



NAZRI NOOR

DOUBLE MAGER

URBAN RIVALS BOOK TWO

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DOUBLE MAGER
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CHAPTER 1

I gazed up into Theodore Morrow's face, his eyes filled with concern, and care, and maybe the faintest hint of disapproval. I sucked and sucked, then sucked some more, relishing the creamy sweetness hitting the back of my throat. And then the balls came, and I nearly sputtered and choked.

He slapped me on the back, then pulled my treat away from me. I swatted at his hands, fighting to retrieve my half-full cup of boba tea.

"Give it back!" I said, a toddler throwing a tantrum.

He hoisted it high above his head as I sprang up from the bench outside Happy Boba.

"Not until you learn how to drink these without half choking to death. You're supposed to chew the boba pearls, not swallow them like pills. Here. Watch."

And watch I did, in stark horror as he sucked down half of what was left of my drink.

I snatched it back, glowering at him as he chewed with exaggerated relish. Okay, to be fair, I was drinking the stuff like a toddler, too. I've had boba before. I was just really thirsty, okay?

It was a hot day out in Nomicon Valley, the perfect weather for my first taste of some nice, cold Happy Boba milk tea. Even better timing since Director Sakamoto had assigned us to investigate the rival corpo.

And I'd already guessed that working with my actual rival would bring its own challenges, but I never once thought that Agent Theodore Morrow was the type to bully his partner over tasty beverages.

Still scowling, I took a sip of what was left of my tea, pausing momentarily when I realized this was the closest Morrow and I had come to swapping DNA. I felt my ears burning.

The fuck? It was like being back in high school again, harboring one of those unhealthy crushes on boys who were very nice to me, but wouldn't ever reciprocate because they just weren't built that way.

Almost angrily I clamped my mouth over the straw, not really getting any tea out of it because I was chewing it ragged. Washing down my hot mingling of annoyance and embarrassment with cool milky tea, I suddenly realized that Morrow had pulled the move first, sucking on my drink without regard for the fact that I'd already been slobbering all over it. I made an even angrier face and scowled.

"Goodness," Morrow said, arms crossed as he stood over me. "If you're really that upset about it, I'll buy you another one."

"Forget about it," I snapped, aware that I was being childish. "Go buy your own drink, you huge ass."

Why did I have to throw in an indirect compliment about his colossal posterior, too? And wow. Real mature, Jericho Frost. Just like being a schoolboy again.

Speaking of which — why were those women over there screaming like schoolgirls?

"What the hell is that?" I said, squinting against the sunlight. "The sign above the shop. Happy — something."

Morrow tapped on his necklace, bluish holographic lenses blurring into place over his eyes.

"Happy Links," he read. "Chains and charms for the charming."

He tapped again, and the not-quite-glasses were gone.

"Pfft," I said. "Showoff."

"You always tease me about my vision." He ran a hand through his hair, sweeping the golden-blond locks back in place. "Maybe you're the one who needs glasses."

I waved my hand to shush him, sucking down the last of my milk tea that he'd so selfishly inhaled — never mind that he'd put it on the company card. Small perks of working with an Occultech agent.

"So is it another cog in the Happy, Inc. empire?" I looked back at the boba shop, then over at the burger place right next to it. "Just how many pies do these people have their fingers in?"

There had to be a Happy Pie out there, too. Happy, Inc. was arguably one of the biggest corpos in Nomicon Valley, if not the biggest. Their Nomicon office wasn't even their actual HQ, despite towering over many of the other buildings. I could see it from here at Happy Boba, even.

It had huge multinational coverage with its many, many popular franchises. Most catered in food, pun intended. Happy Cow did burgers, Happy Boba and Happy Noodle — formerly Happy Ramen — were self-explanatory. But Happy Links? They were doing jewelry now?

It just seemed like such a scattershot approach. Jackal & Ashby, the demon corpo, at least kept things consistent by masquerading as an entire building full of lawyers. SeraphiCorp was never shy about highlighting their charity initiatives, which made sense because it was operated by angels. Or angel investors, maybe?

Occultech had their ominous Investors with a capital I, the ones that Director Sakamoto communed with directly using rituals and blood sacrifice. Freaky shit. Not for me. That was my main problem with Occultech. All this time working for them and I still had no idea who they served, or what they really stood for.

And that was the issue with Happy, Inc., too. Just who the hell was in charge up there? A three-headed dragon with at least one head for business? A cabal of enterprising wizards? Surely not another cult. Right?

“Actually, there used to be a Happy Ink,” Morrow said, somewhat guiltily. “It was a stationery shop. Their stuff wasn't bad. Middling quality, at best, but they had a few nice inks. I heard that the name was why they shut down in the first place. Too much confusion with the mother corpo's name.”

“Sure. Yeah. That all hangs together. You being a huge statio nerd, I mean.”

Morrow frowned. “You're one to talk. I've seen your home office.”

I winced, thinking about the massive mess that had spilled beyond the desk in my apartment. Then a thrill blossomed around the general area of my hips when I remembered that Morrow actually had set foot in my apartment, and vice versa. Standing within dangerously close reach of each other's beds both times, too.

I sucked down the melted ice water at the bottom of my cup, tossed it in the garbage, then nudged my head toward the charm shop, grumbling, “Shut the fuck up, Morrow,” under my breath.

“Never,” he said, nodding at the shop. “Check that out. I must have missed the banner up front.”

“Oh, so it’s opening day? I guess all this action isn’t really that unusual. A big sneaker or console drop, you’d have all these people swarming a store, too. Except — huh. Well, that’s different.”

“What is?” he asked.

I pointed at the sidewalk just outside of Happy Links. “All these people walking out. They don’t look as excited as when they walked in. They barely look pleased with their purchases.”

We studied the crowd — mostly women — wearing admittedly very cute golden charms around the stylish chains on their wrists. I craned my neck to look at one lady’s bracelet as we stopped just short of the storefront. Her charms included a gift box, a poodle, and an ice cream cone. Super cute. Shit. Maybe I wanted a charm bracelet, too.

“I guess I don’t see how this is relevant,” Morrow said. “They bought the thing that they wanted. The shopping itch has been scratched.”

So he noticed the difference, too. There were still people with flushed faces and dazzled eyes filing into the store, not as many as when we’d spotted the shop from the boba place, but still enough to pack Happy Links to capacity.

But everyone walking out was wearing a dazed expression, as if suspended in a blissful trance. Not alarming, exactly, the way they smiled dreamily to themselves and gazed off into the distance, except — why did all those smiles look so eerily similar?

“That’s what I’m saying,” I whispered as another entranced woman brushed past my shoulder. “Shouldn’t they be excited about what they bought? Squealing? Celebrating? Look. If a video game I pre-ordered arrives, I’m hitting the gas on Old Betsy so hard I’m this close to accidentally slamming into a brick wall.”

Morrow pursed his lips. “They look like satisfied shoppers to me. Uh, marginally satisfied, I suppose.”

“Okay, think of it this way. You’re in line to buy Carly Rae Jepsen tickets on a website.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Tread lightly. I told you to be very careful when you invoke her name.”

“Shut up. So you watch the progress bar, and you make it to the purchase page, then score front row seats. What do you do?”

His cheeks flushed as he lived out his fantasy, clearly imagining the scenario. “I would punch a wall so hard I’d break my knuckles. Point taken.”

I gestured at Happy Links again. “So why do they look like that? All dreamy and zombified? Explain.”

A beautiful Black man shambled out of the store, someone I almost didn’t recognize because I usually saw him as a beautiful Black woman instead — at night, in the darkness, working behind a bar.

Morrow elbowed me in the ribs. “That’s Anita Cocktail, isn’t it? The drag queen bartender at Club Debussy?”

I knew I was right. I waved my hand in his face. “Anita? Anita Cocktail? You bought some charms, too?”

“I’m out of drag, stupid,” he drawled. “Call me Ambrose. And yes. I love Happy Links. What a fine selection of charms for the charming.”

Dangling from the chain around his wrist were a cartoonish burlap bag of money — complete with tiny dollar sign — and a cocktail glass, among other things. Annoyingly, temptingly cute. I squinted at the store, fighting back the urge to stroll in and spend.

Before Morrow or I could respond, Ambrose turned on his heel and ambled on down the sidewalk.

I pointed at Ambrose’s back. “See what I mean?”

“You don’t suppose it’s a certain someone’s influence,” Morrow said. “You know. Our crimson friend.”

“No. Theodore Morrow, don’t you even start with that shit.”

The Goddess of the Valley. Was she back?

CHAPTER 2

Director Enyo Sakamoto stared at me over her carefully steepled fingers. Silence suffocated the pristine gray and white of her enormous office, only broken by the perpetual trickle of the artificial waterfall behind her.

How did this woman know exactly how to freak me out? She was holding my gaze just a moment too long. And just when I thought it was over, her other eye slowly swiveled to look at Morrow.

My hair stood on end. She was looking at both of us at the same time, like some kind of insect. Could insects even do that?

I blinked, and her eyes were shut, seemingly in deep thought. Had I just imagined all that?

“But why would the goddess set up a jewelry store, of all things?” Sakamoto asked. “That seems like too much work when she can just fling out binding hexes willy-nilly.”

The director had a point. I mean, I’d just been an almost-victim of the Goddess of the Valley’s mind control. All the zealots and true believers who followed her, how they’d all been gifted with magic through her dubious miracles — surely that wasn’t all just blind loyalty and faith. Or was the temptation of instantaneous power enough? Go from a lowly mundane human to a mage within moments, just add holy water?

“And I’ve checked with the other field agents,” Morrow said. “The surveillance department, too. No one has reported any recent sightings of the Goddess of the Valley’s magpies.”

Her worshippers, those young men in crimson hooded jackets. We'd come to call the cultists hoodies, but the goddess had called them her magpies, sending them out to steal shiny trinkets, magical objects to consume and convert into fuel for her ritual.

Sakamoto drummed her fingernails on her desk. "For a human woman who aspired to divinity — who'd intended to replace an existing goddess with the Rite of Divine Usurpation — the Goddess of the Valley was infused with far too much arcane talent."

And she had seemingly appeared overnight. There was no way to track every last magic user within the arcane underground. Even magical people didn't like intrusions on their privacy.

"I've asked around," I said, "but none of my contacts have ever even heard of her. For someone of this much power to stay out of Occultech's radar is absolutely bananas."

"Then exercise caution," Sakamoto said. "Prioritize Happy, Inc., but assume that Lady Paralumen is still on the prowl."

Another shiver coursed through my body. Sakamoto had already established that names didn't have the power they used to, at least in a magical sense. Information technology had made sure of that, diluting the effectiveness of sympathetic magic through name alone by flooding the world with a tidal wave of human names.

What eldritch power could you truly hold over a person when all you had to do to find their true name was a quick internet search?

Yet knowing all that still didn't stop me from getting nervous at the mere mention of her name. Maybe I was more superstitious than I thought. I was being silly. Say "Beetlejuice" three times. Say "Bloody Mary" in the mirror. Only myths. Urban legends.

"Lady — um, that is to say, the Goddess of the Valley." I clenched my fists, hating myself for stammering. "If we do encounter her out on the street, should we engage her?"

"To the best of your ability," said Sakamoto. "Defensively. But I hope you've learned your lesson. This time, perhaps you won't copy her spells before you understand what's happening."

I threw my hands up. "Hey! I copied the right spell when it mattered. Remember? When she and her magpies breached the basement? Then she broke your creepy drone? Then I mirrored the spell right back at her and

busted her stupid lantern and unleashed the actual goddess that split her into tiny little molecules. Or so we thought.”

Sakamoto sniffled. “We were both right there, Frost. Stop recounting your dubious achievements as if for the benefit of some invisible audience.”

I bit my tongue, because Sakamoto wasn’t actually there. Not physically, at least. She was in her allegedly nonexistent war room, the place where she took control of Occultech HQ’s defenses and facilities by ritually flogging and bleeding her personal assistants or whatever. Presumably. I’m just guessing.

“And besides, you broke our ocular drone.” Her mouth split into a pearlescent grin. “Rest assured, we will be garnishing your wages to pay for the prototype. In reasonable quantities, of course.”

I threw my hands up again. “What wages? I’m just a contractor. I don’t even work here.”

“And you never will, with that attitude.”

I glanced at Morrow as if he could even do anything to help me. He shrugged. I frowned. That shrug wasn’t apologetic enough.

“Consider yourselves dismissed, gentlemen.” She looked down at the tablet in her hand, seemingly bored. “Report back if you find anything. Surveillance has been — motivated — and will provide intel as and when it is ready.”

Morrow coughed. “Motivated, Director?”

“Correct. I told them that hovering eyeball drones would replace them if they didn’t do their jobs properly. By way of a memo. That catches fire when read.”

I caught myself before I rolled my eyes. I thought the self-immolating documents were only meant for freelancers like me, dossiers that burned themselves after reading to ensure there was zero evidence left to incriminate Occultech. You needed to be an attentive reader to do mercenary work for Occultech.

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Merc work, that is. In my case, I scraped through with that little portion of my talent for duplicating spells that helped me retain information better than your average super-handsome magical boy. Still made my head hurt like hell, though.

I glanced at the necklace Morrow was wearing, the one that summoned his holographic not-quite-glasses. It made me think of the fragmentation tablet he'd gifted me in return. Okay. Fine. I couldn't stay mad at him, or his cute, stupid, cute face.

Director Sakamoto swiped at her tablet and hummed to herself as if we weren't even there. Morrow raised his hand up to the reader by her exclusive elevator's doors, bypassing the code input. Most companies swiped ID cards to do that, didn't they?

I winced at the thought that the scanner picked up on a chip inside his hand, the same one that holomagically projected Occultech's proprietary user interface as well as the occasional terrifying video call with Enyo Sakamoto.

We normally needed the director to send us down from her penthouse, but since the battle in the Occultech basement, Morrow's access had been upgraded. Not quite a promotion, but a sign of his upward trajectory through the ranks all the same.

The upgrade also included access to even lower levels of the basement, where they probably kept even more dangerous artifacts and creatures in their combination museum and menagerie. I shuddered at the thought. Whether it was Sakamoto's office at the highest peak of HQ or the infernal depths of the basement, Morrow's upgrade really didn't feel like an upgrade at all.

We rode down together in silence. I was too busy processing the horrible possibility that the Goddess of the Valley was still hanging around. God, I couldn't even get myself to think her name. Call it an overabundance of caution. I had plenty enough problems with spell fragments lingering in my brain. There was simply not enough room for anxiety and paranoia, too.

The doors slid open to the spacious Occultech lobby, waiting lounges to either side of the room, the somewhat intimidating reception counter up front. A woman with a familiar cloud of white hair was already sitting there. I glanced at the set of analog clocks above the sliding front doors, an array of different time zones, plus that unsettling last one that didn't end at the twelfth, but the thirteenth hour.

Morrow leaned on the counter to greet her with his odd, only occasionally conjured charm. I did my best from her other side, still puzzled by how early she'd arrived.

"It's still light out," I told Doris. "I've never seen you here so early."

Doris grumbled. "I was joking about being the gargoyle at the gates, Frost. It's not like I turn to stone in daylight and become a beautiful beast of a woman at night."

Morrow wagged his eyebrows. "A beautiful beast indeed."

Doris muffled her coquettish giggle with one hand and slapped him on the arm. "You're a terrible flirt. And not that it's any of your business, Frost, but I'm taking extra shifts. I need a quick cash infusion. After those hoodies attacked, I think I need another weapon."

I glanced down at the counter. Occultech's people worked fast. The last time I saw it, it was still pockmarked from the impact of so many magical spells — or miracles, as the cultists liked to think of their goddess-granted powers. It was a miracle that Doris survived the initial ordeal in the lobby unscathed, but then again, the lady was packing.

I never would have guessed that someone who worked in reception would have access to — ah, there it was. Doris slammed her Occultech-brand shotgun on the counter.

"Occultech won't issue me a second enchanted firearm. Pssh. Says receptionists are limited to one piece apiece. I just don't know if hexed buckshot is going to cut it the next time we get swarmed by vermin."

My eyes went wide open. "You think there's going to be a next time?"

"It pays to be vigilant," Morrow said. "The cultist attack was an anomaly. Occultech has enough enemies of its own — rival corpos, for example."

"Maybe a sidearm," Doris murmured absently. "Or a rocket launcher?"

"Good luck with that," I told her, reaching for Morrow's arm. "And don't work yourself too hard, Doris!"

Morrow stumbled after me. Doris reached for a cloth to lovingly polish her boomstick as she dreamily gazed off.

"If you wanted to hold hands," Morrow said out on the sidewalk, "you only had to ask."

I ignored the flutter in my stomach. "She's right. You *are* a terrible flirt. Listen. About extra shifts. Club Debussy has a couple bartenders, but Xavi

told me that Anita Cocktail has been picking up extra shifts, too. Something about saving up for a vacation. What say we hit the club tonight?"

He pursed his lips, eyes narrowing into slits. "You're just looking for an excuse to see me in a tight T-shirt again, aren't you?"

He knew about my stupid little crush. He had to know. I wanted to kick him in the shins, or punch him in the gut, or kiss him hard on those annoying pouty lips.

