet, but he had little opportunity for such wondering. Most of his energy went into scrubbing out stains and avoiding Streisand’s watchful eye.

It went well for a time. Lawrence had succeeded in avoiding even the sight of blonde hair when, on the fifth day, a hand descended from the sky and clapped down upon his shoulder.

“Hello, there!”

Lawrence looked around. “Gnrrrrr,” he said.

It was really his own fault. He’d thought he could walk around the back of the castle grounds with Ess for a small break, perhaps discuss a place she had found for brewing so the potion smell wouldn’t tip off anyone passing by the room. He’d forgotten it was only the princess who understood where royalty was supposed to go in the castle.

The prince beamed down at him, and the word *beamed* was very accurate; Lawrence could see shards of sun glinting off his pearly teeth. “You know, I haven’t seen you around lately, after you scampered off like that!”

“No. Well.” Lawrence tried to shift his weight away from the hand, but it was rock-solid.

“Been busy.”

“Hasn’t it? I’ve barely had a chance to breathe. Are you off-duty?”

“Lunch break,” Lawrence said quickly, “but it’s almost over, I’ll have to—”

“Excellent!” The prince pushed him to one of the ivory-colored benches among trawling rose bushes and sat him down. “We can keep each other company. Have you eaten yet?”

Lawrence shook his head, mute.
“Capital. Neither have I. We’ll go for sandwiches in a bit.” The prince dropped next to him. He vibrated with the energy and health achieved by the kind of person who ran up and down ten flights of stairs every morning before dawn. “You look much less tired today. Have you been sleeping better?”

Lawrence fixed his eyes on his hands. “I’m, um, more used to the work.”

“Washing dishes, you mean? Is that all you do all day, don’t you ever get to make anything? You are a cook, aren’t you?”

“I take things out of the ovens sometimes.” Other times, he thought, he went out to buy ingredients under the supervision of his cat so he could drug his social betters.

“But that’s not cooking, is it? Don’t you get tired of scrubbing things all day?”

“It makes my arms a little sore, I guess.”

The prince frowned. “That’s rot. Wouldn’t you rather put yourself to better use?”

Lawrence wasn’t sure what it was about royal heirs that made them ask so many questions, especially such uncomfortable ones, especially ones that no one else had bothered to ask since he had arrived. He hadn’t met someone so inquisitive about his life since Ess was a kitten. He picked a leaf off one of the rose bushes as an excuse not to look up. “It isn’t so bad,” he said at last.

“Well, I say it’s bollocks,” the prince decided. “I can’t think how maddening it would be if I spent years learning about horse-riding and then someone told me I had to polish bridles for the rest of my life.”

Lawrence elected to say nothing at first, but he was touched. “I doubt anyone would tell you that, though.”
“I suppose not,” the prince said. “And damned if I know anything about anything for it. It’s a good thing Leticia’s set to inherit, otherwise I might have to get told things once in a while.”

Oh.

“I’m certain you know plenty of things,” Lawrence offered awkwardly, forgetting to keep his eyes lowered, “it’s just not the kind of thing regular people have to know. Negotiation, and such.”

For some reason, this was hysterical to the prince. He only stopped hitting his knee with his fist and gasping for breath when he saw Lawrence staring at him as if concerned for his sanity. “I’m sorry,” he said, still trying to breathe. “Deepest apologies. Oh, goodness. Oh, you should see your face, Lawrence, you’re like a frightened little deer.” He sucked in a deep breath through his nose. “It’s just that you were so sympathetic. It’s quite all right, you know. I own that I’m not the sharpest tack in the box.”

“That’s a little unfair,” Lawrence said, but the prince waved it away with another ungraceful snort.

“No, no, I’ve made my peace with it. Leticia got all the brains, but I’m still good for something in my own way. People like me, you see. They tend to do what I tell them whether or not I pull rank.”

Lawrence wondered what that must be like. “You’re very frank about it.”

“It doesn’t bother me tremendously anymore. I mean, yes, a brighter prince would probably be a good thing, but a brighter prince we have not got. We’ve all got our merits, anyway, Leticia says, even if we haven’t, ah, been born into the right circumstances for them.”
Lawrence looked at him sharply at that, but saw only the same guileless face as before. “It’s a thought,” he said, neutral.

The prince clapped his hands, making Lawrence jump. “I’ve been rude again, haven’t I,” the prince exclaimed. “You’ve got to stop me when I start going on like that, everyone who gets to know me has to learn how to cut me off before I build up a head of steam.”

Lawrence did not think he was supposed to get to know anyone, least of all the person sitting next to him, but he nodded. This satisfied the prince enough to rise from his seat.

“Then we’re agreed. Let’s put you to work on a test meal.”

Lawrence’s neck almost cracked from how fast he turned it. “Excuse me?”

“Come, come, no time like the present.” The prince caught under Lawrence’s arms and heaved him upright as if he were a doll or a fussy toddler. “Most everyone else has had lunch already, so I’m sure there’ll be some free space in the kitchens.”

“I don’t think that’s wise,” Lawrence said, yet he had already been dragged halfway across the gardens. The only thing that prevented the prince from dragging him further was the sudden ball of fur that almost tripped them both.

*Sorry I’m late. Why is he here?*

“Ah!” the prince said. “What have we here? Ess, wasn’t it? Wonderful. Bring her along, Lawrence. Perhaps we can get Leticia down here as well.”

*Bring me where?* Ess asked, intrigued. *Where are we going?* She leapt onto Lawrence, who caught her just in time to prevent himself from receiving a shirt full of claws. *I thought you were trying to avoid him,* she added. *It would compromise our position, or something.*
“I was,” Lawrence muttered under the prince’s cheerful rambling as they strode along.

“And it does. Can’t you get us out of this somehow?”

Why? He remembered my name. I thought that was cordial. He remembered yours, too, did you notice? No one ever remembers your name.

“That’s a bad thing! Why are you taking such a shine to him, anyway?”

He brought me milk. And he’s very handsome.

“You’re a cat.”

A cat can look at a king, she said primly.

“He isn’t one.”

“—can’t imagine he’d object if it’s less work for him, don’t you agree? What’s this?”

The prince favored Lawrence with a wide smile. “Are you talking to her? It’s amazing the way they seem like they can understand you, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Lawrence said.

***

“Quite irregular,” Streisand said. The man, never one to slouch even under ordinary circumstances, was stiff as a plank. One hand curled and uncurled at his side. “We do have certain rules in place for a reason, your highness. Many of the apprentice chefs working here have not yet graduated beyond simple tasks and decoration work for their day-to-day work, and even those students have been present for at least two years. It’s certainly unprecedented that a new apprentice—” Here he cast a loathsome eye over Lawrence. “—of less than a month’s experience should handle your highness’s midday meal.”
“Nonsense,” the prince said. “I have absolute faith in Lawrence’s abilities. Besides, everyone else has already eaten, so the place should be a bit sparse for a while yet, eh what?”

Streisand took in a shuddering breath. “Although the lunch rush is indeed over, your highness, we do have preparations to initiate in order for the evening meal to proceed as scheduled.”

“Iinitiate away!” the prince said. “We won’t be any trouble. Lawrence will be happy to take one of the ovens in the corner, and I’m sure I won’t make a peep.”

The ovens in the corner, Streisand tried with the last vestiges of his patience to explain, were not for the creation of individual dishes—they were meant to bake sheets of bread and large confections that were unfeasible in a smaller oven. The temperatures were regulated differently in such ovens, making them likely to burn dishes of a smaller size. They also took a great deal more preparation to put into use than the regular ovens, which were closer to the middle of the kitchens and much more difficult to maneuver around during evening preparations. The prince listened to the explanation with the polite interest of one who has information going in one ear and out the other because he plans to do the same thing regardless of what anyone tells him. Lawrence shifted from foot to foot, shooting longing glances at the double doors at the outside wall. Ess, meanwhile, watched the proceedings with a great deal of amusement from her perch on Lawrence’s shoulder.

“So we should take one of the center ovens,” the prince said when Streisand lapsed for breath. “Fantastic idea, Mr. Streisand, thanks ever so much for your help. We’ll be careful not to leave a mess behind us.”
Before Streisand could sputter himself into apoplexy, the prince guided Lawrence to a workspace with a hand hovering pointedly behind his back. Everything had already been washed and set away after the lunch preparations, some of it by Lawrence himself, and it all hung shiny from the ceiling or off against the wall or in the appropriate holder on the counters. A few people milled about doing their own work, but the ones who had been near the center hurried away as they approached to work on the fringes. Tyrone, head poking out from the scullery, appeared to be deeply interested in events. Lawrence tried to look as if none of this was his idea.

The prince deposited him at a stretch of counter. “Here we are,” he said. What will it be? I’m partial to something with chicken, myself.”

Lawrence had signed up to be a human menu about as much as he had signed up to be the prince’s personal chef, but his mind had treacherously sat up to pay close attention long ago and was already rifling through a list of recipes. You could make just about anything when your sole preference was “something with chicken,” but if the prince was the type to run up and down ten flights of stairs every day—

“Tyrone,” Lawrence called. The other boy sprang from the scullery and hurried over at the sound of his name. Lawrence scribbled down something on one of the cheap grocery memo pads stashed at each station and ripped it off its spike. “Would you mind getting these for me, please? I have to heat the stove.”

“Aye-aye.” Tyrone snapped off a salute and bounded forth with such energy that Lawrence thought he might not have been the only one reluctant to resign himself to a lifetime of dirty dishes and sinks. He turned to the appliances in front of him.

Well. If he was going to have to do it anyway.
Lawrence disregarded the wide, clean oven the prince had selected at random and knelt down next to a small stove nearby it. It was a gas stove, going by the knobs at the top, but it had a door for wood all the same, and Lawrence shoveled a few logs in there from the woodpile under the logic that gas was expensive and there was no call to antagonize Streisand any further. Tinder packed neatly into the cracks, and a match struck and applied to the bottom of the setup burgeoned a flame, which crept up the sides of the wood with a few encouraging hisses of air. Lawrence shut and latched the door on the fire in time for Tyrone to spill his bounty upon the table behind him. The prince had sat on the other end of the table in flagrant violation of kitchen rules in addition to basic etiquette, and was kicking his feet back and forth like a child as he waited. Lawrence swallowed the reprimand that swelled in his throat and turned to Tyrone’s finds: a spread of vegetables, mostly leafy greens; a butter dish; a few slices of pumpernickel bread; the garlic wine sauce Ms. Marrows had made yesterday before hearing that the queen detested garlic; and a slab of thawed meat taken from a hook in one of the back rooms.

“I got everything,” Tyrone whispered, bouncing on the balls of his feet, “but I don’t know if you wrote in for too much, will the two of you be able to eat it all, I mean I know he might be able to pack away a good bit of it, but you’re awful small—”

“Of course we won’t,” Lawrence interrupted. He was preoccupied with rolling up his sleeves and buttoning them in place. “You’ll have to help us. How do you feel about chopping the greens?”

It was at this point that Lawrence earned a friend for life.

The two of them took less than twenty minutes, once the stove had been warmed. Streisand’s gaze burned holes into the backs of their necks the whole time, the prince sitting with
his chin propped upon his hands in an exaggerated expression of eagerness which dissolved, eventually, into genuine interest. Ess watched for a while before growing bored and leaping for freedom through an open window. Tyrone sliced the last sandwich in half as Lawrence swept out the flickering ash and unburnt wood to dump it all in one of the fireproof sacks with the rest. He joined Tyrone to wash his hands at the sink. The prince applauded.

“Sandwiches it is! Where shall we eat?”

Consensus decided upon the back gardens again as they were both close and out of view from the kitchens. Lawrence and Tyrone herded the prince out as quickly as courtesy allowed. They settled in some shady grass with a cool flagon of cider Tyrone had swept up as they left and began their impromptu picnic. The prince took the first bite.

“Marfelouf!” he announced. Tyrone lifted a fist. Lawrence, suppressing a matching grin, bumped it obligingly, and the three of them ate.

The prince, it became clear, could give Tyrone some fierce competition in the field of speed-eating. It devolved into a race to empty both plate and flagon in record time. By the end they were chatting like old friends. Lawrence had foreseen something like this and snatched up a single sandwich early on. He’d found it quite satisfactory for his needs. He nibbled on the last of it while they talked.

“I mean, we know coming in we’re going to be the bottom of the heap,” Tyrone said.

“Like, it’s understood. But I’ve been doing nothing but dishes for a year now. Did you know that was the first thing I’ve knocked together for anyone other than me since I started working here?”

“Never!” said the prince. He was appropriately scandalized.

“Swear on my grandfather’s grave,” Tyrone said.
That’s a crime. I’ve never enjoyed a meal so much.”

Tyrone rubbed the back of his neck, which Lawrence knew meant he was pleased. “Well, they’re just sandwiches. Nothing fancy.”

“And they were a delight,” the prince declared with total sincerity. “World-class, the both of you.”

Tyrone’s smile threatened to conquer the lower half of his face. Lawrence suspected he knew why people tended to like the prince.

The prince stood up and brushed his hands off. “Now, what shall we do next?”

“Next?” Lawrence said. Tyrone looked as puzzled as he was, though less alarmed.

“You’re not planning to go back to work already?” The prince placed his hands on his hips. “The day is still young! Surely I didn’t dodge my retainers just for the duration of one meal—spectacular though it was,” he added with a sweeping bow. “What do you think? Tyrone, what do you usually do for fun around here?”

Tyrone tipped his head back thoughtfully. “Other than knocking off to the pub, you mean?”

“A pub!” the prince cried as if seizing hold of the elixir of life. “There’s an idea, I haven’t been to a proper pub in ages. What do you say we sneak out and see what we can see?”

“Yeah, all right,” Tyrone said. He hopped to his feet. “You game?” he asked Lawrence.

Tyrone looked as if he didn’t expect a “no” for an answer, and the prince was watching Lawrence with a twinkle in his eye that said he remembered exactly how fast Lawrence could dart away. The twinkle also said that the prince was faster. Lawrence weighed his options.

“Yyyyyyes,” he said. “Yes, of course. But we won’t be able to go out looking like this.”
Tyrone looked down at his white uniform, and the prince down at his dashing attire. They exchanged nods.

“ Entirely sensible,” said the prince. “Men, your mission is to get changed and meet back down here within fifteen minutes. Are you up to the task?”

Tyrone snapped off another salute. Lawrence followed his example a beat later, with less enthusiasm. The three of them charged or were dragged back into the castle, the prince splitting off from them as they headed for the staircase leading to the servants’ attic quarters.

This was a fatal mistake. Tyrone was not trying very hard to keep a close eye on Lawrence, patteri ng on ahead and talking to himself about which of his favorite places were likely to be open this early in the day. It was the work of a moment to trail behind a few feet, and then Lawrence shot into the closest hallway.

Three turns later to lose Tyrone, in case Tyrone noticed he was suddenly alone, and Lawrence was lost. He had been meaning to explore the castle once he had some time of his own, but he had only learned the area around the kitchens and his own room. After indecisively hovering from side to side of one corridor intersection, he settled on proceeding straight for as far as he could until the scenery began to look familiar or he hit the outside grounds, at which point he could circle back to the kitchens and skulk into the scullery as silently as possible. Perhaps Streisand would even have stepped out for a few minutes by the time Lawrence made it back.

Lawrence walked on and felt much better for about ten minutes, until it became apparent that the floor was inclined a few degrees downhill and he had been led to a dead end other than a line of steps leading beneath ground level. Staircases had become hauntingly common things to
run across in an average day, but most of them were polished wood or marble. Very few of them were unremarkable sandstone, and even fewer lit by torchlight.

He considered retracing his steps and taking a right before picking up his old plan where he’d left it off, but as he retreated he could hear voices back down the passageway he had come from. Now he had another option. He could explain to the footmen or maids how he had been dragged into the prince’s shenanigans for upwards of an hour and was now lost in his own place of employment, or he could go on downstairs. The former option, he knew, was much more logical, and should only have been a little embarrassing.

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It wasn’t so bad once you got used to it, Lawrence thought. Despite the relative darkness, the steps felt reassuringly solid under his feet, echoing every time they hit the stone, and it did not take long for his eyes to adjust. The steps didn’t go down that far, either. They opened up to a narrow passage with the same sandstone floor. Square wood pillars climbed up either side of the passage and met at the top in a bracing facsimile of a mineshaft. The torches were farther apart here, but it was not long until the road opened up into a large room and Lawrence realized where he was with an odd combination of a twist in his gut and the confused feeling he got whenever he’d stayed up all night studying and went into the wrong classroom on accident the next day.

The dungeons were, against all odds, sparklingly clean. The bars of each cell were boot-black, chains gleaming from their perches on the walls. A wide torture rack stood demurely at the center of the room, scrubbed to smoothness, not a single stain marring its surface or the cuffs at the table’s four extremities. A rosewood armoire and lily-patterned sofa had been shunted
against a wall for what could only have been the sake of storage. Something smelled faintly of lemon.

A girl sat in the corner of one of the cells on the west side of the room. Her green dress looked like it had been recently pressed, although it was currently undergoing some punishment being leaned against the wall as it was. Her hair was not long, only reaching just above her shoulders, but it contrived to hang over her features in a brooding curtain anyway.

Maria Wellington looked up. She looked clean, well-fed, and incredibly sour.

“One of you just brought food,” she said. “I’m not hungry, okay?”

“What kind of food?” Lawrence asked, for no reason other than the fact that he was staring around himself more than he was paying attention to her. He hadn’t noticed before, but there was a small chandelier hanging over the armoire and sofa, casting suspicions upon his storage assumption.

“Chicken. A little too rich for my tastes, actually.” She squinted at him, tossing her hair out of her face with a flick of her head. “I’ve seen you somewhere.”

“Um.”

“Benjamin.” She pointed. “From History class.”

Lawrence gave up. “That’s the one.”

“Hell, it’s been ages. What’re you doing here? Caught stealing bread?” She straightened up to walk to the bars of the cell with a spring in her step. She sounded almost cheerful, and nothing like a girl who had recently failed to murder someone.

“I, er, lost my way.” Lawrence drifted over to the cell himself out of some vague sense of politeness. “These are the dungeons, aren’t they?”
Maria’s nose wrinkled. “It’s weird, right? The warden offered me some tea a while ago, and I’d swear I heard someone playing the cello earlier.”

That got Lawrence’s attention. “Warden?”

“Of course. Even a place like this has to have one. Don’t worry, around now’s about time for his nap.” She banged her palm on the bars a couple times. “But, here, I’ve been locked away for days and I’ve got no clue what’s going on upstairs. I guess you’ve heard about me?”

“Sort of. Not really any details.” Lawrence was torn between a spark of curiosity and the abrupt urge to foot it back up the steps, where he could take his chances with Streisand or the prince. Courtesy was what decided him, and trace amounts of pity. He didn’t know how to extricate himself from a conversation with a prisoner who had no one else to talk to.

“Nah, well. For the best. Kind of an embarrassing story.” She scratched her chin, all traces of sullen prisoner gone. “Only reason I’m getting treated all sugary-sweet is ‘cause I botched the whole thing up so bad.”

Lawrence felt an unexpected surge of fellow feeling. “What happened?”

“Nevermind. It’s mortifyin’. Ben, you tell me, now, have you heard anything about Amal or Clark?”

His brain searched through all the name tags it had accumulated since the start of the month. It came up with a pair of boys kicking at each other’s feet. “The other two magic students?”

“Apprentices,” Maria corrected. “We’re students at the Academy, apprentices in the castle. Only those two’ve had a bit of a falling-out lately and I don’t know that they’ll make up in time to get anything done.”
“No, I’m sorry. I haven’t heard about anything except you.”

She nodded. “Just as well. Wouldn’t do for them to be suspicious, too. What’s that?” she added as something hit the ground with a ping behind Lawrence.

And then Lawrence did something that, in retrospect, would have made the prince look a genius in comparison. It would, in fact, have made his mother disown him on the spot more quickly than any botched spellwork would have done. It would have made Ess throw her head back and yowl to the heavens as divine evidence that yes, this child was her responsibility, this was the fool she had been stuck with for the rest of her natural life, in this little numbskull was the sum of all wisdom:

He turned his back on Maria.

The enormity of this mistake wrapped under his arms, lifted him off his feet, and slammed his back against the bars in a single motion that sent ultraviolet stars ricocheting across his vision. He almost bit his tongue. “Ow,” he said.

Maria ignored him. “All right, I’ve got him.”

Two heads, one long and one square, popped up from the other side of the expansive torture rack. The long one was the first to rise to its full height. It had a hand possessing a few pebbles, which bounced up and down in its palm. The boy flipped one out with his thumb. It hit the flagstones with a ping.

“Got a riddle for ya, Ben,” said Clark. “If seven royal magicians can’t get a prisoner to talk, then there’re a few things you gotta consider.” He splayed out a finger. “One: is she getting any outside help?” A second joined its brother. “Two: where’s that help right now?”
“Stop,” Amal groaned, also rising. “You are so full of it. No one is impressed by your stupid rock trick.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Clark demanded.

“You are just copying it from that play we saw. I am keeping seeing you practice the dumb thing with a mirror—”

“‘Keep seeing,’” Clark said automatically, “‘I keep seeing,’ and furthermore, you been spying on me—”

“It is not spying when we have the same room—”

“Guys,” Maria said. “My arms are falling asleep here.” Lawrence dimly found this a little unfair. His own hands already had no feeling left at all.

The two left off squabbling to pin Lawrence themselves, one for each arm. Maria let go and rubbed the life back into her limbs. “Amal,” she said, “do you have your knife on you?”

“I really think that is not necessary, he is so little,” Amal said, but he pulled out the handle of a switchblade from his coat all the same. It flipped open. Lawrence had not been trying to escape before. He tried even less now.

Clark turned to Maria, mortally offended. “Why d’you ask him?”

“Because you always forget yours.” Maria leaned against the wall. “What do you guys think? Hostage?”

“Hostage is too risky,” Amal said.

“Then brainwashing.”

“Not recommended. A magician could detect any spells, too.”
She scratched her nose, deep in thought. “What if we just knock him out and leave him somewhere until we figure out what to do with him? There’s a closet on the fifth floor no one uses.”

“How’re we supposed to get him there?” Clark asked. “If we turn ‘im invisible one of the servants’ll notice us dragging a big load of nothing through the hall, and I haven’t gotten a teleportation gig to work yet, have you?”

“Yes,” said Amal. Clark made an impolite gesture just above Lawrence’s head. “But only small things,” Amal added.

Maria threw up her hands. “Well, great. That’s great. Why’d we kidnap him again?”


“Assassination,’ Clark. Singular. I wasn’t keen on making this a murder spree.”

Lawrence discovered, as they argued, that he could touch the ground with the tips of his toes if he shifted his weight and slid his feet just right. This took off some of the pressure of the bars in his back, which had been trying to get much too intimate, and the hands on his shoulders. It made it easier to think. At present, what Lawrence’s mind was most interested in thinking about was the blade waving around the vicinity of his throat.

“Enough already, Mar, he’s just a kitchen boy, no one’ll even notice.”

Maria’s breath hissed through her teeth. “Don’t be an ass, he didn’t just arrive this morning. Someone’s bound to figure it out.”

“Excuse me,” Lawrence said, timidly, because he was less certain than Maria on this point.
Three pairs of eyes turned onto him. In spite of the situation, it looked as though they had forgotten he was there. “Yes?” said Amal.

“You’re looking to assassinate the prince, right? All three of you.”

Clark snatched the knife from Amal with a sigh. “Ah, damn it, look, if he knows then we really oughta—”

Lawrence said, “I think I can help.”
“I suppose it’s not so different from cooking,” Lawrence said, casting a look over the ingredients laid out in front of him. According to witchcraft logic, which mostly consisted of making everything as ghastly as possible, about seventy percent of the pre-potion spread was predictable: muskrat fur, wolfsbane, tooth of dog, belladonna, sulfur, crocodile blood, and a soup of juices and excretions that did not bear naming. Another twenty percent of the ingredients made more sense in a sleeping potion: magnolia bark and passion flower, for example, Lawrence knew his mother kept ground up to take when she had trouble staying in bed some nights. The ginger was unexpected, as was the vanilla. As for the baking chocolate, Lawrence had had to read its name twice on the potion scroll.

His cauldron, a sizeable pot abducted from the kitchens, sat on a circle of bricks. Some firewood, also liberated from the castle, was wedged underneath along with several handfuls of grass and crumpled newspaper. More newspaper sat neatly folded off to one side, bought off a pleased paperboy who had been crying his wares near The King’s Thumb. Taken altogether, the potion looked like a recipe for a stink bomb. Even the back of the castle hadn’t been secretive enough for brewing, Ess had decided, because any gardener or stable boy who idled within thirty feet of the mix was likely to be tipped off. Ess wasn’t capable of tamping down on the smell by herself for so long, and the possibility of Lawrence managing it hadn’t come up for obvious reasons. They hadn’t expected the problem to resolve itself so easily.

Ess had been a little too willing to go along with the brewing location Lawrence had found, he thought. Using a cell in the castle dungeons to commit treason had apparently been too delicious for her to pass up.
Maria knew a lot about the dungeons thanks to Amal and Clark’s combined reconnaissance. The cells wound down about fifty feet below ground level in a spiral of dirt and ancient metal turned to rust. They were remnants of those days when the castle was meant to be used as a fortification instead of something to hold frills and icing-topped towers, back before the Locke Wars and the ban on witchcraft. No one went down there anymore. There was no rule forbidding it—the old dungeons had simply been forgotten by everyone except those in charge of them, and the warden was too old to go down that many steps. The place looked much more like what Lawrence had expected from the phrase “castle dungeon,” except the chairs were rotting and an old chain hanging from the ceiling had crumbled to pieces when his head bumped against it in the dark.

The lantern sitting next to Lawrence provided enough light to read by, even if it did cast shadows on the ingredients and make them look more menacing than necessary. Ess sat on one end of the scroll while Lawrence kept a knee pressed to the other so he could read as he filled the makeshift cauldron.

*But you’re not really going to let them kill him, are you?* she asked. Her tail twitched and her eyes shone in the lamplight while they followed his hands. She hadn’t been impressed when he’d told her the compromise he had proposed. She had been outright livid when he’d told her why he was forced to propose it in the first place, and it had required quite a bit of stroking and reasoning to calm her down. *They threatened you. Besides, they’re not even competent enough to do it on their own.*
“They stick out too much, I think,” Lawrence said. He measured out the crocodile blood with a tablespoon. “Being a magic student tends to go to your head. You get used to being the center of attention, so you get caught a lot more, too.”

*Maybe.* She sniffed. *Bunch of pansies. But you didn’t answer my question.*

Lawrence threw her a severe look as he dumped the last spoonful of blood. “Ess, how long have you known me, now?”

*Four years.* She didn’t have to take any time to think about it, of course. It was almost as long as she had been alive.

“And in four years, have I ever wanted to kill someone?”

*No, but you never acted like you wanted to put someone to sleep, either.*

“All’s just sleep,” Lawrence muttered, throwing in the muskrat fur. “You wake up from sleep. You don’t wake up from being dead. And it’s not like I have much choice in the matter. You know what she’s like.”

Ess was silent for a time before she spoke again. *Speaking of which, I’ve been wondering.*

*What does Mallory intend to do with a sleeping prince?*

Lawrence stirred with his wooden spoon. “I have a pretty good guess. It involves blackmail and legalizing witchcraft, in that order.”

It was more than a good guess, Lawrence was sure, although not one he found tremendously realistic on his mother’s part. As soon as he had mentioned the word “witchcraft” to the other three, Amal and Clark had dropped him and backed off as if he had rabies. Even Maria had stared at him like she had never seen anything quite like him before. Then she had asked, choosing her words with care, exactly who he was. He had lied. She had nodded.
If witchcraft was only illegal, then that would have been one thing, but a kingdom could have a long memory. The Locke Wars had been named after a dignitary captured and killed by a small coven of witches, which had led to a great many political fumbles made in haste by local officials. The whole thing had swelled beyond a local incident into a national one, the details of which Lawrence was fuzzy on. He remembered reading about protests and individual incidents in his history classes, and magic alliances between groups and individuals that made the whole thing even more complicated. His great-grandmother, Esmerelda Nethienne, who had until then occupied a respected position in the court, cropped up a number of times throughout the records. Most prominently, she had led the coven that destroyed the capital’s previous castle. Her position was revoked at that point.

The Wars had ended piecemeal, messy, with a schism between magic practitioners, several years in the courts spent instituting new bans on unethical potion ingredients, an exodus for all witches to the edges of Videria where the laws were less strict, and, for some reason, a new tax on sugar. And the war had been bad enough that none of the citizenry had complained—all anyone wanted was to see the back of the whole disaster. Then people passed the story down to their children. None of that was going to be overturned in one person’s lifetime.

“Storming the castle would be more her style, I suppose,” Lawrence said with a sigh. “But even she isn’t going to do that when the best magicians in the country are dedicated to keeping people like her out. I don’t think the rest of the coven would fall over themselves to give her a hand, either.”
**No. Lazy bags**, Ess said, with a note of grudging approval that she hadn’t used for the magic apprentices. *Did she decide to go for the prince because the princess is too smart to get caught in something like that?*

“Ess,” Lawrence said. “Of course she did.”

He held his nose to add in the block of sulfur. The concoction sparked and spat out a puff of orange, which drifted above their heads and settled into a thin fog at ceiling level. Once he was sure the smoke had all drained out, he put the lid into place. Lawrence released his end of the scroll and watched it leisurely furl back up. “There. Now we let it sit and feed the fire for two days before we add the rest.”

Ess padded off the scroll and away from the pot. *Urgh. It’s like rotten eggs had a party. Some days I don’t regret your choice of a career.*

“Mother could never stand potion work either,” Lawrence said. He tied the parchment with a bit of string. “Her one failure.” He almost added *besides me* without thinking, but it sounded much too pitiful. He sat back and stared off into space instead, arms curled around his knees. Shadows lit along the wall, shifting where the lantern’s light fluttered or the outline of his cat cleaned her whiskers. The cloud swam out into the dark passage outside the cell.

He’d been thinking about everything as little as possible, but actually having a cauldron simmering in front of him was a difficult fact to ignore.

“Ess?”

*What?*

“I don’t want anyone to die.”
For a moment, it appeared nothing existed that could be said to that. A small head butted against his elbow. He lifted it, and Ess crawled onto his lap. It had been a while since she had rubbed her cheek against his in the ticklish way she did with her whiskers, purring along like a mother pigeon cooing to her chicks. He scooped her up and buried his face in her fur, seventeen years old be damned.

*I know,* she said.

“I don’t know what to do. I’ve already messed everything up and I’ve hardly even started, it was just supposed to be a stupid sleeping draught and no one was going to find out about me and I didn’t even want to make it to start with, now that idiot is going to get killed and it’ll be because of me and I don’t know what to do—”

*I know.*

“—or what if someone does stop us, what if they think we’re a real threat this time, then we’re going to be the ones who hang, and I don’t think those stupid apprentices know what they’re doing, not really, they’re just fighting and playing at politics, they don’t deserve all this—”

*I know. It’ll be okay.*

“—and what about you, you’re stuck in this with me, if I die then you die, that’s what a familiar is, I don’t care how much you want me to be a witch because I’m not one, I can’t cast a spell or draw a magic circle without screwing it up, I can’t keep anyone safe, I can’t even look after my own dumb cat—”

*Shhhh, you big crybaby, shh.* A sandpaper tongue licked his cheek. *It’ll be okay, I said. I can do enough magic for the both of us, all right? We’ll put the prince to sleep, we’ll let your*
mother try to do whatever she wants to do, and we’ll deal with the Incredible Trio when we need to. Then we move to another country and never look back, growing older and more attractive and breaking new hearts each year.

Lawrence hiccupped a laugh. “Yeah, but I don’t know how.”

Ess nuzzled his temple. That’s what you’ve got me for, doofus. Have I ever led you wrong?

“Yes.”

Hush. We’re having a moment. Let it happen.

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Half an hour later, once Lawrence had Ess’s complete assurance that no, his eyes were not red anymore, they climbed their way out of the old dungeons.

Maria was sitting on a stool pushed against the stony wall, her feet propped on a velvet footrest that had small yellow tassels dangling from its four corners. She had a newspaper in her hands, The Queen’s Chronicle, presumably received from the warden who Lawrence had not yet gotten a chance to meet. One of the headlines read, in bold: “A New Breed of Pumpkin Discovered!: Locals Credit Resident Enchantress for Breakout Research.”

“You’d think murder plots would get a bit more press than a five-inch column. I’m starting to think no one is taking us seriously.” Maria lowered it, rustling, to survey Lawrence over the top. “Got everything in place down there?”

“Yes. Thank you. I’ll have to drop by quite a bit to keep it brewing.”

She nodded. “Never much good at potions, myself. You just do what needs doing.” Her gaze slid to Ess. Poor choice on Maria’s part, Lawrence thought. Ess could beat snakes in a
staring contest. He’d seen her do it. Maria cleared her throat, almost quietly enough to sound as if she hadn’t meant to. “Is that, uh.”

Ess did not avert her gaze, but drew herself up minutely and puffed out her chest. “Plenty of wizards have them,” Lawrence said defensively.

“Yeah.” Both of them knew perfectly well that no state-approved wizard would be caught dead with anything less than an eagle or a greyhound for their familiar, and these without an ounce of spellery in them. Only a very few wizards would risk even those for the stares they would attract. The subject was uncomfortable enough that Maria let it drop. “Well. Like I said. You just do what needs doing.”

Lawrence left rather than prolong the awkwardness. He was not sure which was more ridiculous: that he was afraid of this girl in a cell who scarcely seemed to know what she was doing, or that she was, very slightly, afraid of him.

But that’s a good thing, said Ess. It’s about time you started commanding a little more respect around here.

Lawrence could not bring himself to respond to that, so he fell back on silence.

Torchlight guided him back up to ground level. The candle-bearer had lit the lamps in the halls long ago, so white wax dribbled down to the base of each lamp Lawrence passed, artfully regal and entirely purposeful. The candlestick makers in town made them in some particular way that assured equal dribbling along the candle’s circumference. That way, the candles wouldn’t be offensively lopsided for the time until the candle-bearer could make his rounds to replace them.

When Lawrence had had this process explained to him, he realized it was a reasonable metaphor for the entirety of castle life, even a silly castle that looked more like a cake with too
much frosting than anything else. The thing worked. It was absurd and overbearing and far too considerate of trifles, but it worked. Someone replaced the candles, washed the dishes, laundered the clothes, scrubbed the floors, fed the horses, ordered the wallpaper, measured the windows, arranged the cutlery, stitched the holes in every scrap of loose fabric that came with the mess of living. Everything in its place, everyone doing some small job to keep the wheels turning.

And someone trying to poke a stick in the spokes.

Mallory didn’t count. Lawrence’s mother made her living tripping up other people on their way down the road of life. Theatrics aside, he did not think she thought of it any more than she thought of collecting water from the well. While she cultivated an imposing aura and gleefully hexed anyone who whispered after her in the street, she had little ambition outside of being the unquestioned ruler of her own slice of the earth. Her dream of reclining upon a throne of rubies was ultimately only a dream, a thing for her to imagine whenever she sat by the fireside with a glass of wine and little else to occupy herself with. Once, when Lawrence had asked what he should do with a spider found in her room, she had unthinkingly handed him a glass and a sheet of paper to put it safely outside with. Whatever his mother said, she was not much of a killer. It remained one of the few things that assured Lawrence they were indeed related.

So a murderer she was not, but a murderer other people most certainly could be. Nothing to suggest they were anything other than completely serious, either, other than the employment of a trio of apprentices—and Lawrence did not think there was any chance the three were acting on their own—who were not up to the task. A thought occurred that there was not even a guarantee only one such plot was being contrived at the moment. Lawrence remembered
Tyrone’s lack of surprise when he related the news over breakfast, and a princess petting her brother’s head as she told him never to mind the details.

His feet took him through his thoughts and landed him outside his room. He slipped inside, wincing at the creak the hinges made. He fell onto his bed without preamble; the entirety of his day off had been spent ferrying ingredients down a few at a time and trying desperately to avoid detection, so the night had been reserved for the start of the potion itself. Ess appeared next to his head and curled up into a furry doughnut where she left just enough space for his head on the pillow, and they fell asleep like that.

***

Lawrence tasted something wrong in the evening on a Tuesday. It was faint, a burnt taste, charcoal roasted to glowing embers in the back of his throat. He asked Tyrone to pass him the pitcher of lemonade, but it did no good. It just gave the charcoal a citrus undertone.

Ess had kidnapped a sausage and was eating it between her paws in ladylike bites. She raised her head when Lawrence set down his glass in resignation. Problem?

“Excuse me.” Lawrence balled up his napkin and set it aside.

Tyrone took the pitcher back, eyeing Lawrence’s half-finished plate. His own had already been ladled with seconds as usual, on the basis of free food. “Everything all right?”

Lawrence pushed his chair out. “Yes, thank you. I’m just going to turn in early for the night.”

“Don’t get assassinated.”

“Ha.” It had become something of a joke between them, since Tyrone had never heard anything more about Maria and liked to share his speculations during their time at the sink. His
current favorite mock-theory was that Maria was part of an international syndicate that specialized in infiltration. Lawrence found it funny in a more wry way than he thought Tyrone did, but it was something to laugh about, either way.

Ess picked up her sausage between pointed teeth and padded after Lawrence out of the servants’ dining area. What’s the deal? I wasn’t finished.

“Someone’s doing magic.”

I don’t feel anything.

“It’s not strong.” He set a foot down one direction of a corridor, stopped, turned, and went in the other direction. “It’s far off, too.”

She was attempting to eat and walk at the same time, which was a difficult proposition without opposable thumbs. So, what, do we not expect the court sorcerers to do any work after dinner?

“It doesn’t feel as though it’s them. Whoever it is, they’re doing it wrong. It’s like.” He tried to summon the word. “Something left in the oven too long? Overcooked.” It tasted of the eggs he’d tried to make as a child, when he hadn’t known to butter the pan or keep the electric stove at something other than maximum heat.

Your senses are so weird, Ess said. What did you say it tasted like when your mother made that rain cloud? ‘Zappy’?

Lawrence smiled. “I was thirteen.”

Most witches feel something less bizarre. Ess jumped onto Lawrence’s shoulder. He steadied her, and she resumed gnawing on the sausage. A pressure in their head. The pricking of their thumbs.
“Lucky I’m not a witch.”

Remind me why we care about some bad spellwork? I thought you wanted to avoid drawing attention.

He slowed his pace once they reached the bottom of a familiar staircase. A distance away, the door to the closet he’d used to escape from the royal siblings was nestled into the wall. Far away, above in the tall, thin tower, the edge of the princess’s chamber door peeked over the spiraling stairs.

“It’s coming from up there.”

Who cares? Ess said, but she sounded less flippant than she might have liked.

He thought of Brunswick coming down the stairs, and of the princess needling the flustered sorcerer. Lawrence had ascended the first few steps before he realized it. “Perhaps we can just take a look.”

We’re going in?

“Is that wrong?”

I dunno, it’s just—

The dusty, burnt feeling in the back of his throat had been getting stronger the closer he came. Now it ignited. Fire swept over his tongue and smoke sucked back into his windpipe. Lawrence almost misplaced his foot for coughing.

Ess’s fur stood on end. Wow. Okay. Yeah, I felt that.

Now he took the stairs two at a time, holding a hand to his throat for fear that it might give out. The fire expanded, turned over, torched the insides of his mouth. He reached the chamber door and put a hand out for the doorknob.
His hand hovered, then it knocked instead.

Something hollow and metal banged into something else on the other side of the door. He heard a sound like steam rising from a boiling pot. The fire in his mouth was doused. Lawrence could have gasped in relief, but before he got a chance, the doorknob turned and swung open.

If the princess had been expecting him, she did an excellent job of concealing it; she looked as if she had expected anyone but. Her hair was frizzy and sweat coated her forehead. A lock hanging over her shoulder was singed with a few lasting embers. The smell of it was overpowering. Her dress, pink and informal, had a greasy stain on its sleeve.

The princess looked like she had remembered all these facts of her appearance the very second after she had opened the door. Her face froze into unreadable neutrality. She and Lawrence stared at each other, each daring the other to say the first word. Smoke curled up from her hair.

“Meow,” Ess said.

The princess transferred her eyes to the cat. Some undefined tension released itself. She straightened and held the door open. Lacking any other options, Lawrence went in.

The room was as he’d left it on that afternoon, but for one major detail. A big cauldron, a proper one, sat by the foot of the bed. A tiny stove had been placed underneath it, though it looked to have been cooled off in a hurry by a metal bucket that was now more or less empty. The inside of the cauldron was charred beyond recognition. The princess shut the door.

“It has been,” she said, “an unsuccessful night.”

Lawrence had to cover his mouth. An observer as practiced as Ess might have noticed that he was fighting down a smile, but he hoped the princess wouldn’t.
“Your hair,” he said at last.

The princess looked down and saw the burning strands. She caught the bucket by its handle and splashed what little water it had left onto herself. The embers sizzled out. That done, she took two handfuls of her skirts and fanned them out like she was prepared to curtsey. More stains and burns like cigarette holes displayed themselves in the folds of the layered pink. She let go. “That’s it for this dress, I suppose. I’ll wear an apron next time.”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt you,” Lawrence said, because the statement was true enough. He hadn’t thought she would be the person he would be interrupting. “I just thought something might have gone amiss up here.”

“Like the smell of me leaning too far and catching my hair on the stove.” The princess collapsed into her desk chair. She didn’t seem to see any point in keeping up appearances. “Or all the ingredients turning black. Yes, I quite understand. Is it that bad in the tower?”

“I might open a window either way, your highness.”

She gestured to the one by her bed, and Lawrence unlatched it and pushed it open for her. A well-worn hardcover book on the sill had a groove running parallel to its spine on the top of its pages, and it fit neatly under the window as a prop.

“Thank you,” the princess said when he returned. “I should apologize for our previous meeting, while I’ve remembered my manners.”

Ess dropped from Lawrence’s shoulders and onto the princess’s lap. The princess looked startled, but not displeased. She ran a hand over Ess’s back. “I think we made you terribly uncomfortable. Well, obviously we did, you bounding off at the first chance you got. Truth be told, I was just going along with Alex. He does love to meet new people.”
Lawrence thought about Tyrone. Yes, he had noticed that. He was a little uncomfortable that a princess was apologizing to him, though. “What were you making?”

The princess threw a wry eye towards the offending cauldron. “It’s supposed to be a simple potion, but it was my maiden attempt, after all. I could have predicted that it would be harder than it looked. Everyone would be setting off fireworks in the street if magic were so easy.”

Lawrence sensed that he was walking around the edge of a mountain that might prove to be an active volcano. “Is this something you couldn’t ask for help from the court sorcerers with?”

“It isn’t quite a something.” The princess scratched behind Ess’s ears. “I don’t care much about the potion itself. I just thought I would learn. Spells have been fascinating to me for a while now, and it occurred that I might as well try my hand at it.”

Ess purred. You know, I liked her before, but she’s growing on me.

“Heavens, I feel much better.” The princess sat up. Ess got off her and returned to her honorary position on top of Lawrence. “Having a confidant to speak with and a cat to pet does wonders for one’s mood. I’d best clean the worst of this up before the maid starts jumping to conclusions.”

Relief descended onto Lawrence once again. He ducked his head, said his farewell, and beat a quick retreat for the door.

“Lawrence,” the princess said, and he stopped. “I know we got off on the wrong foot, but since I’m being brutally honest, I have to say that I don’t meet many more people than my brother does.” She twisted her mouth. “Outside the confines of the peerage, anyway, and I have
to say that those meetings tend to be startlingly dull. You have few friends when you’re a princess. Would you permit me to impose upon you and Ess again sometime in the future?”

Ess and Lawrence traded glances. He could feel her amusement. There was nothing else he could say, and, frankness aside, the princess knew it. “Of course, your highness.”

So that was that.

***

Traditionally, potions had been the one thing Lawrence showed any aptitude for when his mother tried to teach him witchcraft. They hadn’t worked, unless you counted the fever cure or the weed killer, but at least they had never blown up half the living room when he’d made them, something his mother could never brag about. He was only now beginning to see why so many people had trouble with them.

The sleeping draught was one of the most unpleasant things Lawrence had ever created, second only to the time when he had been eleven and trying to heat some spaghetti sauce in a pot that his mother had earlier used to grow gangrenous lumps. While the potion was docile enough during the first trip back when he came to add in the ginger, it spat and fumed whenever he stopped by to continue work on it after that. If a liquid could swear, he was sure that this was what it would sound like. Ess had a way with it that made it shudder into silence when she sat next to it, but all it took was Lawrence drawing near, spoon in hand, to set it off again.

_You’re upsetting it_, Ess told him one day. _It knows you don’t want it there._

“Grand!” Lawrence finished dabbing Miss Marrow’s borrowed burn cream at the place on his arm where a splash had scalded him. “It’s smarter than most people I know. While it’s at it, why doesn’t it commit suicide by freezing to death?”
Because temperatures below sixty degrees render the effects of a sleeping draught null and void, Ess said, spectacularly missing the point. You don’t have to get along with it, but quit looking at it like you’re about to dump it in the river.

“Why don’t you reason with it, if it likes you so much?”

Ess looked at him pityingly. She placed her single pale paw on his foot. I can’t, she said, as if speaking to an idiot who had suggested she talk down the moon. It’s a potion.

Lawrence finally discovered that if he spoke soothingly and didn’t clench his teeth, the spitting died to an angry burble and allowed him to stir, so long as he cleared out as soon as he was done. He had no problem with the compromise. The orange cloud from the first night sometimes came back to hang around the ceiling and watch events unfold before drifting away to heed some soundless call, and it gave Lawrence the creeps. He got out right away every time.

Streisand was of the same temperament as the draught the closer the date of the harvest ball came. He made two of the chefs cry and gave one of the serving girls a nervous breakdown from his shouting. Tyrone wisely opted to remain at his post with Lawrence instead of skiving off work like he occasionally did if the scullery was full, and whenever Streisand arrived in a whirl of fury the two of them were always bent over their sink, models of industriousness. So far, Tyrone had received two demerits and Lawrence a clip across the back of the head.

“Least he didn’t stab you in the kneecaps,” Tyrone said sympathetically as Lawrence rubbed his head. “I heard he used to be a sergeant in the army.”

The prince’s abrupt appearances in the scullery became almost a source of comfort, even when Lawrence didn’t duck under the sinks fast enough to escape a friendly one-armed hug. His cheer radiated off him and took some of the curl out of Streisand’s mouth for up to an hour after
he left. He was intelligent enough to look at the bustle about him and not ask for an encore of the lunch, unless it simply didn’t occur to him to ask, so he often sat on the footstool to shoot the breeze with Tyrone. The subject of both pubs and missed opportunities was brought up several times in tandem with heaving sighs. Lawrence always occupied himself with a rag until they changed the subject to sports or gossip.

Little by little, annoyance turned to routine. The sun slept earlier each day. The air turned from cool to crisp. Leaves fell off the trees in a trickle of yellow and red and brown that would soon dry up, and Lawrence was no closer to figuring any of it out.
Chapter 8

Princess Leticia held up a frock coat with a critical eye. It was indistinguishable from the rest of the frock coats she had hitherto examined, but she spent a full minute turning this one over in her hands before it joined its brethren on the bed in an untidy sprawl. Her skirts made an audible swishing noise when she turned to the pile of coats she had not yet subjected to analysis. The pile was replenished by her chambermaid every so often when it dwindled towards an excuse for the whole exercise to be over with. As it was, she’d been at it a full forty minutes. An almost empty plate of cookies testified to this.

The princess tapped at her chin. “Lawrence,” she said. “You’re making this very difficult.”

Lawrence stopped picking at the gold trimming along the princess’s chair. It was a nice chair, and he had no particular objection to the trimming except a desire to fiddle with something. “I’m sorry?” he said.

“We’d have to tailor anything to the right size so you’re not swimming in it regardless, but. Mm.” She plucked another article out of the lineup. “Perhaps a touch of gold would make all the difference. It’ll bring out your eyes. Sasha?”

The chambermaid curtsied and withdrew from the room. Lawrence noted, a little impressed, that the door made no sound at all when she closed it.

“Black and grey are too gloomy on their own, anyway, I’ve always thought.” The princess absently picked the last cookie off its platter. “Do you know the measurements for your waist?”

He knew he’d had to give them to be issued the uniform, but he had taken no pains to memorize them. “No, I’m afraid not, your highness.”
“Well, I did sign up for a project,” she said with a flash of her teeth. She fastened her long hair up out of her face in a few deft twists and inserted some pins to keep it in place. The vanity’s mirror was still turned toward the wall as she did this, which impressed Lawrence even more than the chambermaid had. “I do appreciate your patience. There are dreadful few people around here who are willing to indulge me when I have some free time, and there’s little enough of that these days as well.”

“I don’t mind,” Lawrence said, and he really didn’t, though he really should have. Even if her brother wouldn’t clue into the cooking-boy-as-a-probable-accessory-to-murder situation if someone waved a big flag in front of his face, the princess’s questions were much more piercing under their cordiality. The prince conversed; the princess searched. Still, watching her swan about her room as if it were some grand stage was entertainment in its own right, and Ess had made a home in the center of the bed’s pillows where she was blissfully kneading away as if she never intended to leave. The light streaming in through the windows was the sleepy, late-afternoon yellow of autumn hitting its stride. Lawrence hadn’t had such a quiet moment to himself in over a month, and the chair was, after all, very comfortable.

“I don’t expect you would have been able to do much work in that state, anyway,” the princess was saying. She’d been appalled at the bandages mummifying his fingers until he told her they were due to an accident in the kitchens with some soup. The lie had been close enough to the truth that she seemed satisfied to take the refreshments she had requested and let him sit in peace while she went to work.

The princess ghosted a hand along one of the last coats, then pulled it out with an air of triumph. “I believe we’ve struck gold at last. Lawrence, would it bother you terribly if . . . ?”
It was not especially a surprise when the door slammed open. “Let!” the prince said, leaves trailing from his hair and shoulders. “You won’t believe it, I’ve made an incredible discovery!”

“Could you discover it a little more quietly? Here, someone will mistake you for a scarecrow if you dash about like that.” She reached up, and the prince bent down to allow her to brush the leaves from his hair. She picked out the last twig and dropped it into the basket where she threw all her refuse. “There, you look a little more presentable. What’s all the commotion?”

“You know Old Breakback?”

The princess’s expression turned guarded. “You’re referring to the stallion that the stable master explicitly said you were not permitted to ride, likely to do with the fact that his name is ‘Old Breakback’?”

“The very same. I took him out today, and do you know what I found?”

“I’m sure I couldn’t guess,” the princess said, folding her arms. “Other than possibly a newfound respect for certain rules that are in place for your own well-being.”

But the prince produced something thin from his pocket. “Oh, stop being a mother hen and look!”

“A thorn.”

“Just so! The stable boys must have missed it—it was wedged flush against his hoof. I wouldn’t’ve noticed it except for when he bucked me into the creek.”

*Wow.* Ess had rolled lazily onto her back. *Who needs assassins, with this chucklehead?*

The corner of the princess’s mouth twitched. “Yes, Alex, you’re right, I don’t know what I was so concerned about.” She took the thorn and dropped it into the basket with everything else.
“Why don’t you take a seat? I’ve just finished finding precisely the right frock for Lawrence, and I was hoping he might try it on for me.”

“Ho?”

The prince looked over his sister. At some point, Lawrence’s mind had wandered and he’d allowed his head to rest on the arm of his chair. He jerked upright now with lightning speed. The prince smiled at him as if he was a pet who had performed a charming trick. “All apologies, Law, didn’t catch you sitting there. Come to think of it.” He turned to the princess. “How did you get him to sit sunning himself like that cat of his? He always sprints off first chance he gets whenever I’m around.”

“Does he? He’s been perfectly polite to me. I thought he was just shy that first time.”

“What? Injustice!”

“All right,” Lawrence said, taking the coat from the princess. “You know this isn’t going to fit, right? I mean, really not going to fit.”

Her eyes twinkled, not at all dissimilar to her brother’s. “Roll up the sleeves and we’ll make do. If the shoulders are a good match, we may be able to cut back the rest.”

It was as they had predicted. The thing was a baggy monstrosity on him, cuffs hanging above his fingertips and hem hovering somewhere around his shoes. Its shoulders were nowhere close to his. The princess, at least, had the self-control to nod her thanks and take the coat back from him as she sat on the edge of the bed.

“We’ll have to make one from scratch, I think,” she said above the prince’s gales of laughter. “The cut’s a good look for you, though, so we’ll use this as a model. You know, I
wondered if perhaps you were just a little short but it’s as if you’ve been built nine-tenths to scale.”

“You mean I’m a midget,” Lawrence supplied flatly, to the prince’s redoubled hilarity. “Yes, I know. I purchase most of my personal clothing from stores targeted toward early-adolescent children and I need a stool to reach the top of a bookshelf. My inseam, in inches, measures at approximately a fourth of my average test score. I can be carted about like a teddy bear in the pocket of your choosing, all my exercise can be derived from a wheel the size of a muffin. I am a low-maintenance pet ideal for the whole family.”

Lawrence took a breath at that point, because the prince’s mirth had subsided and he was giving Lawrence a look that was not a look he had ever directed at him before. Lawrence continued with more restraint. “If it’s such trouble, then please, there’s no call for you to go out of your way on my account.”

The princess had a hand over her mouth, and Lawrence thought he could see her biting the inside of her cheek. She finally answered in the same smooth manner as always. “It’s no trouble at all. I’m tremendously sorry for being so rude. I’ll ask Sasha to take my order downtown, just as soon as we take your m—”

She cut off with a choking noise and put her hand back over her mouth. Lawrence stared at her in a mixture of confusion and horror as she bent over so far that her nose was almost level with her knees. He thought for a moment of poison, slipped onto the palm of her hand through some preordained scheme, on her teacup or one of the coats, the chambermaid still wasn’t back—before he realized that she was trying to stifle something.
“Forgive me,” she said between her fingers. “This is so rude. You just. Your manners always seem so *impeccable* and then you bolt for the window or say something with such a straight face.”

“Breathe, Leticia, breathe,” the prince said, though he looked nearly as amused. “I have to say, Law, I haven’t seen her like this in years. I think you broke something.”

Lawrence could not think of a reply. The princess overwhelmingly resembled her brother when Lawrence had spoken to him in the back gardens.

*You’re catching flies,* Ess said. He closed his mouth.

“I’m all right. I’m all right.” The princess pulled herself up, hand splayed out on her heart. “Oh, goodness. Oh, that was funny. Oh, no, don’t apologize, Lawrence, I needed that. What time is it?” She glanced at the window, where the sun was already sinking dim and red. “Almost night. You’d better get back to the kitchens before dinner starts. Your cookies were a wonder,” she added as she passed him the crumb-covered plate. “Before I forget. Thank you dearly.”

“Not at all,” Lawrence mumbled. He backed up to the door. Ess leapt up and shadowed him. “Have a good evening.”

He walked out to a duet of “good evening” and “good night!” By unspoken agreement, he and Ess traipsed down the full length of the tower stairs and took what would have been a wrong turn if they were headed for the kitchens. Instead, they made a beeline for one of the only other places Lawrence knew how to get to by himself. He’d had a lot of practice over the past few weeks.

The potion still required near-constant tending. It had been a source of annoyance at first, but now it was as much a part of castle routine as washing dishes with Tyrone or dodging the
prince. Ess attended to the twice-daily chore of stoking the fire to the right temperature on her own, but when it was time to stir the cauldron clockwise or counterclockwise or add in some new ingredient, then Lawrence made the trip with her and took his chances with the odd sulky splash. Once, they’d run into the warden, a round, balding man with a gentle disposition who had assumed Lawrence was lost and told him the way to the kitchens, but he was frequently asleep and as such not difficult to avoid.

Maria was more often their greeting, if a single raised hand counted as greeting, but today Amal and Clark had returned to have another one of their whispered conferences. The two didn’t come by often when it wasn’t necessary, for fear of rousing suspicion from their magic overseers (“You don’t get it, they’re not a pushovers like that ghoul of yours in the kitchens”). When they did come, it meant a lot of shifty glances at Lawrence until he moved on. Today, however, they didn’t even notice him.

Clark was the current talking head of the three-way huddle. “But it’s not like it’s gonna be our only opportunity, is all I’m saying.”

“Are you backing out on us now?” That was Maria, hidden from sight.

“No, no, nothin’ like that, it’s just that it’s weird he’s picked now of all times.”

“Hate to agree, but I think Clark is right,” Amal said. “It’s too public. Everyone could see. Why now?”

“Who cares why now, since when are you two such a couple of—”

Lawrence took the lantern off its hook and left their voices behind him in the tunnels. He had done all listening with only one ear. They argued most of the time when they saw each other,
something Lawrence had taken to mean that they either despised one another or were better friends than any one of them was willing to admit.

The cloud was around today, floating at the end of the cell. Lawrence could have sworn it swiveled to look at him when he came in, but turned back around to face the wall when it saw who he was. It was far more off-putting than a featureless neon fog had any right to be. The potion was less dismissive and bubbled a warning at the two of them. Ess meowed until it simmered down. The room still stank of rotten eggs. Lawrence felt his tolerable mood nosedive.

“I will not,” he said, “miss this remotely.” He retrieved the scroll from its honorary position on the cell’s crumbly bedframe. The potion itself was on the cusp of completion, so long as they could keep it warm enough to survive until someone got a chance to drink it, and so long as it didn’t actually spill itself in one of the legendary tantrums that had left Lawrence with his fingers swathed in bandages. His failure to accidentally get any of the potion splashed in his mouth was at this point a minor miracle, although Ess assured him that sleeping potions didn’t work on their creator. Inadvertently drugging himself was about the only mistake Lawrence was guaranteed to be safe from making.

*I think it’s cozy*, Ess said. *Except for the smell. We could burn some herbs for that.*

“We’d need to get more matches and wood. Actually, we’ll need to get more anyway.” Lawrence pulled the last of the logs from under the bed and prodded it into place under the cauldron. “Do you think Maria could get the warden to bring some down? It’s getting colder and there’s that fireplace right outside her cell. Perhaps he’ll do it.”

*Worth a try.* She flopped onto her side and set about washing her face. While she acknowledged that baths were necessary for anything four-legged, floppy-eared, and possessed
of the intelligence of the common housefly, she regarded them as frivolous for creatures that, she insisted, could clean themselves adequately without outside interference. The fact that she had been known to trail muddy prints over his sheets never found a place in this argument.

Lawrence did his usual stirring before he pulled the vanilla extract from his apron. A single brown drop, then a second, then a third dripped into the cauldron. It protested at first, shaking and sputtering hard enough to make Lawrence beat a smart retreat, before it relaxed into a concoction that had the consistency of liquid chocolate. He screwed the cap back on and pocketed the bottle with a sense of finality. “There,” he said. “That’s the last of the ingredients. Give it another half-moon to set and we will have ourselves a substance banned in eight countries and twenty-seven municipalities.”

*Cheers. Are you hungry? I could murder a mouse.*

“You have never done that.”

Ess had just rolled back onto her feet when a thin, weedy sound reached them from nowhere in particular. The sound climbed in pitch and volume until Lawrence could have sworn there was a whistling kettle right next to his ear. The whistle had sung into an unholy screech when it became apparent that the racket was coming from the cloud. It converged in on itself and dove into the cauldron with a howl. The pot shuddered and fell silent.

Nothing. Off in the distance, a rat scuffled away.

Lawrence brought the lantern to the scroll to reread the last few lines. It recommended he stir clockwise one hundred and eight times before his final addition and perform a small chant on the night of the half-moon for optimum results. Nowhere did it detail eldritch shrieking as a part of the process.
“Was it supposed to do that?” he asked.

_I have no idea. What color is it now?_”

Lawrence checked. “Yellow.”

_Clear or cloudy?_

“Cloudy.”

_Then it’s probably fine. Let’s go get dinner._

This was not the reassurance Lawrence had been hoping for. “‘Probably?’”

_Yeah. Probably. They were making mutton tonight, weren’t they?_

“Ess, what if I just screwed this up really badly?”

She sashayed out of the cell. _Then it’ll still be the same amount of screwed up either way by the time we’ve got some food in our stomachs, won’t it? Let’s go get you changed so you don’t smell at the table._

“But what if it’s a poison or a paralytic or something now? Hey, I thought you were all invested in this!” Lawrence chased after her, scroll flapping at his knees.

_I’m also hungry. Besides, did you ever manage to make anything more menacing than that weed killer when you were a kid?_

Lawrence paused. “No, I suppose not, but—”

_There you are, then. Yellow means nonlethal alteration, cloudy means potent. Worst case scenario sees the prince sprouting a really big pair of antlers and we all get a good laugh before we try it again._

“I’m not sure you aren’t making that up. Besides, we don’t have enough extra components for a whole new potion, you realize. It would mean visiting Newt again.”
Ess faltered in her hop over a broken step. *All right, all right. We’ll test it out on some rodent or other before we put it into practice. Maybe we can fix it if there’s a problem before we use the whole thing up."

“What if we can’t fix it if we wait too long? Wait, what if we can’t fix it at all?”

*You’re worrying way too much again.*

“You’re not worrying nearly enough!”

They bickered all the way out of the dungeons and into the attic stairwell. Lawrence had to clamp his mouth shut whenever they passed another servant in the hall, which granted Ess a decisive advantage she used to the fullest effect.

*Even if he pukes all over the place for a week, so what? It’ll probably make him weak enough that he might as well be asleep either way, so Mallory gets her leverage and the idiots get their opportunity either way.*

“You’re such a comfort,” Lawrence said, shouldering his door open. He would have happily continued—hazy memories from flipping through his mother’s old spellbooks made him pretty sure yellow in a potion meant nothing at all except that it likely had a lot of sulfur in it—but something square and beige caught his eye halfway to his closet. He froze.

On his bed, resting upon his blankets and sealed with a flattened dollop of shiny black wax, was a letter. It had an “M” on it.
Chapter 9

No one had ever said balls were so loud.

The kitchens were one thing. By the time all the guests had arrived and the dance was underway, the chefs had peaked in their frenzy and were winding down into the precise placement of cherries atop cakes. The biggest panic at this point was over such things as keeping baskets of rolls warm enough to make it to the banquet table. They’d hit a lull in the action where nothing could be decorated or arranged or pulled from an oven. Footmen dashed in with empty plates and out with full ones. Ms. Marrows dealt a new hand into the card game she had struck up with a handful of staff. Someone was sleeping under the cooling racks. Streisand wasn’t around to insist on productivity, presumed to be off dousing fires in some other part of the castle. There was always something to wash, so the scullery had not closed up shop, but even it was so affected by the celebratory dead space that Tyrone amiably waved Lawrence on when he said he needed to slip away for a moment.

The ballroom, on the other hand, was a servant’s nightmare. Lawrence had heard estimations placing the number of guests at around two hundred. Two hundred was a manageable number if you were talking about crepes or blackberries. Two hundred people was chaos, and that included only the guests. Lawrence didn’t want to think how many it would be if you factored in the footmen, the maids, the ladies’ maids, the butlers, the orchestra, and, he supposed, the greeter who shouted out titles above the din whenever someone arrived. The prince and princess were almost certainly somewhere in the throng. It occurred to him that the king and queen would be as well.
He let the curtain fall back in front of his hiding place in the corner. Thick as it was, it did nothing to muffle the noise.

_I know that look_, said Ess. _That’s the look you had on the morning of your final exam._

“I can’t do this,” he whispered, or would have whispered if there was any chance he could have been heard at that level. He was in truth talking at a normal volume to much the same effect. “I can’t do this.”

_Don’t be an idiot. Go over, tip it in the carrot soup, and get back to scrubbing teacups._

_Take you less than five minutes. In this crowd, no one will be any the wiser._

Lawrence clutched the bottle tighter. The sleeping draught had turned a ruddy brown in the days leading up to the half-moon last week, which, according to a banned book Ess had snuck in to consult in the castle library, meant it had no problems at all. He had not slipped or stumbled on the incantation, either; it had been less than four lines. The potion was exactly what he had made it to be. He only needed to empty it into the right dish—the soup dominating one end of the banquet was a virtual certainty, because the prince could not stay away from anything with vegetables and meat in it—and that would be that. The strand of hair the prince had left on Lawrence’s uniform one day guaranteed no one else would fall prey to the potion. The prince would fall into a sleep, even a pleasant sleep, thanks to the ginger and vanilla, and he would not wake up until Lawrence found a way to give him the antidote. Almost entirely harmless, if you didn’t consider Amal and Clark waiting in the physician’s office with twin complaints of stomach aches.

Lawrence felt sick.
Look. Ess batted at his ankle. *Hey. Down here. I know you don’t want to hurt anyone and I know he’s a charming lug with the brains that the universe gave a stoat. But you have to get it together.*

Lawrence tried to speak, and managed a thin whining noise somewhere on the spectrum between “pathetic” and “trapped animal about to gnaw off its own leg in a bid for freedom.” Ess looked at him with real alarm. *Oh, hell, you can’t even sass me. You’re serious.*

“I thought you liked him,” he said in a small voice.

*I do, sort of, but come on, this is what we came here for. If we chicken out, what was the point?*

“What if we just tell someone,” Lawrence said, desperation rising. “They can catch the other two, put them under some, I don’t know, truth serum, I can just get fired for aborted insubordination, and—”

*And they investigate you and find out who your mother is,* Ess supplied, and Lawrence wilted. *Probably what I am, too. No one’s going to think a witch’s son just has a regular cat when he’s been brewing a sleeping draught in the castle dungeons. Do you think they’ll kill me or stuff me and put me in a museum somewhere? And perhaps you’ll be lucky enough to get the treatment Maria is, but I wouldn’t bet on a witch getting any goodwill around here. For all they know, you’ll turn the place into gingerbread.*

*They wouldn’t use truth serum, anyway,* she added, more kindly. *That’s illegal, too.* *Violates some code of ethics.*

Outside their hiding place, two older women cruised by arm-in-arm, discussing something to do with hats. Beyond them, visible between a gap in bodies, one of the violinists in
the orchestra had snapped a string and was holding a conference with both of the cellists about it.

A man with a flute carried on, peacefully unaware of all outside stimulus.

“Then why don’t we leave?” Lawrence said. He was almost begging. “Out the door. Right now. A different country, you said—well, why not?”

_You know why not._

Lawrence did know. Maria, Clark, and Amal all knew him, knew his face and his voice even if they didn’t know his name, which meant the real would-be assassin would know him, too. That was nothing to what Mallory might do to him if she ever found him, and his mother was not in the habit of losing things. Their only chance was to go through with the plan and hope the fates were kind. He did know why they couldn’t just leave, but he’d been hoping Ess would say yes, anyway.

_Lawrence._ Ess was not washing her face or flopping on the ground now. She was watching him, intent. _Here’s the thing. It isn’t just about you and him. I know you’d never hurt a fly if you had the choice, but I know you’re not willing to put me in harm’s way, either. Bleeding heart you are, too._

_If you’re sunk, I’m sunk. You get caught, I’m caught. Ball and chain. Witch and familiar._

_So it looks like it’s down to us or someone we met three months ago._

_What’ll it be?_

It was a choice long in coming. It had never been much of a choice, but there it was. The potion in his hand meant that he had made it a long time ago, though he couldn’t remember ever doing so. He’d just gone through the motions, he’d thought. Done enough to get people to leave him alone, get a silly job and fill a silly cauldron and meet some silly magic apprentices, nothing
that got him taken very seriously or that he’d felt like taking seriously in return. None of it had felt real until now. Not even when he’d started the potion. The crowd buzzed behind him.

He did not clearly recall going over to the banquet table afterward. One moment he was behind the curtain, the next he was walking out a back door behind a hurrying footman, empty bottle in hand.

*Right,* Ess said, business-like. *That’s our job done. We’ll make a witch of you yet.* *I don’t think the Tyrone kid will be missing you much yet, but the sooner you’re back and accounted for, the better. Keep your mouth shut and your head down and you shouldn’t have any problems*.

He had not turned left at the intersection that led back to the kitchens. He continued straight on his path, walking fast enough that Ess had to jog to keep up with him.

*Scullery’s the other way, dish boy. I know you’re out of it, but—*

Lawrence tuned out the rest. His mind felt crisper, somehow. It was as if life was a series of blurs that had finally been thrown into relief, showing the corners and edges and fine detail of it all. He tasted something he thought was minty—but, upon reflection, was more as if there had been something repugnant in his mouth for a long time that had just departed and he’d never noticed it. It felt like weights were lifted from his feet; it felt like breathing in the whole of a pink, sunny morning. He rounded a corner and started up the stairs.

*Seriously. This is beyond sleep-walking. What gives?*

“The physician’s office is this way, isn’t it?”

*Beg pardon?*
Lawrence took the stairs two at a time. “They did say they were going to wait for someone to bring him to the royal physician, didn’t they?”

*What? You’re talking about Maria’s sidekicks? Yeah, I guess, but—wait. Waaaaaiiiit.*

It was kind of awful of him, but he felt himself start to grin. He always felt better once a decision was made. Besides, making Ess stop short was not something he got to do very often.

*Wait, wait, you can’t stop it now! The potion’s planted! The idiot will be out on his back any minute!*

“Oh,” Lawrence said. Absurdly, he wanted to laugh. “Not a lot we can do about that anymore. Until I get the antidote ready, I mean, but why get ahead of ourselves?”

Ess rocketed to the top of the stairwell in a blur of black and took up the old strategy of blocking his path. *You were about to throw up a minute ago,* she said, a trace accusatory. *What are you planning to do?*

Lawrence conceded the point far enough to stop where he was, but he bent over and picked her up, nose to nose. She allowed this with poor grace. “You said it yourself, right? Our job is done. We’ve kept our end of the bargain. We get to do what we want now.”

*What’s this ‘we’?*

“And anyway,” he continued, ignoring her, “I can’t say that I’m much for the idea of anyone getting killed tonight. I didn’t say I wouldn’t stop them after I helped them.”

She narrowed her eyes. *Two months ago you didn’t want to get out of work for an afternoon. You thought you’d get in trouble. When did I raise you to be like this?*

“I’m glad I have your approval.”

*You do have an actual plan, though.*
Lawrence shrugged and walked on. “No, but that’s hardly stopped me before, so I suspect there’s no point in letting it bother me now.”

Atta boy.

Ess had been to the physician herself on one of her reconnaissance tours, so she took point while Lawrence followed behind her. The further they went away from the ball, the fewer people they passed, until the corridors were dead silent but for his footsteps and the distant rumble of the crowd. The candle-lighter had done his duties in spite of the excitement, Lawrence was pleased to see; they had no trouble finding their way up to the sickbay’s hallway even with the castle’s maze-like layout. Ess led him to the door with a shiny wooden plaque next to it. Lawrence was about to open the door and do something (anything) when it burst open of its own volition.

High Sorcerer Brunswick almost bowled Lawrence over for the second time in as many meetings. They reeled back from each other in a clatter of curses and apologies, respectively. Brunswick showed no sign of recognizing Lawrence, which was on further examination less surprising than the alternative, and simply dusted himself off with a snort.

“Keep up the good work,” Brunswick said into the room behind him before shutting the door. To Lawrence: “What? Did someone have an accident in the kitchens?” He sounded annoyed and, perhaps, almost hopeful. Lawrence wasn’t sure he’d heard him right.