"Don't flatter yourself," I snarled in response. "Pick me up at nine. I don't feel like driving tonight. And don't be late."

Morrow grinned. "It's a date."

My stomach did a somersault.

"Shut the fuck up, Morrow," I said, cheeks burning like fire as I hurried back to my car.

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CHAPTER 3

Tiny charms jingled and clinked from Anita Cocktail's wrist as she worked on her makeup, staring hard into Club Debussy's dressing room mirror. The border of hot lightbulbs framing the mirror, the explosion of neon feathers and scintillating sequins on all the racks of clothes — I didn't know how any of these queens could work here without passing out from overstimulation.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Anita said, pulling down on her cheek as she expertly traced her lower eyelid with a delicate black pencil.

"But we ran into you outside the store just this afternoon," I said. "You told me your name was Ambrose."

Her reflection glared at my reflection. "The least you can do when I've got half my face on is call me by my drag name."

"Yeah," Xtra Xtra snapped. "The least you can do when his dick is tucked all the way back to his ass is call him by his drag name."

I rolled my eyes. Xavi Ximenez — sorry, Xtra Xtra — loved to use that line on me all the time.

"But yes, Ambrose is my boy name. You could have learned it anywhere, though. I'm sure I've told you at some point. And I was at Happy Links, obviously." She jiggled her wrist, the little charms making a melodic tinkle. "How else did I buy these? But I don't remember seeing either of you there."

Morrow and I exchanged a puzzled look.

“Well, we won’t bother you ladies anymore,” Morrow said through his most dazzling smile. “We look forward to seeing both your numbers tonight.”

Anita batted her lashes at him. When Theodore Morrow turned on the charm, no one could resist, apparently.

“Oh, I’m not performing tonight,” she said. “Tired enough picking up all these extra shifts. But I’m sure that linebacker over there has something special prepared.”

Xtra Xtra gasped. “You’re a huge bitch, Anita. You always were.”

Anita Cocktail blew her a kiss. I could see where the comment was coming from. Xtra Xtra was shaped like a nacho chip, huge, exaggerated shoulder pads and a tiny, cinched waist. That corset was probably holding all her internal organs in place.

“See you girls out there,” I said, following Morrow out to the hallway. “What was that?” I hissed. “I had more questions for Anita.”

“Doesn’t matter, does it? She was getting agitated by your line of questioning, and we have what we need already. This only supports our theory. Something about the charms is, er, charming whoever wears them.”

“Fair point, except that only brings up more questions. You saw her wearing her charm bracelet back there. Why was she talking all normal? No trance state, no weird sleepy slurring.”

Morrow only shook his head. We ordered our drinks from the bartender who was nearing the end of her shift, the one Anita Cocktail would be taking over for. Yoanna Hangover was a dab hand at mixing drinks, but there was just something extra special about the way Anita made cocktails.

We picked our way through the crowd to look for a table, finding a stud with shoulder-length blond hair spilling out of a cowboy hat instead. My jaw dropped.

“Houston?” I said. “SeraphiCorp Houston?”

He tipped his hat and grinned, bare bicep flexing as he did. “Frost. Morrow. Good to see you both.”

I took a moment to appraise his impressive arms, nicely exposed because of his choice of outfit: a brown fringed suede vest over a clean white tank top, blue jeans, and cowboy boots.

“You’re looking very handsome tonight,” I said. “And you’ve clearly been working out. Damn.”

It was so easy being so generous with the compliments around Houston. I wasn't feeling cautious about him taking anything the wrong way, whether in offense or as flirtation. Besides, the fact that he was sitting alone in a queer bar kind of suggested that he wouldn't have any problems being so openly complimented by another guy.

And was I maybe doing it to make a certain other blond buff gentleman a little bit jealous? Was this my own sneaky little way to see if I would get a reaction out of the aloof yet occasionally handsy Theodore Morrow? Sure. Yeah. Of course, it was.

And it worked, too. Morrow tried not to show it, and maybe I was imagining some of it, but he looked jealous enough to me. In my experience, straight guys sulked if you didn't gush about their very obvious pecs and biceps. He was wearing that same tight T-shirt I made him wear to Club Debussy the last time, and —

Yep, there it was. He was holding his shoulders a little broader, puffing his chest out a little too much. Like a rooster, a cockerel, the cock of the walk. It was so amusing to see. Except the real cock I wanted to see was —

"Good to see you again," Morrow said, his muscles flexed so taut that his expression bordered on constipation. "And here, of all places."

Houston's cheeks reddened. He lowered his head and scratched the back of his neck, all but oozing that country boy, "Aw, shucks" charisma from his very pores.

"Actually, I'd heard that Xtra Xtra was performing tonight. Remember when Angelica and I helped out at the newsstand? I tried to talk Xtra up that night, but she kicked us out of the backroom real quick."

I remembered, of course, the night when one of the cultists broke into the astral backroom layered onto Xavi's newsstand, the pocket dimension where the Ximenez family kept its collection of grimoires and rare magical books hidden.

"Xtra's a little extra like that," I told Houston. "But I have a feeling she's going to be happy to see you. Happier than the night we fucked up her backroom, at least."

Houston chuckled nervously, then gestured for us to join him at the table. He eyed the lip of his beer anxiously, the condensation on the bottle matching the sweat forming on his forehead. I couldn't take it. This was so fucking cute. I took a second to glare at the side of Morrow's face. Why couldn't he be more like Houston?

Xtra Xtra was a passably pretty, if suspiciously large drag queen. Houston would blow his top if he saw her out of drag. Xavi Ximenez was a hunk and a half, something I would never tell him to his face, but something that was undeniably true.

“So how long have the two of you been dating?” Houston asked.

I was taking a sip of my cocktail at the time. Half a mouthful of it was now sprayed across the top of our table. Morrow’s cocktail, meanwhile, went down the wrong pipe. He coughed and sputtered as Houston clapped him on the back.

I forced the words out. “We’re not — ”

“ — dating,” Morrow finished.

“Oh. Sorry for assuming. I just — you’d make a cute couple, you know?”

Houston shot us another one of those gooey grins, half his mouth curling into a smile. Xtra Xtra was going to love this guy. And Xavi Ximenez was going to suck this cowboy dry.

I downed what was left of my drink. Morrow did the same, easily dodging the question, simultaneously avoiding my gaze.

“Hey,” I blurted out. “Looks like we’re all out of drinks. I’ll grab some more. Same thing for you, Houston? And for you, Morrow?”

“Um, sure,” Morrow said. “We’ve got a running tab. Just make sure to put it on — ”

“The Occultech credit card. Got it. Be right back.”

Houston’s eyes flitted meaningfully between the two of us as I stumbled off my bar stool. Damn it. He knew, naturally, from the way I tangled my feet and probably turned bright red even under the flicker of Debussy’s lights. I threw him a warning glare over my shoulder, telling him with my eyes to shut it. He nudged his head toward Morrow, then winked.

I clenched my teeth. It’d be too weird to turn around now and demand that Morrow go fetch our drinks instead, just so I could sit down and give Houston a piece of my mind. I’d just have to believe that Houston was enough of a bro not to broach the subject.

Maybe I could bribe him with even more beer. On Occultech’s tab, of course. Except I was surprised to find that Yoanna Hangover had finished work for the night. Anita Cocktail was tending bar now, her nails painted with a stylized drip to resemble molten gold, matching golden tinsel

threaded through the braids spilling from her enormous wig. She smirked as I approached the bar.

“A beer for the gentleman?” she asked, a disappointed “Tsk” already locked and loaded on her lips. Beer sales were good for the bar, of course, but she much preferred the challenge of crafting a good cocktail. They didn’t call her Anita Cocktail for — well, you get the picture.

I chuckled nervously. “Yes, ma’am. Two beers, and a dirty martini for Morrow.”

She peered over my shoulder at our table, then wrinkled her nose at me. “You hitting that? Actually, don’t answer. You aren’t. Xtra Xtra tells me you have terrible game.”

I threw my hands up. “Is that what you all gossip about in the dressing room? My nonexistent sex life? And stop it, already. I’m pretty sure he doesn’t swing that way.”

Anita Cocktail scoffed. “Won’t know until you ask. You got a mouth, don’t you? Use it, one way or the other.”

As if I hadn’t already tried. Something always got in the way somehow, either some stupid, pressing matter that distracted him, or his own oblivious nature suddenly plunging his IQ below sea level whenever it seemed convenient.

I pressed my lips tightly together, deciding it wasn’t worth arguing with the lady who could withhold all our drinks if I got too mouthy. She popped open the beers — nice and frosty — slid them across the counter, then started on Morrow’s martini.

She shook her shaker, and there it was again — that glazed look on her face, the Happy Links trance. Her gold-smeared lips parted slightly as her eyes went distant, her hands still automatically preparing the drink, as if muscle memory had taken over.

The little charms tinkled on her bracelet as she shook the cocktail shaker: the tiny burlap bag of money, the tiny martini glass, the palm tree. Without even looking at what she was doing, staring over my shoulder at absolutely nothing, Anita Cocktail still pulled off the perfect pour, spearing a single olive with a tiny plastic sword and dropping it expertly into the glass.

“Your drinks,” she said, as dispassionate as a robot, nudging the beers and martini across the countertop. “I’ll put them on your card.”

“Um, sure,” I said. “Thanks a lot, Anita.”

Unblinking, unseeing, she answered, "I am always happy to serve."

A shiver ran down my spine, and I knew it wasn't from handling all the icy drinks, either. What just happened back there? One minute she was the same chill and very intimidating drag queen-bartender she always was, and the next, she was Ambrose from the sidewalk outside Happy Links, suspended in a dreamy trance.

I brought the boys their drinks. Houston accepted his with a drawled, "Much obliged," followed by another wink. I barely knew the man, but something in my gut told me this was a different wink, one that said, "Your secret's safe with me." Good. Great. Unless it was all my imagination. Whatever. There were more pressing matters just now.

"Listen," I told Morrow. "It happened again. Anita Cocktail, remember when we saw her earlier, out on the street? She was doing that hypnotized thing when she was making your drink. How's it taste, anyway?"

He took a tentative sip, smacked his lips, then nodded in approval. "As good as the first time."

So this trance state didn't make Anita any worse at her job, just put her in a blank personality limbo. Then what were those charms supposed to accomplish in the first place? What was Happy, Inc. really up to?

"Pardon, gents," Houston said, slipping into the conversation. "But what are we whispering about over here?"

I liked to think that Morrow and I had developed a sort of nonverbal language over the course of our partnership, but his half-shrug of a shoulder and a scrunched face needed no translating, the universal signs for "Eh."

It was Houston, anyway, the sweeter of the SeraphiCorp pair we'd met. By a country mile, pun intended. And at least he asked nicely. His partner Angelica would have launched into a sermon of fire and brimstone to bully us into coughing up the deets.

So we told him, and his eyes lit up with recognition the moment I mentioned the words 'Happy Links.'

"You guys have been investigating them too, then?" I asked.

Houston glanced around, as if checking for prying ears, here in the deafening loudness of a drag club. "Same thing we've noticed. People who wear the charms go all lopsided, but there's no rhyme or reason when the trance kicks in. It doesn't make any sense."

At least SeraphiCorp had the same findings. It was kind of nice that Houston was tipping closer to friend territory than just a tenuous ally. I

didn't mind sharing information if it meant we could both get a paycheck and protect some innocent mundanes at the end of the day.

But before I could say anything else, the club's music climbed several decibels. Carly Rae Jepsen's *Call Me Maybe* thumped through the speakers. Xtra Xtra trotted out onto the stage lipsyncing the lyrics into a giant red telephone.

Morrow pumped his fists into the air. "She's doing the same number! I love this one."

Houston watched the stage with starry eyes, mouth open in a dazzled, lopsided smile. Fucking adorable. Again I restrained the urge to cuff Morrow by the ears.

But Morrow did something I wouldn't have expected. He reached for his wallet, pulled out a wad of one-dollar bills, then shoved them into Houston's hands. Houston looked up in confusion. So cute. The poor thing had never been to a drag bar before.

"Go and tip her," I shouted.

His eyes went wide. "Like a stripper?"

"Sure. But don't stuff them in her panties or anything."

I pointed at the club's other patrons. They held out their dollar bills at arm's length, far enough that Xtra Xtra could collect them while still offering plenty of space for her to continue performing. Houston tipped his hat, then gave me and Morrow grateful looks before he charged into the fray.

What a cutie. If Xtra Xtra turned him down — nah. Unfortunately, Morrow was very much my type. Big, dumb, and presumably hung. Okay, so he wasn't dumb, not really. He did master scrolls and scribing, after all, and to survive and thrive as a field agent at one of the biggest corpos in the Valley? Under Enyo Sakamoto's command, at that?

Morrow leaned into me a little too close in his excitement, the heat of his breath and his body almost too much to bear. "I think someone has a little crush on our favorite drag queen."

"Your favorite drag queen, maybe," I scoffed. "But I agree. It's very cute."

"I know he's a contractor, not a field agent," he said. "It's a dangerous line of work either way. It's nice knowing that someone who works for the corpos can do a little dating."

I forced myself to smile, speaking through clenched teeth. “Yeah. Awfully nice. Maybe you’ll find someone, too.”

He grabbed his drink and grinned. “Maybe.”

That was my cue to chug my beer before I was tempted to bean him with the bottle. I peered into its rim, checking to see if I had enough left to dramatically finish and slam on the table.

My hair stood on end when I saw a woman’s face staring back from the bottom of the bottle.

“We should talk,” said Freyja.

I dropped the bottle, spilling the rest of my beer on the table and all over my jeans. Morrow quickly grabbed some napkins, mopping up the table before reaching for my lap.

“I’m fine!” I said, guarding my nether regions, knowing I would spring a boner or come on the spot if he so much as brushed his knuckles against my fly.

“Are you sure?” he asked, more than a little concerned. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost. I can get you another beer, if you want.”

“I’m okay,” I said. “No more beers for me tonight.”

Or goddesses, for that matter.

CHAPTER 4

I glanced over my shoulder, shocked that even more people were arriving, the line running so far to the back of Southridge Mall that it had wrapped around the corner. I'd been so convinced that the mall was in its death throes, but the amount of footfall it was seeing today was probably more than enough to make up for its losses.

Scratch that. The opening of another Happy Links location was all but guaranteed to revivify Southridge Mall all on its own. Peering through the glass I could see that the previously abandoned lots to either side of it were now boarded up with COMING SOON signs for brands eager to ride on Happy Links's coattails.

I yawned, kind of annoyed that I hadn't had my usual cup of coffee, but maybe kind of glad, too. We'd been in line for at least an hour, and I wasn't planning to leave the queue to pee and come back. I didn't even trust Morrow to let me back in the line, knowing how much of a goody two shoes he could be.

Anyway, people could get touchy about that kind of thing, but especially people who'd lined up since morning for a handful of free charms from Happy Links. For the first hundred customers at the new location, at least. Very clever of them, as if the shop even needed to drum up extra excitement.

I stuffed my hands in my leather jacket's pockets, shrugging off the morning chill. Surprisingly cool today, partly because we were there before lunch — not ideal in terms of my waking hours, of course. Morrow was lucky I wasn't any grumpier.

Morrow, who had foregone his usual uniform of a suit and tie and was now dressed like some kind of thrift-store reject. Almost as if someone had dunked him in glue and rolled him around the inside of a bargain bin. A threadbare cap pulled over his eyes, a garish teal and purple windbreaker, torn and faded jeans, and running shoes with neon laces.

Individually, maybe, some parts of the outfit were cool, but put all together, this alternate version of Theodore Morrow was an unwelcome assault on the senses. He was carrying his shoulders a little lower than usual, too, changing the way he walked and talked like this was some kind of spy game, like he was Double Oh-Seven himself. Hah. More like Double Oh-Kevin.

“Morrow. As your partner, I should really be honest and tell you. You look even more constipated than usual.”

He scoffed under his breath. “Better constipated than conspicuous. We have to stay incognito. Happy, Inc. is still a rival corpo, after all.”

I pursed my lips. “They probably care more about people like Director Sakamoto and the Occultech higher-ups, not about scrubs like me and you.”

“Shush! Keep it down. You want them to know where we’re from? No names. Everybody has dossiers on everybody, Frost. You never know.”

“You just said my name, though.”

“Hush up. What if their CEO is here? Newly installed, too. It’s a dynastic empire — the Thorpes, long line of entrepreneurs dating back to the turn of the century.”

He stared mournfully down at his hand. I could tell he wanted to activate his Occultech palm technology so he could read his precious little dossier and rattle off facts at me like the nerd he was. And why was that so cute? Stupid Morrow and his stupid but kind of sexy ’90s windbreaker.

I nudged him with my elbow. “Does it say anywhere in the dossier why they can’t make their minds up about their business? I mean — food, stationery, jewelry. What gives?”

He shrugged. “No information as to why. Hard to say, honestly. You’d think the different divisions would just splinter off and be done with it, but for whatever reason, the corporation looks perfectly comfortable having everything under one umbrella.”

“Seems chaotic,” I said, frowning at the line.

Then again, what about all of this hadn’t been chaotic to begin with? The frantic rush at the first store’s opening when we went to get boba, Anita

Cocktail's ever-shifting personality, and now this line of people that rivaled shoppers waiting for a Black Friday store opening, or hardcore amusement park fans itching to get on a new ride.