“No, I. I mean.” Lawrence swallowed the instinctive cringe, stood politely at attention instead, back straight, hands folded in front of him, and took a shot into complete darkness. “It’s Maria, sir.”
“What?” Now Brunswick focused his full attention on him. “Maria, you said? What’s that girl done this time?”

“I think there’s something wrong, sir. She may have been hurt.”

Oh! Ess crowed from somewhere below his knee. A downright lie and it’s not even about your mother. We WILL make a witch of you yet.

“What?” Brunswick’s brow furrowed as if he didn’t understand what Lawrence had just told him. Not a frown of mentorly concern, Lawrence thought before he moved on to invent whatever could come out of his mouth.

“Well, sir, I was talking to Mr. Streisand, and—”

“Streisand!” Brunswick barked. Lawrence and Ess jumped. “I thought he was too quiet tonight. The devil were you two talking about? Where was this? How long ago?”

The mention of Streisand had been incidental, a touch of authentic detail before Lawrence meant to go onto a completely different subject. Now he was left staring at Brunswick as if the man had a hole where his face should be. He saw with minute detail the moment that Brunswick realized his mistake. The man straightened his robes with a cough.

“Bit of an odd duck, you understand,” he said. “Had a stroke that put him out of the army a few years back. Certain health problems. A lot of stress. You understand.” He coughed. “What were you saying?”

It had not even occurred to the man that the chef in front of him who didn’t reach the height of his shoulders might be lying, Lawrence realized. He was too wrapped up in himself to even consider a boy from the lower echelons might be anything other than a messenger to be dismissed as soon as his information was imparted.
That was fine. Lawrence knew how to deal with people who dismissed him.

“He was telling me about the arrangements for the ball this evening, sir,” he said, and yes, there was a definite release of tension at that. “About thirty minutes ago. But the dungeon warden came in as we were speaking and said there was something wrong with Maria. Mr. Streisand said he should go get the doctor in that case, but I suppose we were the first people the warden found and he wanted it to be us—we went down to her cell with him, and we saw that she—” It was the easiest thing in the world to make his speech slip a bit, to take half a moment to visibly collect himself.

“What?” Now there was alarm. “What happened?”

Lawrence had never shied away from telling lies because they were immoral; he just knew they were harder to sustain than the truth. The rule only applied when half-truths could be used to the same effect, though. Lawrence was quite a good liar when he wanted to be. It drove Ess crazy that he refused to use this talent, but now he could feel her glee vibrating out in all directions.

He took a deep breath. “I’m very sorry, sir. I knew her at school, that’s all.” Another deep breath, and, in a spark of inspiration, “She was in her cell. I think she’d just eaten dinner, because there was a half-empty plate next to her. She just looked like she was sleeping, sir, and she was breathing, but the warden couldn’t get her to wake up, and Mr. Streisand and I tried, we did, sir, but nothing’s been working and—”

Lawrence babbled on, earnestly looking into Brunswick’s eyes for each twitch that crossed his face. First had been the alarm, then confusion, then worse confusion, and now Lawrence could see a grim conclusion spreading across his face.
“No, boy, never fret,” Brunswick said, with what he probably thought was a comforting pat on the shoulder. “I’m sure she’ll be just fine in due time. There’s no need to bother the good doctor with a thing like this, she has two patients already. I’ll attend to this. You run along back to your cooking and don’t trouble yourself any further.”

Lawrence thought jackpot and started to say that oh, but what if Mr. Streisand was annoyed at him for neglecting to fetch the doctor like he’d been told, when a low whistle reached his ears.

It started at a distance and slowly drilled through his brain into a familiar shriek of agony. Pressing his hands on either side of his head did nothing, might have made it worse, and from somewhere above him he heard Brunswick ask if he was feeling quite all right. Considerably closer, he heard Ess say what in the world and he turned and he also wanted to know what in the world because the orange cloud was back and hurtling down the hall and if it was possible for a cloud to look angry then it looked very angry—

It hit them. For a fraction of a second, Lawrence felt acid on his tongue and in his ears.

Then the world’s color reasserted itself. Lawrence discovered, by degrees, that the sound was still there, but much fainter and less likely to cause his mind to squeeze out his ears. He took his hands away. Ess’s ears were pinned back flat on her skull.

Well, that sucked, she said. She looked like someone had tried to plug her tail into an electric socket.

A snore.
The two of them turned to see Brunswick sprawled out on his front. He was drooling very slightly on the marble floor. His hat had tipped off his head. His thinning hair paled in comparison to the long beard winding off along the ground. He was asleep.

For once, Ess had nothing to say. Lawrence stepped tactfully over the Head Sorcerer and opened the door to the sickbay. He hadn’t known what he expected until he saw what was inside. Clark and Amal were on the line of cots, eyes shut and hands folded over their chests, breathing deeply, a more tranquil scene than Lawrence had ever witnessed them take part in. A woman approaching her seventies sat at the doctor’s desk. Her head had flopped back, spilling some of the white hair from its bun, and her snoring was like two pigs locked in a battle to the death. It put Brunswick to shame.

Lawrence shut the door and examined it for a while. It was a decent door. It had whorls in the grain of the wood that contrived to look artistic. It was probably good wood, too. He didn’t know what kind, but it was dark and shiny. Those were both qualifiers of good wood, weren’t they? They wouldn’t allow cheap doors at a castle, either. You never knew who you might have to impress. He could still hear the whistling far away.

“I think it’s possible that something may have gone wrong,” he said at last.

Ess looked at him incredulously.

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If Lawrence had ever thought the castle was quiet before, it was nothing compared to now. There had always been someone to sidestep or some conversation going on in the next room, day or night. Everyone he came across told the same story as in the physician’s office. Lawrence recognized a few. Here was a stable boy who liked to spit out of windows, the higher,
the better. There was a woman who liked to skip rocks out across the pond out on the grounds early in the morning.

In a quick trip to the scullery later, just to be thorough, he discovered that Tyrone talked in his sleep. This was more information than he’d ever cared to have. Down in the dungeons, Maria proved to be quite collected when she was asleep, except for the leg of the chair she was hugging like a teddy bear. Lawrence didn’t come across Streisand on the tour of the parts of the castle he knew, which was vaguely disappointing because Lawrence couldn’t imagine him at rest. At least none of them looked to be having bad dreams.

“I don’t know if I can cook up an antidote for all this.” Lawrence levered a guard out of the way of the door he had fallen asleep against. The guard slumped to the ground in a rattle of armor next to his spear. “Are there enough mosquito wings in the world for this many people?”

Ess leapt over the prone guard as she might have a puddle with something dead floating in it. Don’t know. Why don’t you do what you did last time and cook up a screaming citrus fog monster to take care of it?

“Good idea. I’ll get on that as soon as I’ve figured out how I did it.” He shut the door again with a sigh. There had been nothing new behind it, except for a lady’s maid who had landed at an awkward angle which she seemed to be entirely comfortable in. “I hope no one got hurt when they fell. No one’s going to be dying of thirst or exposure or anything, are they?”

Don’t be stupid. What’s the point of a sleeping spell if people die when they’re under it? They’ve closed down for the moment, that’s all. Out to lunch.

“Magic,” Lawrence said under his breath. “I’m sick to death of magic.”
They walked out to a nearby terrace. The castle was overflowing with them. This one had an excess of urns spilling out greenery over their polished lips. He saw someone in the bushes a little ways off from the terrace balcony. He had to squint, but he was reasonably certain she had a rake caught in her hair. “You know, the ‘running away’ idea is appealing to me again all of a sudden.”

Yeah. Same here. Ess leapt onto the balustrade. After a moment, Lawrence leaned against it next to her, because his feet hurt and it was nice weather, if nothing else. Clear sky, cold air. Not as many stars as he would’ve seen from the hill of his mother’s cottage, but a fair number nevertheless. She’d pointed the constellations out to him when he was small. He could still see the Archer through the haze of reflected city light, and, a little further north, the Blacksmith. His mother had never been any good at finding the Blacksmith, said it looked like an angry duck to her. An inexplicable seed of something sad and queasy took root in Lawrence’s stomach. He’d never felt it before, but he knew it was homesickness.

You seem pretty calm. Considering it’s you, I mean.

“Hasn’t sunk in yet, I don’t think.” He scuffed a hand over the top of his head. “I kind of want to go home.”

Where?

“Good question.” He sat on his knees and pillowed his head on his arms. “Maybe I’ll get one for my birthday.”

Pity party aside, start letting it sink in, because I’m stumped. What’re we going to do?

“Ess, what if it’s not just the castle?” He sat up and saw her what are you on about now face. “What if it got the whole capital?”
It wasn’t that strong, she said, but she sounded doubtful. *I mean, it wasn’t, was it? It was a potion, not a bomb. You can’t get a whole city with a potion.*

“Law?”

Lawrence barely heard Ess’s screech of *oh come ON* over his own back hitting the balustrade in an attempt to scuttle backwards through it. The owner of the slightly terrified voice (*you’ve gotta be kidding*) was pale and upset in the moonlight. He walked towards them.

Prince Alexander was still very much awake.
Chapter 10

The prince was disheveled: hair sticking up in all directions, clothes rumpled, stupid fluttery one-shoulder cape singed along its hem. One of his gloves was missing. Lawrence smelled burned rubber coming from his tall black boots. The prince had hardly been impeccably groomed every time Lawrence had met him before, but even covered in leaves and twigs, the prince had never looked so sunken into himself. It was off-putting, like walking outside in the middle of summer and finding that a blizzard had hit.

Ess did not care. *One thing! That potion was supposed to do ONE THING!*

The prince sat down in a heavy heap of ruined finery. Lawrence succeeded in ungluing himself from the balustrade enough to inch forward. “Your highness?” he asked, though he wasn’t sure what he was asking.

“I’m so glad there’s someone else.” The prince put the naked hand to his forehead. He wasn’t anywhere on the same continent as *glad*. “I didn’t know what I’d do. What happened?”

“I don’t know, I, I’d stepped out,” Lawrence said lamely. “Before I came back. And then all this. What about you?”

“Leticia,” the prince said and Lawrence thought oh *no*, “she was talking to me about something. Another rejected marriage proposal. Something silly. She asked if I was hungry, and I said yes, and she said good, because she was famished, and we went over to the food, and I just went to pick up the ladle for the soup, that’s all, but something exploded and someone yelled and she fell over and so did everyone else—”

For no discernible reason, the prince calmed down. A few gulps were enough for him to piece himself into something resembling himself. Lawrence judged it safe to remove his hand.

“Was she all right?” Lawrence asked. “Your sister.”

“Y—ah, yes.” The prince scruffed a bewildered hand through his hair. It was a step up from gazing around, heartbroken. “She mumbled something about taking a nap when I tried to help her up and then she went to sleep. I couldn’t wake her after that.”

“She’ll probably be fine. Really,” he said when the prince raised his head to look at him, “it’s just a sleeping spell or something. It doesn’t look like anyone’s hurt. Maybe it’s just a prank.”

“What kind of sleeping spell?”


“Witches? Is that a possibility?” The prince was sitting straight up now. “That is, wizards are one thing, and warlocks are another, you see, but all the witches left a hundred years ago. Or that’s what I’ve always heard . . . ?”

Shoot, shoot, shoot. Lawrence was actually going to have to watch himself. “Well, I’m not an expert.” He looked down at his clothes. “Obviously. I’ve never heard of an entire group completely disappearing, though, have you?”

“I suppose it doesn’t make much sense, no,” the prince said. He looked thoughtful, and that was almost as unsettling as him depressed.
“We can work that out, later, though. For now, we should go find someone to tell about all this. Is the constabulary open this late at night? It would have to be, I would think.” Lawrence made to straighten up. The prince’s hand snaked out and caught his sleeve with practiced ease.

“Hold on,” the prince said. “What happens after we get the police?”

Ess radiated sarcasm. *Other than an international incident?*

Lawrence considered the question more along the lines of what he thought the prince was asking. “I suppose they’ll ask us quite a few questions and keep us somewhere safe while they alert some people,” he said. “The highest Viderian authorities who weren’t here tonight. Or they’ll keep you somewhere safe and I’ll go in a holding cell for a few days, but they’ll probably make sure everyone here is comfortable until they figure things out either way. Highness?”

“Hm?”

“I’m sitting down again. You can let go of me.”

“Oh.” The prince released him. “So you’re saying we’ll be detained on the spot?”

“Not *detained,*” Lawrence said, “probably not *detained,* but they’re not likely to let us go before they’re ready, and you’re in the most danger of all, so they’ll want to keep you under close watch.” The more Lawrence talked about the possibility, the more he liked it. The prince would be securely packed out of the way of any opportunistic poisoned darts for the time being. Lawrence and Ess would, too, to a lesser extent. It wasn’t ideal, especially if the investigators found some telltale ladle or something linking Lawrence to the situation, but it was much better than any of the other plans he had thought of so far. He didn’t think he was likely to be found out before the royal magicians were brought out of their sleep, anyway. They were supposed to be
the best at tracking magical mishaps, even though they evidently weren’t much good at defending against them these days.

A dismal expression had passed over the prince’s face. “You haven’t said anything about how they’ll fix anything. You just talked about what they’d do with us.”

Shoot! “Well.”

“You don’t think they’ll figure out who’s behind this, do you?”

*He’s observant when he’s miserable, isn’t he?* Ess sounded impressed.

“We can’t go,” the prince said. “No one else is going to get to the bottom of this. You know a little about magic, don’t you?”

“A little,” Lawrence said, “really, only a small bit, you could fit it on the head of a pin—”

The prince talked on. “—we’ll have to go get our things packed, we can’t set out looking like this and expect no one to see us—”

“—honestly, all of it’s word of mouth and I only heard a few things while I was in school—”

“—ask around, see if anyone knows about any famous witches in the underground—”

“—can barely tell an illusion from a mirage—”

“—sure to be someone who can point us in the right direction—”

*Oh, not this again,* Ess said wearily.

“—your highness, please listen—”

“—and we can sneak out of the city if we have to, I know a back road—”

“—your highness—”

“—don’t need to worry about supplies, I can get us some money—”
“Alexander, shut up!”

The prince shut up out of shock. Lawrence had never out-talked someone before, so he was brought up short by the ringing silence. He rallied before the last few words out of his mouth could replay themselves over and over in his head. “Your highness,” he said, as if that would somehow take it back. “You’re assuming a few things here that really oughtn’t be assumed.”

The prince continued to gawk at him. Lawrence might as well have just told him that fairies weren’t real.

“That I’ll go with you, for one,” Lawrence pressed on. “And that you’ll be able to walk around without being recognized, which is, frankly, unrealistic. Your face is everywhere in the castle and isn’t difficult to find outside it.”

“We can work out some disguise,” the prince began.

“There’s no ‘we,’” Lawrence said, and body-slammed all the puppies in the world in one fell swoop. “I can’t help you. I’ll be accused of abduction when we’re found, no matter what you say, and then I’ll be the primary suspect for all this.” He waved his hand at the lady with the rake in her hair below, who had turned over in her sleep and tumbled out of the bush and wasn’t quite illustrating his point. He moved on, standing. “I’m very sorry, but if we’re not going to the police, then you’re on your own.”

Lawrence expected more tears after that, or possibly the reminder that he was in no position to refuse a member of the royal family anything. He expected to be yanked off to participate in a harebrained and likely short-lived adventure no matter what his protests were. He expected to be given no choice in the matter because it had become abundantly clear that choices were not a thing afforded Lawrence Caligny.
He did not expect the prince, timid as a mouse, to take one of Lawrence’s hands in both of his, one gloved and one bare. He didn’t expect him to ask: “Please?”

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Word spread quickly in the capital. By the time they had collected what they needed in a couple suitcases—

(“What about a map of the world?” “No, your highness.” “A spyglass?” “No, your highness.” “I have an antique flintlock in here somewhere.” “No, your highness. Hold still.”)

—and crept out one of the back gates, several people must have noticed no one leaving the castle and alerted everyone else. The main gate flooded with police and curious townsfolk. The hubbub had reached the insides of the castle just as they left it.

The prince had agreed that leaving the city was their first priority once Lawrence convinced him that a good witch didn’t need always to be near the site of their spell. It wasn’t a lie, precisely, but it skimmed close to it. His mother and her coven were never foolish enough to stretch themselves so far that they tried any potent magic more than a hundred feet away. It was enough to keep the prince content, however, and this was sufficient reason for Lawrence to provide the prince with half-baked answers whenever he required reassurance.

He was a little proud of the job he’d done on the prince. Finding him some that didn’t dazzle the street had been half the battle, but a little soot and water from the kitchens had rendered the gold hair an unremarkable brown. A little more took the shine off his peachy skin and the prince had taken the initiative to work some under his nails in a stroke of inspiration. The strut in his walk was easy enough to train out of him when Lawrence told him to slouch a bit and

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unsquare his shoulders. Unless someone put him under close scrutiny, he could’ve been any working-class twenty-something out for a night on the town.

If anything, Lawrence stood out more. Ess was curled around his shoulders in her typical imitation of a living stole. She attracted some second glances in the street, but she was warm, so Lawrence made no move to extract her. She was also able to scan the streets more openly than the other two.

*Four o’clock*, she said. *Couple of nightsticks coming out of a coffee shop.*

Lawrence tapped the prince on the elbow and tilted his head. The prince took the hint and they made a right turn into another street. A couple more turns brought them back on course. One of Lawrence’s conditions had been that the prince had to accept his every order as holy gospel, because there was no surer way for them to avoid attention. The prince had readily agreed despite, Lawrence was pretty sure, having no idea just how practiced Lawrence was at keeping himself out of sight.

It was no trial tonight, though. Harvest celebrations brought all kinds of people into town. They passed a gathering around a sword-eater, a woman spinning flaming batons and catching them with the care she would give making her breakfast, and a scrawny man whose only trick appeared to be holding out a fraying top hat to the crowd. He proffered the hat to Lawrence. Lawrence put in a coin and received an uneven smile in return.

“Is it like this every year?” the prince whispered as they moved on. “I’ve never been in the city itself post-equinox.”

“More or less,” Lawrence said, “but sometimes different troupes come in. It’s a good time to earn some money for the winter. Come to think of it.” He guided the prince to a dark
alcove between shops where there was a gap in the crowd. “Where did you put the money you got?”

The prince hefted his suitcase, as predicted.

“Okay, yes, we’ll need to fix that. Take it out, please—no, the whole sack, not each individual piece.”

The little satchel containing their war funds was far heavier than was practical, but this wasn’t the place to argue about it. Lawrence brought out another pouch from his own case, a flat one with a buckled strap. It had remained nestled in his luggage ever since he got to the castle and he’d only taken it from his room as an afterthought. Now he emptied as much of the satchel as he could into it and stuffed the rest with a couple handkerchiefs to mute the jingling. The remainder went back into the prince’s suitcase. Lawrence slid the pouch on between shirt and undershirt and fastened it there. He dropped the shirt back over it, loose enough to leave no odd bulk sticking from his side.

“There,” he said. “We get a lot of pickpockets this time of year, it’s really safer to keep it hidden. Some will steal just about anything.” The prince was giving him another odd look like the one he’d given when Lawrence had gone on a tirade in the princess’s room. “Is something the matter?”

The prince started. “What? Ah, no, sorry, let’s just. Shall we keep on?” He strode off, back en route. Lawrence bit back a reminder to slouch.

_Odd duck, isn’t he?_ Ess said. _Wish we’d gotten stuck with his sister._

“I wonder why we didn’t?” Lawrence murmured, jogging around a couple people to catch up.
Ess was quiet until he’d fallen into step with the prince again. *I think it was his hair. The potion didn’t get us, obviously, because we made it, but I think it took his hair as a signal to leave him alone and get everyone else. You must have mucked up the potion somewhere along the way. Probably because of the cloud."

“Fantastic.”

“Sorry?” said the prince.

“Oh, nothing.”

*Nine o’clock,* Ess said, sharp enough to make Lawrence’s feet stutter. *Don’t look, they’ve seen you. Just get out.*

Lawrence hit a knuckle against the prince’s arm again, making him jump, and kept his eyes ahead when the prince looked down. He sped up instead. After a moment, the prince did the same.

“Excuse me! Hey! You!”

Lawrence had the sense not to run when someone called out “hey, you,” but he neglected to factor in his companion’s failure to ever learn the difference between “running” and “getting away.” The prince seized his hand and bolted.

It was not a tremendously efficient bolt. A few people filtered out of their way, but others swore or, in one or two cases, tried to trip them up, a treatment Lawrence was reasonably sure their pursuers were not receiving. He yanked back on his arm. He heard a crack from his shoulder, and for a moment he thought he had dislocated it, but then the prince was following him down an alley. They came out the other end, clearing a pile of boxes someone had left out,
and tried to run in opposite directions. The prince had tried to go in the same direction they had been headed before.

“No, this way,” Lawrence hissed, wondering if his arm would ever be the same because ow, and the prince reluctantly spun on his heel. They sprinted to another alley along the same line of buildings, and Lawrence tugged the prince into it. They slowed to a halt.

The prince was bemused. “Shouldn’t we keep going?”

Please, said Ess, wrinkling her nose. The alley smelled of stray dogs.

“Your—Al—be quiet.” Lawrence looked down at Ess. She leapt off his shoulder and sauntered off outside the alley. She returned with a meow.

Coast’ll be clear in a minute. Keep Blondie from running off and we should be fine.

Lawrence exhaled. “We’re fine, they’re going. It’s easier to hide than keep running, you see.”

The prince was staring at Ess, impressed. “You got that from her? She’s smarter than I thought.”

Same to you, buddy. But Ess allowed him to scratch under her chin before jumping back onto her perch. She arranged herself. Better find a safer way to get out. They must’ve figured out Princeling isn’t with the rest.

“I don’t think we have a very good chance on foot,” Lawrence translated. “We’ll need to think of something else. Do you know any other routes?”

The prince started to rub his hair before he remembered the soot. He lowered his hand. “My expertise lies in sneaking out of the castle. Sneaking out of a city’s a bit beyond me, to be honest.”
Lawrence pulled at his sleeve thoughtfully. The river boats would be too hard to stow away on, so that left any carriages or wagons that would let them hitch a ride. Money was clearly no object, but was there anyone Lawrence knew who would take it and actually keep quiet? So few people seemed to value discretion, certainly no one he’d met on his castle errands, but that was the kind of person he needed.

He thought of jars. He stopped fussing.

“I have an idea,” Lawrence said. “There’s this old friend of mine, sort of.” His gaze traveled down to Ess, who stared at him blankly for a full five seconds. It hit her.

_No, she said instantly. No way. Not a chance. That’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard. Go on your own. I refuse. We’re not going. Lawrence? We are not going, do you hear? I’m not going._

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Newt’s Vend, portable version, had set up shop a few hundred feet from its usual location, where there was more heavy traffic down Artisan’s Way. There were no actual wares on the little makeshift stall but a fair number of people still stopped by at the sight of the sign: Components! Panaceas! Cheap!! Discreet!!! Most of them moved on again immediately, but those who did passed some money over the table before going on their way as if nothing had happened. Newt smoothed his tablecloth as Lawrence approached and spread his hands in an expression of sincere delight. “Landon! I didn’t know you were allowed to leave the dorms at night. How are you? Where’s your cat? I almost didn’t recognize you without her.”

“Ess is resting,” Lawrence said. He leaned on the stall. “Mr. Newt, I have another transaction I’ve come to propose.”
Newt surveyed him over the cracked glasses. “Not beating around the bush today, are we? Fire away, my boy. I’m sure we can come to an agreement.”

Lawrence took a deep breath. “I know you have a carriage for smuggling, sir.”

Newt drew himself up to full height, which was not tremendously impressive even to Lawrence. “I say, Leroy, that’s really not on—”

“I’m not trying to blackmail you,” Lawrence said in his most earnest manner. “Please, Mr. Newt, you’ve known me for four years. Do you think I could ever do such a thing?”

“Well.” Newt deflated. “Of course not. You’re an upstanding young lad. All apologies. We’ve just got a bit of an unsavory crowd out here tonight, it’s got my hackles raised, that’s all. What were you saying?”

There was no point in saying that Newt was not one to be pointing any fingers when it came to unsavory. “I need to borrow it. Not for long, just a couple days, perhaps three before I send it back. It’s an emergency, and I’m not allowed to talk about it, but I can pay you.”

“Steady on, there, son, steady on. What’s this about an emergency?”

“The one I’m not allowed to talk about?”

“Ah.” Newt rubbed his chin. “Complicates things a mite. Seems to be quite a conundrum you’ve worked yourself into there, my boy.”

“Sir,” Lawrence said with feeling, “you don’t know the half of it.”

Newt nodded. “I think we can work out some arrangement that’ll suit us both. What’s this about pay?”

Lawrence drew his pouch out from under his shirt. “I can spare a hundred periats for you.”
“Ah, weeeell.” The wheedling tone had entered into Newt’s voice at the sight of the pouch, the man tipping his head from side to side. “It’s a rough business, what I’m in, and it’s a mighty fine cart I’m lending ya under awful short notice—”

“One hundred periats, Mr. Newt,” Lawrence said, putting them down on the stall counter. “It’s all I can give. If that doesn’t seem reasonable to you, then I won’t waste any more of your time.”

Newt eyed the coins. “Twist my arm, eh? A hundred and five, then, and we’ll say no more about it.” Once the money had been counted and added into Newt’s accounts, consisting of a single box he kept under the counter, he went on. “The cart and her mistresses are in the stable by old Grumman’s shop, you know the place? I can’t leave when business is, ah.” He waggled a hand at the pedestrians all around them. “But tell Grumman his friend Greg sent ya and he’ll set you up with all the bells and whistles. Tell him it’s a square trade for the weasel lungs, and send his wife my fondest regards while you’re at it. Sound fair?”

“Yes. Thank you, Mr. Newt.” Lawrence wrapped the pack, considerably lighter, back around his midsection. “I do appreciate all of this.”

“Never let it be said that Newt doesn’t look out for his friends,” Newt said. “Just leave the cart at any of the inns in the area and it’ll find its way back here. You’ll put it in a good word for me with your mother, won’t you?”

“Mr. Newt, I never stop.”

Newt waved him away, beaming, to meet with the next customer who had been hovering quietly out of sight. Mission accomplished, Lawrence picked his way back up Artisan’s Way. He would’ve liked to have stopped and look at some of the wares people were crying on another day.
People always brought foreign candy, glassworks spun from sugar, and all manner of spices during Harvest. Sometimes he would get a discount, too, because he was polite and everyone assumed he was still thirteen. No one had ever said being short didn’t have its advantages.

Having a tall companion had its perks as well. Lawrence found the prince idling a head above everyone else at one of the sugar glasswork displays, Ess sitting atop the suitcases at his side. He’d been forbidden from buying anything, even the half-periat candied apples on a stick, so he’d adopted a certain haunted expression by the time Lawrence caught his eye. The prince marched over obediently, but he said in something akin to a whine, “They have little unicorns.”

“Yes,” Lawrence said. “Those are for the children, not the bored adults. Anyway, I spoke with my friend and he says he can lend us a hand.”

_Human hand or monkey?_ Ess asked. She’d relaxed once Lawrence ordered her to keep an eye on the prince, but she still nosed around Lawrence’s leg as if to make certain all of him was there.

“Great,” the prince said. “When do we set out?”

“Right now. Come with me, please. And I may need a moment to converse with the man keeping the carriage, so I’ll need you to stay in the background for that. Don’t talk to anyone, don’t accept anything from strangers, and don’t accept anything from anyone you know, come to think of it. Can you handle that?”

“Law, please.” The prince grabbed their suitcases. “You don’t have to worry. I will be on my best behavior.”

His best behavior consisted of engaging in a conversation with one of the stable boys about the merits of the mares lining the stable while Lawrence tried to tell Grumman that the
thanks for the weasel lungs could go all to Newt and he really couldn’t say when the next shipment would come in. But it could have been worse. Two hours later, their carriage trundled out of the city, trailing a faint smell of earwigs behind them.
Chapter 11

The last time Lawrence had left the capital had been almost a year ago. His mother’s thirty-sixth had been birthday that year and she’d insisted he return over the summer so she could see him in person for the first time since he had left for school. Within an hour, the return had devolved into a passive-aggressive competition—dead bats hung out to dry in front of his window, tactful notes left in the bathroom expressing concern over the amount of water she was using, a bucketful of lizards in his room Ess chased around so much that she left scratch marks all over the floor—from which no one could emerge the victor. They declared a truce on the birthday itself when Lawrence rose early to make her favorite pancakes, and they had kept the fragile peace going ever since. They had silently agreed he did not need to return after that, so Lawrence had never gotten the opportunity to become overly acquainted with the towns and hamlets dotting the area around the capital. Where he and the prince could go now was therefore a thorny question. All the prince’s suggestions were summarily rejected on the grounds that he was only familiar with the busy cities where they were much more likely to be found. Lawrence had vague but pleasant memories of Bracksburg, a cozy little town infested with heather about twenty miles southwest, so that was where they went first.

As the sun was lifting and touching rosy at the edges of their vision, one look at the inn was enough to tell that there was no chance of getting a room. The early merchants had filled them all days ago in anticipation of the celebrations, and now the latecomers were renting out barns wherever they could find them. The prince, who had commandeered the vehicle because he was the most familiar with horses, wheeled the cart back out of town into the shade of a gathering of trees. They gave the horses some water and a feedbag each over their noses as
Grumman had instructed and collapsed, wordless, in the back of the cart, under the cover of some starchy cloth that smelled highly suspect. Even Ess did not have enough time to protest the makeshift quarters before the three of them were fast asleep.

Lawrence was the first to wake, sore and bleary. The sun was now so low that it cut across the branches to the left of the cart and landed on his eyes. He blocked the offending ray with a hand until he had woken enough to lift his shoulder from the cart and remember where they were. The horses, when he glanced at them, seemed content to flick their tails at the head of the cart. Lawrence rolled onto his back and stared at the light-dappled leaves above his head for a few minutes until he felt ready to get up.

The prince was disgustingly easy to wake, full of bounding energy and misaimed helpfulness. He’d roughed it on hunting trips before, he explained, and he’d always been a morning person (of course he had—why would Lawrence have thought any differently?). It would be no trouble for him to travel at night and sleep during the day, a plan Lawrence had not intended to carry out until their bodies had realized they’d been awake for over twenty-four hours, but one that worked out fairly well. Lawrence only stymied the prince’s enthusiasm by directing him back to the reins and telling him it was time for them to drop off the horses.

The inn’s business had not curtailed overnight, but the innkeeper nodded knowingly at the drop of Newt’s name (“Thank you, ma’am—no, I really couldn’t say when the next shipment of weasel lungs is likely to come in—no, I’m just a friend—”) and took the cart off their hands. Free as the proverbial bird, they wandered Bracksburg at dusk for some clue as to what to do next. They spoke at length on the subject of witchcraft as Lawrence pretended to know it, involving a lot of abstract explanations of precisely what divination was not; what might be
happening back at the castle that very moment; the debatable virtues of being allowed to walk around a town without any retainers schooling your every movement. Lawrence had to remind the prince twice not to eat any berries off the heather.

“I was just looking,” the prince said the second time. “It is a cozy little place, though, you were right. Still, I’m not seeing a lot of places to eat. I don’t mean to complain,” he added at the speed of light. “Especially since you haven’t brought it up. I know we have to conserve our funds.”

“Oh, uh.” Truthfully, for once in his life, Lawrence hadn’t thought about food, although it explained why Ess had disappeared as she did whenever she needed to fend for herself. They’d drunk some water from the horses’ spare supply when they woke up, but at this point they were separated from the ball’s banquet by almost a full day. Had the prince ever gone hungry before? Lawrence felt slightly ashamed of himself. “No, that’s a good idea. I know a bakery around here, would that be okay?”

The prince assured him a bakery was perfectly fine, excellent, even, and continued to assure him most of the way there. The bakery in question had a little sign hanging above the street with a bread basket painted on it by some clumsy but enterprising hand. Little black squiggles indicated steam rising from a baguette, a cross-hatched bun, and what could only have been a croissant, although Lawrence had to squint to be sure. The windows were much more enticing and reminded Lawrence why he’d considered the bakery at all, showcasing two dozen different breads that must have been freshly baked, despite the time and effort that keeping them stocked must have taken. The prince thought the little bell that rang when they opened the door was delightfully rustic.
Some half-remembered terror kicked in at the sight of the man yelling into the back from his vigil at the counter. Grey had invaded the hair at his temples and advanced in its steady march over the whole of his scalp since the last Lawrence had seen him, and his neck had more veins standing out from it than theoretically possible. He whirled on the door at the sounds of its jingle.

“Hello!” he shouted. “One moment, please!” He whirled again. “GIRL, if those LOATHSOME ABCESES OF GOOD TASTE you call doughnuts ain’t on the rack within THREE LOUSY MINUTES, you can believe your GUTS FOR GARTERS won’t even be the BEGINNING of the NEW AND COLORFUL WAYS I will use to REARRANGE YOUR INSIDES.”

A voice struck back, muffled by the walls. “I’m powdering them right now, you horse’s ass, just back off before you get a stroke or someone decides to give you one themselves!”

“WATCH YOUR GODDAMN LANGUAGE, GIRL! We’ve got customers!”

“Maybe we should come back,” the prince said to Lawrence. He had to bend over a ways to reach his ear. “At a better time?”

“No,” Lawrence said, “this is actually pretty good for this place.”

“Gentlemen!” They snapped to attention at the baker’s voice. “Dreadful sorry, my lovely daughter’s bein’ a bit of a PAIN IN THE NECK.” This over his shoulder. “At the moment, as y’can see. Can I interest you in anythin’ of a flaky persuasion? Got some new jelly rolls we’re tryin’ out that were her idea, ain’t much for ‘em meself but I’m sure she’d LOVE for you to PROVE ME WRONG.”
“God!” The door to the back banged open. “You can’t let ONE THING go, not one MEASLY—”

Lawrence couldn’t stop himself. “Regina?”

Regina stopped in her tracks and almost spilled her tray of doughnuts all over her floury apron. She was the same as she had been at school, except she’d cut her hair out of its braid. She still had arms that could snap a person in half. “Lawrence?”

Then she looked him over. “Did you get even tinier?”

“GIRL, if you think knowing a customer is ANY EXCUSE FOR RUDENESS AT ALL—”

“I got it,” Regina snapped at her father. She slammed down the tray of doughnuts. One bounced and went rolling across the room. “Here, do it yourself if I’m gonna screw it up so bad. No, not listening!” She snatched up a paper bag, under her father’s tirade of “I OUGHTA”s and “YOU GOT THE NERVE,” to stuff it with jelly rolls and a loaf of something that smelled spicy. “I’ll settle the accounts later,” she said to Lawrence. “Come on.”

He followed her into the back room, prince floating after them in a mixture of bafflement and good humor. “We don’t want to intrude,” Lawrence said. He was trying to go over any of their conversations in his head that might have implied her father’s bakery was the one in Bracksburg. She’d never had to leave very early for the holidays compared to some people, it was true, and she had mentioned how loud her father was, but Lawrence had always thought she was exaggerating.
“You kidding?” Regina led them up some clunky stairs to her family’s living space. Some armchairs and a couch circled a coffee table. “You’re the first face I’ve seen in months that might not be totally intolerable to talk to. Don’t know your friend, though.”

“Uh, Alex,” Lawrence said distractedly. “His name’s Alex, I, er, I met him at work.”

“Pleasure,” the prince said.

She shook his proffered hand. “Charmed. Have a seat.”

“I’ve been here before, you know,” Lawrence said. “I didn’t realize this was what you meant when you talked about home.”

Regina barked a laugh. “Yeah, for good reason. Never gave out too many details. This place is an affront to the map. You two hungry?”

“Starved,” the prince said mournfully. Regina passed them a jelly roll each and broke off a piece of the loaf for herself. Lawrence bit into his roll. He tasted something sweet and warm, no burned sugar or fruit.

“You fixed the recipe,” he said in surprise around his mouthful.

“Haven’t been completely idle,” she said, sitting the bag on the table. “Nor you. Is that actual muscle I see?”

Lawrence swallowed. “It’s only from washing dishes and carrying things. I haven’t been cooking very much.” He held up the hand from which his cook’s callus had faded as proof.

“Apprenticeship, and such.”

She made a sympathetic cluck with her tongue. “That’s rough. How’d you get away? I’d ask if they fired you, but, well, you’re you.”
One thing he and the prince had managed to accomplish in the two hours of walking around town was the construction of a good story for anyone who asked. The prince had wanted to be a gardener’s assistant, but Lawrence had flatly told him that his hands were nothing like a gardener’s hands, soot or no soot, so he settled for being a footman. The two of them had met over dinner at the servants’ table one night and become friends afterwards. They’d snuck out, at the prince’s cajoling, on the night of the ball to take a look around the Harvest celebrations, an affair the prince had never seen before because he was from the east, and had heard about a massive sleeping spell up at the castle before they returned. Now they had no clue where to go. The prince was the one who told all, in between jelly rolls and prodigious compliments thereof. Regina half-listened at first, but by the end he had her full attention.

“Wow. Didn’t hear about the castle,” she said once he had concluded. “Good job you two weren’t around. Good on you, too, Alex. Didn’t know Lawrence had a rebellious bone in his body.”

“You hadn’t heard?” Lawrence asked. It had been a day, and the only thing that traveled as fast as news within the capital was news just outside it.

“Nah, well, not something you’d want to let get out, is it?” Regina said as if it was obvious. She cracked her knuckles, an old habit she fell into when she was thinking. “Whole royal family out of commission, guests and guards included. Bad enough on its own, but it’s the witches’ fault, too? Doesn’t look good. Actually, I bet it’d have the entire country in a panic if word got leaked.” She popped her last finger. “Must be running themselves ragged to keep things quiet over there, but no chance that’ll last. I wonder how long ‘til everyone finds out?”

“Oh,” the prince said, but Regina rolled her eyes when he started to say something else.
“Easy. I don’t got anyone to tell. You won’t get in any trouble ‘cause of me. You two’re nuts to run, I will say, but I get not wanting to go back and then realizing it’s too late for you to go in any case. Without looking real suspicious, anyway.”

“Exactly,” Lawrence said, filing that logic away for his own use. He wanted to thank her for understanding in her own way, and for the food, but Regina had always hated being thanked.

“We were wondering if we could find out anything about witches,” the prince said, and all Lawrence’s goodwill melted into the desire to step on his foot and grind in the heel.

“Lawrence says he doesn’t know much more than I do, and I’m sorry to say I don’t know anything at all.”

If Regina thought this was an odd subject of research, she didn’t show it. She ripped off another piece of bread as she thought. “Well, they’re not really so bad as everyone makes them out to be. Not all of ‘em, anyway.”

She paused at their joint stares. “What? It’s true.”

“Do you mean to say you’ve met one?” the prince asked.

“Two, as a matter of fact. They’re a decent sort, an old lady and another one not much older than you. Pass through town every once in a while. But I’m not telling you any more if you’re gonna harass them.”

“Harass?” Lawrence objected at the same time the prince said, “But they’re witches!”

“My point exactly,” Regina said. “Lawrence, I know you’d look at a man who stabbed you in the eye and thank him for his trouble, but your pal looks like he’s got some agenda going on here. No,” she overrode them as they both sputtered again. “I don’t care how good your
intentions are or how evil everyone knows witches are. These ones are a little weird, but evil
they ain’t, and they’ve never given me any trouble, got me? Don’t push it.”

The prince was prepared to push it, but now Lawrence stepped on his foot in time. “We
understand. Let’s talk about something else. Have you heard what anyone else from school is
doing these days?”

Regina proved to have heard quite a bit—plenty of people who passed through
Bracksburg had information they were happy to share in exchange for some bread. Benjamin, the
real Benjamin, had been hired to build a bridge up north, although it sounded like he was more
involved in the manual labor than the overseeing. Regina also knew the precise locations of
Emmanuel, Peter, Katherine, and Miguel, as well as their occupations as of the past two weeks.
She insisted it wasn’t a big deal to know this much; she’d kept in touch with Katherine and
Miguel and they had their own information networks which they were happy to share the fruit of.
Lawrence thought Tyrone would have taken notes, if not broken down and asked Regina to
marry him. Gossip was an art and Regina had never realized her talent.

Regina was midway through detailing Emmanuel’s exploits, after he had failed the final
exam and chosen to go mountain-climbing for a year, when the window behind the prince rattled.
He unlatched it, allowing Ess to slither in and plop onto Lawrence’s lap with a long sulky meow.
Something white dangled from her whisker. Lawrence extracted it with two fingers and dropped
it back out the window.

“You’ve still got Ess?” Regina asked. “I wasn’t sure the castle would let you keep her.”

“Why is that her name?” the prince asked, intrigued. “Let—my sister didn’t understand it
either. I’ve never heard of anyone naming their pet after a letter before.”

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Show you who’s a pet, Ess said. I can’t believe I took an hour to find you and here you are chatting away and eating. Haven’t you figured out some way to throw the idiot off the trail yet?

Lawrence tweaked her ear very gently. “It was sort of an argument between my mother and me. She wanted to name her something grand and absurd, like Sekhmet.”

Regina looked baffled, but the prince said, “The old heathen cat god?”

“Yes. My mother’s a little odd about names.” It had been a huge production when he turned thirteen. Lawrence hadn’t even wanted a familiar, just a cat to look after and play with. Mallory had neglected to consider this possibility. It was to be their first fight after a long history of concessions and passive appeasement on his part. Lawrence had won the fight in the end, which he suspected was mostly because his mother hadn’t known how to handle the sudden rebellion. “I really just wanted something ordinary, so I thought I’d name her Sock, because of this.” He held up her single white paw for inspection. She twisted around to stare up at him disdainfully and pulled her paw from his grasp.

Close call there, too. Imagine Sock the familiar. Sekhmet would have been perfectly fine, you know. Regal.

“Oh, I get it,” Regina said. “So it’s the first letter of both.”

“Yes,” Lawrence said, allowing Ess to squirm away and curl up on the arm of the sofa, “but you spell it like sounding it out. E-s-s. You see?”

“Mm. I always wanted a dog,” the prince said wistfully. He picked the crumbs of the last jellyroll from his hands. “But my sister said I’d forget to take care of it and someone else would
have to and then it wouldn’t be my dog. I call that a bit unfair, but she usually knows what she’s talking about.”

Regina shook her head. “Never saw the appeal, myself. A lot of work for some dumb animal that’s never going to be any use to you.”

_Funny, Ess said, that’s exactly how I feel._

Lawrence scratched behind her ear meaningfully as Regina glanced at her watch. “Nuts. We’ve been talking near two hours and I still don’t know where you two are going to sleep tonight. Hang tight, I can probably clear out a space in the storeroom before midnight. We’ve got a couple spare mattresses in the attic you’ll need to help me dig out.”

“Oh, no—”

“We really couldn’t, I mean really—”

“Shut up,” she said, and they shut up. “Door to the attic’s at the end of the hall there. The ladder folds out, so watch your head. Just bring the mattresses downstairs and I’ll try to have a spot for you by then. You can set back out tomorrow night. Go on, stop gawking.”

***

By the end of their preparations, they had a comfortable nest in the form of two crowded beds amongst a mountain of flour sacks. Regina had provided them with one of the bakery’s safety lanterns, glass around the flame so it didn’t blow anything up and equipped with a little wheel on the side to snuff the wick. The prince only stopped exclaiming over the coziness of the whole arrangement when Lawrence kindly told him that he would take off the safety glass and set one of the sacks ablaze if he heard the word “quaint” one more time. As it was, the prince was happy enough to huddle down amidst a sea of quilts smelling like mothballs, asking
Lawrence if he knew any good ghost stories. He did not, so the prince supplied his own. He tripped up over the setup of most of them and the ending punch lines made no sense as a result, at which point the prince would have to amend an earlier part of the tale with some key detail he’d forgotten to include.

The overall effect was bizarrely soothing. Lawrence didn’t know when he fell asleep, only that one moment the prince was saying that okay, no, the story about the goblin and the bridge troll was a really good one, he promised, and the next moment Ess was sitting on his stomach with a paw on his nose. Sunlight seeped in the cramped space from the gap under the door. Lawrence pushed off the elbow that had fallen on his shoulder during the night.

*I’m bored,* Ess informed him. *Get us something to eat.*

Zero trickery was required to get out of the storeroom without waking the prince, who powered through his requisite sleeping hours with a single-mindedness that allowed him to spring into action when they were over. Regina and her father were nowhere to be found on the first floor, so Lawrence helped himself to some more bread and a saucer of milk for Ess taken from the kitchen next to the ovens.

“How much would that be, do you think?” he asked her, placing the saucer on the floor.

“Two periats? Three?”

*Who cares?* She set to lapping. He decided on three, to be safe, and left them on the shelf.

The back of the bakery was nice. Motes of flour kicked themselves up wherever you walked, in spite of a chalky broom leaning against an oven meant to discourage them, and the light from the windows highlighted the flour like a sprinkling of clean dust. The stuff was everywhere, collecting in the gutters of the flagstone flooring, the pockmarks in the wooden
shelves, little piles swept into the corners. It was a place lived in and cared for only by the people who lived in it. For a moment, Lawrence felt homesick again.

“Ess?” he said. “I think it’s time we held a war conference.”

Okay. Go.

“Not in here. Let’s go outside, to be safe.”

But I’m not done yet.

“Ess.”

She groaned and licked the milk from her whiskers, longsuffering. Fine. At least bring the saucer.

The sun had been up a while already, though at the moment an expanse of clouds had overtaken it. A clearing interrupted the heather not far beyond the back step of the bakery, one with an old wrought iron bench that had seen better days. It was big enough for Lawrence to sit and Ess to drink off the precariously balanced dish, even if, as Ess commented, it lacked much gravitas for a war conference. Lawrence let her finish her meal and picked at his own before he spoke. “I think we’re in a lot of trouble.”

Just now we’re in a lot of trouble?

“No, I mean. Different trouble. The prince hasn’t lost interest in the witch question yet.”

It’s been two days and his whole family got tranquilized. Even his attention span isn’t that bad. She licked up the rest and permitted Lawrence to move the saucer to safer ground.

You’re the one who decided we’d go with him. He wasn’t gonna force us.

Lawrence did not know how to articulate that this was exactly why he’d felt the need to go along. A command would have made things simpler, something concrete and overbearing. If
the prince had ordered him, it would have been easy to refuse. On his knees and begging with tears in his eyes was another matter. Besides, few were the people who offered Lawrence options in forging his own destiny. “Well, we did go, so I think we need to seriously consider how we’re going to wake everyone back up.”

*Do we have to?*

“Ess!”

*Well, think about it. She sounded genuinely reasonable. We’d be waking Princeling’s friends and family, hurrah, hurrah, but we’re also waking Maria and her goons. And that Brunswick, if he is the one in charge of the whole plot like you seem to think. And they’ll know it’s on us.*

“Okay, fair point.” Lawrence gnawed on that for a moment. “Do you mean you think Brunswick isn’t in charge?”

Ess leapt onto the back of the bench. *I dunno. It’s too easy, I guess. He’s involved somehow, sure, but come on, the dude flipped out at the smallest things. Not the mark of a master assassin.*

“No. None of them is really cut out for it, are they?” By her own admission, Maria had been caught somehow through an amateur mistake, and she seemed the most competent of the lot. It was something of a miracle the three of them had even met the bar for getting into the castle, although Brunswick’s involvement would explain that. Still, how had they even gotten by without notice for as long as they had? The princess had been a little cool to Brunswick at the foot of the tower, certainly, but she hadn’t had him locked in irons at all, and even though
Lawrence had only spoken to her a handful of times, he thought she might have been the most intelligent person he had ever met.

“Ess,” he said suddenly. “I don’t think anyone thought they were a threat.”

Ess snorted. *You go all quiet for like three minutes and that’s the most you have to say? Well done, detective, we’ll send you your medal in the mail.*

“No, think about it,” he insisted. “About what it means. Maria was charged with attempted treason and murder, but she just went to that ridiculous dungeon. The princess knew something was wrong with Brunswick, but she didn’t do anything, and she’s not really likely to put her brother in any danger even under slight odds, is she? Then Amal and Clark were running around, and I don’t know about Amal, but you can’t tell me no one thought Clark was behaving strangely.”

*So, what? It’s a castle staffed with idiots. Big surprise.*

The trouble with Ess, outside of her general stubbornness on the subject of familiars and witchcraft, was that she was dismissive of anyone to whom she hadn’t given her personal seal of approval, and even more dismissive to anything that might prove her wrong on any subject. Dismissiveness was precisely what let Lawrence edge around most of the conflict in his life, which Ess had borne witness to time and again, but the moral had never occurred to her. He plucked her off her perch to a startled meow and brought her face-to-face with him.

“They’re not all idiots,” he said. “Half of them help run the country, and you’ve got to have some wits to do that without driving it into the ground. They must have noticed, so why didn’t they do anything?”
Then it’s like you said. She wriggled out of his hands. They weren’t a threat. Why do anything? This is really basic, Lawrence, I don’t see why you’re making all this fuss.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. He could have yelled, but it would’ve done no good. “Think of it this way,” he said, combing through his mind for a way to make her understand. “You’re running a castle. It’s your job to keep certain people alive. A lot of other people have tried to kill them before and you stopped them, but you only need to trip up once. Just once, and all your successes so far mean nothing. If you’re any good at this job, which you must be if they’re all still alive, then you’re hyper-vigilant, right? You can’t afford to trip up that once. It’d be easy to get complacent, but you can’t, right?”

She was eyeing him in a way that made Lawrence think he was going to have to approach this from a different angle, but she said, Sure, I guess.

“So now say you have this stupid gang of magicians,” Lawrence went on, emboldened, “who are trying to prevent you from doing your job. They’re incompetent, but they’ve got magic and they’ve infiltrated the castle somehow, so what do you do? Do you let them run amok until they blow up a tower somewhere?”

No, Ess said, reluctantly. No, I throw them in jail and question them as soon as I can.

A chorus of hallelujahs. “Right! But they didn’t do that, these people who run a country and a castle, even after Maria made that first attempt, so that means they know something we don’t. For some reason, it’s safer to let these magicians do what they want for now, even though it looks like it would go against all logic.”

Okay, I get where you’re coming from, but what’s the reason? What’s safer than throwing a bunch of toddlers with fire somewhere they can’t get to it?
“I don’t know,” Lawrence said, on reflex, but Ess tsked at him.

Come on, you can’t leave me hanging after that. Do the thing you just did with me.

You’re in charge of keeping Princeling alive, but you let these dim-witted assassins run loose and you’re accountable for whatever they do. So how come? You’ve got half a brain in there, so tell me why you do it.

Lawrence thought. He thought of the ridiculous huddled whisper-conferences the apprentice magicians always had. He thought of a royal sorcerer stumbling over his words about a lapse in security. He thought of Tyrone in his perpetual state of good-natured gossip over Maria and her schemes, and he thought of Tyrone’s gossip before Maria. He thought, again, of a sister telling her brother there was nothing to worry about. He thought about the word again.

It happens all the time, they’d said, in a patronizing pat on the head or a shrug at the breakfast table. A lone archer or half-baked plan. It’s nothing serious. It’s nothing to worry about. Look at all these fools we’ve caught over the years. We’ll catch a dozen more by the time of the next succession. Common sense is enough to keep things together.

So when is common sense not enough? When do we decide not to catch them?

When is it something to worry about?

“I think,” Lawrence said, “I’d do it if there was someone else trying to kill him.”
Chapter 12

Wait, Ess said. You think someone twigged about us?

“No,” Lawrence said, still slow and deliberate. “No, I think we would’ve known. Depressing as it is, I think no one ever figured us out.” It really was depressing. Lawrence had snuck off to the dungeons on a regular basis for months. At the very least someone should have had the decency to wonder if he was in cahoots with Maria.

So who? she demanded. Her tail flicked to and fro, never a good sign, but at least her agitation was not pinned on him. Oh, I hate when there are a dozen cooks in the kitchen like this. There, I made a cooking pun. You can have that one for free. She leapt off the bench to pace. All right, so someone else is trying their hand at killing Princeling so we leave the obvious ones be? Explain.

“It’s not too complicated. The obvious ones were obvious to this other assassin, too, and they might have been capitalizing on it somehow. Maybe just as a distraction, but maybe something else. The point is that they puzzled it out somehow so that catching the obvious culprits would work in their favor, so the only option, from our castle security perspective, is not to catch them yet.”

How does it work in their favor, though?

“I don’t know. No, I honestly don’t,” he said, seeing the look on her face. “That one’s too much for me right now. It’s not a bad guess that there’s a third party involved, though, is it?”

Bother. I don’t suppose you’re going to come out with a fourth later on?

“I hope not.” Lawrence rubbed a hand over his eyes. A pair of robins twittered overhead. One pecked at something stuck in the leaves of the tree, withdrew a stick, and flew triumphantly
away. The other fluttered after in short order. “I suppose we can speculate all we want on it, but it’s not going to bring us any closer to figuring out what to do right now. I wish there was someone we could talk to.”

Ess plunked down in front of him. *There is.*

“Hm?”

*We could ask your mother what to do.*

Lawrence peered at her through his fingers. “Ha, ha.” He stood, dusting himself off.

“And, for effect, ha.”

Her ear twitched, miffed. *Really. Who’s to say she doesn’t know what’s been going on in all this political nonsense? You know this sort of thing is right up her alley. Conspiracies and the like.*

“Yes,” he said. A leaf dropped on his head, because the robins had returned to hop around in search of more sticks. He brushed it away. “You’re absolutely right. We’ll go to my mother, tell her I’ve put everyone to sleep except the prince, and she will in no way see this as an opportunity to storm the castle and take it for her own to start a fifty-year reign of terror, the likes of which have not been seen since the ban on witchcraft. I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. We shall set out straight away.”

*I’m only saying a reign of terror might be a good way to shake things up a bit. I’m joking,* she said as he walked away, swishing through the tall grass. She padded after him. *Half joking. If there’s someone you want to talk to about this, another witch is still your best bet. Who else is going to understand?*
“Who, indeed.” Lawrence looked down at Ess. He’d stopped walking. He could feel something sparking in the back of his brain.

She watched him warily. *I hate it whenever you stop what you’re doing like that,* she said. *I never know whether you’ve just had a good idea or a terrible one.*

***

Regina, once she had returned, consented to tell Lawrence the location of her witches after an hour of begging, but only under the condition that “Alex” was not allowed to hear of it. The condition suited Lawrence well, so long as Regina took over chaperone responsibilities, which she said she would accept but also thoroughly abuse. She had set the prince to scrubbing the windows by the time Lawrence slipped away through the back door. Her directions took him to The Inn.

The Inn was not the same as the inn in Bracksburg, dedicated solely instead to being a watering hole for those familiar with the area. The distinction was lost on most passing through town for the first time and, as such, the uppercase Inn saw quite a bit of business from confused travelers who would at that point accept a pint as soon as a warm bed. The lowercase inn had not yet named itself The Tavern in retribution for economic reasons, those reasons being that people who were specifically in search of alcohol were less open to alternative suggestions than those in need of sleep. Needless to say, both establishments hated the other with a vitriol that people in the capital usually reserved for taxes and upstairs neighbors. Regina had explained the details at length so Lawrence would not make the mistake of mentioning the inn on the premises of The Inn, stating that it was grounds for beheading during the competitive times of the year. Lawrence
agreed despite uncertainty as to how anyone would have been able to tell which one he was talking about.

Uppercase Inn had the look of a building that had grown into its role over the years. A second story had been thrown atop a previously thatch roof to suggest the presence of rooms to let. Some cleverer artist than the one responsible for the bakery’s sign had fashioned an emblem over the door that could have been either a bed or a frothing flagon of ale. There was even a blanket hung out to dry on a clothesline visible from the front, a little bleached from time spent out under the sun. Ess remarked, approvingly, that the place felt quite underhanded once you were in on the secret. Lawrence thought that went a long way towards explaining why a pair of witches might have singled the place out. Ess led the way in, past the set of swinging doors, and he did not protest.

The inside had little to recommend it outside an expansive fireplace that swallowed the far wall. Round tables filled most available space, excepting a small stage where a fiddler or a couple jugglers might perform. The bestubbled barman, cleaning a glass with a rag in acknowledgment of the proper pastime of a barman who had nothing else to do, looked up when they came in.

He placed the glass on the bar upside-down and spoke with a voice like a pillowcase full of gravel. “Can I help you, kid?”

Lawrence heard it as you better be running an errand for your mom or dad or you’re about to be intimately acquainted with that door you just came through. That wasn’t such a bad reaction to work with. “My aunt said her friends were staying here for the week,” he said. “I’ve come to give them a message . . . ?”
The barman heaved a sigh and drew up another dirty glass from under the bar. “You’ll want the other place. Common mistake. North end of town.”

“Oh, no, I’m quite sure,” Lawrence said, clasping his hands together. “The two of them said they’d be here, at the south side. My aunt said I wasn’t to get confused.”

The rag’s squeaking halted. “Two of them?”

“Yes, two ladies. One’s still pretty young, the other one is older. That is right, isn’t it?”

Another sigh and this time the rag got slapped onto the counter with the glass. “Son, I’m not saying I know who you’re talking about, but you’ll have to come back later. If we do have anyone staying upstairs—which we don’t, because the other place I mentioned is primed to smack us with a lawsuit so fast it would make your head spin if we give so much as a church mouse a place to stay—they’d be taking their afternoon nap around this time. This nap would be a treasured tradition for these women, one they are unhappy to have interrupted. I, for one, would rather bash one of these bottles against the counter and try to shave with it than go up and interrupt the sleep of these hypothetical friends who, if I haven’t made myself quite explicit enough yet, do not exist. Are we clear?”

Lawrence bit his thumbnail. “I think so.” His gaze trailed toward the stairs that ran over the tiny stage. Ess followed his eyes, flicked the tip of her tail, and then became a yowling blur so fast the barman’s shout of “wait a minute, keep the fleabag out” served only to punctuate her disappearance upstairs. The barman cursed and swung himself over the bar.

“Oh, no, I’m so sorry, really I am,” Lawrence said, but the barman pounded upstairs without a word, and Lawrence followed. Ess was making an admirable racket, screeching and knocking things over that sounded loud but inexpensive. The barman hit the top of the stairs and
twisted his head this way and that. He let out a snarl at the sight of Ess sprawled insolently over a pile of linens that looked to have been knocked off a gurney. Ess meowed and tore down the hall, the barman in hot pursuit.

Lawrence kept his own pursuit lukewarm because there was something about the hall that was putting him off. It wasn’t bare and unfurnished like he’d expected. Lavender curtains had been draped over the window at one end, and a vase sat on an end table in the middle of the hall with flowers in it. As Lawrence trotted closer, he saw the flowers were marigolds. What had his mother’s old books said marigolds were for?

Something creaked open at the end of the hall, and Ess darted out of sight at the same time the barman skidded to a halt. He hastened to straighten himself. “Really sorry to interrupt your nap, misses, I’ll just take the cat and—”

“Oh, hello, Ess,” an absent voice said from the other side of the doorway. “Don’t worry, Matthew, we’d just woken anyway.”

A head poked into the hallway, two long black braids hanging from either side of it and thick, round glasses complementing the effect. Some twigs stuck out from her hair. She looked at Lawrence, or, more accurately, she looked at the space several inches to the left of his head. “Good afternoon, Lawrence. I thought you’d be dropping by soon. Won’t you come in?”

***

Cassandra was seven years older than Lawrence, making her by far the youngest of his mother’s coven and one of his primary playmates as a child. She was willowy, had freckles peppering skin so dark it shone, and tied her hair in place with strips of yew because they were more convenient than ribbons. She had also been clairvoyant from a young age and sometimes
had a tenuous grasp on the physical world as a result. That was what marigolds were for, Lawrence remembered. Good luck and prophecies. Cassandra had a slew of them growing on the side of her house. When he was younger, he hadn’t known why. She could tell you the weather for next week without having gone outside all day. He’d brought this up one day while helping her gather the flowers, and she’d said a drop of talent was nothing without a lake of hard work and left it at that. She said things like that a lot.

He liked Cassandra. He was better friends with her than he was with Vivienne, who was squat and in her eighties and shared a temperament with melted butter. She had liked Ess since she was a kitten, proclaiming cats as an excellent choice for a witch’s first familiar, and was now stroking her back as Ess sat in her lap in a loaf of smugness. Vivienne favored Lawrence with a leathery smile as he sat down on the seat opposite the three of them.

“Landsakes, you’ve grown,” she said, proving that even grandmotherly people you had known since you were born would lie to you. “I haven’t seen you since your mother’s thirty-fifth. How is school?”

“I graduated a few months ago, thank you,” Lawrence said. “My friend told me you two were here, but she didn’t mention your names. You two come down here every year by yourselves?”

“Oh, aye. It gets dreadful dull in West Lingkin sometimes. Lovely in the spring, the summer’s quite nice, and there’s something to be said for a fresh layer of snow on a winter morning, but the wet weeks on the late end of autumn are no fun for anyone.” Vivienne nodded to herself. “And it’s a bit of a chance to get away, you know. Good for the mind. Luckily, we
found an inn without anyone else staying at it, and wouldn’t you guess it, the owner is quite a reasonable man when it comes to witchcraft.”

“Quite reasonable,” Cassandra said, but Lawrence asked, “Get away from what?”

“Lingkin, as I said,” Vivienne said breezily. “Terrible drafty. A vacation gives us chance for a spot of sightseeing, the chance to try new foods, new company—”

Lawrence sat up. “What about my mother?”

“Who said anything about your mother, dear?” Vivienne asked guilelessly.

“No one did. That’s what I find rather odd. You’re a coven of three, but I’ve never heard her mention these trips, and she’s not with you. I thought covens were to go everywhere together?”

Vivienne laughed. “Good gracious, Lawrence,” she said, “we’re not so heartless as to—”

“It’s because Mallory’s insufferable on these trips,” Cassandra said without rancor. She was staring out the window. “She always wants to domineer the entire thing.”

“Cassandra!” Vivienne said, but Cassandra shrugged.

“It’s true. No one else wears the hat or dresses all in black anymore, either. She just wants to make a spectacle and it makes for a lousy vacation when we’re dodging the policemen the entire time, so we told her we were bored of the city. Now we just go to a made-up gathering right around the time when she’s busy harassing the farmers each year. Sorry, Lawrence,” she added to the vicinity of his knee.

Lawrence shook his head even though Ess looked appalled. “I quite understand. It’s difficult to enjoy yourselves when there’s someone who insists on green fireballs to light the way.”
“And won’t fly above cloud cover,” Cassandra agreed. “Or pay for room and board.”

“Or get up before noon.”

“Or go to bed at a reasonable hour.”

“Or leave the frogs alone.”

“Lord, yes, the frogs, deliver us from the frogs.”

*It’s called style, you philistines.* Ess looked from face to face in disbelief. *I can see why you wouldn’t get it, but these two? They’re the real deal! Why are they making fun of it?*

“Well, we’re relieved you understand,” Vivienne said, stifling them. “We didn’t want to hurt Mallory’s feelings by telling her outright, you see. She does so like to be included. You won’t say anything, will you?”

Lawrence smiled. He’d always assumed the coven was just less enthusiastic about tormenting the locals than his mother, but this was the best news he’d heard all year. “Not a word, Aunt Vivi, I promise.” Then, because this was as good an opportunity as he was going to get, “But there is something involving her I came to talk the two of you about. It’s why I’m here, actually. I’m afraid I’ve made some terrible mistakes and I’m at a bit of a loss.”

Vivienne patted the air in front of her reassuringly. “I’m sure you haven’t done anything that bad, my dear.”

“Aunt Vivi, you’re a light in the dark, you truly are, but I think you may change your mind.”

It took a while to tell all. Ess interrupted every other line to remind him of some detail she thought was important, some of which he related and others which he judiciously excluded. Vivienne was interested primarily in his potion-making process and wanted more detail on the
appearance of the cloud. Cassandra showed no outward indication of listening but her favorite part was early on, when Mallory forgot her broom in the café, and she made him tell it twice. Vivienne asked him to supply a few more details once he concluded. Then she sat back thoughtfully, smacking her lips.

“Well, it’s a pickle, sure enough,” she said. “I’m a tad confused about one last thing. Whatever made you decide to do what your mother said?”

Ess sat up. Lawrence blinked. He wasn’t sure he had heard her correctly. “I’m sorry?”

Vivienne was frowning at him. “Certainly, a son should respect his mother’s wishes, and I’ve always admired the way you accommodate Mallory even when she’s unreasonable, but she wasn’t asking for your help around the cottage, for goodness’s sake. You’re a grown man, or close enough. If she gave you no other choice, why didn’t you just tell her no?”

“You know what she’s like,” Lawrence began, but Cassandra pulled her head from the clouds and nailed him with a direct stare.

“It’s odd to me, too,” she said, all dreaminess evaporated. “You’re a bit of a doormat, Lawrence, and Mal’s as bossy as they come, but she couldn’t force you if you really didn’t want to do it. It isn’t as if you two never fought. You’ve stood your ground before, didn’t you, else you wouldn’t have gone to school to begin with.”

“That was different.” It bewildered him that he had to explain this to them. They knew his mother at least as well as he did. “I was a kid, and she knew where I was going to be, plus she wouldn’t have gotten anything out of me staying at home, I mean, you both know how hopeless I was at spellery so there was no way she could have trained me up . . .”
His words faded. Vivienne and Cassandra were exchanging looks. “What?” he said. His head turned from one to the other, Ess squirming in Vivienne’s lap. “Am I the only one who knows her at all? I’m not proud of it, but do you really think I would’ve done everything I did if I’d had a choice in the matter? Ess, you were there. Ess?”

_Leave me out of this_, Ess said.

“You think I could’ve just walked _away_?”

_No, not walked away, not exactly_—

Lawrence took a deep breath. He had to will himself to stare at the table instead of their faces. His hands were shaking. He curled them up. “Unbelievable,” he said. “Leave aside the fact that I had to poison someone who didn’t even do anything wrong, I could have _died_, I could have been caught and left to hang and I did it by _choice_?”

“Lawrence,” Vivienne said with hateful tranquility, “it isn’t that we don’t believe you, but you haven’t explained yourself properly, either.”

“Because it’s obvious!” Lawrence said. “Don’t you get it? I couldn’t say no!” What was the matter with them?

“So just tell us why not,” Cassandra said sharply. “Tell us exactly what would have happened if you had said no to Mallory in that café.”

Lawrence opened his mouth . . .

. . . and had nothing to say.

“She would have given _up_, Lawrence, dear,” Vivienne said. She was painfully gentle. “She would have yelled and postured and stormed about for a few minutes, maybe half an hour, but she would have left. She’d never do anything to hurt you, legalizing witchcraft or no. Do you
remember what she used to do when you were young? Back when she was trying to make you spiteful and angry at her so you’d be a proper witch?”

Something was stuck in the back of his throat, not quite a lump but something that made it difficult to speak nonetheless. He tried anyway. “She’d. Put slime on the floor. Or a mouse in my bed. I’d clean it up or give it something to eat and put it back outside. She put tacks down, once.”

“But never anywhere she thought you’d step on them,” Cassandra said. Her unnerving stare had been redirected to his shoulder and was softening back into indistinctness. “She told me the point was for you to pick them up, not stab yourself. It was all silly pranks. Remember that farmer who hit you when you were a kid? I thought she’d burn his arm off.”

“I’m not saying your mother would never put you in harm’s way,” Vivienne went on, “but she’d certainly never do it on purpose. I’m sure she thought you’d be perfectly safe at the castle, especially with Ess there.” She stroked the cat for emphasis and settled her most matronly smile upon him. “Do you understand, dear? She wouldn’t hurt you for the world.”

Oddly, Lawrence knew she was right, even though it hadn’t occurred to him in so many words until now. His mother was self-absorbed, casually cruel, and far too vain for her own good, but she wasn’t a killer. And he’d thought about that before, hadn’t he? She whipped with words sometimes or sent a cutting look or filled the cottage with a smell to rival a dead rat, but she never laid a finger on him. He’d been annoyed by his mother, but never scared of her, not in the way some of his classmates had feared their parents. He couldn’t think why he hadn’t remembered any of that in the first place.
He rested the heel of his hand against his forehead. Something touched his leg. It was a white paw.

“I’m sorry for taking it out on you,” he mumbled. “And for being an idiot.”

Let’s not talk about it anymore, okay?

“No, we have to talk about it.” He scrubbed his eyes. “But later. Once we’ve figured out what to do right now.”

Ess subsided, curling up into a warm ball against his hip. Vivienne’s fond smile dissolved back into deliberation. “Yes, it’s a thorny question. Obviously, we can’t leave the castle the way it is for much longer. I’m sure people will hear of what’s happened quite soon.”

“Regina said the same thing,” Lawrence said.

Cassandra glanced over. “She’s a smart girl. So the question is how we’re going to make enough antidote and how we’re to administer it, yes?”

“Without implicating Lawrence, obviously,” Vivienne said.

“It’s okay.” Lawrence sighed. “If I’m implicated. I kind of deserve it.”

“For not thinking straight when you made a decision? Nonsense. Once we’ve woken everyone up there’ll be no harm done.” Vivienne folded her hands in her lap. “But I think we’ll need to take a night to consider our options. We’ve all just had a lot dropped onto us, so I think we could use a break.”

Lawrence wanted to argue, but he thought he’d made fool enough of himself for one night. Cassandra nodded, and he rose to leave. “I should be getting back, then. I left Regina to look after the prince and I’m sure she wants relieving by now.”

“Lawrence,” Cassandra said.
She said in such a way that made him stop without thinking, eyeing the ceiling though she was, but all she said was, “Be careful on the way back.”

“Okay.” You never got anywhere if you questioned Cassandra’s premonitions. If they were any more specific than a bad feeling, she would tell you. Lawrence let himself out, Ess in tow, and trooped downstairs. Matthew the barman cocked a curious look at them as they came into his line of sight, but Lawrence only thanked him for his patience and left. It was getting dark and The Inn’s night crowd was already oozing in. He didn’t care to be swept up with them.

Because it was the height of stupidity to ignore Cassandra’s advice, no matter how vague, Lawrence took a different route back to the bakery, one that wound around a bit on a path with some lights on the way. He arrived safely to the sound of Regina preparing to commit homicide. The prince stood meekly in the midst of a broken window.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to impose on you for one more night,” Lawrence said when she paused to take a breath. “We need to stay in town one more day?”

“We do?” The prince had cheered considerably after he turned and spotted Lawrence. “How come?”

Regina glared at him. “Yeah, do tell.”

“I met with some old friends and I think they can help us,” Lawrence said, and Regina’s eyebrow shot up so fast it was in danger of springing from her face. “But I said I’d wait until tomorrow to meet with them again. I really am sorry,” he said to Regina. “I did mean to be out of your way tonight.”

Regina shook her head. “Just keep this idiot from cutting himself open while I go find the broom. I’ll make up some story that’ll satisfy Dad.”
“More old friends?” the prince asked as she left. “I didn’t realize you had so many.”

“You know,” said Lawrence, “neither did I.”
Chapter 13

Ess wasn’t there when Lawrence woke in the morning, but this was no surprise. He’d left the storeroom door open a crack before going to sleep per her request. She liked to wander. It did mean he rose with the prince as an alarm, complete with sleepily buffeting him over the head and then mumbling an apology. Luckily, the prince took no offense and, after he had reapplied his hair’s daily layer of soot from a bag, he was soon out and bouncing around to ask Regina how he could help. Her suggestion of sticking his head in a hole in the ground met with much hilarity. “You can take him today,” Regina told Lawrence when he had roused himself from bed. She’d already washed and brushed her hair. “Really. I don’t mind if you do.”