I'd chalk it all up to demons if I didn't already know that Nomicon Valley's particular brand of infernal was more dedicated to the maddening properties of too much order over hellish chaos. Literally. I'd heard that the preferred method of firing a client over at JackAsh was to send them on a deliberately confusing quest between the corpo's floors, counters, and offices, complete with armfuls of increasingly complicated and useless forms. The confusion would inevitably drive a client mad — provided they didn't die of exhaustion, starvation, and dehydration first.

The line suddenly lurched forward. Everyone murmured in excitement. We were moving. The store was open.

"Come on," Morrow said, grabbing my hand, rubbernecking to see where we were going.

"I'm right behind you," I complained, making no effort to remove his hand from mine.

I already knew that Morrow was strong, but I could tell that it wasn't just from going to the gym. Those sturdy fingers, the rough palm — was he a bouldering fan? I thought back to when I'd trapped him with a copy of one of his own concrete wall spells, how he'd actually clambered up the damn thing with very little effort. And those muscles in his back, those didn't just sprout from —

"Keep up, will you?" Morrow barked over his shoulder.

I hadn't realized I was stumbling over my own two feet. We were moving faster than I'd expected, the excited chatter growing louder and louder as we plunged through the mall's atrium. Jesus Christ. This was how long the line actually was? Surely it was going to slow down soon, now that everyone up front was cramming themselves into the store.

But the line just kept moving, and as we hurtled toward Happy Links Too, I could finally see why. There were kiosks set up around the facade, some of them dispensing the promised free charms for the store's first one hundred shoppers, others offering games to win even more.

Devious. It might have taken some extra permits from mall management to set this all up, but considering Southridge's formerly flagging reputation, whatever passed for management was probably happy to let the store do whatever it wanted.

They'd set it up like a miniature carnival, even: big colorful signs, metallic balloons in the same shapes as their tiny charm counterparts, a fleet of smiling workers inviting shoppers to try out their various attractions. Balloon darts, a ring toss, a claw machine — they'd pulled out all the stops.

These Happy, Inc. people were geniuses. Overstimulation? More like total sensory overload. Morrow had finally let go of my hand, freeing himself up to collect a little bag of charms for himself. I didn't make it two steps before a worker pressed a bag of charms into my open hand.

"Have a Happy Links day!" she trilled, going off to distribute even more goodie bags.

I glanced at the rest of the workers tending the line, mentally calculating how many people had already gone ahead of us and how many more of the velvety pink drawstring bags they had left to hand out. One hundred gifts was a severe underestimation. There had to be a couple hundred more between them. Happy Links was casting a wide net, making sure to hand out as many of their charms as possible. That wasn't counting all the prizes from the booths, either.

And then stepping aside to peek into my drawstring bag, I understood why. They'd given us free charms as promised, but had also strung them on the most boring, basic black cord available. I watched as shoppers inside the store tried on glitzier options — brass ball-bearing necklaces, woven silver bracelets, delicate gold chains — and then I understood. These things were trendy enough that no one would want to be caught dead wearing them on some default shabby piece of string.

"It's kind of brilliant," I told Morrow, who was also sifting through his drawstring bag.

"I know," he replied, fishing out the cord, grimacing at it like it was something he'd discovered in his bowl of pasta. "They're not just profiting off the charms. Those chains can get pretty expensive, too. Happy, Inc. is making bank here, whether or not these things are magical."

"Of course they're magical!" boomed the tallest woman I'd ever seen. "They bring so much joy to people of all ages. Look at all these Happy faces!"

And when I say tall: an imposing skyscraper of a woman, surely almost seven feet, an absolute giantess. Draped over the elaborate collar of her golden tuxedo dress was a gold necklace dripping with Happy Links charms. Oh, and the earrings, and the bracelets, and — yep, there it was, an

anklet, too, all of them festooned with tiny little charms. With her dazzling smile, oceanic waves of glossy hair, and sparkling green eyes, she was a gilded statue come to life.

“Sure, yeah,” I told the shiny titan. “Magical smiles! Can’t wait to try mine on. Thanks for the freebies.”

“Absolutely,” she said, blasting both of us with another smile. “Enjoy the charms, and have a Happy Links day!”

She swanned off, radiating charisma as she moved down the line to keep on schmoozing. I chuckled nervously to myself, unsure of what to make of my encounter with a human cartoon character.

I thumbed over my shoulder and held a hand by my mouth, giving Morrow a conspiratorial wink. “Wilhelmina Wonka over here, am I right? I was waiting for her to whip a golden cane and top hat out of nowhere, too.”

“Be serious,” he said, bending closer to whisper. “I’m not sure if you noticed, but that’s Alexandra Thorpe. You know. The current head of the Happy, Inc. dynasty.”

My jaw dropped. “You’re kidding. Holy shit. Why was I expecting a stuffy old guy in a suit? And for her to be all boots-on-the-ground running publicity at a store opening. Like, wow.”

Alexandra Thorpe was Enyo Sakamoto’s counterpart. I couldn’t imagine the director at a product launch, much less rubbing shoulders with common folk.

“Tell me about it,” Morrow said, still watching Thorpe like a hawk. “Talk about being hands-on with your business. But that thing she said about magic felt like a convenient deflection to me. These charms are obviously magical. She’s almost certainly magical, too. Her corpo is breaking the terms of the Accord.”

“Maybe she doesn’t care about it,” I said. “Maybe she thinks she’s above it.”

The Accord was the special agreement forged by the arcane corporations of Nomicon Valley. No matter their business models or product lines, the corpos agreed not to get mundanes involved.

Necropolux catered exclusively to the arcane underground, providing both electrical and analog lighting solutions to conceal the more intimidating features of nonhumans, supernaturals, and the living dead, staying out of mundane territory entirely.

JackAsh skirted the line by actually offering some of the most efficient and ruthless legal services on the continent, truly working in the best interest of their clients — except for those who even demons considered assholes, that is.

But this? Happy, Inc. was way over the line. Shoppers were streaming out of the Happy Links store in the same state as the first location, dazed looks on their faces, far more sluggish and a lot less excited than when they'd walked in. Each, naturally, was wearing charms on their person, whether on bracelets or anklets or earrings. I gritted my teeth as an idea came to me, but if we were really going to get to the heart of the matter, Morrow and I would have to go deeper. At least wrist deep.

“You’re going to hate this,” I said, “but I think we have to test these charms on ourselves.”

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CHAPTER 5

“Best two out of three,” I huffed, smacking Morrow’s hand away. “And besides, you hesitated for a split second. You saw me throw rock before you threw paper.”

“That’s impossible,” he said, “but we both know you’re a sore loser. Fine. Two out of three, then.”

Another quick round of rock-paper-scissors later, Morrow bested me again. I bit on the inside of my cheeks, refusing to prove him right, but he could tell I was fuming anyway. Well, shit. This meant that I was going to test the charm bracelet first.

“Go on,” Morrow said, ushering me into the farthest corner of the corridor. “Put it on. Let’s see what happens next.”

We’d found our way to one of Southridge Mall’s abandoned corridors, an alcove ending in nowhere flanked by dark, empty stores with the shutters pulled down and the windows plastered in closing-sale signs. Even the fixtures above had been liberated of their light bulbs, as if management wanted to make especially certain that they wouldn’t have to pay for electricity in this part of the building.

And not just this darkened dead-end, either. The mall branched out from the ground-floor atrium like an asterisk or the spokes of a wheel, the dried-up, nonfunctional fountain in its center. Maybe Happy Links really would revivify mall business with all this new footfall, but that depended on what our investigation would find. Any Nomicon Valley corpo would gladly take any opportunity to throttle another corpo’s income stream, Occultech most of all.

Sweat formed on my brow as I fished the black cord out of the promotional drawstring bag. The charms I got were cute, all right — a donut, a beachball, and an open book — but I was still apprehensive. I mean, I was the one who succumbed to Paralumen's binding hex, after all.

Sure, through no one's fault but my own, but who's counting? Morrow should have taken that into consideration and volunteered himself. My brain was already all fried from spell fragmentation without the looming threat of being mind controlled by a piece of jewelry.

"Okay, so it's like we agreed," I said. "If I do go under, you have to do your best to snap me out of it."

Morrow nodded. "If you fall under the spell, I slap you out of it, just like we discussed."

"That is *not* at all what we discussed, and you know it."

He held his hands up, fingers crooked a tempting distance away from my throat. "So I just choke you a little bit?"

I glowered. Like that time when Paralumen had taken over his mind, too, in what I'd come to think of as the Battle of the Occultech Basement. I had to admit — I kind of liked it. But that reminded me that we'd both succumbed to Paralumen's horrifying hexing charms ourselves, just in different ways.

"Just watch me, okay? Trust you to be so weird and start messing around at a time like this."

"I was trying to lighten the mood. Sorry."

His lip turned up like I'd wounded him. Great. So now I had to feel conflicted on top of being afraid of potential mind control. Why did Morrow have to look even hotter when he was pouting?

I took a good, long breath, then gave him an apologetic nod. "Fine. Didn't meant to be so snippy. Okay. Here goes nothing."

I gritted my teeth as Morrow looped the cord over my wrist, then fastened the closure. He took a swift step back, his hand already halfway inside his windbreaker, because even with his ridiculous, totally radical vintage outfit, he was apparently still wearing his super sexy scroll holster underneath. I held my breath.

And kept holding it, staring hard at the three charms dangling from the black cord. Huh. I wasn't sure what I was expecting, maybe for them to go warm or start glowing. I tapped the side of my head, then patted my chest. No fuzzy feeling in either my brain or my heart.

“Nothing?” Morrow asked. “Well, this was anticlimactic.”

“What were you expecting, exactly?” said a voice from the mouth of the corridor. “Even more of your notorious arcane distortions? Hasn’t the city suffered enough?”

The heels of Angelica’s white boots clicked as she approached us, her hair in braids threaded through silver beads. Houston followed in her wake, now dressed in his more familiar suede jacket and jeans, tipping his hat and grinning as he drew closer.

I pursed my lips, still a bit wary of our uncertain alliance with the SeraphiCorp agents. If Xavi started dating Houston, then I’d have to be a lot nicer to him. Which wouldn’t be a very hard thing to do, really. He was pretty chill at Club Debussy, a sweet guy, not a bad hang at all.

Angelica was a different matter entirely, the way she looked imperiously at me and Morrow like we were peasants who had somehow found our way into her manor’s back garden. Her gaze swept down my body, head to toe and back again, stopping at the charm bracelet still looped around my wrist.

“Impressive,” she said, in the voice of someone who wasn’t actually looking at anything very impressive at all. “Does Occultech always have such a hands-on approach to investigative work?”

Houston rubbed the scruff on his chin and chuckled, somehow always successfully straddling the line between taunting and charming. “Gotta admit, that’s an interesting way to see how those bracelets work, huh, Angie?”

“I told you not to call me that in the workplace,” she hissed, turning on him with her icy gaze.

Houston doffed his hat and cleared his throat. “Sorry, Angie.”

She winced, then turned to me and Morrow again. “So, have you discovered anything interesting about those charms yet?” She smirked. “Have you found what it is that makes them tick?”

“Not just yet, but we’re definitely trying,” Morrow replied, somehow penetrating Angelica’s cloud of celestial smugness with his weird brand of occupational apathy. I could say what I wanted about him, but the guy was effortlessly professional, through and through.

Which was probably why Angie — sorry, Angelica — seemed so determined to throw him off his balance. SeraphiCorp knew something that

we didn't, and it was clear that she meant to lord it over us and stretch this out for as long as possible.

"And you're carrying on undercover, I see," Angelica continued. "Well, one of you, at least. Looks like someone visited a few garage sales over the weekend. Or does Occultech have its own moldering costume department somewhere?"

Morrow stretched his arms out and glanced down at himself. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"Don't bully him," I said, feeling oddly defensive of Morrow — possessive, even. "I think he looks nice."

Beside me, Morrow grew at least an inch taller, his shoulders broadening. Maybe I shouldn't have mocked his totally tubular outfit so much.

I crossed my arms and sighed. "You obviously know something that we don't, Angelica. Why don't we cut the crap and get down to business?"

Her eyebrow twitched, but her mask of confidence never broke. "Very well, then. Far be it for us to withhold information that could support both our causes."

"Or someone else's cause?" Morrow asked. "I'd like to think that you're only trading information with me and Frost. Unless you're cheating on the two of us with someone else."

Angelica and Houston exchanged glances, then laughed.

"Promiscuity has its perks. But no. It's a square dance. Our professional polycule begins and ends here." Houston adjusted his hat and winked directly at me.

I tugged on my collar and tried not to blush. Morrow twisted his foot against the tiled floor, adjusting his posture so that part of his body blocked me from view. It was a subtle shift in his body language, but I definitely wasn't imagining it this time. Big guy definitely was getting a little jealous.

"Very vulgar of you, Houston." Angelica stepped forward, producing her own Happy Links drawstring bag from her pocket. "A trade. If you agree to exchange some charms with us, then we may consider spilling some proverbial tea. We have duplicates, between me and Houston, and I'm unhappy with that."

I tried not to laugh. "Are you serious? Like we're trading Pokémon cards?"

Angelica cocked an eyebrow. “Pokey — mans? What gibberish is this? Houston. What is he talking about?”

“They’re trading cards with cute little monsters on them,” Houston explained. “Emphasis on ‘trading.’ We’re all trying to complete our own sets. Frost? You won’t be so smug when you find out why we’re trying to pick up unique charms instead of duplicates.”

Okay, this was intriguing, and it was yet another side to the Happy Links business model that I hadn’t even considered. These drawstring giveaways, the prizes at the mini-carnival’s booths, even the random blind bags that the stores sold created a community component for the brand.

The mundanes would trade, reinforcing their fascination with the charms and spreading their influence even further, a kind of self-oiling marketing machine. It would be kind of brilliant if I didn’t know there was some sinister bullshit going on behind the scenes.

“We’d love to trade with you guys, too,” said a dreamy voice from the end of the corridor.

The speaker was a wispy young woman in a tank top, jeans, and chunky sneakers. I thought I recognized her from the line outside the mall, but I couldn’t be sure. Two similarly dressed ladies flanked her, and — were they teenagers? College students, maybe?

I could at least tell that they weren’t magical. I didn’t sense the thrum of spell residue that surrounded a magic user like radiation, and she didn’t dress like one of us freaks from the arcane underground.

I don’t know what it is about magical people that predisposes them to walking around like they were attending a cosplay convention. Houston with his cowboy getups, Angelica with her combination priestess-dominatrix outfits, and Morrow with his — well, it was usually the suit and tie. I wasn’t used to being the most normal one in the group, but here we were.

“Sorry, ladies,” Houston said with an especially syrupy drawl. “Private engagement. We’d prefer to keep this trade between ourselves. We probably don’t have anything you want, anyway.”

“Oh, you have plenty of what we want,” the girl in the center said, again in that same dreamy, distant monotone.

“Trade with us,” the girl on the left said, just as the girl on the right echoed her. “Trade with us.”

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All in the same drone, too. I didn't need to check their wrists to know that they were wearing those Happy Links charms themselves.

I spoke out of the side of my mouth. "Umm, guys? I think they're charmed. This doesn't look good."

Angelica scoffed. "Doesn't look good in what way? We just ignore them and carry on with our business. Actually, I'll do you one better. We'll go somewhere else. Gentlemen? Follow me."

Angelica swept down the corridor with all the majesty of someone wearing a cloak and crown, only to be stopped short when the girls spread themselves out to block her. Uh-oh.

"Ladies?" Angelica said. "Stand aside. This has nothing to do with —"

"You're not playing very nice," the girl in the middle said. "That makes us very unhappy."

They lunged without warning. Angelica sidestepped at the last moment as one of the girls fell upon her with fingers tipped with wicked acrylic nails. She stumbled, the soles of her chunky sneakers squeaking against the tiles.

"Final warning," Angelica boomed. "I will not hesitate to slap the nonsense out of each and every one of you."

"You see what I mean?" Morrow whispered to me. "Angelica thinks so, too. Slapping you would have probably worked."

"Time and place, Morrow," I hissed, watching the corridor for signs of spellwork I could copy, carefully ignoring how the thought of Morrow manhandling me was an uncomfortable turn-on.

Chunky Sneakers lunged again. Angelica darted backward, teeth clenched as she gestured with her fingers, weaving a celestial spell.

The other girls ignored them, racing down the corridor toward us.

"Frost!" Morrow shouted. "Heads up. Class Delta threats."

"You mean code Malakim hazards," Angelica said. "But sure. Whatever you say."

“Incoming!” Houston shouted, hands reaching for the holsters where he kept his six-six-six shooters.

“You can’t blast them in here,” I said. “Too much noise. Lasso them, maybe?”

“*You* lasso them. Not enough room in here to swing a cat, much less three conjured ropes. Wrassle them into submission, then maybe I can hogtie them.”

I gasped as I narrowly dodged a set of swiping acrylic talons. These girls were very pissed about not getting to trade charms with us. It was fully the influence of the bracelets they were wearing, of course, but what had flipped the switch? How did they go from basically catatonic to completely feral?

“Frost, heads up!” Morrow shouted. The next part he said directly to the third girl. “So sorry, but this is probably going to hurt.”

“Copy,” I shouted back.

She issued a battlecry as she charged him, hands poised to reach for his throat. In no time at all, Morrow had read and incinerated one of his scrolls, the smoky scent of charred paper filling the corridor. I watched his lips and the movement of his hands, wincing when I recognized the spell. This was going to hurt, all right.

A barrier flashed around Morrow’s body, solidifying in the briefest instant before the third girl fell upon him. She collided with his barrier with a resounding clang, then dropped to the floor unconscious.

My heart pounded as I ripped his spell out of the air, duplicating his barrier. Arcane energy gleamed in a bubble around me as it manifested. It would be more brittle than Morrow’s, but if it served the same purpose and protected me —

Clang. The second girl slammed against the invisible shell of force, then crumpled to the floor. These poor girls. This was far, far better than fighting them head-on with any of our magic, though. None of them were in their right mind, no point using anything that might endanger them. I hated that this reminded me of Paralumen and her cultists.

Angelica dusted off her hands. “And that takes care of all of them.”

Chunky Sneakers was on the ground, smothered in a generous coating of angelic feathers. I didn’t know whether Angelica had cast a secondary spell or let her tire herself out. At least we managed to suppress everyone without causing permanent harm.

She snapped her fingers, the feathers dissolving into nothing, leaving no traces of her magic. She stepped over the quietly snoring Chunky Sneakers, then crossed her arms, studying the three unconscious women.

“So where do we hide the bodies?”

Morrow flinched. “They aren’t dead, Angelica. And this looks bad no matter how we slice it. Three unconscious young women in some random corridor? We can’t leave them like this.”

“A bad joke, I admit,” Angelica said.

Frankly, I didn’t think she was joking.

“We can’t just *Weekend at Bernie’s* them out of here, either,” I said. “I’m not willing to go through all the trouble.”

Angelica frowned. “Here you go again with your Pokeymans and your weekender Barnabys. Where do you get all this nonsense, Frost?”

“I’ll explain later,” Houston said, patiently patting her on the shoulder. “Right now we need to handle this — predicament.”

I knelt by one of the girls, examining the charms on her wrist. A beach umbrella, a sun, and — huh. The word ‘Happy’ in a cursive font. That was new. I examined the other bracelets.

“You guys. They’re all wearing different charms, except they have this one in common. See?”

Morrow pinched one of them between his thumb and forefinger, squinting at it. “I still don’t understand what it is that makes these things trigger. I mean, you’re still wearing your charm bracelet. Nothing happened to you at all.”

I ripped off my bracelet, then watched as each one still around the sleeping girls’ wrists disintegrated, charms and all.

“What the fuck?” I muttered.

Angelica and Houston exchanged a hesitant look. Angelica spoke first. “Well, you see — about the trigger.”

One of the girls groaned, then another, until all three shifted, waking from their sleep. They rubbed the sides of their heads, a little roughed up from our encounter, but none the worse for wear.

“What — what happened?” Chunky Sneakers asked.

Houston went down on his haunches and treated them to one of his winning smiles. “Looks like you might have tired yourselves out. Shop till you drop, am I right, ladies?”

The three went from groggy to bashful, dazzled by Houston's grin. Couldn't blame them. I'd fallen victim to the radiance myself.

Angelica squatted next to him, wearing a kind smile. I started at the sight, so used to her being haughty and commanding.

"Are you girls staying hydrated? The air-conditioning barely works in here, and it's very hot out. Did you have anything to eat today?"

They glanced at each other, then shook their heads. "We were in kind of a rush to get to Southridge. We thought we'd have time to grab some drive-through, but, you know. I can't remember why we were in such a hurry to get here."

Angelica offered her hand, then helped the girls to their feet. "That explains it. You're probably starving. Here. Nice and easy. Let's get some lunch."

I blinked hard at her back as she left. I didn't know Angelica could be so sweet. Then she turned her head over her shoulder, blasting us with a wide-eyed glare and mouthing the words, "Figure this out."

"There she is," I said. "That's the Angelica I know."

Morrow rubbed the back of his neck. "So where do we start?"

Houston sifted through his pockets, then pulled out two drawstring bags. "Right here. Time to trade."

They squatted right there on the floor, very seriously assessing their charms, like schoolboys exchanging marbles. I rolled my eyes, feeling like I'd lost my marbles myself.

CHAPTER 6

Houston chewed on his lower lip, assessing the assortment of charms spread out on the table.

“I’ll give you a martini glass for your lipstick,” he finally declared.

Morrow put down his iced tea. “That’s not a fair trade. Make it a martini glass and a teddy bear.”

“Theodore. Buddy. That is a lopsided trade and you know it. Throw in that froggy and it’s a deal.”

“Deal.”

I tried not to groan as these two grown men slid their respective charms across the table. I’d convinced them to abandon the playground huddle and dragged them to a fast food place instead.

Like Chunky Sneakers and her friends, I was starving. We ended up at the Happy Cow, of all places, Happy, Inc.’s burger chain and the most successful of its enterprises.

Maybe we were tempting fate. I liked to think of it as testing a theory. Were the wearers of the charms somehow magnetically attracted to ones that they didn’t yet own, a sort of hypnotic drive to collect an entire set by any means necessary? Only one way to find out. We’d made sure to pick a table in a faraway corner, but those girls had found us in the abandoned Southridge corridor anyway.

And coming to Happy Cow was part of our research. As far as we knew, there had never been a case of a Happy Cow diner walking out their restaurants in a trance. What made the business model so different? If

Happy, Inc. was so intent on mesmerizing the mundanes at large, why not just throw something horrible and magical in their food?

Fear of retribution, maybe, from the other corpos, or even mundane law enforcement and agencies. Scrambling someone's brain with enchanted jewelry was one thing. Feeding them tainted burgers was quite another.

But whatever they put in their food had to be borderline magical, anyway. I'd ordered some large fries and some sliders. Houston and Morrow were too engrossed in trading charms to be bothered with food. I was three sliders deep and still had plenty of room for more. Melted cheese, crisp edges, juicy bites of quality beef — Happy, Inc. knew how to make good burgers, all right.

"You know what bothers me?" I said, speaking through a mouthful of slider. "We've got all these charms, but not a single one of those Happy charms those girls were wearing. They definitely had something to do with making them all angry and violent. I'm sure of it."

"Yeah, about that," Houston said, looking up from the table. "It's what Angelica and I discovered. Well, to be more accurate, it's what the eggheads in the SeraphiCorp labs discovered."

Despite the corpo rivalries, I couldn't think of better people to handle the problem of mind-controlling trinkets. That was probably why SeraphiCorp was so invested in Paralumen and her cultists in the first place. Where demonic magic specialized in destruction and corruption, celestial magic worked wonderfully for healing and cleansing.

That meant curing hexes, curses, and mind control, too. Not that the celestials lacked in magical firepower, of course. I didn't relish the idea of being on the business end of one of their signature golden weapons, or a holy smiting spell, for that matter.

"And what have you learned that we haven't?" Morrow asked, leaning in curiously as he sucked down the rest of his iced tea.

"There are specific triggers for these charms, and they have everything to do with their shape and design." Houston picked up a beach umbrella, holding it between his thumb and forefinger. "Wear a bracelet with one of these babies, and you'll enter a catatonic state if you so much as take a stroll by the seaside. Work out? A dumbbell will have the same effect. Drink a cocktail? Martini glass."

I stared at Morrow with my mouth open. Maybe making drinks had a similar effect. Anita Cocktail was wearing one of those charms when she

went into her trance at Debussy. And the little money bag charm — had it charmed her from the mere act of shopping at Happy Links?

“But that doesn’t explain why some wearers go into a trance,” Morrow said, “and why others become completely enraged. Now that’s proper arcane distortion — these clearly magical objects don’t function as intended. Though to be fair, we’ve only seen it happen once. So far.”

“And what’s up with those Happy charms?” I asked, a dog with a bone. “And the self-destruct feature after the girls freaked out on us? And why did they forget everything that happened?”

Houston shrugged. “The current theory is that the ‘activity’ charms are priming them for future shenanigans. They’re getting their minds and bodies accustomed to entering a trance state. As for the rage and the memory wipe? I wish I could tell you.”

“This was still plenty, though.” I patted the back of Houston’s hand. “Seriously, man. Thank you for sharing. This really helps.”

Houston gazed past my head, smiling at someone. That someone standing behind me cleared his throat. I frowned. I’d know that condescending little cough anywhere.

“Hands off the merchandise,” Xavi grumbled. “Don’t you have your own man to handle?”

I glowered at him as he slipped into the seat next to Houston. Houston was holding his spine a little straighter, his head held high, grinning like a golden retriever.

“Manhandling and panhandling,” Xavi said, reaching for a slider. “That’s Echo’s MO in a nutshell.”

I frowned harder. “You’re constantly telling me that I’m terrible with men and have zero game. Pick a lane! I wasn’t flirting with Houston, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Houston said, watching Xavi with a dazed grin. “He wasn’t flirting with me.”

Morrow cleared his throat. “What’s this about you having your own man?”

I considered smacking him upside the head, but couldn’t overlook that now-familiar slightly jealous curiosity in his crinkled eyes. I carefully ignored him. Let him suffer a little.

“Why are you here, anyway?” I asked.

Xavi smirked. "Houston said you guys were hanging out and that maybe I could come over and provide some crucial information."

Oh, so they were on texting basis, now? I wondered if this was the first time Houston had ever seen Xavi out of drag. He didn't seem hungry before, but the wolfish look in his eyes said he very much liked what he was seeing.

Xavi was very casually dressed, just a black tank top, jeans, and sneakers, but he knew how to carry his clothes extremely well. "It's all about the fit," he'd once told me, which worked great for him. His ass looked phenomenal in those jeans.

The tank top hugged him in all the right places, too, showing off his pecs and his slender waist, and, of course, showcasing his toned arms. "It doesn't take a lot of money to look this cheap," he'd also told me, which confirmed that he poured way more money into his drag than his boy clothes.

Not that I would ever tell Xavi out loud, but how this handsome man transformed into a beautiful woman by night was nothing short of magical.

"Crucial information?" Morrow said. He sat up. "Of course. Anita Cocktail's charm bracelet. Do you have any updates, Xavi?"

This was stuff I should have passed on to Xavi myself. Apparently Houston had taken the initiative to ask himself, whether out of professional curiosity or as an excuse to hit Xavi up. Good guy Houston. This SeraphiCorp sharing was an even better idea than I thought.

Xavi all but unhinged his jaw and finished the rest of his slider. Houston's mouth fell open, looking impressed, maybe even a little aroused. I found it unsurprising. I knew for a fact that Xavi had shoved much larger things down his throat.

"So you know that vacation she was saving up for? She left for it already, some kind of gay cruise. But it wasn't just you guys. The girls at the club noticed that something was up with her. She took off the charm bracelet when she was taking off her makeup, so I stole it. But she never bothered looking for it, never even asked anyone. She went back to normal after, no more weird, zonked-out behavior, no more dopey faces."

"Now, that's new," Houston said. "So removing the charms makes them lose interest. Maybe that explains why those girls at Southridge Mall forgot about their bracelets entirely."

“Girls, plural?” Xavi asked, grinning like a tiger. “You been seeing some pretty ladies behind my back, Houston?”

Houston blushed, then filled Xavi in on our encounter at the mall. Xavi fished one of the charms out of the pile in the center of the table, holding it up for all of us to see.

“So does that mean that anyone wearing one of these goes nuts the next time we get a full moon? When is the next full moon, anyway?”

Morrow tapped away at the palm of his hand, consulting his Occultech implant. He pursed his lips.

“Three days.”

“Fuck,” I said. “So now we’re working on a timer, too. Just great.”

“You know, it’s not all fucked just yet,” Xavi said. “I think I know someone who can give you a little more intel about Happy, Inc. A journalist. I’ll keep you boys posted.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” Houston said, utterly entranced. Xavi could barely contain his delight.

“I owe you one, Xavs,” I said. “Multiple ones, maybe.”

He reached for the last slider. “Pay up your tab at the newsstand and maybe I’ll call it even.”

“Nah. Never gonna happen.”

We parted ways for the afternoon. Morrow was desperate to change back into a suit. I wanted some time to get my head on straight. And Houston and Xavi clearly wanted some time to themselves.

Old Betsy and I made a beeline back to my apartment, the one place I could count on to help me re-center. I settled into my couch, phone practically glued to my face, ready to relax my brain with my favorite activity: accomplishing absolutely nothing of value.

My phone chirped. A text message from Theodore Morrow. My heart skipped at the sight of his name, then almost fell out of my ass when I saw what he’d written.

WHAT ARE YOU WEARING, his text said. No punctuation.

“What the fuck?” I muttered.

What the fuck, what the fuck? Was this really how things were going to kick off for us, with badly timed afternoon sexting?

A second message arrived.

TONIGHT. WHAT ARE YOU WEARING TONIGHT

I locked the screen and rolled my eyes, giving myself a moment to think. I should have known it was too good to be true. But wait. What the hell did he mean by ‘tonight?’ Did we have some prior engagement I’d forgotten about? Questions upon questions. I frowned at my phone, preparing to ask for clarification in my same annoyed tone that he was presumably used to.

The black oblong lit up to reveal a woman’s face.

“So I said we should talk,” Freyja said, her voice tinny through the little speakers.

I almost threw my phone across the room. Instead I shoved it deep into my couch cushions. I reached for a glass of water, taking a long, cool sip to calm my nerves. The face reappeared at the bottom of the glass.

“This is awfully unfriendly of you,” Freyja complained. “Whatever happened to, ‘Hello, Freyja, how have you been?’ Honestly.”

I slammed my glass onto the table and reached for the TV remote. I clicked through the channels, wondering if I should just pull out the old controller and play a video game instead. Before I could decide, the television flickered. A rerun of some sitcom from the ’90s dissolved into static as Freyja’s face filled the screen.

“You’re being very rude, you know,” she said primly, her voice even more present in the room through my surround speakers. “It isn’t every day that a goddess reaches out to chitchat with mortals.”

I flipped the channel. The screen flickered to a cooking show, except that Freyja’s face was in the way. I flipped it again. The green grass of a soccer game scrolled in the background, Freyja’s face still in full view. I groaned.

“And that’s exactly what worries me. It’s *why* you’re reaching out. We’ve helped you once, Freyja. You’re free of your restraints. There’s nothing we could possibly do for you that you couldn’t do yourself with one snap of your fingers.”

“That’s exactly my point, Jericho Frost. You did me a favor. I would like to do you one in turn.”

My nose wrinkled. I knew it wouldn’t end there, how ties and alliances with entities were always transactional. And never in the mortal’s favor, either. In all the many, many tales of world mythology humanity has collected throughout the centuries — when has a human ever come out on top? I mean, Greek mythology alone.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” I told her. “I threw out your gemstone over and over again. It keeps coming back. Stop haunting me, already.”

Freyja watched me quietly for a tense few moments. When she spoke again, her eyes gleamed with eldritch radiance.

“I would show you so much that you do not already know, Echo. Ways to make your very special talent blossom and thrive. Aren’t you curious to learn what incredible feats you could accomplish with your gift? Under the tutelage of a goddess of magic, freely offered. Think of the wonders you could create. Think of the miracles.”

I frowned. She had to go and use the M word.

“Goodbye, Freyja,” I said, hitting the power button.

I avoided everything reflective for the rest of the afternoon, an incredible challenge for me especially, Jericho Frost, brainrot victim and doomscroller extraordinaire. I spent the time cleaning my apartment instead — a rare event — then took special care to drop Freyja’s gemstone down the garbage chute. Again.

It wasn’t until my phone rang that I dug it back out of the cushions, averting my eyes from the screen when I picked up.

“Great news,” Xavi said. “My contact wants to talk.”

CHAPTER 7

Comforting warmth seeped into my skin, the gentle smell of citrus and sandalwood wafting toward me as I stepped into the lobby of the Grand Harrington Hotel. The soles of my boots squeaked against the genuine marble flooring, its interiors classic in polished wood, the scarlet carpet and drapes, the brassy fixtures.

This felt like the type of place where people only wore pricy shoes that left a satisfying click on the marble, the type of place where even the bellboys looked down their noses at you. The fact that they had bellboys alone — I'd never stayed in a place as swanky as this. My budget was more off-ramp motel with paper-thin walls adjacent.

But the bellboys were friendly enough, nodding and smiling as I passed. Bunch of cuties, too. I felt the compulsion not to look too hard — but why? It wasn't as if I was dating anyone, right? No man to handle, as it were.

This was where Xavi told us to meet our contact. Xavi, who had very rudely called Morrow first to tell him about successfully setting up our meeting. No wonder Morrow texted me about what I was wearing tonight.

Time was when the Harrington Hotel dynasty was as omnipresent as a coffee chain. You couldn't turn a corner without running into one of their properties, whether it was a four-star business hotel or a cheaper two-star for family getaways.

The Harringtons had fallen on hard times, but the Grand Harrington Hotel was just as grand as ever. I followed the sound of jazz music to the bar at the far end of the lobby — a misleading label for a sprawling lounge that could seat several dozen guests — and found a live jazz quartet

strumming away. Only a smattering of guests in the lounge that evening, but I only had eyes for one, naturally.