Lawrence hedged around her with the promise that he would consider it, perhaps if Alex seemed like he would behave himself today, one could never tell, footmen, you know, and scurried away from her unamused stare under the pretense of keeping the prince from knocking over a display shelf. Unfortunately, this meant he attracted the prince’s attention and had to field a barrage of questions about who these friends of his were that he was being so cagey about, and what were they going to do today, and did Lawrence think they might soon find a lead as to which witch, ha ha, which witch—

All in all, Regina had the patience of a saint to wait until the sun was at its zenith before she kicked them out. They strolled down to a small diner for a late breakfast, because they still had plenty of money and you could only subsist on bread for so long before the taste turned traitor. Lawrence shepherded the prince away after the meal was done in order to prevent him from buying out the entire repository of pie. The prince asked brightly if this meant it was time
for them to go meet his friends, and Lawrence thought that it might as well be. Perhaps Cassandra or Vivienne would be able to distract him once they got there.

The Inn looked no different from yesterday, still empty this early in the day and the same blanket hung out to dry, but Matthew the barman shook his head when they came in. “Sorry, cap’n. Ladies took off this morning.

“But they knew I was coming back,” Lawrence said, crestfallen. “Did they leave a note or a sign or . . .?”

“Not such’s I’m aware of. Come back tonight and I’ll nod you through if they’re back, but don’t hold your breath if they ain’t. I saw one of ‘em carrying some luggage. Shimmy off, now, we can’t have a kid hanging around. And come in through the side next time,” he called as the door swung shut after Lawrence.

The prince had waited obediently outside at Lawrence’s behest and had his hands stuck in his pockets. “Was it bad timing?” the prince said.

“I don’t understand,” Lawrence said. He backed up from the building and shielded his eyes. The top windows had their lavender curtains drawn. That was as good a guarantee as he was going to get. Cassandra never did without sunlight in a room when she could help it.

“They’re gone, but they knew I was coming back. They told me to come back. Why would they leave like that?”

“Should we move on?” Undercurrent: we’ve spent two days here already, your friend may murder us if we stay a third, my family isn’t getting any less unconscious, why don’t we try somewhere else?
Lawrence dropped his arm to his side. “No,” he said. “I’m sure they had some business to attend to. We’ll come back tonight.”

“You know best.” The prince clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Let’s see, what shall we do in the meantime? I’m of a mind for some fun, personally. Let’s pop around and see what Bracksburg has to recommend it.”

What Bracksburg had to recommend it was an acerbic rivalry between two equally insignificant establishments and an embarrassment of southern red-berried heather, but Lawrence kept this opinion to himself. The prince’s perpetual good mood was one of life’s little comforts. Lawrence followed him back onto the road.

His opinion proved not to be far off the mark—the most entertaining tourist attraction in the area was a shop that sold an impossible variety of jams, in jars ranging from mammoth to doll-sized—yet the prince had a gift for entertaining himself. He first struck up a lively conversation with some housewives who had gathered outside the jam shop and learned the latest intimate details of town gossip in as much time as it took most people to say hello. Soon after, he made friends with an injured sparrow and supplied it with a safe place to rest and, after a brief trip to the back of the bakery, gave it enough bread crusts to serve for the whole winter. The prince even collected flat rocks on the roadside to skip over the river later on when he heard that Lawrence had never learned to skip a stone. “It’s a national pastime,” the prince said as justification. “You can’t call yourself Viderian if you’ve never even splashed a few rocks.”

Lawrence had only left Videria a handful of times in his life and he had never discovered this rule, but the prince wouldn’t hear of it. Lawrence had no better ideas for how to pass the time. He joined him in the collecting.
It was getting toward evening when they checked back again, pockets weighed down, and saw that the curtains were still visible in the second-story window. Lawrence’s heart, having cautiously swum back to normal height, sank once again. No one would help them. They were as directionless as they had been before. If anything, they were worse off; he’d wasted two whole days. He wished he could apologize to Regina.

“We’d better move on,” he said at last. “I’ll fetch Ess and we’ll be on our way.”

“Chin up, Law,” the prince said. “Nothing else to do about it.”

“No.” They left the scene. Lawrence glanced at the darkening sky and asked if the prince wanted to go get dinner for the two of them. They split up, and Lawrence went to see where Ess had gotten off to. It wouldn’t take long. Bracksburg wasn’t a big town.

He couldn’t tell where she was right away, but that only meant she was farther out than she might have been. He knew she wasn’t near The Inn, and the area around the bakery turned up nothing. A visit to the actual inn proved the same. By the time he confirmed that she wasn’t anywhere near the shops either, nor the houses or the park or the town hall, a cold feeling had crept up through his limbs.

He asked people he met for directions to places he hadn’t been yet, but the schoolhouse had nothing to offer, and none of the geometric patterns of farms held any promise. She wasn’t near the small rubber factory, or by the tethered riverboats, or in the campground of the caravans that were passing through for the harvest festival. He’d had some hope for this last one. Ess harbored no fear of strangers, and the right caravan might have tossed her some food in exchange for affection. She could have easily lost track of time, he’d told himself. But Ess wasn’t there.
Two hours later, he found the prince, fed and content with a small pile of wrapped
sandwiches next to him, skipping stones by the river outside town. The prince brightened at
Lawrence’s approach and opened his mouth to speak.

“I can’t find her,” Lawrence said. “I’ve searched everywhere.”

“So we’re moving on, then?” the prince said.

Lawrence stared at him. The prince chucked another stone.

“I mean, I know you’re fond of her,” the prince said, “but we won’t be gone all that long.
She can look after herself until then, surely?”

Lawrence watched him sling out his last stone. It hit the surface of the river a full three
times before plopping in. “Are you joking?”

“Certainly not. Cats are very independent. A week or two on her own will be good for her,
I should imagine, and we have other things to worry about.” The prince checked for any further
ammunition, saw he had none, and pushed himself to his feet. “I do understand how you feel,
but—”

“You clearly don’t,” Lawrence said. He was still cold, but there was a heat bubbling
under the skin now.

The prince stretched his arms above his head and worked his neck around with a crack.
“It’ll be slower going without the wagon, of course, but we won’t need to look after the horses
either. Reasonable exchange, do you think? Perhaps we can hitch a ride. There’s enough
caravans going through.”

“We’re not going.”

“Or perhaps there’s a farmer who wouldn’t mind giving us a lift to the next town over.”
“If Leticia was missing and I said we didn’t have time for her, would you be fine with that?”

The prince finally looked at him, frowning. “Steady on. It is just a cat, Law.”

He was right. That was the insufferable part. One missing cat was not reasonable grounds to ignore all the people they’d left behind for even a day. Lawrence was being the illogical one here. If it were anyone else in his place, he would have thought them quite ridiculous to be putting up such a fuss. He understood precisely how he must sound to the prince.

However, the prince had never held a mewling kitten who had been caught in a hunter’s trap and felt her pain as if it were his own.

“Then go ahead,” Lawrence said. “A farmer’s wagon, you said? You shouldn’t have any problem getting a ride on your own.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Lawrence knew the prince had been listening that time. “You’re out of the capital. That was the only tricky part. Stay off the main roads and try to keep a disguise going. It won’t be hard if you pay attention. I’ll even give you half my share of the money so you won’t run out.”

“Come, now, Law,” the prince said. An uncertain half smile touched at his face. “You don’t really mean to leave me on my own, do you?”

Lawrence did mean to. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed to solve a number of problems. The prince would get caught by the police within the week for some tomfoolery or other and be kept in a safe cell somewhere, and Lawrence could be leagues away with Ess by then. Surely some far-off sorcerer would be called in to take care of the sleeping spell, someone who knew what they were doing, and they would be able to dispel it in a trice. It
couldn’t truly be that strong of a spell if Lawrence had cast it, even by accident. The matter would resolve itself. It was a wonder he hadn’t considered it before.

Lawrence took the money bag out from under his shirt and pulled it open. He upended it. Periats spilled out, thudding and clinking, onto the grass. “There. About half. Best of luck.”

“Oh, to you, too,” a third voice said behind Lawrence. Something pushed into his back. He supposed he’d been a bit silly for thinking there was ever an easy way out.

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It was with obnoxious ease that the prince let himself get caught in a headlock. If there was any use Lawrence might have imagined he would have, it would have been some utility in case of an armed robbery. As soon as the prince saw the pistol, though, he was docile as could be.

The first of their assailants kept the gun to Lawrence’s back as he plucked the money bag from his fingers. He nudged a knob of Lawrence’s spine, and Lawrence knelt to pick up the coins that had spattered onto the ground.

The second assailant, a man with a wide-brimmed hat and a milky eye, had finished trussing up the prince by the time Lawrence stood. It was a twine-and-fishing-line affair expertly knotted around his wrists and ankles. Lawrence briefly appreciated that the man had been thorough enough to include cloth for a gag. That showed some foresight.

Another nudge from the gun. Lawrence looked over to see the money bag, open and proffered. Lawrence dumped in his two fistfuls of periats. His keeper brought it to his ear, shook it once, and stowed it away within the confines of what, from the edge of Lawrence’s vision, looked to be an expansive and moth-eaten coat.
“Much obliged, young master,” he said. “Very wise in the ways of the world, I can tell.

Over yonder now. That’s it. Hold.”

Lawrence stopped at the river’s edge. It was a lazy river, meandering along at a walking pace, but it ran deep under the ground and Lawrence didn’t trust deep water. He was used to swamps and creeks. The river lacked the decency to lead into its depth. It was a steep drop from the bank.

“That’s our fee settled,” the one with the gun said. “What’ll we do with the little one?”

A bit farther away, his partner answered. “Don’t know. She didn’t say we had to keep anyone alive.”

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“Are we carrying his highness’s head back, then?”

“Seems easier to have him carry it for us.”

“Yeah, but then there’s food and stuff.”

“A frog swam over to the bank and hopped on. It observed Lawrence with round, wet eyes. The sunset cast a rosy glow over its skin’s mucus. At least the prince wasn’t trying to talk or do anything. Small blessings.

“Who says we have to feed him?”

“I’m just saying. We brought the sack for it and everything.”

“Put it away for later.”

“It’s waterproof.”

“So?”

“Waterproof’s expensive.”

The second man sighed. “Rich, you’re so goddamn unprofessional sometimes.”

“Do you have an axe? I don’t have an axe.”

“No.”

“How are we going to get his head off without an axe?”

The frog blinked once, a slow shutter of translucent lids. Its tongue snapped out and caught a fly. Lawrence contemplated the sound it would make if he kicked it back into the water.

“We could get one.”

“Yeah? Borrow it from some friendly neighbors? Get a cup of sugar while we’re at it?”

“No call to be nasty.”

“Just shoot him already and we’ll be on our way.”

“Feel kinda weird about shooting a kid.”

“I feel kinda weird about your face, but you don’t hear me complaining.”

“All right, all right.” Before Lawrence could tense up more than he already had, he heard a click behind him. The frog leapt away with a mighty croak.

Then another click. A third.

“Uh. Nil?”

“What?”

“Gunpowder’s wet.”

“The gunpowder is wet.”

“Yeah.”

“Why is the gunpowder wet?”

“Well—”
“Rhetorical question. Just kick him in the water.”

“Gonna make a lot of noise.”

“More than a gunshot?”

“A gunshot’s quick, though.”

Footsteps. “Shove over.”

The time between a boot planting in Lawrence’s back and his face hitting the freezing water was negligible. He meant to come up splashing, but a hand seized the back of his neck and pushed him back down. His fingers caught the muddy edge of the bank. Something stepped on them.

Minutes went by, except they must have been seconds because he’d never been able to hold his breath for that long. He’d never learned to swim either, not really, just kind of a flailing paddle in the creek by the woods during the summer. The hand was heavy on his neck. When he tried to move his hands, nothing happened, even when he tried a lot harder, not even an inch of freedom, what wouldn’t he have given for even an inch. His lungs were burning, his throat was ready to burst, blackness pounded through his brain, he tried to suck in air when there was none and freezing water flooded his nose and mouth, he had never drowned before and he didn’t know when it stopped—

The hand slipped on his neck just a little, just enough, and Lawrence surged up. He got as far as getting his head above the water and a knee slung up on the bank.

“Whoops—” Something—a fist—hit his jaw and snapped him back at the same time that something audibly cracked beneath his knee. Pain sprouted up his leg. The fist uncurled and caught the back of his head this time. It pushed him back under before he was ready.
It was worse, it was a thousand times worse, he tried to kick out or squirm away or move his hand just a little just enough to get that hand off of the back of his head but nothing worked and it hurt and he hated this and he hated them and he had never really hated anyone before even when they forgot his name or stepped on his foot because they hadn’t noticed him standing right there or made him work all night or threatened to knock him out and lock him in a closet because those were all just stupid things that people did sometimes and he’d cared about it all more than he said even though he’d laughed about it and he’d never hated anyone for it but he was willing to start now, he was willing to do just about anything because he hated them . . .

The hand did not slip this time. It left his head entirely. Lawrence tore out of the water screaming for breath and choked on it when he got it. He coughed, he sputtered, he hacked his throat to rawness and he pulled himself onto the grass with weak, red fingers and thought about possibly dying.

When he didn’t die, he spat out some of the blood gumming up his mouth. Something worryingly solid and small and white got spat out along with it. He didn’t check to see if it was what he knew it was. He squeezed droplets from his eyes and looked up.

All of it was still there. The sky had not fallen to the ground in a dark blue velvet silence. The grass had not withered into fertile dust. The core difference was that the men were not standing. They were lying down on their backs, rigid and unmoving. Lawrence pushed himself up a little.

The milk-eyed man, Nil, was the taller of the two. Rich had no eyebrows and a nose that looked to have been broken a few times over the course of his career. His mouth was open. They looked to be asleep or unconscious. He might have thought they had simply given up work for
the day and settled in for a nap if one hadn’t had a drop of blood winding down the side of his face from his hairline. Both had their arms at their sides, as if sleeping in a crowded tent as opposed to the wide field dotted with foliage that was afforded them.

Lawrence could see they were both breathing, which he decided was very disappointing. He couldn’t find it in himself to be appalled at the thought.

The prince was not actually dead either, but wide-eyed and silent. He had a muddy boot print on his cheek. He’d moved a whole two feet over the course of events before, presumably, the men called Nil or Rich had prevented him from moving any more.

Lawrence unthinkingly tried to stand up. This went over poorly with the bad knee, and the rest of him leaped upon the opportunity to run up a tally of everything that had happened to him. He crumpled back onto the floor and spent a while considering the benefits of breaking down in tears. Once he had used up a satisfactory amount of time for this exercise, he gave crawling its turn.

He went over to the prince on his hands and spare knee, letting the other drag behind him in an ungainly manner. When he reached his destination, he pulled the cloth out of the prince’s mouth. It turned out to be a bunched-up handkerchief. It had initials embroidered on one of the corners. It didn’t start with an N or an R. Lawrence wasn’t sure how to feel about that. He tossed it aside.

“No,” he said when the prince tried to speak. His voice was hoarse, which startled the prince into silence as much as the command did. Lawrence cleared his throat and tried again.

“Shh. I have some questions you have to answer. Before you start babbling whatever the most
gallant thing that comes into your head is. Did you see those two get attacked? Don’t talk. Shake
or nod.”

The prince nodded.

“Did you do it?”

He shook his head.

“Did you see who did do it?”

The prince paused, evidently wrestling with the most accurate response he could muster.

Lawrence took pity on him. “You can talk for that one.”

“It was the river,” the prince burst out. “It was like—one was holding you down and the
other came to keep me quiet because, well, and there was such a lot of splashing about that I
couldn’t tell at first but it was like these two big watery hands came out and grabbed the one by
me—”

Lawrence sat back and rubbed his temple in slow, deliberate circles, eyes shut. It must
have been Ess, he thought. He couldn’t think of a better explanation, even though it didn’t
explain where she had come from or why she’d left right after.

“—hit the other one over the head, I mean really bashed him, and he let go of you and the
other hand grabbed him—”

He pushed his thumbs into his forehead. They hadn’t been just robbers, had they?
Someone had sent them. And they’d known who the prince was. What if there ended up being
more of them?

What if this happened again?

“—took about three seconds and I know I must sound mad but—are you all right?”
Lawrence took his thumbs from his forehead and wondered at the question.

“Help me walk, please,” Lawrence said. “I’d like to get away from here before they wake up.”

This was well and good, but the prince was still quite incapable of doing anything on his own (more so than usual, Lawrence thought to himself, and then he did feel a little appalled at the thought). Searching through Rich’s coat turned up their money bag again and a switchblade—too dull to cut a throat, but sharp enough to saw through the prince’s makeshift bonds. Lawrence’s shaking hands lasted long enough to free the wrists, and then the prince took over for the rest. He rubbed the circulation back into his hands and feet and announced that they would not need amputation.

They went. The prince had enough presence of mind to offer Lawrence an arm to help him hobble, but lacked the presence of mind required to not leave him leaning against a tree outside while the prince went back for something he’d “forgot.” He returned empty-handed. Lawrence didn’t have the energy to ask, so they hobbled on in some mockery of a three-legged race.

They stopped at a copse of oak trees after some interminable time. The prince set him against the biggest tree and started talking about ways to patch up his leg and how to treat the bruise that was forming on his cheek, the prince had a great deal of experience treating injuries when he was out hunting and he was sure he could remember most of what his tutors had told him about leg wounds if he had a little time to pull his thoughts together—

Lawrence did not raise his voice. “Please listen,” he said. “I have something very important to tell you and we need to discuss it right now.”
The prince fell silent. He was learning, at least. Lawrence hoped the same was true for himself. He had spent so much time worrying about the consequences of trying to get off the ride, well. Maybe there wasn’t much to be said for the ride at all.

He took the plunge:

“I’m the one who cast the sleeping spell.”

The prince considered that.

“Oh.”

Another pause.

“Really?” he asked.

“No. It was a potion, actually. In the soup. It went wrong. It was supposed to be for you.”

“Ah.” The prince rolled this one around in his mind for a while, as if he was chewing it up and was uncertain whether he should spit or swallow. “But I’m still awake.”

“Yes. It didn’t go very well, as I said.”

The prince tilted his head, bit down on a thoughtful nail. “But you said a witch did it.”

Lawrence pinched the bridge of his nose. “Half true. My mother is a witch. I’m not. She wanted me to be. She’s rather famous. We’re descended from the witch who made that law against witchcraft necessary. Name of Esmerelda.”

The prince snorted. “What, Esmerelda Nethienne? You have the Grand Sorceress for a grandmother?”

“Great-grandmother,” Lawrence said listlessly. “She was dead before I was born, but there’s a portrait of her in my mother’s room. Lot of warts. Right above her bed. It’s a bit creepy, honestly.” An understatement. The leering portrait had given Lawrence nightmares for years. His
mother had been delighted when he confessed his disquiet and told him he should study it for his own future reference. This was, he thought, a depressingly accurate summation of his childhood.

“You . . .” The prince hesitated. “Forgive me, but you don’t really seem like a witch’s son.”

“And that’s the best thing I’ve heard all day.” Lawrence slid down to sit on the leaves. They was a little wet, but he discovered he did not care. “I’m not much for magic, to be honest.”

He let out a hiss of breath. “Wow, it feels really nice to say that. I’m going to do it again. Magic’s the worst. You know back at the academy, the magic students were always treated better than everyone else? Even by the other students. It was so stupid. They were just blowing things up or moving them around. As if that’s so special. Show me someone who can make a seven-tier cake in three hours and I’ll show you a real wizard. Enchantments. Ha.”

Lawrence prodded the gap in his teeth with his tongue. “I’m assuming you’re upset with me but it hasn’t sunk in yet, and this is why you’re being so uncharacteristically quiet.”

“Er, no,” said the prince. “I was thinking it’s a shame you don’t go on those rants more often. They’re really quite funny.”

“Yes, I’m hilarious,” Lawrence said. “I’m sorry, I must’ve missed it; why aren’t you upset with me?”

To his credit, the prince thought about it for a while before he answered. “I don’t know.”

Lawrence scooted over and the prince sat down next to him. “I suppose,” the prince said, “it’s rather refreshing. Do you know the number of people who have tried to kill me over the years?”

“Eighteen,” Lawrence said immediately.
The prince looked at him, wide-eyed. “Is it really?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know. I was being sarcastic. I do that a lot.”

“Oh. That’s going to take some getting used to.” The prince clasped his hands in front of his knees, worrying at his lower lip. “I don’t think I’ve ever had anyone try to put me to sleep before. I know no one’s come up to me afterward and admitted it once the job was botched. It’s.” He stuck out his jaw thoughtfully. “Human, I think?” He nodded. “Compared to a knife in a pie, it is. It’s very human. Lawrence Fletcher seems like a person to me, more than a witch or a witch’s son. A person who just almost drowned in front of me so I wouldn’t have to, too. I have a hard time being upset at that.”

“My last name’s actually Caligny. I lied about that. And I did put a spell on your entire family.” Lawrence was aware this was not the most diplomatic thing to say. He had kicked the hornet’s nest and a wave of colorful candy had fallen out, but he couldn’t help sifting through the ruins in case there was still a chance of getting stung. “That’s still something I did.”

“Did you do it on purpose?”

Lawrence squinted at him, but said, “No.”

“And you’re trying to undo it,” the prince said.

“I suppose.”

“Well.” And that appeared to be all he had to say on the matter. Moral complexity and the prince were not on speaking terms with one another. He twiddled his thumbs. “And, ah, are you still upset with me about your, ah.”
Lawrence didn’t see how he could be after the prince had taken his news so generously. Besides, the man had a point. “No,” he said. “I understand. You’re right, anyway. She can take care of herself for now.”

The prince brightened, then dug in his pocket. “While I’m thinking of it, I have something for you.”

He drew out something small and white and bloody. Lawrence peered at it.

“Is that my tooth?”

“Yes.”

“You went back for it?”

“Yes.”

“That’s disgusting.” Lawrence accepted it. “Thank you.” The tooth was cold and smooth. It went in his own pocket. “I think that’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me.”

The prince looked pleased at that, if green. “Do you think we can put it back in?”

“I don’t know.” Lawrence rolled a shoulder. He knew nothing about dentistry. “Maybe. It’s not as if I lost an arm.”

“Perhaps one of the magicians back at the castle can help.”

“Magicians helping. That would be a first.”

“That’s a bit unfair.”

“So are they.”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re a touch jaded?”

“Ess says I’m a killjoy sometimes.”

“I thought you were going to die, you know.”
Lawrence poked at the gap again. He couldn’t resist. It was right there and tasted of iron. He could feel threads of ragged gum. “I didn’t, though.”

“Yes.” The prince had that odd look on his face again, the one he’d pointed at Lawrence a couple times before. It was like he’d opened a door and found a factory of starlight on the other side. “I appreciate that.”

“Now,” the prince said, “you’re really going to have to tell me what the situation is with your cat. Can you two read each other’s minds, or . . . ?”

Lawrence smiled and explained the connection between familiars and their witches, then had to backpedal and explain that a familiar was an animal you had bonded with. The prince insisted on overcomplicating it, saying he’d read something about pentagrams in a book and other such nonsense. Lawrence told him that all of it was wrong. It didn’t dissuade the prince from jumping in every time Lawrence paused for breath with some irrelevant “fact” he’d learned by hearsay. The overall effect should have been irritating, but Lawrence found it comforting. He’d done all he could do for the moment, and the world had not yet caved in on itself.
Chapter 14

The village’s name was West Lingkin. Its siblings, North, South, East, and Central Lingkin, did not exist anymore—they had died natural deaths over the course of a colorful history involving the entwined immigration and urbanization that had hit most of Videria’s countryside over the last twenty years. Of the five, the surviving sibling raised sheep for its livelihood, supplemented by a growing cotton cash crop economy and that slow, sleepy crawl of time only rural areas could cultivate. It had a population of roughly five hundred, most of them old or middle-aged, receiving money from the children who had gone onto employment in the cities. It smelled of cool fresh air and grew enough blueberries in the spring to fill a dozen pies for every person that lived there. Lawrence knew this for fact because he had endeavored to prove it once and received the adulation of the entire village for his trouble, to his mother’s mortification. He never had commanded the kind of awe and respect in the village his mother wanted him to, and he considered this a major blessing.

Her cottage’s hill was, of course, nearly a mile outside the village proper and tilted at an incline of roughly one-hundred-and-eighty degrees. It wouldn’t do to encourage anyone to climb it. Years ago, Lawrence could have scaled the grassy slope without breaking a sweat, but years ago he had gotten a lot more of the healthy outdoor exercise than the indoors scrubbing exercise he was now accustomed to, and years ago he hadn’t had a broken leg, either, or an ungainly branch wedged under his arm for a crutch. The prince had offered twice already to carry him the rest of the way on his back, but after Lawrence had stopped to look at him the second time, he hadn’t pressed the issue.
The crutch had been the prince’s invention. While Lawrence had consented to using the man as a lumbering mount until they could catch one of the wagons heading westward (with a driver who could be very understanding in exchange for a few coins from Lawrence’s saved supply), he had found the ease with which the prince could handle him in a cradle-carry—the only carry that didn’t hurt his leg too badly—to be unnerving. He requested walking autonomy thereafter, because at least it had been a clean enough break that the swelling wasn’t awful and he’d had enough sense to purchase some painkillers from one of the apothecaries on the way. He’d thought the prince was offended by this when he disappeared during the horses’ water break, but he had returned half an hour later, covered in scratches, with a branch broken off at about the right height. Lawrence hadn’t quite known what to say, so he’d accepted the crutch and awkwardly picked a twig from the prince’s hair like his sister had done months ago.

Anyway.

Autumn treated West Lingkin well, regardless of what Vivienne said. Even the air tasted of it, and it was still in the honeymoon stage where nearly all the leaves had fallen from the trees but not all of them were a withered brown underfoot yet. The scene was enough to make up for three days spent in the back of four different wagons and carriages, each with its own harmony of discomforts to add to the ongoing medley.

Lawrence wasn’t aware he’d almost tipped over backward until he realized the prince was holding him up by an expedient hand placed on his shoulder. Hot stars peppered his vision, and he blinked a few times. His hair was stuck to the back of his neck. “Sorry,” he said. “Only dizzy for a moment. We’re almost there.”
The prince’s worried face eclipsed the sky. “Law, we’re not yet halfway. I think you’d better take a rest for a moment.”

It seemed impossible to Lawrence that the last hundred hours of hiking hadn’t taken them to the top of the hill, but he let himself be lowered onto the grass without protest. Pain, bright and pulsing, had never made him want to throw up before. This trip was a trip full of new experiences. He must have asked a question, because all of a sudden the prince was chatting away again.

“No, no, not so terribly bad, honestly. A few minutes and we’ll be on our way again. I’m more worried about how you’re going to introduce me to your mother. I mean, it’s an awkward house call we’re making.”

“She’ll know we’re here,” said Lawrence. “She always knows when someone’s coming. Some charm she’s set to go off at the bottom of the hill. Trust me, we won’t be the ones introducing anyone.”

“Er,” the prince said. “I detect an undertone there, but I don’t think I know quite what you mean.”

“You will,” said Lawrence. He rubbed a starry eye. “I haven’t asked so far, but are you holding up well?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Over your family. News must have got out by now. Do you think things are okay back home?”

“Oh, I’m sure they’re safe enough,” the prince said lightly. “Very good security, even outside the immediate vicinity of the castle. Father and Mother could use the rest, I’m certain,"
and Leticia’s never been one to take things lying down, even in her sleep. She’ll be plotting her winter schedule in her dreams, mark me.”

Lawrence knew enough not to ask any more. He pulled himself up to sit. “Help me up the rest of the way, please. It’s going to be wretched for everyone if I pass out on her doorstep.”

It was easier going when Lawrence had two supports to lean on. He directed the prince to the front entrance since the bottom of the back door had been swelled shut by moisture for years. The knocker on the front door was rusted from disuse, so Lawrence disregarded it. He opened the door. It wasn’t locked, naturally. There wasn’t even a deadbolt. His mother would never dream of locking up her own cottage. What kind of a witch needed protection?

He hobbled in. The cottage was warmer inside than out, meaning his mother hadn’t left on a trip recently, and the kitchen was as neat as he’d left it, meaning she hadn’t cooked so much as an egg in all that time but had left the dusting spell on. The sitting room lay on the other side of the little entrance hall and it looked much more lived-in, a teapot sitting comfortably on the table by the sofa. At the end of the hall, things branched off into two separate halls that led to the rest of the cottage, and a staircase that looked impressive but led to nowhere except the attic and a spare closet. There was currently a scarcity of horrible magical items lying around, but Lawrence was pretty sure that a dead ferret was hanging from the ceiling just for the look of the thing.

The prince had stopped in the doorway, so Lawrence turned to assure him it was quite dead but also possibly to watch where he walked for the moment. But the prince wasn’t looking up. His face was directed at his feet. He was pulling on one leg like it had been glued in place, but it wasn’t unsticking. He looked up at Lawrence with a helpless shrug.
Lawrence turned, and there she was, at the top of the stairs that had been empty five seconds ago.

“Welcome,” she said. Her voice was magnified in the little space by some magic. She swept out a gracious hand, trailing a long black sleeve after it. “I trust your trip was comfortable, Prince Alexander? I would so hate for you to think me a . . . rude hostess.”

She was doing the evil villain greeting, of course she was doing the evil villain greeting. She’d waited for just the right moment before swanning in and now she was going to make the most of it with meaningful pauses and gentle sneers. She’d even dusted off her old fox stole for the occasion. Lawrence wanted to fall to the floor and shrivel with embarrassment.

“Er,” said the prince, eyes cutting to Lawrence for some hint not forthcoming. “Thank you?”

Nidhogg was coiled around the hem of Mallory’s dress for maximum effect. The snake familiar was eight feet long and the width of a modest tree. He must have smelled that Ess wasn’t with them, because he made no attempt at flight. Instead, he watched with yellow, malevolent eyes. Lawrence didn’t think he had any other kind of eyes to watch with, having known the snake since birth, so he didn’t take it personally.

“I do thank you for looking after Lawrence,” Mallory went on. Nidhogg took the hint and uncoiled from her feet to allow her smooth descent. “He’s still young, you see, and doesn’t know the way of the world so well as he thinks.” Her eyes lingered on Lawrence, who was trying very hard to pretend he wasn’t there. “But he will. Tell me, your highness, do you know why he’s brought you here?”

“Well, we were out of ideas for who to consult next and you seemed a likely expert so—”
“No,” Mallory said, “that is what he said to bring you here. It is a lie, your highness. It is something that is untrue. You are here not because either of you wish it, your highness, but because I deemed it appropriate.”

“Sorry?” said the prince.

“Let it never be said that I was ungracious,” she said. She glided around Lawrence in the hall, toward the sitting room. “I will admit these circumstances are not strictly according to plan. Our meeting in person was, originally, supposed to occur a little later in the grand scheme of events. I had meant for you to be put under a simple but effective sleeping spell, but my agent in the castle has apparently decided to conduct affairs differently.” She paused with the air of one who is holding all the cards as she poured herself a single cup of tea. Lawrence wanted to shout that she didn’t even like tea, that whatever was in that pot must have been sweetened with enough honey to kill a bear. “The boy you’ve met, the boy who has brought you here, is no mere scullery apprentice, you see. He is, alas, my son.”

“Oh, yes,” the prince said, bafflement dispelled. “Yes, I know that already. He told me a few days ago.”

Lawrence knew his mother. Mallory had been gearing up for an impressive arrangement of opening taunts to set the mood for the rest of the conversation. Chief among them would have been reproving remarks upon the prince’s choice of friends and implications of all their prior interactions. She would have brought up the princess, and the king and queen. She would have concluded with some falsely touching, ironic comment, like the value of meeting new people. Now all she had been going to say left her, expression frozen in a rictus smirk, tea in her hand going cold.
“What,” she said.

“Things have become a bit complex, Mother,” Lawrence said, who would have found her imbalance magnificent if he wasn’t still in an irritating amount of pain and also gripped by the urge to melt into the floor and never return.

Mallory laid her cup down. “There must be some misunderstanding. Do you know who I am, your highness?”

“Er, he told me your name, blast, what was it—”

“My name,” she said with visible annoyance, “is immaterial. I will rephrase. Better if I ask if you know what I am.”

“Mother, please stop with the insidious chess master act,” Lawrence begged. “You’re just making things much stranger than they already are. He knows everything. I messed it up, I told you I would.”

She turned her gaze onto him. “The potion?” she said. He grimaced.

It was like he’d pulled a switch. All elegance dropped away at once. She flopped back into her favorite chair with a groan, passing the back of a hand over her eyes. Nidhogg put his head on the arm of it with a concerned hiss. “Oh, Lawrence.”

“Did I do something wrong?” the prince asked Lawrence worriedly.

“I think you’d better let me do the talking—”

“After all that,” she said blindly to the ceiling. “I’ve spent the past six months preparing, and all of it, gone to waste. It was only the one thing you had to do. Just the one thing. Oh, Lawrence.”
“It wasn’t on purpose,” Lawrence said. He shifted his grip on his crutch. “And I didn’t want to do any of it to begin with. I told you that right at the start.”

“Well, of course I knew that,” Mallory snapped, “although it looks like I should’ve made the spell I put on you stronger, but I really thought you might put forth a little more effort than this, Lawrence—”

“Spell?” Lawrence repeated at the same time the prince said “I say!” but Mallory was only beginning to hit her stride.

“—you can hardly expect me to do all the work myself, as busy as I’ve been raising you and attending to your tuition yet you can’t spare a moment to consider how I might need your help, I shudder to think what would have happened if I had attempted to take you into further confidence and I can see my decision to withhold certain information was wise or who knows what you would’ve told the first drunkard you met on the street—”

Lawrence did not try to speak over her. He crossed to the other side of the sitting room where all the fine china was, the plates and teacups he used to set out as a child when there was some birthday or other occasion going on. They were patterned with white and blue flowers, bequeathed from some relative years ago, an aunt of an aunt, someone he should have known the name of. Lawrence had been quite fond of them when he was young. He’d broken one of the cups when he was seven, he remembered, and been scolded roundly for it before his mother mended it with magic anyway.

“—not as if I asked you to murder anyone or steal anything, it was just one potion you had to administer to one person, and you had Ess’s help besides, I mean really, how much simpler could I have possibly made things for you without painting a big red target on him? But
no, you continue to cling to this inexplicable insistence upon failure at every turn whenever I request the slightest help—”

It turned out the cabinet wasn’t as heavy as it looked.

“Spell,” Lawrence said, once the shattering had died away. Mallory’s mouth was hanging open.

Lawrence continued, “A spell. On me? In the café? What was it you used, the chair? The table? No. Silly. Of course not, that’s not the style, a witch wouldn’t enchant a chair when she could use something else. Was it the scroll for the potion? Did I have to take that for it to work?”

Mallory found her voice, but Lawrence raised his own, shards crunching underfoot. “Because you knew I’d be an idiot to actually do it, putting a prince to sleep in his own castle, otherwise you’d have done it yourself, wouldn’t you? Yes? Is that it? You knew I’d say no? You decided to just make me do it anyway?”

When he didn’t say anything more, she spoke. “I didn’t think—”

“You didn’t think!” Next was the pot of tea on the table, smashed into the floor with the crutch and the hot liquid splashing so that Nidhogg reared back and hissed. “Of course you didn’t think, that’s not what a real witch does! A real witch doesn’t need to think about anyone else! You skin a frog or you stab a goat or you sell out your son and as long as you get what you wanted, you don’t give a damn! Nid! Shut up!”

On the other side of the room, a vase shuddered and fell over onto the carpet with a dull thud. Nidhogg ceased hissing to flee under the sofa. A pair of yellow eyes peered out from the darkness.