Ew. Too romantic. Too delusional. But it was hard to look at Theodore Morrow without thinking sappy, slightly impure thoughts.

He looked like he'd been poured into his suit, even more of an agent than ever as he sat alone at a table, taking a delicate sip of his martini. What was so different about him tonight? It looked like he was wearing the same old suit he loved so much, the same style he had several copies of in his closet. You know, like a serial killer.

Maybe it was the silver watch he kept checking to see whether I was going to make it on time, or those little cufflinks that gleamed from his sleeve. Or was it the slimmer fit of his jacket that made his muscles strain each time he glanced at his wrist?

Was it only the setting and the music that made him a little sexier, a little more smoldery? And was he wearing something in his hair? It was pushed back, slicked back, even, across his scalp. Some sort of product had brought out new tones in his hair, streaks of amber and honey amid the gold.

Oh, crap. Maybe this was Morrow's version of dressing up for the evening. All because we were meeting Xavi's contact in a lobby? And here I was, dressed in my usual semi-slobby threads: a T-shirt, jeans, boots, and a leather jacket thrown over everything.

Hey, at least the T-shirt was clean, and the boots were sort of shiny. Sort of. Also, I ran my fingers under a tap and through my hair to style it a little. Surely that counted for something.

Morrow turned his head, a slow smile spreading across his face as he saw me approaching. I almost stumbled over my feet, my ankles threatening to tangle with each other as my legs turned to jelly. He looked happy to see me. This was a little unusual, to say the least.

"Right on time," Morrow said, gesturing to the seat across him.

Far be it for me to ever consciously pay the man a compliment, but I couldn't help myself.

"You're looking especially snazzy tonight, Morrow. What's the occasion?"

"To make up for wearing all that other stuff earlier. I don't know." He pinched his sleeve. "It just feels like this stuff really suits me."

He grinned out of the corner of his mouth when he realized he'd made a little pun.

Stop it, I told myself, resisting the urge to reach out and feel his jacket, or the trousers that seemed to strain against the thickness of his quads. The suit only resembled the others that I'd seen him wear. The material was definitely more expensive, the tailoring even more precise.

I held my arms out to either side and gave a nervous huff. "Well, now I feel even more underdressed."

"You look fine. I just felt like taking things up a notch for the evening. We never come to a place this nice." Morrow pouted. "Speaking of which — you didn't reply to my text earlier. I thought it would have been fun to coordinate."

Well, that just made me feel a little worse. I wanted to play dress up, too. But then I thought about what I actually had in my wardrobe — nothing fancy enough, really — and felt a little better about not actually trying. Only way I'd fit in was if I begged Xavi to lend me something nice, which I'd definitely done a few times before.

Okay, several times before. Ohhh. So that was what he meant about panhandling.

"You wanted to coordinate outfits?" I asked, incredulous.

Morrow shrugged. "Why not? Matchy-matchy. We're partners, after all."

I swallowed hard. Work partners. That was what he meant. Either way, he needed to stop doing whatever it was he kept doing, my stomach twisting and fluttering and everything.

"Anyway," I said, "I didn't reply because — you know what? We might need a little extra privacy to discuss that." I leaned in to whisper. "Remember the goddess distribution system? Yeah. This one's being kinda clingy."

Thank god Freyja didn't show up in Old Betsy's mirrors, or I might have crashed into a lamppost on the way.

Morrow raised his eyebrows. "Maybe we should head to our table, then. I requested something secluded, just like Xavi told us to."

I didn't know what kind of fancy-pants journalist Xavi wanted us to wine and dine, but the very last booth in the hotel's swanky Chinese restaurant seemed like overkill. It resembled a four-poster bed more than

anything, or maybe a very elegant cabana, red drapes spilling down from ornate wooden pillars.

I settled on the delicately embroidered cushion of my chair, sighing as I sank into it. Comfier than my own couch. Yet again I thanked my lucky stars that Morrow had a company card. I didn't need to see a menu to know that this place would bend me over its lap and spank my poor ass for the price of the appetizers alone.

But what else were we supposed to expect from a place called Heavenly Concubine? I tried to ignore the small coincidence of the restaurant referencing beautiful celestial women. I quickly studied the table, checking again for reflections.

Porcelain tea cups, enameled plates, lacquered chopsticks. Good. Freyja might have skipped harassing me in my car, but it was nice to know that I could at least eat dinner in peace.

So I told Morrow about how she'd appeared in the bottom of my glass at Club Debussy, then again at home. His brows furrowed as he listened, absently digging at the tiny bowl of peanuts the server had brought for us.

"It sounds like she wants to help you grow," Morrow said. "Is that so terrible, really? I mean, learning how to better use your magic at the feet of an actual goddess?"

At her feet. I frowned. That was the problem. I didn't like the obvious power imbalance. Mentorship under a human mage would be different, though I knew that any mage who took me on would be driven insane within weeks of trying to teach me anything.

"I think you and I both know that I have — issues with authority. And this isn't just Director Sakamoto, who's terrifying enough on her own."

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to [Lokepub](#) to pick your next novel.

Morrow nodded. "Point taken. Maybe it's best to avoid attracting attention as much as possible."

“Which is way tougher than it sounds, let’s be honest.” I glanced to either side, as if I might catch Freyja listening. “I can’t look at my phone. I can’t shave. I can’t admire my beautiful mug in the mirror. She loves showing up on shiny surfaces.”

“Except on the way here. Otherwise I would have had to pull you out of some burning wreckage or something.”

“Or something,” I said, rolling my eyes. “That’s exactly why she didn’t manifest. She wants her plaything alive. Like a cat playing with a mouse, except it’s Godzilla playing with a termite.”

“Hah. Weird analogy. I’ll be honest, I think you might have to accept that she’s going to keep showing up.”

I threw my hands up in frustration. “It’s not fair. Why isn’t she stalking you, too? You’re just as interesting to her. She said so herself.”

Morrow rested his chin on the back of his hands, grinning. “Maybe she thinks you’re cuter.”

“Shut up,” I snapped, lifting my teacup to my lips, practically biting on the rim. This man needed to stop immediately.

“Oh, don’t take that as a compliment. She thinks you’re cute.” He adjusted his tie. “But she probably thinks I’m *hot*. She’s intimidated.”

I tossed back the rest of my tea, wincing as it burned my throat. I didn’t know how much more of Morrow’s bizarre brand of flirting I could take. I poured myself a second cup of tea, pretending that it was a shot of tequila. Liquid courage, right? Down the hatch.

“Whoa,” Morrow said. “I didn’t know you were so thirsty.”

I grimaced at the searing heat in my chest. “You have no idea. You know, I thought that you of all people would know to be wary about the you-know-what distribution system. Occultech trains you about entities, too. Why all the jokey-jokes?”

Morrow pursed his lips. “Maybe I’m trying to lighten the mood so you don’t feel so frazzled all the time. Maybe I’m more comfortable cracking silly jokes around you now. I don’t know.”

My insides withered, my anger fading fast, but it was now or never. Man, that was some strong tea.

“Okay, point taken. Sorry that I’m so snippy with you all the time. It’s fucking weird. Maybe your seriousness is rubbing off on me. Who the hell knows? Maybe I’m more comfortable with you now, too. Which is why I really, really need to ask you something.”

Morrow folded his hands on the table, all intent and attentive. I swallowed hard. Now or never, right? Before I lost my nerve.

I opened my mouth.

Then the drapes opened, too. Our waitress swished gracefully in, her red cheongsam matching the furniture perfectly. I gritted my teeth.

A second server, a handsome young gentleman around my age wearing a silken shirt with a mandarin collar, pushed in an ornate cart positively heaving with food. Not a tray, mind you, but an entire cart, both of its levels filled with a massive variety of dishes.

My jaw dropped, my eyes going wider as more and more plates hit the enormous lazy susan that sat in the middle of our table.

I was still stunned by the time our servers had finished laying out what was clearly far too much food for two people — even three, if you counted our still-missing guest.

I stared at Morrow in disbelief. He shrugged. “Xavi did say that we were supposed to order ahead. He even gave us a list. I guess his contact wants to show up with everything ready to eat.”

“Or maybe we scared him off,” I said, craning my neck, trying to look out through the drapes.

I had to admit, I wasn’t really bothered as I surveyed the overwhelming assortment at our table.

Morrow nodded, picking up his chopsticks and a bowl of rice. “We’re supposed to start,” he said, nodding at the lazy susan.

“What the hell kind of foreign dignitary are we meeting tonight?” I asked, still in disbelief. But my stomach was rumbling, and without even thinking, I realized that I already had my own chopsticks and bowl of rice in my hands.

I liked to think of myself as a connoisseur of all sorts of cuisine, especially Asian food. We could say what we wanted about how strange life could get in Nomicon Valley, but the city sure didn’t have a shortage of restaurants featuring cuisine from all over the world.

But I had to admit that I’d never seen at least half of the dishes here. Morrow, on the other hand, seemed to know something interesting about every single one.

Translucent black eggs with gray yolks, covered in a clay mixture for months to achieve that special consistency and color. Century eggs, they were called. They reminded me of gemstones, like obsidian. They tasted

like heaven, too, savory and creamy, nothing at all like fresh eggs, and nothing at all like what you might expect from an egg that had been buried for a hundred years. It was more like a hundred days, give or take, as Morrow explained.

There was a shredded jellyfish salad, spicy and chewy. Bird's nest soup, which reminded me of a mix between egg drop soup and vermicelli. A fried yam ring topped with a colorful seafood medley and surrounded by crispy noodles. And something called Buddha Jumps Over the Wall, yet another kind of soup, just as delicious as everything else.

"This is unhinged," I said through a mouthful of rice and hot shrimp salad. It felt twice as uncivilized to speak with a mouthful of food like that, but Morrow never once condescended. In fact, he seemed delighted by the opportunity to tell me about every single thing I put in my mouth.

It felt like I'd been eating for an hour, but we'd barely made a dent. I was about to ask Morrow if he could guess where our guest was when a little gout of fire flashed on the table, accompanied by a puff of smoke that smelled like farts.

Out stepped a tiny metallic man, pot belly, horns, and all.

I held my breath, waiting for the brimstone smell to go away. I had to be polite. Morrow barely reacted, gracing our guest with a kind smile. Holy crap. Xavi really hooked us up.

He'd sent us to meet a demon.

CHAPTER 8

This little guy was an imp, a diminutive demon from the prime hells. This wasn't our first brush with these creatures. Our first and only visit to the Wispwood showed us that the academy's kitchens — its entire food and beverage staff, in fact — was operated by a small army of gainfully employed, well compensated imps.

Very convenient, considering their ability to quickly teleport with dishes straight from the kitchen counter to the dinner table. I'd heard of imps working as messengers as well, or as spies, and now, apparently, they were journalists, too.

You just had to get used to the characteristic flatulent odor of imp teleportation. That was why the table suddenly smelled like sulfur, like rotten eggs. I slowly exhaled, hoping it was okay to breathe in again. Oh, good. The fart smell was gone.

"You must be Xavi's contact," Morrow said. "I am Agent Theodore Morrow, from Occultech. This is my partner, Jericho Frost."

The imp cocked an eyebrow. "Partner, eh? You guys are cute together."

"It's not like that," we said at the same time, carefully avoiding each other's gaze.

The imp cocked the other eyebrow, obviously restraining a mischievous grin. Wait a minute. Did Xavi tell him about my little crush on Morrow? Damn it, Xavier.

"The name's Scrimshaw," the imp said. "Reporter for the *Eldritch Observer*. I'm on the crime beat. Well — sort of. I also do lifestyle and entertainment. And features. Look, we're short-handed, okay?"

“So you and Xavi know each other because of the periodicals, huh?” I nodded encouragingly. “It’s super cool knowing that the *Observer* has such a diverse range of talent onboard.”

The imp puffed up his chest. “As if they could resist me. Didn’t have much on my resume going in — total rookie when I started, in fact — but they knew that I’d be good at snooping. A literal fly on the wall, you know? And that’s why we’re here, aren’t we? To talk about some snooping.”

Scrimshaw paced over to a napkin, tying it around his neck like an oversized bib. He strutted over to the nearest crab dumpling — as big as his head, really — and cleanly ate half in a single bite.

“Whoa,” I said. “Impressive.”

“Fank you,” the imp said through a mouthful of juicy dumpling.

“I’m sure Xavier briefed you on what we wanted to discuss tonight,” Morrow said. “And we’ll be sure to make this worth your while. What was it that you wanted in exchange for information?”

Scrimshaw swallowed the second half of his dumpling, then chuckled. He swept his little arm across the table in a grand gesture.

“This is it, right here. I always take my payment in vittles. Victuals. Grub. The more of it, the better, and I happened to be in the mood for high-end Chinese. It’s been a while.”

“High end is right,” I said. “I’ve never even heard of some of these dishes.”

“Order as much as you like, Scrimshaw,” Morrow said. “As long as you give us everything we need.”

Scrimshaw held perfectly still, his hands rubbing together covetously, like the fiddling of a fly. “Everything?”

Big mistake. Huge.

Between Scrimshaw’s very noisy and demonstrative enjoyment of his food and the constant stream of dishes being delivered by an increasingly panicked waiter, it was tough getting much info out of the imp at all. Every server’s intrusion meant he had to hide under a napkin, and every new item from the menu meant another round of erotic moaning as Scrimshaw molested his meal.

Which weirdly didn’t put me off my own food. Scrimshaw’s enjoyment somehow heightened mine. Maybe he was a demon from the prime hell of Gluttony. Something about his presence made everything more delicious, or

maybe the Heavenly Concubine really was as amazing as all their reviews said.

Nearly an hour later, settling down from our bacchanal, I leaned into my chair and patted my belly. Scrimshaw, meanwhile, was using half a pork bun as a stool, picking at it with his grubby little paws even as he lazily kicked his legs. Where was he putting away all of this food? Fascinating.

“If you’re quite ready to share,” Morrow said, clearly addressing Scrimshaw except for the very pointed way he cocked one eyebrow at me.

What? Like this was my fault? I defiantly chewed on another dumpling, adding it to the monstrous pile of food already sitting in my belly.

“Oh, yes, absolutely,” Scrimshaw said.

He clicked his fingers, conjuring a tiny spiral notepad, then flipped through the pages. With a start, I realized that a tiny pencil had materialized behind his ear, too. Neat.

“Let’s see. Happy, Inc. Aha. There it is. I was doing all this research, see? Looking to do a big exposé on the corpo. The story of a lifetime! Until my editor killed the story. Between you and me, I bet it was the Thorpes who paid it off. Suddenly we’re running all these ads for Happy Cow and Happy Boba, and now, Happy Links.”

I pointed at his tiny notepad. “Maybe you can explain that part to us, actually. Why such a scattershot approach to business? Burgers, milk tea, ramen, then suddenly charm bracelets? And Morrow mentioned a defunct stationery brand, too. What gives?”

Scrimshaw flipped through the pages, eyes glinting with excitement.

“See, that’s the thing. The product diversification doesn’t end there. They were working on virtual assistants at one point, too. You know, the ones that look like speakers, then you give them commands and hope they’re not actually spying on you? ‘Hey, Drusilla, buy me a thirty-pack of toilet paper.’ That kind of thing.”

“And what happened to that?” Morrow asked.

“I heard there was a warehouse fire. Something like that. They keep things pretty tight-lipped over at Happy. And like I said, they have the power to kill stories just like that. Whatever happened to journalistic integrity, I ask you? I used to like our editor before I noticed all the corruption. But who knows? Maybe he’ll kick the bucket and someone better takes over. Maybe a young priest and an old priest will walk into his office with some holy water and a prayer.”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

“But enough talk about exorcism. Happy, Inc. has a junk-food division too. Snacky Yum-Yums, ever heard of them? Those addictive cheesy puffs? Can’t get enough of ’em. And dog food, don’t forget the dog food. Puppy Yum Biscuits. All made in the same facility, or so I heard.”

My eyes went as big as the porcelain plates on our table. “*Excuse me?*”

“But never mind that. You know what I think? It’s all this family drama in the corpo. It’s how it works with these dynasties, I guess. Used to be that Happy, Inc. only changed hands once a generation, but it’s been happening a lot more these days. Maybe the younger Thorpes aren’t as competent as their ancestors, or maybe they’re butting heads or clawing at each other to get to the top of the clan’s corporate ladder. Too many cooks, you see? That’s why all the splintered businesses. The broth isn’t spoiled. It’s spilled all over the damn place.”

Scrimshaw trotted over to a sweet egg-yolk bun, poking it with one steel-sharp claw until the runny custard oozed out.

“Right now, for instance. The guy before the current CEO? Same name as you, actually, Agent Morrow. Funny coincidence. Forced retirement is what my research tells me. Theodore Thorpe is out of the public eye, and now we have Alexandra Thorpe, large and in charge. Literally. Here, let me send you some pictures. What’s your email address?”

Morrow slid Scrimshaw his fancy embossed ivory Occultech business card. The imp looked it over, then dismissed both the card and his notepad in a puff of smoke, replacing them with a tiny laptop. I didn’t even know they made them that small. Magical, maybe?

“We’ve met her, actually,” Morrow said, “so I definitely believe you on the large part. I mean — um, she certainly has massive, uh, presence.”

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“Absolute unit of a lady,” Scrimshaw said, shutting his laptop before he dismissed it. “Ever met a valkyrie? Totally reminds me of one. She’d be a

menace on the basketball court. Anyway, I sent you everything I have on the corpo. Look it over later if you like.”

A bluish glow pulsed from the center of Morrow’s palm, an email notification. “Much obliged,” he said, clenching his fist so he wouldn’t be tempted to start reading at the table, which I knew was a Herculean effort for a huge nerd like him.

“So you’ve seen her in person, huh? Did you notice anything — interesting about her?”

“You mean apart from the fact that she could snap me like a twig?” I said. “Well, Morrow and I suspect she’s magical, at least in some capacity. All the Thorpes are, probably. The charms are obviously enchanted in some way. We’re having a devil of a time trying to figure them out, though. Um, no offense.”

“None taken.”

“Maybe you can help us there,” Morrow said. “Has your investigation shown you anything about how the charms work? No rhyme or reason on our end.”

“Yeah. Even our buddies over at SeraphiCorp said — oops.” I clapped my hands over my mouth, carefully avoiding Morrow’s eyes as he glared daggers at me.

Scrimshaw held his hand up in a mock salute. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell. Hell scout’s honor. Everything we’ve discussed is off the record. Besides, I’m not gonna screw you boys over. Xavi’s a good guy, and you two lunks haven’t been so bad to hang out with.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I think.”

The drapes parted again. Scrimshaw threw himself under a napkin just in time. Our same waiter, who’d gotten a proper cardio workout from pushing his cart to the kitchen and back one too many times, was rolling in our desserts. Crispy black bean pancakes, red bean porridge, almond jelly, a sweet silken tofu pudding, and slices of fresh fruit.

“Oh, no,” I groaned. “I couldn’t possibly.”

Our red-faced waiter did his best not to goggle at us as he cleared away the empty dishes. We’d demolished enough to feed a family of six. This man and our hostess deserved an amazing tip.

The drapes whispered shut. Scrimshaw slithered out from under his napkin, eyes bulging as he perused the dessert spread.

“I’ve truly never seen this much food in my entire life,” Morrow said. “Like a buffet spread. The whole table should have collapsed by now.”

He held his head in his hands, no doubt already stressing out over our bill.

“Cheer up,” I told Morrow. “We don’t have to finish it all. We can get some of it for takeout. Probably.”

Scrimshaw rolled up his nonexistent sleeves. “Not if I have anything to say about it.”

I served Morrow and myself some bowls of red bean porridge before Scrimshaw dove in. Literally, I mean, gurgling and doing backstrokes in the sweet, soupy rice. I lifted a spoonful to my lips, blowing on it before I burned my tongue. As a tiny metallic imp, Scrimshaw seemed totally immune to the possibility of boiling himself alive.

Morrow sighed. “I certainly hope your email offers a commensurate amount of intel, Mr. Scrimshaw.”

“Please. Call me Scrimshaw. And don’t worry, I wasn’t done talking, anyways. Here’s the bottom line. My most important finding. It was there all along, if I’m honest. By process of elimination, think of all the corpos that put down roots in town. There’s only one for every underground faction. It’s a loyalty game. The corpos will compete with each other, tooth and nail, but they won’t abide internal conflict. One of each kind. No duplicates.”

Scrimshaw had a point. The undead had Necropolux. The celestials had SeraphiCorp. If a rival demon corpo ever tried to establish itself in Nomicon Valley, Jackal & Ashby would sue them out of existence.

If I understood correctly, it worked similarly even outside the world of arcane corporations. Only one vampire court in every state. Only one chapter of any given wolf pack in every city. Too many cooks, just like Scrimshaw said.

“Food for thought,” he continued. “Maybe it’s a dragon in disguise, you know? All that stuff they like: hoarding treasure, sleeping on giant piles of money. Or maybe it’s some other powerful mythical creature. Ooh. Like a recently awakened mummy with tons of newly exhumed riches.”

He scooped up a little handful of almond jelly, slurping it between his fingers, smacking his lips appreciatively. Morrow and I watched and waited in silence. That was one thing you learned pretty quickly in our line of

work. Don't interrupt the talkative ones. You never know how much more they have to tell you.

"But I'm just spitballin' here," Scrimshaw continued. "For all we know, it might just be a very, very powerful wizard."

I straightened up. "You think that's actually possible?"

Scrimshaw shrugged. "Sure. Why not? There's plenty of ways to amass power in the underground. Contracts and such. Commune with the right entity, build a two-way relationship with someone even stronger than you."

Morrow and I exchanged a careful glance. This was clearly a sore point for me, especially considering our little conversation about Freyja.

"Or if you think that's too dangerous, then you contract with a bunch of mid- to low-level entities," Scrimshaw said, this endless font of dubious wisdom. "Ever heard of a wizard's familiar? Imagine one with dozens of them. Which is something I would know all about. That was me in a past life."

Between handfuls of red bean porridge, Scrimshaw explained that he'd once served as a familiar himself. Some deadbeat wizard — his words, not mine — who ran a stall in the alternate bazaar dimension known as the Black Market.

"Smoked way too much wizard weed," Scrimshaw said. "We never got anything done, so I spent my downtime writing and honing my craft. I wanted to do something better with my life, you know? Something bigger."

I grinned. Even the smallest among us had big dreams.

"And now, you're exactly where you want to be," I said. "You're exactly where you belong. But I have to ask. Wasn't the separation a problem for either of you?"

"Well, it's not quite as messy as a divorce, if you can believe it. Each party is just happy to leave the relationship with everything intact. Sometimes you decide that you're just not a good fit. But it's not always a clean break. Things can get pretty ugly pretty fast. You might walk away with less than you started. With missing parts of your soul, for starters, or maybe a few less fingers."

I looked down at my hand and winced. I was right, then. I always knew it made sense to stay away from entities. Didn't matter if they were dragons or mummies or goddesses. These things were always transactional, and the humans rarely — maybe never — came out on top.

“If you boys are ever interested in linking up with a familiar, I could give you a couple references. Good people. Hardworking folk. Only if you’re keen, of course.”

Morrow politely declined. I said nothing, unsure of how to explain that I wasn’t worried about contracting my own familiar.

I was far more concerned about becoming one for a goddess.

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CHAPTER 9

When it came time to pay the bill, Scrimshaw expeditiously vanished in a horrible puff of brimstone-scented smoke. No harm done since that was the deal, of course, but my eyes still bulged when I saw just how much our banquet had cost.

Morrow was sweating bullets as he signed the receipt. Our hostess was flushed, exhilarated. Our waiter was probably somewhere in the back, getting some well-deserved rest on an overturned plastic crate. Thank god for the Occultech company card.

We would have left with leftovers if Scrimshaw had actually left any. No wonder our hostess looked so flustered. It was physically impossible for the two of us to have put away so much food. Briefly I wondered if Scrimshaw's belly was linked to its own pocket dimension. Seriously, you never know.

But Morrow wasn't quite ready to call it a night.

"Post-mortem cocktails," he said, stopping me from heading straight through the lobby, nodding toward the lounge. "We spent a small fortune on our small contact. What's another couple drinks courtesy of the corpo?"

The jazz band had retired for the evening, the live music replaced by the stylish, soothing beats of electronic lounge music.

"Over there, maybe," Morrow said.

He guided me toward the table by the small of my back, definitely not beating the date-night allegations. His touch was electric, even with layers of clothing between his fingers and my skin. He was handling me so delicately. This was a nice change, except that this sort of setup normally

led to drinks, followed by more drinks, then a nightcap at someone's place, then hot, sweaty sex. I tried not to let the most likely probability of us ending the night at 'more drinks' sour my mood.

A very sleekly dressed server came to take our orders, wearing a long-sleeved black gown in a heavy fabric that rustled with her every step. Morrow placed my drink order on my behalf, a white Russian. You know, something an actual romantic partner would do, like we were boyfriends on an actual date or something.

He leaned back into his seat and crossed his legs, watching me over the lenses of his nonexistent glasses. His posture was so confident, so cocky, and for what? I flushed under his gaze. It wasn't fair how much this awful man flaunted his hotness in my face.

I coughed into my fist, unable to take it anymore, then shifted gears. "So was tonight worth it, you think? I mean, Scrimshaw seems like a nice guy, but I don't know if we really learned all that much from him."

Morrow shook his head. "It's more the stuff in between the lines that helped fill some of the blanks for me, if that makes sense. I still think it was a night well spent. That stuff he said toward the end about figuring out the faction behind Happy, Inc.? That was valuable. Something for us to look into, for sure."

He leaned forward in his seat, uncrossing his legs, folding his hands on the table. "Besides, we had a nice dinner, didn't we? And it was sort of fun, getting to spend time with you outside of work for a change."

"Getting to," he said, as opposed to "having to," which was something Morrow might have said about me at the start of our working relationship. Something tingled at the base of my spine, but I steeled myself again. He just meant that it was good how we were getting this opportunity to connect as partners. That was as important as getting our ducks in a row in a professional sense, wasn't it? Understanding each other on a deeper level in our personal lives could only translate to advantages on the field and in battle.

And then I remembered something Director Sakamoto had said the first time Morrow and I sat down for a meal together. Something about how Spartan warriors bonded with their peers for the express purpose of excelling in battle. Said quality time commonly involved raunchy activities, too. I licked my lips, throat parched, praying our drinks would show up before I said or did something too embarrassing.

“Sure,” I said. “Getting to spend time with you is, you know. It’s great, too. I’m sure partners do it all the time. Um, corpo partners, I mean, field agents and mercs. I can totally imagine Angelica and Houston hanging out for cocktails together.”

And that was a bald-faced lie. As Morrow and I had both learned, Houston liked his beers and bars, gay or otherwise. Angelica looked like she wouldn’t drink anything short of the finest champagne. They worked extremely well together on the field, but I had my doubts about how much time they spent with each other outside work.

Morrow chuckled. “That’s not exactly what I meant and I think you know that. Actually, I was going to propose that we should make even more of an effort beyond the workplace. Team-building exercises, but just for our team of two.”

I gulped. He leaned even farther over the table. Morrow wasn’t that much taller than me — in fact, if anyone asked, I made sure everyone in a one-mile radius knew that we were both six feet flat. Even so, from where I was sitting, he seemed to loom over me. This man could pick me up and fold me like a card table.

“Exercises, huh?” I breathed.

“Sure,” Morrow said, smiling out of the corner of his mouth. “I had a few ideas in mind.”

Relax, Echo, I thought. Morrow was just being his weirdly flirtatious self again, though the most observant and hopeful parts of me couldn’t deny that he’d turned up the charm more than a few notches. He was just messing around like always, right? Trying to keep things light, as he liked to put it?

Which felt kind of inappropriate, to be honest, unless he was planning to put his dick inside me at some point. I sat there with a storm brewing inside me, confused, angry, and horny all at once. I bit my tongue, knowing I’d regret anything I said.

And then the sound of rustling cloth knocked me out of the warm, gooey, filthy place my mind had traveled to. Oh, good, our well-dressed waitress and her form-fitting dress was back. I looked up, grateful that this wonderful woman had come to pull me out of the fire.

Only to find myself looking up, then farther up, until I met the eyes of the exceptionally tall woman who was dwarfing me.

“Oh,” I said. “Alexandra Thorpe.”

The head honcho of Happy, Inc. herself. She smiled down at me as if perched atop a mountain peak, so tall that she reminded me of a wizard on his proverbial tower. Scrimshaw's words stuck to the inside of my skull as surely as all of my spell fragments.

"Alexandra," Morrow said, standing bolt upright. "I mean, Ms. Thorpe."

She held her hands up and smiled, the slitted sleeves of her emerald dress draping down her sides like a butterfly's wings at rest.

"No need to get up, gentlemen. Fancy seeing you here. We *have* met, haven't we? I'm quite sure I saw both of you at the opening of Happy Links Too."

"Well, we didn't quite meet," Morrow said, little blotches of red on his cheeks. "No introductions were made, technically."

All that effort to put on his disguise, all for nothing. It was weird sitting there feeling bad for him, then feeling bad for kind of wanting to laugh about it, too.

"No introductions necessary," Alexandra said. "Part of the pains of being a very public figure, not to toot my own horn. I mean, I do put myself into these situations, don't I? None of my predecessors would have ever considered wading into the fray for a product launch. Grandfather would turn over in his grave."

"It's very modern," I said. "I think it's pretty cool that you have such a hands-on approach to your work."

Alexandra grinned. "Yes, indeed. I'm sure you can relate, being so hands-on with your investigation yourselves. Isn't that right, Jericho Frost? And you must be Theodore Morrow."

I tried not to look so stunned. There I was in Southridge Mall telling Morrow that Happy, Inc. couldn't give two shits if some punks from a different corpo went in to grab freebies, but here was their CEO calling us out by name. But this wasn't that unusual, was it? Occultech had files and intel on everyone. It would have been stranger to learn that Happy, Inc. didn't have any dirt on us.

Morrow returned Alexandra's smile, doing a far better job of looking unperturbed. "So you've taken a look at our dossiers? I hope it made for an entertaining read, at least."

"Oh, quite entertaining, indeed. Very interesting, too. The two of you make quite the pair with your, ah, special talents. Very valuable gifts, your

experiences with, shall we say, crafting and copying rare documents.”

Which was a very roundabout way of hinting at Morrow’s scrollwork and my mimicry, but this sealed it once and for all. Alexandra Thorpe was magical — of course, she was. Everything we’d discussed with Scrimshaw sharpened into a big, blinking arrow pointing at her and her corpo as elements of the arcane underground.

It was only a question of *how* magical she was, or what type of supernatural she represented. Not to stereotype, but from height alone, but maybe actual giants? Valkyries? We had to be patient with her, play her little game, but politely. Maybe flattery would get her to show her hand.

“But it doesn’t seem right that I should know so much about the two of you,” Alexandra continued. “It would only be fair for us to be on equal footing, yes? Why not ask me the questions you’ve been dying to ask? There’s a reason you’ve been investigating my charming charms, after all.”

Only then did I notice how Alexandra had none of the charming charms in question on her person. She was festooned with garlands upon garlands of them at the launch, like a human Christmas tree.

Not human, I reminded myself, though that was still up in the air. A sorceress, a dragon in disguise — Alexandra could be any number of things.

Morrow’s eyes flitted toward me, as if to say that we should play along. I gave him the subtlest of nods, a quiet go-ahead, because frankly, I was still too taken aback to say anything, much less formulate any questions. Morrow’s lips parted just as our waitress returned with our drinks.

“Oh, Ms. Thorpe,” she stammered, sliding our drinks onto the table before glancing nervously around the lounge. “I didn’t realize you’d be — please, let me pull up a chair for you. Can I get you something to drink?”

Alexandra Thorpe graced her with a kind smile, then turned to us with a nod. “It’s not my notoriety this time, I promise. I spend quite a bit of time here. A frequent flyer, you might say.”

All part of the Harrington Hotel luxury experience, I imagined, where the very important received the privilege of being made to feel even more important.

“And thank you,” Alexandra told the waitress, “but no need to bother. I won’t be staying long. I was only dropping by to say hello to these fine gentlemen. I’ll only be here for a spell.”

Alexandra Thorpe waved her hand, but it wasn’t some friendly, casual dismissal. A slow nova of quiet magic rippled out from our table, a pebble

in the water, Alexandra's spell creeping throughout the lounge.

No words, barely a gesture. Very difficult for me to copy, bordering on impossible. But was there another reason? This flavor of magic felt foreign, yet all at once somehow familiar.

The waitress smiled, as if relieved that she hadn't committed a faux pas, shoulders lifting as she inhaled and mustered a polite answer. And then she stopped breathing.

I jerked upright. Morrow held his hand up to stop me, nodding at Alexandra, then at the rest of the room. Everything else had frozen, too — the hotel guests, the bartender, the fountain in the lobby. Even the speakers had stopped playing music. A cold bead of sweat trickled down my nape as I soaked in the awful, eerie sensation of complete stillness, so quiet I could hear my own breath, the blood pulsing in my temples.

That and the sound of fabric ripping. No. Not just fabric. Skin.

Alexandra Thorpe flayed apart, her skin, hair, and clothing shredding into strips and ribbons, like a cocoon unraveling. Her face went last, her smile still serene even as her eyes and lips drifted off in an eldritch breeze. I looked on in horror as the woman who was once Alexandra Thorpe came completely undone.

In her place stood an entirely different person. He was a shorter man than Alexandra, but still taller than Morrow, and wearing a suit like Morrow. But something about his demeanor made his aura stretch unfathomably higher still.

This was the real power behind Happy, Inc., this dark man with features that ended in edges and angles, handsome in only the deadliest of ways. This was the mummy in the sarcophagus, the vampire in the coffin, and yet I knew in my gut that he was none of those things. He was greater, stronger, and worse.

He smiled with all the sharpness of a dagger as he flicked the remnants of his alter ego from his shoulder, a stray scrap of Alexandra's dress.