“Is it still on me?” Lawrence said. “This spell, is it on me right now?”
“Here, now, Law,” the prince said weakly, “that’s not really how you should talk to
your—”

“And you!” The prince flinched away as Lawrence whirled on him. “You’re going to take
down a witch? You? With the new cook boy along for the ride? The only one besides you
who is miraculously still awake, by the way, and that didn’t strike you as suspicious at all? Do you
have the slightest clue how many chances there were to just kill you and have done with it?”

“But you didn’t,” said the prince.

“Of course I didn’t!” Lawrence nearly screamed. He stabbed a finger at his mother. She
was staring at the fallen vase, which was at this point the only ceramic in the room left intact.
“I’m not her! I wouldn’t’ve even done the potion if not for that stupid spell! The point is that you
didn’t know that!”

“Law—”

“It was stupid and it was dangerous and you don’t have anyone to keep you safe right
now, all right? Do you understand that? You can’t just dismiss people and expect for there not to
be consequences, I brought you here because I know her and I know she’s basically harmless—”

“Excuse me,” Mallory said, head snapping back to them in affront.

“—excuse not granted—but you had no guarantees in this trip, you still wouldn’t have
the slightest clue about what’s going on in your life if I hadn’t told you! You’re not an idiot, you
just act like one, so figure something out on your own for once!”

Then the prince said the only thing in the world that could have calmed Lawrence down
at that moment, which was, “You’re right.”
For the second time in an hour, the prince threw a Caligny off-balance. He pressed on. “I was caught up in everything going on and didn’t stop to think. I should have taken you seriously from the start and I didn’t. I thought I could do what I wanted just because you didn’t get angry. It was silly, it was mean, and I never apologized for it. I’m sorry.”

After a few seconds, Lawrence remembered to lower his hand.

“Well. Good.” He rewound the last couple minutes of conversation in his head. “I was talking about you needing to look out for yourself, wasn’t I?”

“If we’re discussing the content of your literal words,” the prince said carefully, “then yes, you were, but if we’re talking about a subtextual analysis of the given message then I suspected some other source for your disquiet.” He coughed. “And I, I admit that I have been a touch disingenuous. With the . . .” He managed to make a halfhearted gesture with one hand that took in all of himself. “Unrelenting enthusiasm. I never considered that it might upset you until I started seeing you weren’t, ah, quite as patient as you seem.”

Lawrence flared back up in an instant. “I don’t—”

“It’s not a bad thing,” the prince hastened to say. “Really, if anyone were to be as patient as you appear to be sometimes, it might become a problem. And it’s very kind of you to try to be that way, except I think being very kind has made you rather unhappy, and it shouldn’t have. I really am sorry I didn’t notice it sooner. I hope you aren’t too angry with me.”

For some reason, Lawrence wasn’t. Maybe it was because his mother had actually subsided enough to let two other people hold a conversation in her presence, or because Nidhogg had slithered uncertainly out from under the sofa and was resting his head on Lawrence’s good foot, or perhaps it was because someone had noticed him and said patient instead of doormat and
kind instead of stupid. And that mattered a lot, that last one. It surprised Lawrence with how much it mattered. He swallowed.

“Okay,” he said to the floor. “All right, then. That’s settled.” He turned to his mother. “I have yet to hear your explanation, however.”

Mallory rolled her eyes, evidently having thought he would forget about her after he lost his head of steam. “It was only a suggestion spell. To give you a little push into what you were going to do anyway. There’s no call to go making a fuss about it, and do you know how long it will take me to repair all this china?”

Lawrence could have started yelling again, but he said, “About ten minutes.” He didn’t add do you know how long it will take me to burn this lousy cottage to the ground either because you were only allowed so many self-righteous outbursts in one day. “I asked a question. Is it off now or isn’t it?”

“It wore off the second you slipped the potion into something,” she said, lolling her head back onto the cushions. “I was going to have it stop once the draught was complete, but then I thought you might chicken out at the last second. By all appearances, I’d say the concern was well-placed.” She frowned down her nose at him. “Actually, I’m not certain how you managed to wreck everything so magnificently, given all my work in advance.”

“It’s a talent,” Lawrence said. He’d forgotten about his leg, which was hurting again. He leaned against the wall. “But since you mention it, we did come here for a reason, Mother. The potion itself didn’t fail, exactly.” Lawrence weighed the truth of that statement. “No, it did, it really did, but not in the way you’re thinking.”

“Oh?” Mallory pulled herself up to better survey him. “Do tell.”
“Pardon me,” said the prince, “but could you . . . ?”

Mallory waved her hand, and the prince’s foot unstuck itself from the floor in a jolt. “You might as well help yourselves to the tea,” she said as he massaged life back into his leg. “And sit down, Lawrence. You look dead on your feet.”
Chapter 15

The tea was as oversweet as Lawrence had thought it would be. He drank three cups of it while the prince told most of the story as he understood it. This excluded any mention of Cassandra and Vivienne by name—the prince instead calling them “a couple friends of Law’s”—but Lawrence did not amend the oversight. They hadn’t wanted his mother to know where they were, and he thought he ought to keep his word about at least one thing this year. He did step in for a lengthy discussion about the assassination attempts, throwing in the hypothesis he’d discussed with Ess, though not much came of it.

“Where is Ess?” Mallory broke in. “I noticed she wasn’t with you when you were coming up the hill.”

That led into its own digression about Brackenburg, but it didn’t turn up any new insights about how she might have disappeared. Mallory listened and then she asked what else had happened, and they moved on.

“But we encountered some difficulties as we were waiting for them,” the prince concluded, sitting back in his seat, “which I’m sorry to say that Lawrence received the brunt of, but we pulled ourselves together and came here thanks to the help of some thoughtful travelers, and, well, here we are!”

“Difficulties? Explains the black eye.” Mallory tapped her cheekbone. “Healing well, is it?”

“It’s fine,” Lawrence said, in his I-don’t-want-to-talk-about-it-and-neither-should-you voice.
Mallory, though, seemed to be enjoying the opportunity to prod at him. “What difficulties were these you encountered on the road, your highness? Were you savaged by squirrels, perhaps? Ruined by raccoons?”

“Mother, it’s fine.”

“I hear the rat population can get quite out of control this time of year, there’s no shame in it.”

“I’m sorry, madam, but I don’t find it amusing either,” said the prince. “Whoever hired the men we ran into was not a jocular sort. They might have killed us.”

“Oh, there’s no need to be dramatic, I’m sure.”

The prince’s voice rose with indignation that was close to actual displeasure. “I assure you I’m not! They tried to drown your son and broke his leg on top of that!”

Mallory sat up. She had, prior, adopted a kind of interested lounge for the duration of the tale, legs swung over the arm of the chair and cheek propped on her fist, as if to say that she was listening but might withdraw the privilege of her attention at any moment. “Your leg is broken?”

“Mother, it’s f—”

“It’s not.” She was out of the chair, rolling up the leg of his slacks without ado. “Seven hells, Lawrence! Is this a broken bone or has someone stuck a goose egg under your skin? I thought you’d just twisted an ankle or something when you came in. Why didn’t you say something earlier?”

“Can you fix it?” the prince said before Lawrence could say something to make her change her mind.
“Of course I can fix it, it’s been splinted properly and everything so it hasn’t knitted wrong, but it won’t be pleasant.” She hovered a hand back and forth over the swelling. “Are there any other hideous disfigurements that have been made on your person that I should know about, or is this the only one?”

Lawrence wordlessly reached into his pocket. He presented the tooth for his mother’s inspection. She squinted at it, and went pale. She’d never liked even the loss of his baby teeth. “Lawrence,” she said, “you’re going to have to tell me about the gentlemen who did this to you in more detail.”

“Why?” Lawrence asked.

“First, so we can figure out who hired them.” She rose to her feet. “And second, for personal reasons.”

“Mother,” Lawrence said, with the first affection he’d felt for her since he’d stepped inside the cottage, “as little as I sincerely want to stop you from melting their hands off, I don’t think I could tell you anything useful. I know one was named Richard and the other had a blind eye and that’s all. It was days ago. They got knocked about their heads a bit, but they’re gone by now.”

She grunted, pulling a thick book off the shelf. “Well, another time. I’m glad to hear you gave as good as you got, at least. Did you hit near the top of the head or closer to the base of it? Either one might be a killing blow, but one is more likely than the other. I ask out of scholarly interest.”

“They were still alive, but I didn’t,” Lawrence said. “It was Ess.”

“What do you mean, it was Ess?”
“Or someone,” he amended. “But I don’t know how it could have been anybody else. I didn’t see who, and neither did he.” He nodded at the prince, who raised a hand in corroboration.

“The water rose up and struck them quite on its own,” the prince said. “Magic can do that, can’t it?”

Mallory was flipping through her book, which was thick and had real vines trawling the cover, obscuring most of the gold lettering of the title. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “As if Ess could do anything that difficult. You would’ve noticed her even if she did. No, dear, whatever you did, you did on your own.”

Lawrence filled his fourth cup of tea. “Yes, I’m sure,” he said. “Mother, you do know I’ve never lifted so much as a pin with my mind, correct? And I think I’ve demonstrated my ineptitude with even potions sufficiently to lay the question of my innate ability to rest. I can’t do magic, Mother. Not without making some terrible mistake. You do realize that, don’t you?”

She ran a long, red fingernail down a page. “One day, Lawrence, you will accept that there are certain things that I know more about than you do, and one of these things happens to be the entirety of the field of witchcraft. You have plenty of ability. You just haven’t the slightest aptitude for using it.”

“You’re right,” Lawrence said. “Those are completely different things.”

“Ah.” Her nail came to a stop. “Yes, I think this will do nicely. Your highness, do you mind giving us some privacy? You can go . . .” She wagged her fingers. It was a cottage, after all. “. . . stand in the broom cupboard, or something.”

“My room’s down the hall to the left,” Lawrence told the prince as the man stood. “Just watch where you step. She puts things down sometimes when she knows I’m coming home.”
Mallory looked eminently self-satisfied at this. The prince wandered off, casting backward glances at the two of them. Mallory laid the open book down on the table. A yellow stain took up most of the page on the left, and the one on the right was so tightly packed with scribbles that it was unreadable. Some parts had been scratched out while others were circled. Books on witchcraft were written by hand and tended to get improved upon over the years, given the egos reading them, and the pages were always a mess.

Mallory collected a jar of dock leaves off a shelf in the kitchen, along with a sprig of feverfew. Both were things that would have seemed more appropriate for a scrape or headache in the hands of a saner art’s practitioner. Lawrence was sensible enough not to ask as she packed the herbs onto his leg. She dusted her hands off and shook her sleeves out of the way. A yelp sounded somewhere on the other side of the wall.

“Tacks?” Lawrence asked.

“Swamp water,” she said. “And mushrooms. Untidy. I didn’t have much time to prepare.”

She placed a hand on his leg. “Brace yourself. This will hurt.”

It hurt.

***

When Lawrence woke up, it was dark out. He’d been laid out on the sofa next to it with his foot elevated on a couple cushions, another placed under his head for good measure. An experimental shift of his leg sent no agony sparking up through his knee. He felt surprisingly not terrible. He sat up.

Someone had lit the fireplace on the other side of the room. The fire crackled bright and unsinister, which Lawrence took to mean that his mother was out. When she was around, she had
always had a gift for making flames leap into orange, misshapen faces that melted away in the
next instant. Someone had also left a plate of cookies on the table. It didn’t require detective
work to figure out the culprit. They tasted of too much flour and time spent in the oven.
Lawrence ate two, out of the twin duties of hunger and obligation, before he realized the new
hollowness in his mouth had disappeared. A quick search proved that the prodigal tooth was
gone from his pocket. This felt somehow like an invasion of privacy, but in all honesty he had
not been attached to the idea of losing a tooth at the age of seventeen. Two points for magic.

The prince had returned to Lawrence’s room at some point, after a clumsy attempt at
cleaning up the kitchen, and was now engrossed in going through the squat bookcase next to his
bed. Several volumes of Enchantments: Beginner to Intermediate were spread out over the floor.
The prince looked up from his place in the middle of them and his eyes landed on Lawrence
standing in the doorway.

“You’ve only got one cookbook,” he said, almost like an accusation, and Lawrence was
seized with an urge to laugh.

“There’re a few more in my room at work,” he said, joining the prince on the floor. “I
thought they’d be useful. I left everything I didn’t want here.”

“You look better.”

“I feel better. Have you found anything interesting in there?”

The prince turned the page, shaking his head. “This stuff is mind-bending. People try to
learn all this when they’re still children?”

“Some people do.”

“Good heavens. How much of it did you get through before you quit?”
“I sort of skipped around,” Lawrence said. He found the first volume and pulled it into his lap. He skimmed a few pages. It had a variety of notes in the margins that he had no memory of but that were written in his tentative, wiggly script. Most of them read alternatingly of desperation and boredom. “You know, I’ve forgotten all of this. I don’t even know what Owlswick’s Theorem is anymore. What was the point of learning it in the first place if I just forgot it all as soon as I had the chance?”

The prince shrugged. His attention was focused on a paragraph about incantations. “Do you always need to say something to cast a spell? Brunswick only waves his arms and looks grand most of the time.”

“It depends on what you’re doing. Where did my mother go?”

“She stepped out an hour ago.” The prince turned another page. “She told me not to break anything and to tell you she wouldn’t be long.”

“Did you two talk?”

“Oh, yes. She wanted to know all about the state of the castle when we departed.”

Lawrence groaned. “I’ll bet she did. She did say she would be back soon, though? Not, for example, after the length of time necessary to travel by magic to the capital, conquer it, and travel back?”

“Goodness, I hope not,” the prince said as if the idea had never occurred to him. “She’d have a job doing it in one night. We talked at some length about other things too. I found her quite personable when she wasn’t trying to intimidate anyone.”

“Was she not trying to intimidate you?”
“I think she was trying, but then she gave up. Something about it being like spooking a sunbeam.” The prince put the book down, defeated. “She wanted to know how you’d been getting on at work. I think she feels bad about making you go since things turned out so poorly.”

Lawrence leaned against his bed. “What did you tell her?”

“I said to talk to you about it if she wanted to know.” The prince paused. “Was that wrong?”

“No. I appreciate it.” Well, it had been more than Lawrence expected for the prince to show that kind of discretion, and one good turn deserved another. He stood. “Are you hungry?”

They were halfway through some eggs and pancakes—Lawrence would have to have another conversation with his mother about keeping the pantry stocked—when Mallory came back, Nidhogg at her heels. She looked disgruntled, as she often did when things hadn’t gone precisely her way. She swept up the plate that Lawrence had set aside for her and dug into it. The prince glanced up. Lawrence shook his head. He let her eat and washed the dishes before he judged she had simmered down enough to hold a civil conversation.

“I was just trying to get in touch with the rest of the coven,” she said as he took a breath to ask. “They always leave around this time of year for some gathering. I thought they might’ve passed near the capital on their way, but Cassandra won’t answer her mirror.”

Lawrence had seen Cassandra’s mirror a few times before. It was about the height and width of a fist, covered with a faint, green film, and allowed her to talk to anyone with sufficient magical talent and some calm water who knew how to reach her. The mirror was illegal, owing to the process involved in its manufacture, which took witchcraft’s policy of cruelty to animals to a new level. Cassandra had inherited it and hadn’t replaced it when it cracked. It still worked,
and she didn’t care for hurting anything that much. “Perhaps she left it somewhere,” Lawrence said.

“She never lets it leave her sight, what if some two-bit conjuror reported it?” Mallory rattled her nails on the table. “No. Either she broke it or something . . .”

She didn’t say something happened, because the sentence was inconceivable. What could happen to a witch? Witches happened to other people. “Went wrong,” she finished. “Fine time for it, too. I wanted to leave as soon as you woke up, but if we have no clue what the state of affairs there is like, then it gets a tad tricky, doesn’t it?”

“Leave?” the prince asked. “You mean for the castle?”

“Were you planning on staying here?”

“No, but it’s rather soon—”

“I’ve no doubt security is getting tighter every day,” Mallory said. “The sooner, the better. At this rate, we’ll have to bite the hook and go in blind.”

“Even though we’re not sure who might be there?” Lawrence said.

She stroked Nidhogg’s scaly head. “Yes, well, I’m not keen on it, as I said. Unless you have a better idea?”

Lawrence had come this far precisely because he had no better ideas. His life was one long procession of never having a better idea. “There is one thing, if we’re going.”

“What is it?”

“I want Ess first.”

“Oh, Ess will be fine, wherever she is,” Mallory said dismissively. “She’ll turn up. You know how cats are.”
“But we left her over a hundred miles back,” Lawrence said. “We were in a rush. Couldn’t you find her before we set out?”

“She’s not *lost*, Lawrence. A witch doesn’t lose their familiar. She’ll show up when she feels like it.”

Lawrence wanted to point out, for the thousandth time, that he wasn’t a witch, familiar or not, but the prince said sympathetically, “Terribly sorry, but I’m with your mother, Law. I know how you feel, but we can look for her after everything else is settled, can’t we? Surely this is more important?”

No, it wasn’t, it really wasn’t, and it wouldn’t have been more important even if it was the entirety of Videria that had fallen asleep, but Lawrence only nodded. The prince couldn’t understand, and Mallory had no intention of trying to. He wasn’t going to win. Besides, logically, Ess *could* take care of herself. It was just that she was also alone. Familiars weren’t supposed to be alone. There was a reason they had the name.

“Then it’s settled,” Mallory said. “No point in delaying. Come.”

She had swept out the door with her snake by the time Lawrence and the prince had collected themselves enough to get out of their chairs. They caught up to her striding down the hill at a pace unsuited to the billowing black dress, even though the hem mysteriously caught on none of the twigs or leaves littering the hillside. Mallory stopped at the small pond equidistant from the hill and the village’s swamp about half a mile away. The pond birthed hundreds of frogs every spring and summer, but at the moment it was covered with a blanket of leaves. Mallory lifted her skirt primly and stirred the surface with her foot until the soggy leaves had drifted from the center of the water. She stepped out onto the pond. Her weight was held, despite the surface
of the water lacking even the thinnest layer of ice. Lawrence made sure of this when he toed the surface himself and sent ripples billowing out. The prince looked to Lawrence. Nidhogg slid onto the water and curled around his mother. She crossed her arms and tapped her foot.

“Just don’t think about it too hard and you’ll be fine,” Lawrence said wearily. The prince still hesitated, which was the wrong thing to do if you wanted a spell to work, so Lawrence took hold of his hand and led him onto the pond like he was leading a horse. The prince followed obediently enough, and Lawrence was a little impressed to note they were not submerged in freezing water. Not thinking too hard could be a useful talent of the prince’s.

“I’ve never done anything like this before,” the prince said, shifting from foot to foot.

“Lucky you.”

“My, er, immortal soul isn’t going to be warped by participating in this, is it?”

What a question. “It’s a pretty cheap immortal soul if it is, your highness.”

“And this is going to deliver us to the castle?”

“That’s the idea.” Lawrence peered down at the water. It was glassy and black, reflecting the moon up past his head. “Stop asking so many questions, though, please, or you’ll ruin it.”

“What? How?”

“It doesn’t like curiosity.”

“What doesn’t—?”

“By your leave, highness,” Mallory said with a theatrical sweep of her hand. She stamped down on the water.

It was like being picked up by a damp, enormous hand, shaken around and listened to for any rattling, then tossed over an invisible shoulder. It was also not actually anything like that; no
hand that Lawrence had ever encountered prickled to the touch, and saying it was like being
shaken around was like saying that fire could feel a little warm, or like saying that the universe
was rather big. Touching down wasn’t so bad, at least. You only felt like your feet had been
smashed into your knees with a hammer when you touched down.

Mallory landed on her feet exactly as she meant to, in a practiced whirl of cloak and skirt.
Lawrence stumbled, but kept his balance. The prince ended up in a sprawl across the room.

And it was a room, now, no longer a pond or a hill. A large closet, really. Lawrence
fumbled for the glint off a lantern and struck it to life with the matchbox next to it. It was the
same cloakroom he’d used to escape from the princess and her brother that first week of work. It
was much emptier than before. Someone must have taken all the coats and hats inside, either to
make the sleeping guests more comfortable or to sell while no one was paying attention. One
theory was as likely as another.

The door flung open with a bang. Mallory swept out of the room with no regard for
stealth. There was little point in asking her to be quiet. Lawrence set the lantern down and helped
the prince off the floor as Nidhogg left them there. “Are you hurt?”

“A touch traumatized is all.” The prince got up, wincing. “This is the castle, isn’t it? I
was confused for a moment. Have you done that before?”

“A few times. If you’re all right, we’d better go catch up with her or things might take a
turn for the worse.”

“Do you still think she’s going to storm our defenses?”

Lawrence blew out the lantern. There was enough light coming from the hall. “No, your
highness, I think she’s going to get lost.”
They jogged out after her. Someone had indeed lit the candles in the hall, although they were in need of replacement and the floors were gathering a patina of dust. This struck Lawrence strongly, for some reason. It was the first time he’d been confronted with far-reaching evidence of what he’d done. How many people had lost a week of their lives? If you added them all up, did it count as a single murder spread translucently thin? Tyrone had wanted to go out and enjoy the festivities after work, he remembered. Some girl in the caravans he liked to meet. He was going to have to wait another year, now.

“You may as well leave off with the ‘highness’ at this point,” the prince said, bringing Lawrence back to reality. “It feels much too distant after going on a journey together. And you saved my life, sort of.”

“It was a week, your highness,” Lawrence said. They rounded the corner, where Mallory was now climbing the first set of stairs she’d seen, Nidhogg following her loyally. “I don’t know if you can call it a journey, and ‘saving your life’ consisted of some pain and a spell I didn’t do. Besides, I’m still technically employed here, so it wouldn’t be proper. No one has thrown me in the dungeons yet.”

“What would you call me if you were thrown in the dungeons?”

“Probably the same thing,” Lawrence said. Politeness was a hard habit to break, even if it was a thin veneer over irony sometimes.

“Well, that wouldn’t do,” the prince said decisively. “We shall have to keep you out of there, in that case.”

They reached Mallory at the top of the stairs. She stopped just long enough to look imperiously from end to end of the new corridor. She angled herself to stride off in the opposite
direction of the ballroom. Lawrence took off the other way, and she followed him as if that was where she had meant to go all along. It wasn’t hard to get her to take advice if you knew how to do it.

They didn’t run across anyone on the way to the ballroom, even though there were surely guards posted to patrol and keep an eye on the sleeping nobles. Lawrence assumed his mother had something to do with it. She wouldn’t like to bother with anyone unless there was an appreciative audience to see it. The two people with her made for poor spectators. When they reached the grand double doors at last, Mallory burst them open with a wave of her hand—in case there ended up being anyone watching on the other side, Lawrence assumed. Mallory’s shoes clicked over the marble floor as she went inside.

The ballroom was a much more orderly version of the scene they had left. The nobles, in their candy-colored dresses and neat suits, had all been lined up in tidy rows atop blankets, sheets, coats, whatever soft something had been at hand. Some of the rows had conspicuous gaps. Presumably, not all the families of the victims had been content to leave their members where they were as investigations went on, and it would be difficult for a police officer to say no to a lord. One woman nearby, with a long nose and a pleasant face, had her fingers laced under her heart as if she was only taking a much-needed nap. There were no guards.

The banquet table was empty. Lawrence considered that the police might have eaten it all and cleaned the dishes away, and he felt irrationally pleased at the thought.

Mallory had reached the center of the ballroom by the time he was through taking everything in. “I don’t see the king in this rabble,” she said. She nudged a portly man in the side, who sniffed and rolled over. “Nor the queen nor princess. Did they not come?”
“They’ll be somewhere separate from everyone else,” the prince said. “For security reasons. Perhaps in their own rooms? There’s no reason they wouldn’t be taken to their beds, is there? Even if we only have so many beds for everyone else.”

“Bother,” Mallory said. She fished around in her wide sleeves and plucked out a scroll. She wasn’t doing it to impress anyone anymore, Lawrence realized. It was just habit by now. “We’ll need to find them first, obviously,” she said. “No point in waking the masses before their rulers.”

“Why?” asked Lawrence. “We’ll need to wake everyone eventually and they’ll be disoriented anyway, so what does the order we do it in matter?”

But the prince took Mallory’s side again. “I’d feel better if we did do them first, Law,” he said. “Besides, it looks better for us to all be awake before our guests. We’ll be needing to make a lot of apologies if we don’t want to start a war.”

It wasn’t even your fault, Lawrence wanted to say, but of course anything that had happened under the castle roof was their fault. Everything that happened in the whole country was their fault. Lawrence was struck once more by the thought that he had absolutely no idea how to make this up to anyone.

The prince slapped him on the shoulder. “Never you mind,” he said. “We’ll sort them out and be back down here quick as a wink.”

Mallory stowed her scroll back in its sleeve. “Lead on, then, your highness. The royal quarters it is.”

The royal quarters it was, but what the royal quarters turned out to be was empty. The princess’s room at the top of her tower was as tidy as she’d left it, bed still made, vanity mirror
still turned defiantly to the wall. The chambers of the king and queen, while covered in an
obscene amount of gold and mink, were no more occupied than the halls of the castle.

Mallory picked up a shiny bauble from the queen’s mahogany dresser and examined it
while the prince dithered around the door.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “Where else could they be?”

Lawrence was staring around the room. The princess’s room, while big, was mercilessly
practical compared to this. Did anyone really need velvet curtains? How much work was it to
keep them clean? He pushed Nidhogg off the ocean of a bed. The snake hissed at him without
rancor. “Maybe it would be too difficult to guard them one by one,” he said. “Maybe they’re all
together somewhere else?”

“Yes . . . yes, that makes sense.” The prince stopped wringing his hands. “I suppose . . .
yes, do you think they may be in the throne room? It’s very spacious, but quite defensible,
obviously. There would be no problems in there.”

Mallory tossed the bauble up in the air and caught it. “A throne room,” she said. “That
does sound appropriate.”

“Mother,” Lawrence said warningly.

“Did I say I meant it was appropriate for me?” she asked. She stowed the bauble away in
her sleeve in a blatant display of theft that the prince did not notice. “No. We’re not the first.
Someone beat us here.”

“What?” said the prince.

“What, what? I thought I was quite clear.” She folded her arms. Her mouth was set in a
thin line. “I hate second place. It always looks so foolish. First place always lords it over you.”
“You mean someone beat us here, other than the search party and the police,” Lawrence said. He was getting the same sinking feeling as when he’d realized he wouldn’t be able to find Ess no matter how hard he looked.

Mallory waved a hand. “Of course someone other than them. I mean someone with actual vision. They’re still here, too. Waiting for us to greet them, I wager. The throne room sounds about right for that. No one waits in a sleeping castle without waiting in the throne room, not if they have any self-respect.”

“But how can you tell?” the prince asked, voice strained, even though Lawrence already knew the answer as he spoke.

“Don’t be silly,” Mallory said, heading for the door with Nidhogg in tow. “Of course I can tell. It’s another witch.”
Chapter 16

Lawrence had, in truth, never expected to see the throne room. It was for visiting dignitaries and petitioning townsfolk, not cooks and scullery boys. He’d never even been in the area near it: dead center of the top floor where there were only a couple windows. Proof that the architects of the castle had considered some defensive strategy, at least. The place was impenetrable.

The place was impenetrable if you didn’t have a loaded witch, anyway.

Mallory blew the thirty foot tall doors off their grand hinges. They sailed, hit the floor upright ten feet away, and tipped over to a roaring crash at the finish. She strode in on clacking heels as the echoing noise died down. The prince gaped after her, no voice even to protest with. Everyone knows witches ruin castles, Lawrence thought, and don’t they just. Anything to make an entrance. He tugged the prince’s sleeve, and after her they trailed.

The room was unreasonably big. The ceiling reached up three stories high. Chandeliers hung, resplendent with a thousand flickering flames reflected a thousand times more in the shiny floor. If the intended effect was to make visitors feel unwelcome and insignificant, then it was doing an excellent job on Lawrence so far.

Mallory stopped halfway to the thrones at the head of the room, of which there were four. A pair of high windows threw them into some relief. Two larger ones with red trimming dominated a smaller, bluer one on either side. The king and queen sat in the larger ones, heads lolling, eyes closed. Their daughter sat in the left blue throne, tidy and self-possessed as ever in her own slumber. They were all arrayed still in their party finery. And in the right blue throne . . .
“Cassandra,” Mallory said in some surprise. “Well done. I didn’t think you had the ambition for something like this.”

“I don’t,” said Cassandra. She was in the same dress Lawrence had seen her in last. She sat unusually straight, hands in her lap.

Mallory watched her, long nail tapping her chin. “No,” she agreed. “The little throne wouldn’t do. You would have taken one of the big ones. Get up, then.”

“I can’t,” said Cassandra.

“You’re a witch, girl, no one can keep you there. Get up.”

“I can’t,” said Cassandra. “Mal?”

“What?”

“Above you.”

A few things happened very quickly after that:

Lawrence seized the prince around the scruff of the neck and shoved him onto the floor;

Mallory flung her hand up and something exploded above and hit the marble around them in a great many small pattering pieces;

Cassandra said, “the left side, the left side—”;

Nidhogg launched himself, one hundred pounds of scaly, spitting fury, into a soaring eagle made from nothing but fire and bit down;

Lawrence looked up;

And Vivienne walked serenely down the steps from the thrones.

She had a mostly black cat asleep in her arms, which she was petting. It was Ess.
“Just a little welcome,” Vivienne said. “You’re a little too paranoid to die of that, Mallory, honey. And good job, getting him out of the way,” she added to Lawrence, who still had a hand frozen on the back of the prince’s head. “I did think I was going to get him that time. Thwarted again.”

“Again?” said the prince, who was looking pale.

“What, both of you?” Mallory asked, brushing some hair from her face. “You think you know a person. Just what have you two been doing on these vacations of yours?”

“Not both of us,” Vivienne said cheerfully. “Just me. Cass had no idea. Your foresight doesn’t work too well on other witches, does it, Cass? She sensed great danger around me and Lawrence and thought it was us in the danger. Half right, anyway, the poor dear. Though she’s been sticking to me like glue, and I have to say that it has gotten a little annoying. I’ve put her in time-out for the moment.”

Cassandra shrugged. Anyone other than a witch might have looked abashed. “Sorry,” she said. “She’s a lot stronger than me.”

“You could have invited me,” Mallory said, all crossness. “You know I hate being left out of these things.”

“Oh, sweetie, no,” Vivienne said seriously. “You’re really even more annoying than Cassandra is, and you have a moral compass, of a sort. You would have objected to hiring anybody to beat the living daylights out of your son, even if it was more logical than leaving him be. There’s no point to having the royal family here if I don’t have the full set, you see. Princes will tend to take revenge if left unweeded.”

Nidhogg seethed around the hem of Mallory’s dress. Lawrence straightened up.
“You?” said Lawrence. “You’re the—?”

“Mmhm.” Vivienne rubbed Ess’s head. “You found me. Congratulations.” She spoke as if she had a cookie for smart little boys who did their homework. She probably did, too. She always kept some treat in her pockets or the inside of her hat.

They were going to drown me, Lawrence almost said. Those men, the ones you hired. They didn’t care. You didn’t tell them to let anyone live. You didn’t care. I’ve known you since I was born.

“Honestly,” Vivienne sighed as if she was reading his mind and the cookie offer was now rescinded. “You smile and you bake pies and everyone neglects to remember the ‘witch’ part. Witches are not nice, Lawrence. It’s not what we do.”

“I’m nice,” Cassandra volunteered. “When I feel like it.”

“You’re lower on the ladder than we are, love.”

“I’m not annoying,” said Mallory.

“Why do you have Ess?” Lawrence cut in before the usual squabble could start itself up. Vivienne looked at him in surprise. “Goodness, why do you think? You were running around loose, and there’s no better way to blackmail a witch than to snag their familiar.”

“I’m not a witch,” Lawrence said, “and why in the world would you be concerned over what I was doing? I understand if you were trying to get to him—” He nodded at the paralyzed prince on the floor. “—but there were easier ways—?”

Vivienne tutted, somewhere on the spectrum between approval and disappointment.

“Well, I hardly know where to begin with that. For now, Lawrence, you would do well to
consider that sometimes people do pay attention to you. You can’t dismiss people and expect there to be no consequences. But now I’m a little tired of questions.”

She smiled a sweet, crinkly smile. “This is where the blackmail part comes in. I can’t seem to lift this spell you’ve put on everyone, so Mallory, I need you to be a dear and help your son wake our fine ruler up or I’m going to have to kill his cat.”

Lawrence’s heart stopped at around the same time Mallory said peevishly, “I was going to, but after all this I fail to see why I should anymore.”

“Oh, come,” Vivienne said. “Even at this distance, I’m sure the death of his familiar would be quite painful. I’m not sure he’d survive the process if it was drawn out, especially at his level.”

“But there’s no point in all this!” the prince burst out. He’d climbed to his feet at last, pale and shaking. “We were going to wake them all anyway! You didn’t need to do anything!”

“Yes, that’s the trouble, your highness,” said Vivienne. She still spoke with the same patience she always used when there was something immensely obvious you had missed and she was going to have to be the one to explain it to you. “You were going to wake them all. I only need the king, at the moment—possibly the queen, too, but the princess should stay as she is for demonstrative purposes. It will be quite the situation if I suddenly have a castle full of confused nobles to deal with. No, it’s always best to keep things as simple as possible, and this is a golden opportunity.” She examined Ess’s paw. “Eliminate distractions and you’re well on your way to success. I never did think familiars were useful for that. Never saw the point of one, myself.”

“You were never witch enough,” Mallory said.
“Dear,” said Vivienne, “I’m more witch than anyone else in this room will ever be. Now, your antidote. Just the king, if you would.”

Lawrence touched his mother’s arm before she could snap back with some unwise remark. She scowled at him. “Please,” he said, quietly, and the scowl disappeared, or at least shrank into a frown. The scroll sullenly produced itself from her sleeve again. The prince did not follow them as they approached the steps, though Lawrence didn’t look back to see what expression was on his face. Cassandra was as silent as the rest of them, but her own face was as perfectly inscrutable as ever.

They reached the steps, and Mallory unrolled the scroll. It had far fewer instructions than the one she had given Lawrence all those months ago. In fact, it only had one line, less than five words. Lawrence stared at it.

“One more question,” Lawrence said to the old woman above them. “If I may?”

Vivienne nodded. “I expect we’re in no rush, dear. One more, then.”

“I still don’t understand something,” he said.

“Oh, no,” Vivienne said. “You’re asking for me to reveal my evil scheme. Do I need to cultivate a villainous laugh to boot? I thought better of you, Lawrence, truly I did.”

She adjusted her hat on her head. “What shall I say? Do I want to rule the world? Perhaps turning it into a forest of darkness has caught my fancy. I’m not Mallory, love, no one with any sense is aiming for total domination. I’ll be satisfied with planting a few seeds for later. A compulsion spell doesn’t have much finesse to it, unlike what some people seem to think, but it’s amazing what a little fear in the right place can do.” She was finally satisfied with the angle of
Mallory had bristled up into a rage at all this, Nidhogg rising at her side. “No,” said Lawrence. His fingertips were buzzing. “That wasn’t the question.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I don’t care what your reasons are,” he said, and he didn’t. He’d stopped caring the instant Ess was involved and the bile had begun to crawl up his throat in a slow, acid boil. He did not care what excuses Vivienne had to offer. None of them were going to be good enough.

“I was going to ask you,” he said, and he was not five feet away from her now, “why you don’t take your own advice about dismissing people.”

He twitched his fingers. A ripple sighed through the air.

Very gently, wholly unremarkably, and without experiencing the least discomfort, the castle awoke.

Behind Vivienne, the queen stirred. Vivienne turned, saying, “How did you—”

She was interrupted by one of the high windows behind the throne shattering. A familiar orange cloud roared down upon her like the wrath of a released deity, gnashing and screaming mouthlessly.

She threw up her arms and it exploded. Lawrence dove for Ess as Mallory fired off a lightning bolt which fizzled out in the fog with a smell like burned toast. He caught the cat before she hit the ground and rolled away from the two witches, who were circling each other.

Ess opened her eyes and looked up at him. She yawned her pink mouth.

What did I miss? she asked.
“Law,” said the prince.

“Oh dear,” said Cassandra.

“Annoying, am I?” said Mallory.

“What the hell,” said Princess Leticia.

Lawrence gathered Ess to him. “I’ll tell you later,” he promised, adding behind him, “Your highness, follow me. With alacrity, please,” and ran full-tilt for the thrones.

The royal siblings took after their mother more than their father, her being blonde and blue-eyed as could be, with fine crow’s feet that her children might have someday. The king, on the other hand, had brown hair and a small goatee on a rather weaker chin than his son’s and eyes that Lawrence was practiced enough to know, from experience with his daughter, could cut right into you. Both were faces Lawrence had seen on currency before. They looked much nobler and less baffled on the currency than they were now.

“Alex,” the queen said, “would you mind terribly telling us what’s going on? Who are these women? Who’s this?” she added, focusing on Lawrence. Her eyes were not so needle-precise as her husband’s, but Lawrence was learning to take nothing for granted. He bobbed his head politely.

“It would take much too long to explain,” the prince said. “This is Lawrence. He’s a . . . ” He looked to Lawrence for some explanation of exactly what he was.

“Cook,” Lawrence said firmly. “Apprentice.”

“He’s the one who woke you up,” the prince explained.

“And the one who put you to sleep,” Lawrence said. He might as well get that part over with, even if it did make the princess look at him with her old calculation setting back in. Was
there an *aha* in her face? “Your majesties, I think it would be a good idea to continue this conversation behind your seats.” There was precious little elsewhere to hide in the expansive room. Cassandra had already taken the hint and was slipping behind hers—whatever Vivienne had done to keep her in place, she was evidently too distracted to keep it up now.

“Why should we do a thing like that?” the king asked. He was staring past Lawrence’s arm, where Vivienne was saying something to Mallory and sounding far less sticky-sweet about it. “Are you not the one responsible for . . . whatever this is?”

*Aren’t we?* Ess asked. She was also staring back at them.

“No, I am,” Lawrence said. “I really am. I’d also like to be the one responsible for fixing it, please. Behind the seats?”

The wall behind Vivienne rumbled and twisted like a living thing. Lawrence dove behind the biggest throne, and the king dove around the other side with him. They looked at each other. Everyone else joined them with equal haste.

“Lawrence, wasn’t it?” the king said to him.

“Yes, your majesty?”

“A cook, you said? Here?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“You’re fired.”

“Yeah,” Lawrence said.

Masonry and shrapnel rained over them. Lawrence covered his head until it was over.

“I think I would like to leave,” said Cassandra, arranging her glasses. “Before they take the whole castle down.”
The queen’s eyes traveled to her pointy hat. “Excuse me. Aren’t you a witch, madam?”

“So are they,” said Cassandra, and didn’t add your majesty. “And they’re a lot worse than me. C’mon,” she said to Lawrence, “let’s get out of here. The royals can come if they want.”

Seriously, what’s going on? Is everyone awake? Ess wriggled around in Lawrence’s arms, but he tightened his hold on her and she took the hint.

“So seconded,” said the princess. “Interrogate them later, Mother, Father.” She turned to Lawrence in a rustle of skirts. “There’s a back door behind the corner tapestry. Do you think we can make it?”

“I don’t see why not. They’re not paying much attention to anyone else,” said Lawrence. “They usually don’t. It’s sort of an occupational hazard.”

Something crashed at the other end of the room. It sounded like one of the ex-doors.

“Witches,” the princess said under her breath. She demurely lifted her dress a few inches from the ground and kicked off a pair of crystal high heels. “Well, ballroom dresses aren’t the best for running in, but we’ll see what we can manage.”

Another crash. Lawrence took the beat of silence after it to be as good a cue as any. He sprinted, and the rest followed his lead: Ess hugged to his heart, siblings right behind him, monarchs after that, Cassandra at the back. It took about three seconds to reach the corner.

The corner tapestry, which featured a scene of knights nobly running at each other with long lances on horseback, lacked much presence compared to some of the other tapestries lining the back wall. It was a little dingy near the base and had a few threads trailing loose. With the poorly aimed force of two angry spellcasters dueling behind him, Lawrence would later admit
that he may have been incautious as he approached. To his credit, most tapestries didn’t explode into flames when you ran towards them.

Prince and princess, who were just behind Lawrence at the front, seized one of his shoulders each and yanked him backward. Heat rolled over them. It smelled like burned hair.

_Holy crap_, Ess said.

“Are you all right?” the prince asked. Lawrence hardly paid him any attention.

Head Sorcerer Brunswick strode out of the flames from the hidden passage, tall hat gone and robes billowing around his feet. He had murder written across his face.

“Oh,” Lawrence said, blankly. “Oh, that’s right.”

“Why is _he_ here?” the princess hissed, her hand digging into Lawrence’s sleeve. Before Lawrence could explain that it was his fault again—he was fairly sure it was, even if the waking spell itself had been hazy and unfocused and over before he knew it, he probably should have thought this part through ahead of time, left the troublemakers asleep—and before he could instinctively apologize, Brunswick raised an arm.

He scythed it down. Lawrence slammed back into the brother and sister as hard as he could, bearing them down where they had been holding him up, and a fireball _fwooshed_ over their heads. The three of them—four, including Ess—tumbled in an embarrassment of bumping, painful limbs. The fireball hit the unbroken window behind them. For an instant, there was a shower of hot glass. It hurt more than seemed fair.

The frame of the window popped as it cooled. Lawrence swallowed the aftertaste of fireworks and sparklers and tried to disentangle himself from the others in a hurry. He saw the
arm rise again through a gap in the crook of the prince’s elbow. He saw it reach its apex and he said, “Please don’t.”

The arm seized. When it did not fall, the king and queen scurried forth to help their children up. Brunswick stared up at his arm. More wrath than bemusement twitched under his beard. He clenched his hand and pulled it back, slow, as if drawing the string of a rigid bow. A fierce pain knifed Lawrence’s temple. Ess shrank into herself.

Brunswick stopped and vanished with a crack. Something slashed at the space he had occupied. It was a sword. It was, to the point, a very long, very sharp sword.

“Goodness,” said Cassandra.

“Back behind me, you all,” Streisand said. He held the sword with one hand, unwavering, at Brunswick, who had reappeared several feet away in a flurry of sparks. Lawrence didn’t think he’d ever seen Streisand hold anything heavier than a mixing bowl before.

“Ah, Li,” the king said, appreciative, as a mildly thirsty man might receive some lemonade. “I hope we haven’t inconvenienced you.”

Brunswick’s fingers convulsed. Li Streisand flicked the tip of the blade warningly. “It’s all right, sire,” he said. “You’re not the first tonight.”

He lunged before he finished talking, almost casual. This time Brunswick caught the blade in his hand. The metal shone blue. Streisand snatched his hand back; the next second, the sword was in red-hot pieces on the floor. Streisand stepped away and drew a knife from under his coat. He watched the sorcerer.

“I demand to know what is going on,” said Brunswick. A vein pulsed erratically at his neck.
“Well,” said Streisand, level, “for one thing, you’ve just come close to committing treason several times in one night. It may be a record. Congratulations.”

“Don’t start,” Brunswick spat. “I know what I’m talking about.” He thrust a finger at the space behind Streisand. “Who’s the boy?”

This had not been the question Streisand expected. He looked around and saw Lawrence, still on the ground. Lawrence had Ess cradled in the protection of his arms. He had, he became aware, a bloody elbow and a tear in his clothes at the knee.

“Fletcher?” Streisand said, as though understanding the question was more surprising than hearing it. “What’s Fletcher got to do with anything?”

“He’s the one who conjured that orange—” Brunswick took a deep breath. “—monstrosity. A new hire, wasn’t he? Your jurisdiction? What was it going to be, fighting fire with fire? Magic against magic? The fool has no control!”

You’re right here, Ess said. They could stand to act like it.

“That’s terribly rude,” the prince said as if he’d heard her.

“Fire with fire?” Streisand asked. He was now completely lost. “I’m sorry, is anyone going to talk sense any time soon?”

The king shrugged in an unkingly gesture. “Things have been happening a tad fast for us as well,” said the queen.

Lawrence looked over his shoulder. “Excuse me,” he said.

“Look, it’s really not that complicated,” said the prince.

“It’s not complicated to you,” said the princess. “What were you doing in the middle of all this, hm? Off having another adventure?”
“Oh, come on, now, Let, you know that’s not fair.”

“Excuse me!”

“What?” the prince said, but no one else paid him any mind.

“I knew you’ve had it out for me from the start,” said Brunswick. “I’ve had to sneak around in the middle of the night ever since the beginning of the year to get any work done, and you couldn’t let me be for a second.”

“Spare me,” Streisand said, “you couldn’t sneak your way out of a closet.”

“I’ve done enough to keep you from any proof!”

“I’ve had proof enough for months, you flouncy nitwit—”

“Li, this isn’t quite the time—”

“I’m really sorry, sir,” Lawrence said, because he knew a lost cause when he saw one, and took Streisand’s knife as tactfully as he could. It wasn’t difficult. The man only stared as his fingers were divested of their property. Lawrence wasn’t sure he knew what had happened for a second.

Lawrence had no experience throwing knives, but that was fine. The important part was the metal, anyway, not the finesse, as Brunswick had demonstrated with the sword. Lawrence just wound back and pitched the thing as hard as he could. It collided with a boulder of ice roaring down upon them.

The boulder changed its mind mid-roar. It dropped into the marble flooring with a meteoric slam, cracking it into a dozen spidering lines under their feet. Brunswick drew away from them like they were live snakes. Streisand still stared. Nice, Ess said.
“Please be more careful,” Lawrence called to the other end of the room. “You might hurt someone.”

“Not now, Lawrence!” his mother shouted. She swirled her cloak around and a vine the size of a tree trunk boiled out of its depths. It stabbed into another boulder of ice rocketing toward her with a deafening crunch. The boulder smashed into pieces around them. The vine whipped around toward Vivienne with a hiss like Nidhogg, and fell to the ground in flames a moment later. Lawrence wisely backed off.

Streisand gathered himself enough to swallow. “Who?” he said.

“My mother,” Lawrence said. “And someone I’m not sure how to introduce. It’s Caligny, by the way. Not Fletcher. I’m sorry,” he said again.

“Caligny?” Brunswick interrupted. “Esmerelda Nethienne’s Caligny?”

“Excuse me?” said the princess. “Nethienne? We’re discussing the Grand Witch? Final Enchanter? Not a different Nethienne.”

That was unexpected. Even the queen looked startled, and her husband had turned the color of sour milk. Lawrence had always assumed his mother was the only one who paid any attention to their genealogy. The thought that there was someone else who could trace the magical roots of a family tree back more than one or two generations was—well, it was a little creepy, in fact, now that he thought about it. It was his family, not anyone else’s, not even a history book’s.

“Great-grandmother,” he said, “but does it matter right now?”

“I’d heard of her granddaughter,” said Brunswick, in some awe. “Is that her? Mallory?”

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Mallory caught a lightning bolt and smashed it into the wall. The thunderous crack apparently wasn’t enough to stop her from eavesdropping any conversation that featured her as a subject. “The one and only,” she said. She withdrew her hand from the smoking crater and shook out what must have been all kinds of pins and needles. “You can ask for my autograph later, wizard. I’m tied up at the moment.” She said “wizard” the way that a duchess might say the word “servant.”

“Grand Witch,” Vivienne said, in the closest approximation of a sneer Lawrence had ever heard from her. “Saints preserve us from Grant Witch. There’s nothing grand about getting your own practice banned across the whole nation for one silly plague. It’s really about time someone else took the title.”

“My grandmother, Vivienne.” Mallory raised her hands above her head like some concert pianist before the first note. “Watch what you say.”

“And my old coven,” said Vivienne. “I’ll talk as I please, child.”

From the way Mallory’s mouth twisted to a snarl, this was worse than the lightning, the boulders of ice, and the fiery eagle all put together. “Old coven!” she shouted. “I’ve known you thirty years, crone!” She struck down with her hands, and Vivienne actually stumbled back under some invisible blow. “Thirty years! You never said you were in her coven!”

If she had planned on saying more, and Lawrence was sure she had, it was silenced by Vivienne striking back. Lawrence heard Brunswick take a step away behind him. Mallory caught herself on her knees.

“I had sense,” said Vivienne. “Now, I am very tired of your tantrums, Mallory, and I see no reason to continue putting up with them. Be silent, please. I said be silent.”
Mallory’s mouth clamped shut. Someone had taken Lawrence’s elbow—the princess, probably—to try to tug him toward the glowing embers of the tapestry while the witches were preoccupied. He didn’t move. His mother had brought the back of her wide sleeve to her nose to staunch the blood dripping out of it. The red stained it a shiny midnight black. Vivienne took a deep breath.

She stopped. She let it out as a sigh. “That was stupid, Cass,” she said. “I was going to let you run.”

Cassandra had pushed her palms out in front of her. They shook under the weight of keeping Vivienne in place.

“I know,” she said. She sounded only vaguely regretful.

Cassandra brought her hands together with a clap that rattled Lawrence’s teeth, and, without ceremony, the roof fell in on them.
Chapter 17

Dust choked the air. It stung Lawrence’s eyes, tickled his nose, clung to the back of his throat when he opened his mouth to breathe. Coughing didn’t help. He swallowed instead, which was not much better, and squinted at the heavy thing that lay across his legs. There was little light to see by, but it was something flat and patterned with round semicircles. It took a moment to realize that they were shingles from the roof. His legs didn’t hurt, meaning either nothing was broken or he had more adrenaline in his system than he had realized. He looked up, through a patchwork of broken masonry, and saw stars.

Lawrence turned his head. Something black was moving beside his head. It was blessedly unhurt, surveying him for damage with yellow eyes and a searching pink nose.

*My fur is ruined,* Ess announced once she was satisfied.

“Ugh,” Lawrence said, and the rest of the heap surrounding him took this as its cue to start groaning.

The prince was the first to make intelligible sentences, even if all he had to offer was, “What was *that*?”

“I think it was our roof,” his father told him.

“Is everyone quite all right?” The queen. She was met with a chorus of unhappy assent from most of the party. Lawrence let out a breath.

“I don’t hear Brunswick,” the prince said. “Is he there?”

Streisand snorted, somewhere close on Lawrence’s left. “Took his chance to make an escape on his own, I’ll wager. Can’t have gone far, but it’ll be hell to keep him down when he’s caught.”
“Couldn’t our friend just throw another ceiling at him?” The princess’s voice dripped with a sourness that, if bottled and sold, would have made millions. “We have so many. No need to hold back.”

“That was all I had,” said Cassandra. She was back to sounding dreamy and distant, probably lying on her back somewhere in the mess. “I mean between doing the obvious and keeping everyone alive after. I don’t think I can stand, actually. I hope one of you is ready to carry me out of here.”

“Li, find the good lady and help her up, please,” the queen said. There was silence for a moment, which Lawrence used to imagine the thin line that Streisand’s mouth had pressed itself into. Then some pattering and muffled cursing as the man extracted himself from wood and tile. A splintered support beam, sticking out over Lawrence’s head, groaned slowly lower (Watch it, watch it, watch it, Ess said, scrambling out of the danger zone) until it rested a couple inches above his nose, where it stayed. Streisand, as he passed by, reached down an absent hand and pulled Lawrence out from under the beam by his collar.

“Thank you,” Lawrence said. Streisand only let him go in reply and picked a path to a pair of round, cracked glasses on the ground. Beside them, a braid of hair was visible coiling its way under a large section of roof.

Streisand bent over, took hold of the edge of the roof, braced his knees, and heaved. Dust and pebbles crumbled off the edges until the eaves were shakily level with Streisand’s shoulders.

“That’s all you’re getting,” Streisand said. His voice was strained with effort. “Hurry up and crawl out.”

“Swoon,” Cassandra said, without inflection.
The family was beginning to converse again as to who was where and how to help each other get out. Lawrence let them be. What was more important was that, a distance away, a scaly heap had curled around a pile of black cloth. Lawrence kicked off a sheet of tile lying across his legs and hurried over to the hazy lump. Nidhogg slid off his charge when he saw who was approaching.

Lawrence took his mother’s arm and helped her up. “Are you all right? Where’s Vivienne?”

“Vanished,” Mallory spat. “Quick as she figured out what Cass was doing, the old bag.”

Lawrence cast about. “But there’s no water around here. You can’t teleport far without it, can you?”

“No. She’ll be somewhere close.” Mallory patted her head. Her hat was gone, leaving only crow-feather hair speckled with plaster. “You’d better—”

Something smelled of heat and fireworks.

“—damn damn damn—”

Nidhogg lunged forth. He wrapped around Lawrence in an enormous, slithery ribbon and bore him to the ground. Less than a foot from his face, a chunk of ceiling the size of a door shot up into the air just in time to catch itself on purple flames. It crashed to the ground and split into two neat, fiery halves.

Mallory meaningfully shook her sleeve away from her hand. Her nose was bleeding again. “Now isn’t the time, wizard,” she said. “Find someone else to inflict your existence on.”

An overturned column jutted out from the rubble at an angle not far away. Brunswick stood atop its peak, half as tall again as he would have been on the ground. His arms were spread
out to either side of him as if parting the sea. The hem of his red robes swirled about his ankles in the night breeze. A shaft of moonlight struck down upon him, lit his hair and the stars on his robe a blinding white.

It had that certain dramatic flair that Lawrence, as he pushed off Nidhogg, would have ventured to call witch-like. He thought his mother might have appreciated it on different day.

“Mallory Caligny,” said Brunswick, “you will desist in the wanton destruction of my castle.”

Mallory leveled a finger like a cocked musket at the High Sorcerer’s head. “You have three seconds to get out,” she said. “And it’s three seconds more than you ought to get. I am not having a good night.”

“*Your* castle.” Streisand sounded outraged.

His arms were preoccupied with steadying Cassandra, who was paying him no mind. “I don’t think you should fight him right now, Mal,” she said.

“He’s outclassed,” Mallory said, disdainful in her torn dress and mussed-up hair.

“It’s not going to end well,” Cassandra insisted. She was using the voice that meant the future was about to be full of unpleasant surprises for anyone who didn’t pay attention. More worryingly, she was making eye contact.

Brunswick started to speak again, but Mallory was not a listening sort of person.

“No one cares about your silly schemes,” Mallory said. “You aren’t *important*, wizard. You never were. I’ve known you twenty minutes, and even I can tell that. It sounds like you’re about the only one at this point who hasn’t realized it.” She brushed the drying blood from her mouth. “All right. I’m feeling generous. I’ll educate you.”
She drummed her nails on her arm. “Let’s see. You’ve been receiving letters from some anonymous benefactor, yes? Left in some location for you to find? Perhaps the top of a tower, the tallest tower in the castle. That’s classic, that seems Viv’s style.”

Lawrence thought of Brunswick in the astronomy tower. That was embarrassingly obvious, come to think of it. He silently promised himself never to let his mother know he hadn’t thought of it before.

Nidhogg abruptly slid away from Lawrence, and something prodded his head. It was Ess. She was nosing Lawrence over for injury again, rattling off something about how she couldn’t leave you alone for a second, good lord, what’s it going to be next, are you going to cartwheel off a flaming building into a pit of spikes?

He touched her back. “Go hide,” he said, quietly.

Mallory went on. She was back in her element, all stagecraft and mockery. “What did they say, these letters? Plans, I’m sure, a great many plans. Nothing big at first, just small things, tips to help you on your way up the ladder. I’m certain a man like you would never have earned a robe as ridiculous as that on your own merit. No, don’t fuss, I’m not finished.

“This would’ve taken a few years, I’m sure. Childlike trust takes time to manufacture. And when the big plan came around, you were worried, I suppose, wizard? But the letters were never wrong before, were they? So you missed your chance to burn them. You got greedy. It was just going to be the prince to start with, anyway, and everyone knows he’s an idiot. You were going to work your way up to the king. Except I doubt you actually were; Vivienne would have had some plan to rid herself of you and the royals both at once. Much neater. She likes things neat, Viv.
“And you? Your motive for murder? Did she offer you money? No, pettier than that. Did she promise to make you king?”

Brunswick said nothing.

The corner of Mallory’s mouth twisted up. “Honestly? King? And you bought it? Who ends up king after a coup as clumsy as this? You were made a stooge, man. An idiot’s one thing, but what’s worse is you didn’t even have the grace to realize it. Even the fool prince has you beat there.”

Ess looked from face to face. What’s she doing?

“Being herself,” Lawrence said, still sotto voce. “Go hide.”

Brunswick slid his hands into his sleeves. When he spoke, it was with the iceberg calm possessed by those who have taken everything into consideration and realized they now have nothing to lose.

“You,” Brunswick said, “are nothing more than a vile, contemptible, weak, puffed-up, egotistical excuse for a witch, and I will take a great deal of pleasure in killing you first.”

Mallory pressed a long, lacquered finger to the skin under her eye and pulled it down.

Incredible, Ess said.

They struck at the same time. Their spells met in the middle in a clash of smells and tastes and an electric feeling that buzzed all the way to the back of Lawrence’s throat, and then the two of them were gone, each vanished to some other end of the room to try and get the drop on the other. Lawrence put a hand over his mouth and nose and tried not to throw up.

Ess bumped her shoulder against his. Okay, enough lying around, let’s beat feet.
“She can’t fight right now,” Lawrence said. His mouth tasted like copper. Brunswick was older and had considerably less finesse, but he was going into the duel fresh. Mallory was exhausted.

*Seriously, get up, I think they’re going to come back.*

An explosion rattled Lawrence’s teeth. “She was bleeding, she can’t—”

*I know! I know. Just get up.*

With the help of one of the charred halves of the ceiling Mallory had used as a shield against Brunswick, Lawrence got up. Ess herded him toward the thrones, which were still mostly intact and remained the most reliable protection in the room. Lawrence made it there, pebbles of rubble skittering around his shoes, and half-tripped behind one.

“Glad you survived the party,” said Streisand. He was kneeling against the back of the biggest throne with his shoulder jammed into it like he had a grudge.

Lawrence turned his head this way and that. “What happened to . . . ?” Lawrence waved a hand to indicate the heap of roof that had been suspiciously silent for some time.

Streisand nudged an indignant Ess away with his foot. “Cleared them out through the passage while those two were grandstanding. The princeling was having a fair fit about it, but his sister’s got half an ounce of sense and he listens to her.” He stifled a sneeze. “Anyway, I told him he needed to haul that younger witch out of the way and he couldn’t argue with that. They’ll be out in the halls by now.”

“I didn’t notice.” This was somehow galling to Lawrence. He was used to noticing things.

“You weren’t supposed to.”
They left off talking to cover their heads against a shower of glass from a shattered chandelier. Lawrence dusted some of it out of his hair. He scored a nick across his thumb for his trouble. His mother and Brunswick were shouting incomprehensibly at one another over the roar of clashing spellery, a mix of smells and tastes that left Lawrence feeling sick. Nidhogg had disappeared for the moment, likely slithered under the shelter of the wreckage for safety. Ess crawled into Lawrence’s lap. Her ears lay flat against her head. She wasn’t talking.

Streisand was singing a stream of expletives under his breath. He did not pause for breath as he pulled something out of his shoe and held it to his chest. Lawrence craned his head to see. It was another blade.

What kind of person had more than two?

“Mr. Streisand?” Lawrence said suddenly. “What division were you part of in the military?”

Streisand looked down at him as though Lawrence had just shoved a lemon in his mouth, but he said, “Undercover Investigatory Operations.”

“Ah.” Tyrone would be ecstatic. “I don’t suppose you have much experience with emergency evacuations, in that case?”

“Fletch—Caligny,” Streisand said, with a restraint that must have taken a lot of effort to muster, “we’ve got an unhinged wizard and a witch dueling in the throne room and another witch running rampant who knows where, and, according to Princeling, we’ve all been asleep for a week. There are other things to worry about. A mass evacuation might make sense to a civilian, but it’s not the smartest thing to do under the circumstances.”

“No, sir, but I think it may be the kindest.”
Chandelier glass rained down on them again. This time it was mixed with hot wax. Lawrence scraped a glob of the stuff off his cheek. “People are going to get hurt, Mr. Streisand, and they haven’t done anything. Isn’t a military there to protect those kinds of people?”

Streisand grabbed a broken candle off his shoulder and threw it away. “I can tell you’ve never been in the military.”

“Are you planning on making some better use of your time, sir?”

Streisand peered around the edge of the rubble in time to almost lose his eyebrows from a blast on Mallory’s end. He ducked back behind their shield. A shaft of wood popped and sizzled on the other side of it.

“I didn’t sign up for this,” he muttered. “All right, half the staff will have headed for the hills by now anyway. I’ll organize something for the rest. No promises.”

Lawrence smiled. “None at all.”

“What’re you going to do?”

Yeah, I’d like to know that myself.

Ess had sunk her claws into his shirt, pupils cut to fine slits. Lawrence curled his arms around her. “I think, sir, that I’m going to figure that one out on the way.”

“Don’t get anyone killed,” said Streisand, and they parted.

Where Streisand went, Lawrence didn’t see. He had his own affairs to mind. The melting ice, residue of the errant boulder Vivienne had conjured earlier, slicked down the floor, but Lawrence had grown up next to a swamp. He was used to keeping his footing. He bolted over it with a practiced step, cleared a stray pile of rubble, hit the entrance to the passageway with lightning on his heels.
It was dark and narrow, not even lit with torchlight to mark the path, but unlike the throne room it had nothing he risked tripping over. Ess dropped from his arms, and he followed her down the claustrophobic corridor. The smell of gunpowder and fresh dirt receded the further they ran until it was only a tingle at the tip of his tongue. He swallowed, and then even that was gone. They slowed to a walk.

_So, do you really not have a plan?_

Lawrence looked at his feet. He couldn’t see them. His reply echoed. “Not at all.”

_I was hoping you were just being modest._

“No’s not the time for modesty, I think.”

_Sssss._ His toe bumped into the back of her leg. She had stopped. _We’re going after Vivienne, aren’t we?_

“Do you know what’s going on?”

_No. But she was trying to hurt you._ She had the voice she always had when her hackles were about to come up. _No explanations needed._

Lawrence smiled at the gloom at his feet. He couldn’t help it. “I missed you, Ess.”

_Oh, don’t turn into a big baby on me. Your mom’s got that sorcerer distracted, so let’s take care of cleanup before he wipes the floor with her._

“I never thought you’d imply she was anything less than fully up to the task at hand. What happened to witches being invincible?”

_I don’t want to talk about it,_ Ess said in a grinding way that meant she really didn’t. The pressure left his toe and they walked on again. Anything would have been preferable to the smell they had left behind, but the corridor itself wasn’t exactly roses either. Rain water had eroded
and snuck in through cracks in the architecture until a fine, thriving society of mildew had set itself up high along the walls. Something flat squelched under Lawrence’s foot. He silently praised the darkness.

*So how do we find the old crone?*

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

*Okay, now you’re lying. Fess up.*

“Well . . .” Lawrence swallowed again. The mildew wasn’t overpowering if he breathed shallow breaths through his mouth. “She said a few things, back right after you woke up. I’m not sure if you heard her.”

They stopped again, this time because they’d hit a dead end. A moment’s feeling about the cool, slimy walls (“Shouldn’t you be able to see?” *There’s nothing to see with.*) showed that it was actually a bend in the passageway. They continued on. *Can’t say I was paying much attention to the nut jobs, no.*

“It was something about being a witch.” Of course it was. There was nothing else witches cared about more than their own status. Vivienne might have derided Mallory for it, but she was no different, in her way. “And before we came, Mother was the one to say she must be in the throne room. Even without knowing it was her or trying any sort of enchantment to locate her. She knew how Vivienne thought because she knew how a witch thought.”

*What’re you getting at?*

“Well, we just have to stop thinking of her as Vivienne. What does a witch do once they’ve run from a duel in the center of a castle?”
The answer was plain. She was a witch, after all—a disgraced one, come to that, which was even worse—and it was a castle. There was not much a witch wouldn’t do to a castle. In fact, there was one thing in particular a witch would do to a castle. Everyone knew it. It was what witches did.

*She’ll take the whole thing down*, Ess said.

A roar sounded. It shook up from the ground through Lawrence’s legs, and the corridor bucked him hard to the left. He thought for a second that he had dislocated his shoulder against the wall.

*Run*, Ess advised, and they ran.

A pale light gradually made itself known, and another turn in the passage showed its end around the cracks of a door. As they reached it, a shadow flashed by, blocking the light through the cracks for an instant before it was gone.

Lawrence opened the door and leaned out carefully. Of all things, the shadow belonged to Amal, darting down the hallway, and Clark was waiting for him a little further ahead. Amal reached him and together they went wordlessly onto a staircase which Lawrence knew would lead them down—all the way to the dungeons, if they kept going. That would be Maria taken care of. He had forgotten about her. He hadn’t considered there would be no way for her to run if she was stuck in a jail cell and Streisand forgot about her, too.

Ess slipped around and went ahead. Lawrence conscientiously closed the door behind him. There was no handle on its other side; it melted almost seamlessly into the wallpaper.

Lawrence left it and hurried to catch up. “How are we going to find her?”

*I don’t know. Can’t you do something?*
“With what?”

*Magic, you doofus!*

This *again!* “For the last time,” Lawrence fairly shouted at her, “I’m *not* a witch!”

*All right!* Ess shouted back. *So don’t be one!*

Lawrence skidded to a halt right there in the hallway. Behind him, a long way back, he heard someone yell something at someone else. “What?” he said.

*You’re not a witch! Okay! You don’t have to be. No one can actually make you, so get over it!*

He pointed at her. “You,” he said, “you’ve always given me grief about wanting to be a proper familiar. *You* thought you could make me.”

*I’m not saying I haven’t been part of the problem,* she said grudgingly, *but that isn’t the point right now. The point is—the point’s— She struggled. Look, have you seen those mad idiots back there?* She leapt up, and he caught her out of reflex. She dug her claws into his shoulder.

*They wrecked the throne they were fighting over. They didn’t even care! I don’t want you to be like that, okay?*

“You said you did!”

*I’m saying something else now!*

Another explosion rocked the hall. Lawrence stumbled sideways into a column. That one had come from below, but it hadn’t been witchcraft. It tasted wrong, like fire and lightning instead of earth and night. Brunswick was still going strong. At least it meant Mallory hadn’t given up yet, but there was no telling how much longer that would last.
Lawrence pushed off the column. He felt punch-drunk. His fingers buzzed in sympathy with the magic-saturated air and something keened, soft, in his ears. He craned his head back.

Something was cutting across the white noise, a rippling tide against the flow of the ocean. It slid down from the top of his head like melting ice and worked burning through his jaw, under his tongue, dissolving into old bitterness.

“She’s up there,” he said.

*How high?*

“The roof.” He didn’t have any extra-sensory basis for that. It was only because, given how high they were already, the other option was the attic servant’s quarters. That was no place for a showdown. No. She would be waiting, a vulture silhouette against the moon, or the rising sun now, for her witness. It didn’t matter that the witness would be him. It just mattered that someone would be there. You couldn’t hold a show in an empty house and call yourself a star.

He could imagine precisely how it would go, if he didn’t get her before she got him. She would immobilize him somehow first—a statue come to life pinning his arms to his sides in a bear hug, perhaps, or a spell to turn his legs to stone—anything to keep him and his familiar in one place. She would assure herself of there being no possibility that Lawrence could use some quiet magic again before proceeding. She had come this far to gloat, not to be incautious. That would take only a few seconds. The next part would last longer.

It would be the talking. It would be the equivalent of the speech Mallory had tried to five the prince, the one she had successfully given Brunswick half an hour ago, except that it would be warm, even maternal, and laced with complete poisonous vitriol. Lawrence had not forgotten the look on her face when she’d fought his mother. She would tell him her plans. She would tell
him all she had done and all she planned to do. It would be the same old story dressed up as some revolutionary idea: fire, pillage, a thousand-year reign of terror. Towards the end, she might summon a seeing spell to show him his mother dying at Brunswick’s hand, for sport.

Her parting remarks would follow. They would be short. They would roll off her lips in a practiced cadence. They would be words she had perfected over years of idle daydreaming, decades of gentle seethe, words that cracked across his face as the last he would ever hear, words that at last there was someone to hear. And it would be done. She might kill Ess, then, absently. A neck, a twist, a snap as the final punchline before the castle came down.

He would be irrelevant at that point. Probably he would follow Ess in the wake of the roof’s destruction beneath his feet. Anyone who Streisand hadn’t evacuated would share the same fate. Those who survived might prove, in the end, to be the unlucky ones.

If he didn’t get her before she got him. And he wouldn’t. She was a veteran. He was a cook. If he was honest with himself, he didn’t even want to fight her. He didn’t want to fight anyone. Lawrence’s jaw ached.

“I don’t,” he said, “know what I should do.”

Ess shook her fur out. Show me someone who does.

It was silent now. The stairs to the roof stood waiting, gaping, down the hall. They were not far away. Lawrence could see the shine off the banisters. Someone kept them polished, even up here. Of course they did. There was someone to do everything, around here. Vivienne wouldn’t have chosen a dusty castle to destroy. It wouldn’t have made the same impact, and she was in for impact; she had been planning this for a long time. It would never do if every piece was not perfectly in place. She was not going to be denied her moment.
Lawrence turned the other way and ran.

He made it a full twenty feet before something erupted behind him. An earthquake rattled under his feet and hot breath bathed the back of his neck. Wood splintered and snapped. Stone groaned. He heard a roar.

*What’s happening?* Ess was clinging to him with all four limbs. *Where are we going?* *What are you doing?*

“Sorry,” he said. He didn’t dare a backward glance, but the windows reflected some of it. In one glass pane, for an instant, there was a glimpse of a shiny banister leg. He ran harder.

She had been planning to use the stairs to incapacitate him, then. That was more original than Lawrence had given her credit for. They were fast, too. He wouldn’t be able to outpace them.

Lawrence ducked under a flying candlestick and hurled himself around the first corner they reached. He shoved his back against the wall and held his breath.

The stairs stamped past. They had eight banister legs, and a mosaic of marble skin covering its core. Even the marble shone. The servants were really quite dedicated, Lawrence thought. Then it was gone, a barrage of expensive masonry barreling down the hall, each step fainter. It had left small craters in the floor. He wondered how far it would get.

*She’s in the walls, she’s in the walls, she’s in the walls—*

It was more than the walls. Vivienne had invaded the castle’s entire skeleton. Lawrence could feel it vibrate against his back.
Carved into the wall was an alcove with a vase sitting inside. He extracted Ess from his shirt and placed her next to it. “We’ll split up here. She won’t notice you if I’m making a scene. You have some energy left, don’t you?”

*Split up?*

He brushed dust off her back. “I need you to go look after Mother, please. As fast as you can. Some shield spell, whatever you’ve got. Nidhogg will help you. Brunswick can take care of himself. It’s been long enough for everyone else to get out, right? I can manage if it’s just a few left.”

Ess seized his sleeve. *You’re leaving me here on my own? With that hag around every corner?*

“You’ll be all right, I’ll lead her away. She was in a duel, too. She’s not strong enough to be everywhere at once. Just wait here until I’m gone.”

*But what’re you going to do?*

Back in the main hallway, the stomping stopped. The stairs had realized he wasn’t there to chase anymore.

He pressed his nose to the top of her head, between her ears. “Get noticed, I think.”