Morrow and I sat motionless. Who was this man, really, and what was his purpose? We needed to be careful with our words and our actions, avoiding any breaches of etiquette that an entity would deem offensive. Fucking entities and magical manners and protocol. The whole while our waitress stood as still as a statue, her smile frozen in time, features as glassy as the rest of the hotel lounge.

“You’ve learned a fair bit about my charms, haven’t you?” the man said. “It’s honestly quite impressive how dedicated you are to the cause. It makes me wonder why. Happy Links has hardly brought any trouble to the city — unless, of course, the two of you are following your primal imperative to protect your fellow humans.”

As if we needed even more proof that the thing behind Alexandra Thorpe wasn’t human.

“Factually untrue,” Morrow said. “We were attacked by three young women wearing your charms just yesterday. Who knows how many more of these assaults have erupted across the city?”

He was keeping deathly calm in the face of this being who’d so effortlessly frozen our surroundings. Barely visible patches of frost hung in the air, their patterns unnatural, unsettling. The world beyond our table curved when I turned my head this way and that. Like a fisheye lens, as if we were trapped in an icy bell jar that warped reality itself.

“You’re referring to the Happy charms, yes? The ones that bear the brand logo? Something about them makes their wearers go berserk. The rage appears to trigger when they’re unhappy or when they don’t get what they want. Perhaps it’s a glitch in the workflow. We’ll have to re-examine our manufacturing process.”

“We?” I asked. “Who else are you working with?”

The man blinked. “Why, my employees, of course, entire fleets of them well compensated and provided with excellent benefits. Are you implying that I need anyone else to infuse these creations with the right dose of magic? Don’t be so silly. I am a god.”

That wasn’t an exaggeration. Arcane essence poured from his very skin, a deliberate demonstration of power. He was literally flexing on us.

“My name is Loki. It’s your pleasure to meet me.”

CHAPTER 10

This was the part where I would have hauled ass and dragged Morrow behind me, if only I didn't know that I would slam headfirst into the invisible barrier and break my nose.

Morrow didn't miss a beat. "As an Occultech field agent, it is my duty to inform you that your corporate activities are in violation of the Nomicon Valley Accord."

This man and his massive balls could be such a goddamn turn-on. Then I realized that I would never get his massive balls in my mouth if the two of us ended up offending, then getting slaughtered by an actual god.

"I don't recall signing, much less hearing of any pitiful Accord. Would you deny me this entertainment, gentlemen? That would be like telling the wind to stop blowing. How my cousins would mock me. Anansi, Kokopelli, all the trickster gods braying in laughter at the thought that Loki, out of all of us, would comply with such petty concepts as rules and contracts."

"So the Thorpes," I said. "Did you kill them off, assume their identities? How long has this been going on?"

The god's soft laughter reminded me of the rush of feathers, the rustle of wings. "I *am* the Thorpes, Mr. Frost. Every single one of them. Zebediah, Felicity, Zachariah, Theodore, Alexandra — name any of the Thorpes. Every last one is a meticulously-crafted meat puppet, and I'm the one pulling all the strings."

"To what end?" Morrow asked, playing off Loki's casual dismissal of the Accord as if it didn't deeply offend his by-the-book nature. "What's the point of all this? Boredom?"

“Boredom, yes. You live long enough, walk this earth for centuries, and you start to look for diversions. This corpo is my playground, gentlemen. Anything I can possibly imagine I can bring to life by assembling the right team of professionals. All the wealth I’ve accrued over the ages — compound interest is an insufficient description.”

“Except that’s not the whole truth,” I said, caught unawares by my own daring. “You’re not just out here trying to make a good product and turn a nice profit. Every corpo in Nomicon Valley has an ulterior motive. What’s yours?”

I tried not to dwell on how I didn’t quite know what Occultech’s was, either. One of these days I’d try and grill Morrow about the corpo’s true objectives, but something told me that he didn’t really know himself.

“Frost is right,” Morrow said. “It’s not boredom that made you unleash this mishmash of goods upon the world. Ramen, boba tea, trinkets — it doesn’t hang together.” He crossed his arms, positively fuming. “And you used to produce very decent ink, too.”

“And the hamburgers are delicious,” I grumbled grudgingly. “But those charms — I just don’t get it.”

Loki arched one eyebrow. “Clever boys. You’re absolutely right. There’s no rhyme or reason as to Happy, Inc’s stable of goods and services. Quite chaotic, the way I like it. Trickster god, remember?”

My fingernails dug into the table as I struggled not to roll my eyes.

“There’s only one common thread: virality. Things that are guaranteed to explode on the market. It’s where we invest the most, really. Marketing research to identify trends, see what gets you humans rushing to stores in droves to worship, throw your tithes and offerings at the cash register, helpless in your slavish devotion to fads and false idols. Can you guess why?”

I didn’t especially like how mocking his tone had become, even more so than when we’d started. And when your baseline is already smarmy, how much higher can you really go?

But what frustrated me more was knowing that he wasn’t wrong. Not exactly. It’s human nature, that intrinsic desire to belong to an in-group. Like attracts like. Safety in numbers. To be too different meant exclusion from the tribe, isolation, and danger from predators. Even cavemen knew.

That stuff is coded in our brains and bodies. It’s not really anyone’s fault if they have the sudden urge to buy collectible items, tchotchkes, trinkets.

It's all about status, selection, and how those who want to sell things in massive quantities prey on the fundamentals of human behavior, our primal instincts.

But all that stuff he said — you hang around corpo types enough and you pick up on how they love to throw around their stupid buzzwords. Circle back, touch base, synergize — you learn to tune it out after a while when so much of it starts to sound meaningless.

And then sometimes the words stand out a little too well. Worship. Tithes. Devotion.

It was the Goddess of the Valley all over again, her magical talent made all the more powerful by the blind, zealous faith of her followers. Every magpie she added to her flock fed her, adding to her stock of arcane essence. Some of them even died in the Battle of the Basement, sapped of the life force that they'd willingly donated to their mad goddess.

And that was when it clicked.

"Faith," I said. "Somehow, some way, you're generating power from all the stuff you sell."

Loki tapped the tip of his nose, his grin stretching wider.

"Funny, isn't it? How I, of all the radiant personages in my pantheon, made the most of myself after all this time."

I thought of Freyja and her gemstones, of the summoning magic she transmitted across great distances from the suffocating confines of her crystalline prison. But I said nothing. Was this why she wanted to link with me so badly? If she molded my mind and I devoted myself to her hard enough, could she feed on my faith, too? To become her servant, her worshipper, or her familiar — the thought made me shiver.

Morrow's words from all that time ago came back to me. "Do you believe in fairies?"

"The temples are empty, gentlemen. No. The truth of it is that the temples are *gone*, replaced in this age by all the many, many distractions of modern human life. Now you worship your phones and tablets and televisions, the black voids you feed your attention while you receive so precious little back.

"The gods have grown weak and hungry in an age when humans only go fervent and feral over the newest technology, the tastiest new twist on fast food, the very silliest new viral video. Too many of my brothers and sisters have withered away from lack of worship, attention, or even

acknowledgment. Who speaks the names of dead gods when they have already been forgotten?”

Nomicon Valley. This whole place was built on names, every corpo keeping its own precious record. Was this why Loki had muscled his way into the city? Was that why the corpos collected these names, as little power as they held? So that someone — anyone — would remember, so that something — anything — would never truly cease to exist.

For a moment I thought I spotted a glimmer of sorrow in Loki’s eyes, but it was swiftly replaced by a glint of malice.

“I refuse to be forgotten. My name is still well remembered today, but the Thorpes too have maintained a long and powerful lineage. Their names are all my names, too, as is every last one of my fabulous franchises. No god is dead for as long as someone speaks one of his many names. Love for Happy, Inc. is adoration for Loki. It’s all faith in the end, really.”

The god parted his arms.

“I wish to live forever. That is why I built my own temples.”

This went farther back and deeper down than Morrow, Scrimshaw, Sakamoto, and I could have ever guessed.

“And now you have your charms, too,” Morrow said, carefully keeping his composure. “You’ve fattened us humans up on all your goods. The faith keeps coming. Why risk your perpetual drip-feed of power on, what? Random, useless trances?”

Houston had said something about docility, how repeated trances could hypothetically be conditioning the charm-wearers for something bigger. Something worse.

Loki laughed again. This time the laughter was boisterous and bold, a villain proud of his monologue and his masterwork. I know I said that letting the talkative keep talking was a great way to learn new information, but this guy really, *really* loved the sound of his own voice.

“And why should I tell you everything and spoil the surprise? Surely I should leave something for you to discover for yourselves. Play along. Try and guess the mystery as you watch the movie. All play and no work? You very dull boys.”

“You know some of your charms are defective, right?” I said, trying to bait him. The twitch in the corner of his eye said I was at least mildly successful. “The charms that say ‘Happy’ — they’re not like the others. They disintegrate after they go off.”

Loki waved one dismissive hand. “Single-use charms. And what of it? Do you recall your attackers experiencing lapses in short-term memory? They’ll think they just lost a charm over the course of going about their day. It only means that people will buy more to replenish. Profit.”

“Or they self-destruct on purpose,” Morrow said. “They’re meant to leave no evidence. The other charms just dull someone’s personality and tranquilize them. The ‘Happy’ charms, the ones that drive people berserk — you don’t want anyone researching them, reverse engineering them. Because you’re testing how violent they’ll make their wearers before you churn them out at an even larger scale.”

“And what about the moon charms?” I asked. “There’s a full moon coming. What happens then?”

Another derisive chuckle. “Do your own homework, children. I’ve told you enough. We at Happy, Inc. are delighted that you’ve taken such keen interest in our fine line of products, our brand new charms and charm bracelets most of all.”

What the hell? From villainous monologue to sales pitch? I watched in disgust as the ribbons of Alexandra Thorpe began to wrap themselves around Loki’s body again, entombing the god and transforming him into Happy, Inc.’s giantess CEO.

“Remember,” Alexandra said. “Happy Links bring happy thinks.”

I cringed. “That’s a terrible tagline, you know.”

“We’re still workshoping it. I should have the marketing department flogged.”

I had the strangest feeling that Loki and Director Sakamoto would get along. Or hate each other on sight.

Alexandra clicked her fingers. Time unfroze, a bead of condensation dripping down the side of my white Russian. The glassy dome of icy magic around us collapsed, the lounge’s ambient noise returning in concentric waves. Our waitress slipped away, perhaps relieved that she wouldn’t have to serve the influential and potentially very picky Alexandra Thorpe.

“Perhaps we’ll meet again very soon, gentlemen,” Alexandra said. “Sooner than you think.”

She fluttered her fingers at us in a playful farewell. Morrow and I watched as Alexandra strode away from the lounge and out through the hotel doors.

“Fuck my life,” I grumbled, kneading my eyelids with my fingertips.

“Same,” Morrow said, right before he downed his cocktail in a single gulp.

Freyja, Paralumen, and Loki, too? Now we had three gods to deal with. Great. Just great.

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CHAPTER 11

“So Thorpe was a god all along. I knew it!”

Sakamoto slammed her fist on her desk. Power reverberated throughout her office, sending documents flying, rattling my teeth.

I kept my mouth shut, biting back the urge to demand why she never voiced her suspicions in the first place. I could tell that Morrow was thinking the same thing, including how it was a good idea to shut up and swallow the question. I shifted in my seat, Sakamoto's horribly uncomfortable acrylic chairs making my butt slip and slide on the surface.

The dense mass of fancy Chinese food was still sitting heavily in my belly. Morrow had proposed that we head directly to HQ to report to the director. I agreed. It didn't matter that my internal organs were still paying for my gluttony. This was super important.

“As if things could get any worse,” Sakamoto said. “I should have suspected. All these factions represented by Nomicon Valley's corpos, yet there was never one helmed by a god. It should have been so obvious.”

“That's exactly what our contact told us,” I said, hopefully reminding her that she'd plucked that precious nugget of information from what we'd reported to her some two or three minutes ago.

“Your contact who turned out to be a completely unnecessary expense! Accounting flagged the transaction and notified me immediately.”

Morrow coughed. “You found out that quickly?”

“Naturally. All field agent expenses are routed to my office. I'm willing to overlook more reasonable purchases, but these aren't plane tickets or

business hotel stays, gentlemen. I mean, look at this nonsense.”

Sakamoto pinched her fingers together, then spread them apart, a holographic projection of the world’s most horrifying spreadsheet sprouting from her hand.

Actually, it was JackAsh that held the record for the most maddening spreadsheet in existence. Literally. Complicated and chaotic enough to drive the uninitiated insane.

“You spent how much for this Heavenly Concubine? I certainly hope that she gave you the level of service you paid for. And may I add that I’m very surprised by your proclivities.”

I wasn’t sure which of us Sakamoto was referring to, a problem worsened by how her eyes were doing that thing where they swiveled outward and focused on two things at once. In this case, it was our faces. A horrible prickling went down the back of my neck. I blinked, and Sakamoto’s eyes were back to normal again.

“What was the whole point of you spending so much on your indulgent overpriced orgy when the god you were hoping to investigate just happened to stroll by mere moments after your delectable debauched degustation?”

“To be fair, Director,” Morrow said, “there’s no way we could have predicted that Alexandra Thorpe would make an appearance immediately after our meeting.”

“The timing was impeccable,” I added. “At this point I’m sure it was deliberate. Trickster god, remember? As if she — sorry, he? — was trying to prove to us that he knew all along. That he’s probably one step ahead of us at all times.”

“Happy, Inc. cannot get away with this,” Sakamoto said. “It’s just like entities to step over their bounds and pull these sorts of shenanigans. Whatever happened to common courtesy? Whatever happened to honoring the Accord? The Investors will not be pleased.”

Getting the mundanes involved was one step too far. The charms, the charm magic — Loki clearly had something up his sleeve, and it killed me that we were no closer to learning what it was. And what Houston said about how each activation seemed to be prepping the Happy Links wearers for something bigger, something more sinister — what were the mundanes being conditioned for?

“So what happens now?” I asked. “When stuff like this goes down, who actually holds a corpo’s feet to the fire?”

“Who else but the other corpos?” Sakamoto said. “We have to enforce the Accord. We have to police each other. And by we, I mean you.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, my eyes squeezing shut. “Respectfully, Director, you’re asking us to go up against an actual god. What could we possibly do against Loki, of all people? We need Occultech’s backup. We need resources. Support.”

Sakamoto scoffed. “Resources? Hah. Support? No quantity of concubines no matter how coordinated is going to help you with your quandary. But you have an excellent point. Don’t let this get to your heads, but the two of you are too valuable to expend for this mission. This isn’t going to be a simple case of throwing more bodies at the problem.”

That was probably the nicest thing Director Sakamoto had ever said to us. I opened my mouth to answer, but she was already undoing her cravat and shrugging off her blazer. She pressed a button under her desk, a panel sliding open in the ceiling to reveal a projector.

Uh-oh. Didn’t she usually do this kind of thing in the board room? She opened a drawer, pulling out a canister of salt and a bejeweled dagger.

“I shall consult with the Investors to see if we can requisition additional resources. They will not be pleased either way. A god-helmed corpo in Nomicon Valley, and then all the additional expenditure to stymie his operations? This is going to be a bloodbath. All those charms, all those arcane distortions.”

What could the nebulous Investors even do for us? Were they going to send down a god-slaying box cutter from on high? Or were they going to issue a sternly-worded threat on their special Investor letterhead?

It would be great if a few of them could show up to kick Loki’s ass. They might just be that powerful, the way Sakamoto talked about them. Still, she always made it sound as if even a single Investor’s descent would herald apocalyptic consequences.

And where would they even descend *from*?

The projector’s lasers drew a pattern on the floor, an intricate ceremonial circle. Morrow and I didn’t need any warning this time. We sprinted straight to the elevator.

Morrow and I didn’t speak as we rode down to the lobby. Even as we strode out the front doors — no Doris tonight, a stern man with a buzz cut at reception instead — we barely looked at each other. But I knew we were both on the same page. We were dead meat.

He finally broke the silence, scraping the sole of his shoe against the sidewalk.

“I’m not sure where we should go at this point.”

I chuckled, the air exiting my lungs in a humorless rush.

“Do you mean physically or — terrible joke, sorry. I’m honestly confused, too.”

“We should take the night off to rest,” he said, adjusting his collar, undoing his tie. I tried not to watch the lump in his throat bob as he swallowed.

Was he about to say something else?

“Yeah,” I said. “I should probably — I think I’m going to take a walk to clear my head.”

“Oh. I can come with you.”

I hissed as I bit the corner of my lip, which must have been a clear enough sign of my hesitation. With Herculean effort I carefully avoided the disappointed look in his eyes, the pinch in the corners of his mouth as he not quite, but almost pursed his lips.

“Sorry, it’s just — it’s not you, man. I just need to be alone for a while.”

His shoulders slumped as he glanced at the top of his shoes, his fan of golden lashes only just hiding his expression.

“Yeah. Sure. I suppose I’ll head home, take a shower. Look over my scrolls and see if there’s anything I can come up with to help us, dig into some spell books.”

“Stop at the shower. You should get some sleep. We need to be fully rested if we’re going to tackle this problem. First thing in the morning. I promise.”

Morrow smirked. “Which by your standards means noon.”

“Just for you? I’ll wake up at eleven.”