The thing that took him dashing back into the main hall was not any kind of a solid plan. Plans went awry, or at least his did. Instinct kept him in the hall, even after the distant pounding started up again. The stairs took distressingly little time to turn around. With all the legs, he’d hoped it might trip over itself somehow, buy him some time. It wasn’t long before it became clear that it was gaining on him with more speed than he’d counted on.
A stitch started up in his side. His lungs fought against each breath. Months spent in front of a sink hadn’t done a lot to prepare him for this. He couldn’t keep it up. All right, then. No point in trying.

He stopped. He turned. His fingers were buzzing again. The front of the body of the stairs opened, revealing a jagged, gray, stony mouth.

He did something unkind to it.

The stairs reared back, howling. The banisters skittered and stumbled. One skittered the wrong way—it was too smooth, too shiny, the thing wasn’t used to being alive, it had no practice with running—and the whole mess crashed down. It twitched, and didn’t move.

Lawrence checked to see if he felt like a monster. He did not. It hadn’t really been alive to start with. That was something. He stepped away.

The rumbling up and down the hall started back up. Vivienne was marshalling herself again. The thing she sent next time would be better equipped. If he got the best of that one, the third would be yet more difficult, and on and on until she bested him, even if it meant she had to step out herself. He wasn’t going to beat her in a long game. So, fine. He wasn’t going to try. He’d never meant to. His mother had never been in a position to survive a long game. Still, Ess would be in the throne room soon, wouldn’t she? It was faint, but he could tell she was close to the secret passage they’d come out of. She’d only need another couple minutes.

Lawrence touched the wall. It hadn’t stopped shaking under his hand.

“You can hear me,” he said. Vivienne wasn’t focusing on anyone else but him at the moment. He would have smelled it if she was. “I know you’re not listening, really, but you can hear me.”
The shaking continued, but the rumbling had died a bit, gotten softer. He went on. “I
don’t know why,” he said. He paused. That was wrong. “I don’t know the specifics,” he
corrected. “I know you’re sort of after the same thing that all of you are after. You all want to
rule. Over a silly farming village or a kingdom, it’s all the same. It’s just that you’ve come much
closer and maybe you want a throne of skulls to rule on. Maybe you want to do things a bit
differently. Maybe you really are so much smarter than my mother like you think. She’s not that
difficult to outwit, honestly, if she isn’t paying attention.”

He put his forehead to the wall. It was almost warm, after the cool weather. “Vivienne,”
he said. He spoke in the same voice he always did. “Please believe me when I say I didn’t come
up here to hurt anyone. I’d like it if no one had gotten hurt to start with. All right? I didn’t come
to hurt you. But I need you to believe something else, too.”

He straightened up. “That doesn’t mean I won’t do it.”

The rumbling surged again. It was loud, a deep, bone-trembling laugh. Pebbles clattered
off the wreckage of the stairs. A candelabra fell from its shelf. The windows rattled against their
panes.

“No,” he said, once it had died down. “I’m sorry. I know you think you’re safe in there.
You’re not. If those walls come apart, you won’t survive.” Another vibration started up from the
soles of his feet. It wasn’t one of hers, this time. This one, he knew. “You’re only as safe as the
castle you’re in, and we know what witches do to castles.”

He pushed his hand against the wall until his wrist might have snapped. “And I’m not a
witch, but Viv? It wouldn’t take me more than a minute. For one minute, I can pretend. Just for
you, Vivienne, I can be one.”
And he took his hands away and put them together, just as Cassandra had.

And in the second’s delay as he did, all the rumbling stopped completely.

And he smiled and thought, to no one in particular: don’t let it hurt anyone else, either.

Instead of the ceiling, this time it was the floor that gave way first.

***

It would have been appropriate for Lawrence to fall unconscious for a few seconds, but everything had fallen in at such an angle and a dusty, soft something had been so strategically placed that Lawrence was only scuffed up a little. He’d gotten worse from the throne room. He sniffed. Something smelled like a bakery. Less pleasant was the fact that his eyelids felt like they were stuck together. He opened them with some effort. They had the burning sensation they’d often gotten when he hadn’t slept enough after first starting work in the kitchens. He didn’t much feel like getting up, but he thought he ought to try.

He rolled off the soft something and cursed as his foot punched through a bit of debris. This was not material made to withstand the weight of being a castle. No wonder it had collapsed in on itself. He hoped he wasn’t going to be expected to pay for all this—the going rate for a castle, while unknown, was most likely outside his salary range—then it occurred to him to take a look at what “all this” was. A gap in the wreckage high above his head allowed plenty of the morning sun in. He looked behind himself.

The thing he’d rolled off of was huge, a circular mound of white. It was clearly not the bed he had thought it was. He had to prod it to be sure, then pulled off a piece in his hands. It didn’t come easily at first, drawing a thick string in its wake like melty cheese, but then the string snapped soundlessly. The inside was sticky and smelled of sugar.
All right. He’d landed on top of a giant marshmallow. That didn’t make a great deal of sense, but nothing did today. He turned to take stock of everything else.

The theme of destruction was, at least, consistent. Snow covered many of the ruined surfaces, except it wasn’t snow, but a glaze of sugar artfully dripped down the sides. Gumdrops studded the glaze where candles might once have existed. The wainscoting of the walls had turned unmistakably to chocolate. A few wall fixtures were transformed into candy canes the size of swords, but those had broken in the impact and now red-and-green-striped shards lay all around. Oddly comforting was the existence of a broken rocking chair some ways off. It looked to be carved from plain wood.

Beneath him, atop a slab of what had once been a wall, he saw a witch’s hat, too short to be his mother’s or Cassandra’s. He tasted no earth or bitterness, but he tasted no death, either. Vivienne was unconscious. He let her be.

Possibly the most curious thing was the stuff that had clearly once made up the bones of the castle. It was brown, for one thing. Plain, serviceable brown, not white or colorful like the rest. Some parts, the thin places, had the consistency of a cookie, while the thicker areas looked fluffier and more like cake. Lawrence reached out, dreamlike, and snapped a bit of the crumbling ceiling off in his hands. Because some habits were hard to break, especially if you were a professional, he took a calculating bite.

He had never made gingerbread before. It didn’t taste all that bad.

Lawrence chewed and swallowed (not enough egg? He would have to ask Streisand later) and thought about life. He felt pretty okay about it, on the whole. He didn’t know what was going to happen next, but at the moment no one was shouting or trying to kill him, and possibly this
trend would continue. He didn’t hear any more crashes or shrieks in the distance. It was probably difficult to hold a battle in a castle that wasn’t a castle anymore. Or anything resembling a castle. Could you get fired twice? Perhaps you could get fired, then hired again expressly for the purpose of getting fired a second time. That sounded like the kind of thing Streisand might do, if the king wouldn’t.

Except that wasn’t really fair. Streisand was blunt and loud and insulting, but he wasn’t cruel. In fact, the actual number of people who Lawrence knew to be cruel was vanishingly small. A lot of them were stupid or thoughtless or self-absorbed, but outright malice was unusual. And that was true even of the witches, he thought, for whom Malice was supposed to be an old friend. Cassandra was largely benevolent and Mallory was mostly petty. He suspected, even in light of a long childhood spent being introduced to covens and circles, that Vivienne was right. She was the only real witch he’d ever met.

He didn’t know what that made him. A chef didn’t go around turning palaces into extravagant confections—even if there wasn’t much extra work to be done in this case, the uncharitable part of him whispered; those ridiculous towers hadn’t been far removed from pastries to start with. A witch, on the other hand, didn’t doubt themselves so much that they were easy pickings for a suggestion spell, or capitulate to a teary-eyed prince out of guilt and pity, or generally allow their fate to be decided by other people. A good person didn’t put an entire castle full of people to sleep. A bad person didn’t risk life and limb trying to wake them up again.

That made him just a person, then. Another stupid, thoughtless, self-absorbed person like everyone else. Far from being a comfort, the thought was depressing. How did you go about not being those things? Very human, the prince had called him. They were human things. Were you
allowed to be better than that? Maybe wondering if he was allowed to be anything was part of his problem.

Lawrence broke off another bit of gingerbread (it definitely needed more egg, maybe a touch of extra cinnamon to give it an edge). Reevaluating his life was not something he’d had many chances to do lately. He hadn’t expected to get the opportunity to do it under such outlandish circumstances, but it was okay, in the grand scheme of things. A lot of things were okay. Even being a doormat was okay most of the time, because at least that might make you a little less thoughtless and self-absorbed even if it didn’t make you less stupid. You only needed to learn to pick out the good times and the bad times for it, like with everything else. Streisand had said something like that, hadn’t he? Kindness wasn’t wrong, Lawrence was sure of that. It just wasn’t always smart.

You had to be strategic with your selfishness. You had to balance it out. You were smart because you needed to look after yourself, and you were kind because you needed to look after everyone else, too, or else what was the point?

He would have taken another piece of gingerbread, but off in the distance Lawrence could swear he heard meowing.

*Hey! Royals! Look alive! One, two, one, two!*

“Law! Are you in there? I’m coming down!”

“Alex, at least watch where you’re going, you’ll break your neck.”

“My foot’s stuck again! What is this stuff?”

“It’s sugar glaze, obviously. Still fresh. Try not to step in any piles of it.”

*Obviously! Can’t you smell? It’s like a bunch of sweets married a heart attack in here.*
“But the only other thing to stand on is this brown crumbly nonsense.”

“Yes. Lend me a hand, please, and let’s proceed a little more carefully. I don’t think Lawrence is going to be very impressed if we get suffocated by marshmallows.”

“Damn suffocating, and damn marshmallows! What if he’s hurt, Let, I mean really hurt this time?”

“If he is, and if all you’ve told me is true, I promise that Miss Vivienne will wish she went after me instead.”

You know something, princess? I wouldn’t bet against you.

And, hopefully, if you were very lucky, and if the world was to keep spinning, looking after everyone else meant everyone else would look after you, too.
Chapter 18

“It’s a matter of mentality, you see,” Mallory said around a mouthful of her third scone. “It isn’t like wizardry or divination where you can just chant some words or burn some incense and there you are. You have to convince yourself of it.”

She swallowed. “You can hardly expect to lift a needle if even you don’t think you can do it, and by the same token, with enough training, you could move a mountain if you thought you could. It’s why you should never back a witch into a corner—there’s little time to doubt yourself when your life is on the line. Alexander, pass the butter.”

Prince Alexander passed the butter. Not much survived Mallory’s sweeping knife, and what did continued softening under the midafternoon sun. It was only a couple weeks to winter now, but Mallory disliked hard butter, so hard butter she did not suffer. Lawrence hadn’t even noticed her casting the spell for it. Hopefully, neither had any of the guards.

“Psychology,” the princess said. She sat with her fingers laced together under her chin, enraptured. “Self-targeting psychology, no less. Could anyone do it?”

Mallory swelled with self-importance as she fed Nidhogg bits of sausage under the table. “Gracious, no. Well, there have been some prodigies who have risen to a level of basic adequacy in the craft with no prior heritage, but it’s all about blood in the end. When a line dies out, so does its talent, unless other arrangements have been made in advance. Apprentices and the like. I was considering throwing up the white flag and finding a student for myself, but I’m happy to see it’s no longer necessary.”
“No, it’s still necessary,” Lawrence said. He’d found the scones disagreeably dry and stuck with the tea and cake. Ess had given the decision her executive approval. “And you really oughtn’t encourage her, your highness. She’ll only come to expect it.”

“No, it’s fascinating,” the princess said, but she permitted Mallory to override her.

“Still necessary! You put half a thousand people to sleep in under a minute in the most well-defended place in the country and destroyed the symbol of our oppression not a week later. Esmerelda couldn’t have done it better. And you say it’s still necessary. Really, Lawrence, what apprentice could live up to all that?”

“It doesn’t count as oppression if you’re asking for it, Mother. Besides, they’ve all agreed to compromise the most severe clauses of the ban, so you aren’t even technically oppressed under law anymore.”

The wonderful thing about his mother was her tendency to get sidetracked once you had changed the subject. Lawrence sipped his tea as she assured him that legalities were only the start of her campaign. He was feeling quite content with Ess warming his lap and the smell of gingerbread lingering in the air. He had wondered if he shouldn’t help all the staff who were still at work clearing away the sweets around them, but Tyrone had waved him off when he’d asked. Streisand had said something about it getting taken the wrong way, even though Lawrence knew that almost no one was aware of his involvement with the whole affair. As far as the staff was concerned, he had been asleep with the rest of them.

He’d initially been hesitant to accept the princess’s invitation to a tea party with her and her brother in the midst of the deconstruction, but upon learning his mother was attending he’d thought she might need adult supervision. He suspected the princess had known he would react
that way. Like her brother, she had a talent for getting people to do things, but unlike her brother she didn’t see any need to be nice about it.

Considering that, her interest in his mother’s explanations of witchcraft got ratcheted up from “amusing” to “mildly alarming.” Lawrence thought of a witch princess and rubbed Ess’s ears until he felt better.

The prince had spoken and eaten little during all this. He’d arranged things so he took a seat between Lawrence and his sister, and now he sat with his chin propped against his knuckles as if there was no place he would rather be in the world.

“But these psychological tricks.” The princess poured Mallory another cup of tea. “With the hats and the acting and everything you’ve mentioned.” She glanced at Lawrence. “You say they’re not always necessary?”

Mallory accepted the cup. She would never be seen adding in milk in public, even though she was like Lawrence and couldn’t stand drinking anything bitter. She relented enough to squeeze a slice of lemon over it. “It’s tricky,” she said. “Not a practice for the faint of heart, witchcraft. You’re your own worst enemy. A flicker of doubt’s enough to bring the whole thing down. The best have always been the ones who understood that and did it anyway. But.” She stirred the cup. “No, not always necessary. There are times when you don’t have the luxury of doubting yourself, as I said. Plenty of people discover their talent through some traumatic event, especially in childhood. I found mine when I was eight.” She took a drink. Only a practiced observer would have noted the way her mouth crinkled in disgust at the taste. She selected another slice of lemon. She squeezed. “I fell off a cliff.”

Lawrence sat up. He’d never heard this story before.
His mother looked up and saw she suddenly had everyone’s attention. “It wasn’t terrible,” she said, “only about twenty-five feet high, but it was enough to break a child’s neck if she fell the wrong way. I bruised a shin. My grandmother had an apprentice at the time. She dismissed him as soon as she heard.” Mallory took another drink and suppressed another wince.

“This grandmother was the Lady Esmerelda, I take it?” the princess said.

“My father hadn’t lived up to her expectations, unfortunately,” Mallory said. “He told me how she used to do all kinds of things to try to draw his ability out of him, but anyone could see he didn’t have any. It skips a generation or two sometimes, you see. She even pushed him off the same cliff once. He told me before he died.”

Mallory stared at her cup, lost in reminiscence. “He’d come up to her cottage with me whenever it was time for a lesson. They never talked to each other, but he always came. He got quite sick when I was about thirteen, but he still dragged himself up the hill. Never left us alone in the room together.”

She blinked at them. “Do you know, I’d completely forgotten about that until just now? Funny how the mind works.”

Lawrence’s great-grandmother had died before he was born, but his grandfather was a dim memory, a balding man with a checkered cap and a shepherd’s crook hung from a nail on the front door. Lawrence thought about the difference between getting thumbtacks put on your floor and getting pushed off a cliff.

He poured another cup and stirred some milk into it as the princess tactfully steered the subject around to something else. He passed his mother the new cup without a word, and she accepted it with palpable relief.
They had just worked the conversation around to the topic of broomsticks (“Good for an entrance,” said Mallory, “and an exit, but not tremendously reliable long-distance.”) when someone stepped through the ranks of the guards and strode up to the table.

“Feeling better?” Cassandra said to Mallory.

“What are you doing here?” Mallory asked her. She hadn’t yet let Cassandra off, although she wasn’t quite sure what Cassandra had done that needed letting off. She was nevertheless certain that something offensive had happened, so she’d settled for reining in downright hostility until she knew what it was.

“I’m visiting Viv, but the guard said I needed permission to see her.” She looked between the space above the prince and princess’s heads. “So I’m here for permission. And your guard might need some help getting his leg out of the ground. It’s grown up around him.”

“Good heavens, why?” the prince asked.

“He wouldn’t let me get permission.”

Like many people meeting her for the first time, the prince looked put-off by her overall Cassandra-ness, but the princess could be gracious to a garden rake. “Of course. You two must have so much to talk about. You’ve met Li already, haven’t you?”

The head of their escort jerked to attention, out of place amidst a crowd of armor, and marched over at the princess’s crooked finger. He gave Ess a wide berth. The princess wrote something on a napkin and passed it to him with a smoothness that almost looked as if it hadn’t happened. “Do accompany our guest, won’t you? I shall be very upset if anything untoward happens to her, and trust you will handle everything with unusual tact.”
Streisand snapped a hand to his head in sour salute and took the napkin. Lawrence didn’t catch what was written on it, but he was sure it had something to do with listening in on the witches’ conversation and passing information along to Leticia when the time was right. She knew to never send a guard to do a spy’s job.

*Politics,* Ess said. *People should just say what they mean.* Lawrence privately agreed.

“You should come along,” Cassandra said to Lawrence’s ear, forgetting that, in polite society, thanks usually followed the granting of permission. “I know she’s conniving and backstabbing and everything, but I think she’d be glad to see you. You know how she is. It’d help bury the hatchet if you showed up.”

Since there was such a thing as being too forgiving, whatever the prince seemed to think, Lawrence said, “No, Cass. I don’t think so.”

But since there was definitely such a thing as not being forgiving enough, he added, “I’ll send her one of those apple pies she likes. Perhaps she can share it with the warden.”

Cassandra did not look offended. She shrugged. “She’ll like that. I’ll talk to you later. Bye, Mal.”

She walked off without acknowledging anyone else. Streisand left after her, stuffing the napkin into his pocket. He looked even sourer after she had left without giving him as much as a glance. The princess had implied he wasn’t allowed to yell, too. Immovable object meets unstoppable force. Lawrence almost regretted not tagging along.

Lawrence saw the princess was smiling at him, which meant she was weighing him again. Instead of dropping his eyes, he smiled back.

“How I pass?” he asked, and she laughed.
“A gold star,” she said. “I’m glad to see you won’t accept every invitation. I was starting to worry that Alex and I weren’t special.”

He wasn’t sure how sincere she was being, so he said, “I feel I should apologize again.”

“Oh, please,” Mallory said, rolling her eyes.

“Yes, don’t be ludicrous,” the prince said at once. “You’ve been pardoned on all counts.”

It hadn’t exactly been a formal pardon, as charges hadn’t been leveled at him in the first place. Apparently the consensus among the royal family was that stopping two assassination plots was enough to make up for aiding a third, particularly when the third had failed so spectacularly and hadn’t counted as a real assassination anyway. The justification for his expulsion from duty fell under “communal nuisance.” It helped, he thought, that half his jury was inexplicably fond of him. Even Maria was set to be released in a week or two, after claiming she had been put under a compulsion spell in a story suspiciously similar to Lawrence’s. She had claimed this the day after Lawrence had confided his full testimony to the princess in relative privacy. He doubted that the two events were unrelated, but he knew the princess would shrug it off if he ever asked her.

He never would. Maria had only been rather foolish. She didn’t deserve more than a few months in prison and a delicate verbal reminder that the castle still kept its thumbscrews in the deep dungeons. Clark and Amal needed someone to keep the peace between them, regardless. Their own recent stay in prison, on either side of Brunswick’s cell, had done nothing to repair their friendship.

The warden was delighted. The dungeons hadn’t been so full in decades.
“It’s a shame,” the princess was saying. “You’ll be sent off with a glowing letter of recommendation, of course, but the place will seem emptier without you around.” She waved a hand at two maids heaving along a sheaf of gingerbread. “Once we’ve rebuilt it,” she clarified. “I don’t suppose you’d be interested in staying in some other capacity?”

“Oh, do,” the prince said. “I’m sure we could talk Father and Mother into offering you another position. I think they’ll like you once they get to know you.”

Lawrence imagined being invited to a family dinner with the two most powerful people in the country. His mind blocked it out. “I’m sorry to say that I only went to school for cooking, your highnesses,” he said. “I don’t have any other talents. A soufflé I can handle, but hand me a shovel or a riding crop and things may get a bit complicated.”

“What about an official legislative seal?”

The princess relented at the look of blankness and then horror that crossed Lawrence’s face. “Very well. I concede that we’re not all born to be diplomats. I think you’d be rather good at it, though.”

Yeah, why not? asked Ess, who had somehow departed from his lap and sat on the table eating off his plate without his noticing. I like it here. They’ve got everything. Just get a better room this time.

Mallory seemed to feel that the conversation had gone on long enough without her input. “I’m for it,” she said. “If you’re not going to uphold tradition, you might as well do the next best thing. No one’s remembered for soufflés. I’d like to see you making something worthwhile out of your life.”
And get another foot in the political door while she was at it. “I’m sure you would, Mother,” Lawrence said. He removed his plate from Ess’s reach and passed her a cake slice of her own to content herself with. “However, I would be entirely unsuited. I have no training for that sort of thing.”

*It’s not like we’ve got anywhere better to go.*

“No one does, really,” the prince said. He was a touch more eager than Lawrence thought he had much right to be. “You just pick it up as best you can as you go along and ask a lot of questions in private.”

The princess placed her fork on her plate precisely perpendicular to herself. “My brother puts things more bluntly than I would, but he’s essentially correct. The best lessons happen in the field. Besides, you know how to pay attention to people.” She glanced at her brother. “Most of the time.”

The prince and she shared a look that belied an earlier conversation that Lawrence hadn’t been privy to—the prince had raised his eyebrows in some gesture of benign warning while she repressed a tug at her mouth.

Before Lawrence could parse the other unspoken words passing between them, she continued. “And you’re well-spoken and you sit up straight and you know how to use a knife and fork. You’d be amazed how few people have all those qualifications. Image is what counts in person. You won’t have an important position to start with, anyway. Perhaps someone’s assistant.”
Unspoken words or no, he could tell she was sidling him where she wanted him by talking as if he’d already accepted. *Won’t have*, indeed. He could guess whose assistant she meant him to be. “I’m flattered, your highnesses, but—”

“Excellent, then—”

“—*but,*” he said, “I respectfully decline. Not being a witch doesn’t mean I’m a politician. I’d like to try plying my hand to my trade for once. I’ll keep your offer in mind.”

The princess paused for a fraction of a second before dipping her head and saying he knew his own mind best, acting as gracious a loser as he could hope her to be. Lawrence nevertheless made a mental note not to get stuck alone with her in the near future. The prince slumped, and Lawrence decided the same went for him for different reasons. He wasn’t sure he was so defensible from the prince’s puppy eyes as he was from his sister’s fast talking.

“I’ll be sure to come visit,” he added against his better judgment. They both brightened up somewhat. They would get to try to convince him again at a later date. Oh well. Whatever made them happy.

“I think it’s a waste,” Mallory declared. “Where are you even going to go?”

Lawrence had thought about it and he had his answer ready. “Trisdale, like I was going to before. I’ve decided against working in a manor, but I’m certain I can find a place at a restaurant if I’m patient.”

*Don’t care much for the ocean, personally.* Ess licked her paw. *Too cold around there this time of year.*

“There’s fish,” he said to her. “And don’t talk as if you don’t have a serviceable coat right there on you.”
I’ll come, I’ll come, I didn’t say I wouldn’t come. I think we’ve just about proven that you’re doomed without me, anyway.

“You’re so smug about it.”

_Cat_, she reminded him. He stroked her back.

“Familiars sound wonderful,” the princess said with a sigh. She reached over the table and scratched Ess behind an ear. “I wish I could understand her. It’s only witches who can talk to theirs, right? It seems such a pity.”

Unprovoked, Mallory launched into an explanation about the nature of the familiar-witch bond and its historical nuance, its symbolic entrance into the covenant between the witch and their land, the first recorded instance of a witch and familiar, all nonsense Lawrence had heard before and that the princess was, figuratively, enchanted by. The prince seemed about as interested as Lawrence, because he nudged him with an elbow and nodded his head to one side.

“Excuse us,” Lawrence said, and the other two waved him off with hardly a glance. He and the prince pushed out of their chairs and went to the back gardens where there was less activity. Ess trailed along after them.

The area around the rosebush bench had been cleared of castle confectionary, except for some crumbs that would no doubt disappear in short order. The rosebush itself had suffered the same fate as some of the other ostentatious greenery in the area. The green itself of the rosebush was as organic as it had ever been, dark and clean to the touch. However, its buds were unseasonal, redder and stickier than nature would ever have allowed. They reportedly tasted of cherries. They certainly smelled of them.
Lawrence took a seat on the bench (still happily made of stone). Ess leapt into his lap to curl up there into her usual warm bun.

“Is she going to follow you everywhere?” the prince asked. He sounded put out for some reason. “You were perfectly fine splitting up before.”

“We were apart longer than we’re used to,” Lawrence said. “It’s hard to go back to normal right away.”

Yeah, get your own, Ess said, purring.

The look on the prince’s face told Lawrence that he didn’t understand, but also that there were a lot of things he didn’t understand and he was unwilling to trouble himself over all of them. He let out a breath and looked up at the sky.

“So,” the prince said. “Not a witch?”

“No,” Lawrence said.

“Even though you, ah, transmogrified the castle into a—”

“It’s a bit complicated,” said Lawrence. “I can do witch things, but it doesn’t make me a witch. It’s more than that. You can cut some onions, but it doesn’t make you a cook, you see?”

“But nonetheless, you have to admit, a gingerbread house—”

“It wasn’t on purpose.”

“Yes. Of course.” The prince rubbed his neck. “I—we wouldn’t mind if you were, you know. And that law’s to be changed. I think Let would be kind of pleased, truthfully.”

“It’s not about,” Lawrence said as kindly as he could, “what other people would mind, your highness. It’s about what I would mind. That’s the point, in the end.”
The prince nodded. “Right. You’re right. Er, with that in mind—I’m not saying you are one, you understand—but there is something I’ve always wanted to ask you about it.” His hand chafed at a spot under his ear. “Since you know more about it than I do, obviously, and I don’t want to offend anyone, but it’s been bothering me for a while and, well, I should just get it over with and ask you if I want to know, shouldn’t I?”

Lawrence glanced down at Ess. She looked as nonplussed as he felt.

The prince removed his hand from his neck and took a deep breath. “All right. How can a man be a witch?”

Lawrence tried to ignore Ess’s hysterical laughter enough to think of a diplomatic answer. She wasn’t making it easy. She writhed around on his knees and kicked her feet in the air. He deposited her on the bench next to him.

“I take it that wasn’t an intelligent question to ask,” the prince said. Ess fell off the bench and rolled onto the ground.

“It was a little blunt,” Lawrence said. He was doing his best not to smile himself. “It’s not, ah, it isn’t a bad question. It’s just that no one’s asked us that before.”

“You think I’m an idiot again, don’t you.”

“No, no.”

“You most certainly do.”

“Not at all, it’s only—” The crestfallen look on the prince’s face proved to be too much. Lawrence had to lean over and put his hands over his mouth and nose for almost a full minute before he was composed enough to speak again. Ess had calmed by the time he was done, and now languidly stretched on the ground as if that was where she had meant to be all along.
“Stories tend to exaggerate certain aspects of history,” he said at last, addressing his feet. He didn’t trust himself to look up. “It’s true that covens tend to be either all-male or all-female, but this owes more to personalities and mindsets than any, ah, biological imperative, if you will. People tend to gather with other people who are like them, with gender as with everything else. Individuals vary, naturally, but most any study of people on your own will tell you the same. And covens are small, two to four people most of the time.”

Speaking like a textbook was helping him to gather himself. He went on. “It happens that a couple of the more infamous covens were made up of women and so everyone thought women were the witches. It’s as likely as any other combination. Because of that, men are now less likely to enroll in witchcraft as a lifestyle, even if they have the advantage of heritage. Assumptions feed assumptions, stories feed stories, women are now the majority, it will change again when the stories change, so on, so forth. There’s no science to it.”

“So why were you laughing?”

“I didn’t laugh,” Lawrence objected, but said, “I suppose it’s just obvious to us. We’ve grown up around it. It’s like if someone asked you what monarchy was.”

“Oh.”

He dared to lift his eyes. The prince was no longer staring at him in total distress, nor had he moved onto indignation or humiliation. He was giving that look again, like Lawrence had pulled some wonderful magic trick and the prince had yet to figure out how it was performed. It lasted less than a second. He looked away again.

“You know, Let and I . . .” The prince scuffed the ground with the toe of his shoe. He had his hands in his pockets. “We’ve been talking about a few things.”
“Yes, I could tell.”

The prince flashed him an abashed grin. “Well, she pointed out some things to me, more like. About me. And some things about her, too. And we talked a long time, and we came to a rather, a rather, a rather unconventional conclusion.”

The prince was now wearing a small trench in the ground with his shoe like he could dig himself down into it. Some crumbs of sugar glaze mixed into the dirt. He caught Lawrence’s eye and stopped with a cough. “I’m doing it again, aren’t I?” He said it more to himself than to Lawrence.

“If it’s another question about witchcraft,” Lawrence began, but the prince grimaced and shook his head.

“Nothing to do with that, I assure you. I’m only. That is to say.” The prince kicked over a pile of dirt back into the trench. “To be truthful, I’m concerned you’ll think poorly of me if I don’t say this in the right way. I fear I’ve been mucking a lot of things up in our conversations to date. With the.” He scrubbed his fingers through his hair. It was back to its old color, although it looked like he’d forgotten to get someone to run a comb through it this morning. “Blind enthusiasm and such. I realized it when you were telling me everything after that incident with the river. Awful as it sounds, I haven’t really considered how to speak to you as a proper person before. I’m still figuring out which things I’ve done wrong and how to make up for it.”

The idea that the prince cared what Lawrence thought of him was a charming surprise. Lawrence could not remember the last person who had cared what he thought of them.

“Well, how’s it going so far?”
The prince’s shoulders dropped. “It is exhausting. I’ve been running myself ragged all morning. Do you have any idea how hard it is to think about everything you say and who you’re saying it to?”

That explained the prince’s silence at the table. “Not the faintest,” Lawrence said.

*Chump,* Ess said in her fond way. She was batting at a leaf on the ground.

“It’s a nightmare. Blast it,” the prince said. “I can’t think of a way to make it come out how I want it to. I’ll tell you some other time.”

Lawrence ventured a suggestion. “You could try and I could promise not to be offended?”

“Won’t do. I have to get it exactly right. I just wish I knew Let wouldn’t be annoyed with me for putting it off. She’s got a stake in this herself.”

Before Lawrence could wonder very much at what atrocity the prince couldn’t figure out how to confess, the man in question finally sat next to him. His hands rested loosely on his knees, all awkwardness drained out of him. It left not much but the residue of that constant cheerfulness. Perhaps it made life simpler to smile. “So, Trisdale. That’s a ways off.”

Lawrence drew his head out of the horror scenarios it was concocting. “Not much. Two days by coach.”

“You’ll be by yourself again, though, won’t you?”

*Excuse you.*

“I’ll have Ess,” Lawrence said.

The prince waved a hand. “Yes, but still, just the two of you, and right when you were getting used to living here. It’ll be difficult to adjust to another change so quickly, don’t you think?”
“Your highness,” Lawrence said, “compared to everything that’s happened since I came here, it’ll be the easiest thing in the world.”

“Yes, but still,” the prince repeated, as if grasping at a lifeline.

Lawrence met his eye. “I’m afraid my mind is set, your highness. I won’t be staying, but I’ll visit sometimes. And I’ll write, both you and your sister.” And in the future, Lawrence thought, who could say? But the prince didn’t need that much encouragement. “That will do, won’t it?”

The prince looked like he wanted to squirm about the issue some more, but he threw up his hands. “That will do. Yes, that’ll do well enough for now.”

They talked about a few more things—how Lawrence planned on finding employment, what the prince might do to help reconstruction—but then the princess was calling for her brother and it seemed time for the conversation to die a natural death. The prince rose, hesitated, then stuck a hand out to Lawrence. Lawrence spent a moment observing the hand as if he expected something supernatural to happen to it, then he took it in his own.

They shook, once. The prince left.

All done? Ess had grown bored of her leaf and was licking at the red lollipop roses stuck in the bush. Her tongue had turned a ruddy shade.

Lawrence scratched his head. “I think so. We’ll just have to be sure to fetch Mother before we leave.”

I bet the princess could take care of her. They can talk about the finer points of turning people into frogs.

“Don’t even joke.”
The cat hopped onto the back of the bench beside his head. She was cheerful these days and rarely talked seriously of witchcraft. It put her at a bit of a loose end, Lawrence thought, since bringing up the witchcraft question had sustained a quarter of their conversations to date, but she would find something else to fill her time with. Maybe she would decide that he had made an enormous mistake when he had refused the princess’s offer and it was her duty to see to it that he became a diplomat, but likely she would think of something more exciting. Right now, her lazy contentedness was palpable.

She leaned forward and placed her front paws on his shoulder. *How much money do we have saved up for Trisdale?*

“Enough for a few months.” The apprenticeship hadn’t paid so poorly, and Lawrence had had the opportunity to spend next to none of it. “Half a year, if we’re frugal.”

Her cheek rubbed his ear. *You could’ve kept some of the prince’s money, you know. You didn’t have to give back all of it.*

“There’s an idea. I didn’t think I’d committed enough crimes this year.”

*We didn’t do that much.*

“Yes, if we get started now, we can round the list out to an even dozen.”

*Bah.* She oozed down so that her chin was where her paws had been, and her paws draped down freely. *Hell of a year, though.*

“Let’s never do it again.”

*I don’t know. I thought it was fun.*

He rubbed between her ears. She purred. “It could have turned out much worse than it did.”
Are you still worrying about that?

“I don’t see how I can avoid it.” So many things, he thought, could have gone wrong. If Vivienne had been quicker on the uptake, if Cassandra hadn’t picked a side, if Streisand hadn’t evacuated everyone in time. And that was just one evening. There had been months upon months for something to turn out terribly. He couldn’t quite believe that everyone he’d seen today was alive and upright. The other shoe was taking a long time but it had to drop at some point, didn’t it? “It was so close, Ess. I was so stupid and so many people should’ve gotten hurt for it and no one seems to care.”

You’re overthinking this.

“But—”

No. Look. She slid off him and sat on stone. Okay, yeah. You want someone to chew you out? Here’s a freebie. You shouldn’t have fallen for the compulsion spell so easily. You should’ve noticed something was off when you started seriously thinking your mother might kill you. You buckled way too fast when the prince asked you for help, and your lack of control when you destroyed the whole castle was frankly embarrassing. And I should’ve helped you with all that, because that’s what I’m here for. And I didn’t. I wanted to make you into a witch, which was a stupid thing to want, and by the time things went south I didn’t know what I was doing anymore.

But guess what? No giant karmic hammer is about to come down and make all that right. We’re not going to get smote because we were idiots. It doesn’t work like that, and thinking that it should is a waste of time. You were dumb! You know you were dumb, so now you’re a little less dumb for knowing it. But you probably weren’t totally dumb, because things did turn out okay. I
don’t care if it’s mostly okay because of other people, or because of luck, or whatever. You had a part in it.

You cared about people. You were nice. You did a lot wrong, but you did some stuff right.

So. Welcome to being a person, I guess.

The winter sun shone. Birds chirped. Off in the distance, someone turned and hit someone else with a sheaf of gingerbread and apologized frantically for a full minute, and the world spun on.

Lawrence leaned forward. “Reconstruction is going to take a lot of work.”

They don’t want you to help, though.

“No, but I doubt many of them would turn down some lunch.” Lawrence stood. “Do you think the kitchens might be all right? Most of the furniture survived.”

She dropped from the bench and joined him at his heels. As they walked off, he didn’t know what he was going to cook, or where he was going to get ingredients, or how he was going to explain to Streisand that this didn’t count as helping, but that was all right. Everything was all right. There was a strong chance that, with some work, it would continue that way into the next day, and the next, and the next. People would be people, and he would be him, witch or chef, and none of those things was perfect, but it would do well enough for now.
Bibliography