I reached out to bump my knuckles against his. We still weren’t quite close enough for a bro hug, but it also didn’t feel correct to just wave him off without at least some cursory physical contact, especially after I’d so cruelly shooed him away.

Maybe Morrow didn’t know how fist bumps worked, which was perfectly believable. Maybe he was more worried about me — or maybe our god problem — than I thought. His hand closed around mine, strong and warm, melting the night chill from my skin, my flesh, my bones.

“Hey,” Morrow said, head lowered, his voice gravelly, like he was struggling to get the words out. “Text me when you get home, okay?”

A thrill rushed through me, the gooey drip of molten chocolate warming every inch of my body. I knew this sensation well, even though I hadn’t felt it in a long time. Old crushes, a few years of trying and failing to date in the city, a couple of guys I met on the apps — the warmth always faded away.

But Morrow was different. The flutter in my stomach, the flicker of flame that burned inside me every time he was near — *he* was different.

“Yeah,” I said, mouth dry. “I will.”

I left him there on the sidewalk with my heart pounding and my ears on fire. *Don’t look back*, I thought. *Don’t look back*.

That’s all it was. He was only worried, just being a caring colleague. Though I oddly didn’t feel the same sensation of dread out on my own, something I couldn’t say when Paralumen was still on the prowl. It was strange, knowing that Loki could probably obliterate me with a single thought, but also knowing that Morrow and I were fish that were far too small for him to fry.

Loki was much more concerned with doing — well, whatever it was that he had planned for the mundanes. Otherwise he would have disposed of us in the lounge right then and there. He froze time for his big dramatic reveal and to deliver his try-hard villainous monologue. The man was a menace.

I let my feet take me through the city, my mind on autopilot, only conscious enough to avoid passing Xavi’s newsstand on Lucas and Fifth. I meant it when I said I needed to be alone. I wanted to think that I was exiting Nomicon Valley’s business district, except the city didn’t really have a centralized business district. The corpos were scattered throughout the city, no real pattern for their locations to those uninitiated in the ways of the arcane underground.

On the outskirts of the city, Necropolux HQ loomed with its gargoyles and parapets, like a gothic transplant from another time and place. Closer to the center, the SeraphiCorp building shone even at night in stark white and sparkling glass, the ivory tower from which the celestials gazed smugly down upon the city.

But there was a method to the madness. These locations had been carefully researched, of course, following the ley lines of the earth, built on

viciously contested plots of land where the channels met, every HQ on another nexus.

All except one. Happy, Inc. sprouted out of the commercial district, surrounded by its many franchises, like a monument in the heart of its very own theme park.

“Fucking trickster gods,” I muttered. I stopped myself from following that statement with, “Fucking gods,” perhaps out of the ever-present risk of attracting yet another god’s attention.

Or maybe I stopped myself as a form of grudging respect. Why bother offending any gods — or goddesses — who happened to be within my periphery? Specifically those who weren’t out there charming and endangering the citizens of Nomicon Valley.

I exhaled in resignation, watching as my breath billowed into curls of mist. Maybe I was ready. Maybe I was curious. How bad could one little conversation be? I grudgingly shoved my hands in my pockets as I passed by a darkened store. Maybe they were selling books, maybe board games. It didn’t matter. I wasn’t really looking at the merchandise, only my own reflection.

I rolled my eyes, watching as my reflection copied my actions, shrugging his shoulders and stamping his feet to keep warm. Yikes. I really did look like an indignant little shit. I sighed. It was time for this indignant little shit to reach out to the one entity who sort of liked him and wasn’t likely to eviscerate him for saying the wrong thing.

“So. Um. Hi.”

My breath misted against the glass. Nothing. I felt like a complete idiot. If they had security cameras here, the staff would get a treat in the morning, more so if Freyja actually showed up and replied. Just me standing there talking to a dark window display.

“Why, hello, there,” Freyja said, her voice arriving before her image did, wavering in the window and replacing my reflection. “It looks like someone’s had a change of heart. And a noticeable change of attitude, too.”

“Okay, so I was being a dick. Morrow says so, too. You’re not trying to antagonize us or anything. I’m just — I don’t know. It feels rude to tell you that I have a hard time trusting entities, but that’s exactly how I feel.”

Gravity released its hold on the Freyja phantasm. She floated up in the glass, grinning as if to taunt me with her ability to fly.

“I can’t say I blame you,” she said. “The gods of the earth don’t exactly have a good track record about being forthright with humans. In fact, I’d say that many of us can be quite deceptive when it comes to getting what we want.”

I grimaced. “So you’ve heard. About the other god, I mean.”

Her face took on a more serious expression as her feet touched back down on solid ground. “Hmm? What other god? I was speaking in generalities.”

“He revealed himself to me and Morrow tonight. Loki. Does the name ring a bell?”

I pursed my lips, cringing at my sarcastic tone even as I said it. She frowned, pressing her face up against the glass like a fish in an aquarium.

“That scoundrel. Has he truly come to the city? And of course I know him! What kind of a question is that?”

I froze. How the hell had it not occurred to me that Loki and Freyja hailed from the same pantheon? I raked my fingers through my hair, stepping away from the glass, frazzled by the evening’s revelations all over again.

“Now you wait” — Freyja said, flitting to another window — “just a minute” — again, past another window — “young man.”

I’d opened myself up to this nonsense, and there was no way I was going to shake her now. Like a stray kitten nipping at my heels. Goddess distribution system, remember?

I startled when the next shop window I passed lit up with a blinding glare of light. Freyja’s face stared out at me from a bank of television screens, each of her images in a slightly different state of irritation.

“I know what you’re thinking, Jericho, and you can just stop. I am not working with that awful ruffian in any way. Why, the very thought of it sickens me. The man is a rogue. A jokester. A liability.”

“Okay. Sorry. I panicked. It’s been a long day. And you’re right. Charming others doesn’t seem like your style. That’s what he’s been doing to the people of the city. You’re more the type who just blasts your enemies into oblivion, like that wannabe goddess you destroyed.”

It was a test, and a silly one, at that, but I wanted to know what Freyja knew. Not much, as it turned out.

“Who?” she asked with an oblivious blink.

I scowled. “The human woman who captured you. Hello? She stuffed you into a lantern because she wanted to take your power?”

“Oh! The tacky dresser with the pompous attitude. Yes. About that. I’m not sure if I annihilated her, after all. I was very upset, mind you, but it’s also possible that she whisked herself away just in the nick of time. You know how magic is, flashy colors, blinding lights, and all. Who can keep track?”

That all but confirmed that Paralumen was still out there. But where were her magpies? Had she lost all her followers? Was she hiding in some dark corner, licking her wounds?

I rolled my eyes and stalked away from the store, frustrated and annoyed, wanting to be anywhere else. I was exhausted, and the Goddess of the Valley could still be out there. I made a beeline for a bus stop, parking my butt on a cold metal bench.

And then I groaned. This time Freyja was on the side of a bus, of all things, its exterior wet with evening condensation. There she reclined in all her magnified, colossal glory, the passengers oblivious to her presence.

“From a pretender god to a god who pretends. Such amusing problems seem to hound your every step, Jericho Frost.”

“There’s three of you now. It’s not very amusing at this point.”

The older woman occupying the other half of the bench gave me the side-eye as she scooted away from the man who was talking to the side of a bus.

“Well, I hope you know that I cannot intervene on your behalf,” Bus-Freyja said. “And neither would I be willing to. It would cause far too much drama in my pantheon. There would be unpleasant — no, catastrophic consequences. And you and I just don’t know each other like that.”

“Oh.”

She smiled. “Yet. Not yet, at least.”

I kneaded my forehead, desperate for a drink. God, I was still parched from when Morrow had done that cute, annoying pouty thing that turned my mouth dry. I dragged myself over to the tantalizing glow of a vending machine, studying its rows of canned drinks and snacks, surprised when I found myself quietly hoping that Freyja would follow. Her apparition in miniature materialized, hovering up and across the glass, as if following where my eyes were going.

“A can of iced coffee this late? Are we sure that’s such a good idea, Jericho?”

I shrugged. “I mean, what can it hurt at this point? I’m tired. I’m thirsty. And I think I have a headache coming on.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “A normal one, or the kind that arises from too much magical duplication?”

So she knew about the fragmentation. I didn’t answer. I just watched her in the glass.

“It doesn’t always have to be that way, you know. Of course, it could be worse. Copying mortal magic is one thing. Copying divine magic? Now that’s a feat that will leave your head pounding for days.”

I didn’t think my throat could get any drier. I licked my lips. “You really think that’s something I can do?”

“Who knows? Perhaps if you tried hard enough. Perhaps if you knew a certain benevolent goddess who might be curious enough about your talents to help you try. You’re only going up against another god, after all.”

I bit my lower lip. Copying regular spellcasting offered me plenty of tools and firepower already. But actually duplicating a god’s magic? I couldn’t imagine. Could my limits truly stretch that far? What if I stretched them *too* far? Would I snap? I was only human after all.

Still. We were only going up against another god, after all.

Freyja watched me with quiet intent as I tapped my card against the vending machine’s reader. I pressed the button for a can of iced coffee. Nothing. I banged on the machine with the heel of my palm. Something fell into the dispenser, rattling with a glassy clunk.

“Ah, ah,” Freyja said. “No coffee for you. Not this late in the evening. Very bad for your sleep hygiene.”

I frowned as I reached into the slot. I knew it. Barely an hour of me giving her the time of day and my designated meddling goddess was already fully meddling. My fingers closed around something cool, hard, and smooth. I pulled out an orange gemstone, like amber, only harder and heavier, the color of marmalade sealed under glass.

“Should you find yourself interested in an arcane education, then feel free to call on me. Shatter the gemstone to summon me. Not in battle, mind you. It’s not like I’ll come charging to your aid. We’re not there yet.”

“Right,” I muttered. “We don’t know each other like that.”

“See? You learn fast. You’ll be an excellent student. If you choose that path, that is. Mimicking arcane magic, then learning to mimic divine magic, too? Consider it a double major.”

“Didn’t like school,” I grumbled. “Not sure I’ll like it now.”

“Suit yourself. But speaking of gemstones, you’re clearly quite worried about these charms that your trickster god has scattered all over the city. You really should be speaking to some experts on enchanted jewelry.”

The vending machine’s glass showed the lady on the bench in its reflection. She was still staring at me, her handbag clutched to her chest. Maybe I *was* crazy. I was taking advice from a goddess, after all.

“And where would I find these experts, exactly?” I asked.

Freyja smiled. “The same place you’ll find a bazaar of magical wonders. Have you and Theodore Morrow considered a visit to the Black Market?”

CHAPTER 12

I was up bright and early the next day, exactly as I'd promised Morrow. Even earlier than I'd promised, in fact, the two of us meeting at ten in the morning in front of a shop somewhere in a more dilapidated corner of the commercial district.

And yes, *of course* I texted him when I got home.

I hated to admit it, but Freyja had definitely nudged us in the right direction. Did I owe her for her little hint, or was this one a freebie? Only time would tell. As for the orange gemstone: quarantined inside a tightly sealed mason jar that was itself inside a shoe box sitting on top of my dining table. I wasn't taking any risks, but I also needed to know where it was at all times.

You know, in case of emergency.

With its grubby windows, dusty floors, and empty tables, Crepes & Drapes was the shop equivalent of a western ghost town. It would be generous to say that the store had seen better days, except that was a total lie. The store had never seen a single good day in its life. Was it actually a front for a money-laundering operation? I mean, who ever thought that mashing a crepe café and a curtain store together was a good idea?

Not the gangly, borderline hostile teen sitting at the counter, that's for sure. He glared at us as we passed, shooting daggers at me especially for daring to peruse the menu above him. The signage was so sad and faded, discolored from long exposure to the sun, even the photos of their most luscious chocolate and fruit-flavored offerings desaturated into pale, unappetizing shadows of their former selves.

“Like ghost crepes,” I mumbled to myself.

“Sorry?” Morrow asked.

“It’s nothing. Just talking to myself.”

He led us away from the café half of the shop and toward the completely unstaffed showroom floor, moldering drapes trailing from oxidized curtain rods, great swathes of dusty fabric dangling from hooks high up in the ceiling. No wonder the teenager was so pissed. He was probably the only person working, not that he had to worry about customers in either half of the store.

I nudged Morrow by the elbow. “Are you sure this is the right place? I mean, I’ve heard rumors about the Black Market, and this ain’t it.”

The dimension was supposed to be a bustling hub of magical trade, the preferred destination for fulfilling all of an arcane underground shopper’s needs.

“A place where all your wishes can come true,” I said, only half certain I was parroting the dimension’s tag line. “For the right price, that is.”

Morrow wagged his finger. “You’re talking like it’s your first day in the arcane underground. It’s in the name: everything’s secreted away, remember? You’ve heard how Sakamoto puts it, how we keep our half of the world hidden from mundane eyes.”

In a way, it was how she discussed the Accord as well. We needed to keep the veil over mundane eyes, because as weird as things could get in plain sight in a place like Nomicon Valley, it was better for the world at large if humans didn’t know that wizards walked among them.

“Like a veil to keep us hidden,” I said. “Or curtains.”

“Exactly. The location of the portal to the Black Market changes, but this time, it’s in the back. Way in the back.”

Morrow had tried to explain it to me how the Black Market tunneled its entrance portal to various parts of the world, depending on supply and demand. We’d lucked out that the portal had elected to open up in Nomicon Valley this week, which saved us the hassle of driving to a different city to chase it down.

I’d expected something spinning and glowing, like the stereotypical fantasy rifts I’d seen in video games, except I really should have known better by now. Portals could be embedded in all sorts of things, like the archway formed by a pair of wizened trees, or an empty picture frame, or a

broken mirror. For extra mystique, sometimes you had to enter these portals in unusual ways, too.

“This way,” Morrow said, wrinkling his nose as he pushed through a pair of heavy crimson drapes.

Uh-oh. Extra mystique, here we come. I followed behind him, grimacing when my skin brushed against ancient velvet, so laden with dust that it almost felt grimy.

“Are we sure this is the right way?” I sputtered.

“Positive,” Morrow said, his voice muffled by the womb of fabric closing in around us.

Claustrophobic. Stifling. My breaths came faster, shorter, even as I told myself to stay calm. And then Morrow’s fingers laced through mine, and all my anxiety drained away. The strength of his hand, the certainty of his step — wherever Morrow went, there I would follow.

My heart fluttered. This was just some guy pulling me through a hellish sphincter made out of ancient curtains, yet I was still practically melting out of my boxers. I had it bad, man. Real bad.

I blinked hard as the velvet drapes opened into brittle lace, curtains so tattered that they reminded me of a mummy’s bandages. And then as if this horrible tunnel had read my mind, the lace gave way to strips of gauze, delicate and scratchy, clinging like strands of dry seaweed to my already sweaty skin.

I opened my mouth to ask Morrow when this awful gauntlet was supposed to end, only to be slapped in the face by something heavy, sticky, and smooth. I squinted angrily into the darkness, recognizing the gleam of grubby plastic, those huge, heavy strips that separated a refrigerated butcher’s backroom from the rest of a supermarket. I mean, the nerve.

And just when I knew I couldn’t take anymore, the world went bright. I breathed in greedily, grateful to be out in the open air, a complex perfume layered with the smells of baking bread, of strange beasts, of unnameable flowers. I blinked my eyes against the sunlight, holding back a gasp as I took in the Black Market.

A cobblestone lane led out from the portal behind us, thrusting us straight into the buzz of the grand bazaar. This was the heart of the Black Market, a dizzying array of stalls, carts, and carpets piled high with arcane goods fit to fulfill every fantasy.

A man with four arms gestured invitingly toward a rack of magical staves, one of them issuing a steady stream of smoke, another wreathed in leaves and tendrils. A woman in veils pushed a cart filled with rolls of cloth in impossible colors, gleaming and shimmering. A messenger pixie wove in and out of the crowd, a tiny crossbody bag strapped across his chest, a wax-sealed scroll clenched in his arms in a protective embrace.

“Whoa,” I breathed, and that was all I could really say. This was well worth getting slapped full in the face with a greasy butcher’s curtain.

Entire segments of the bazaar — buildings and street lamps alike — appeared to be crafted out of midnight velvet, a strange, shadowy substance that gave the shopping dimension its name. Morrow brushed his hand against my shoulder. I watched as a strip of midnight black fell to the ground, vanishing before it reached the cobblestones.

“Just dimensional detritus,” he said, picking some of the fluff out of my hair. “Come on. Let me show you around.”

Suddenly I longed for him to reach for my hand again, to guide me through the living, breathing maze of the Black Market bazaar. But that would feel too jarring, too public. I wondered if he only ever felt comfortable doing it out of sight, like I was his dirty little secret.

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There I went again, building all these expectations. I was an Occultech contractor, and he was an Occultech field agent, and we were on a mission to gather information. Nothing more, nothing less.

But good luck with that, what with all the overstimulation. Even Morrow was looking around with his lips parted, as if seeing the bazaar with fresh eyes, maybe because he was. He’d activated the holographic lenses from his ocular pendant, head turning this way and that.

He locked eyes with me, a boyish grin on his lips. “Are you seeing this shit?” his expression seemed to say. “Can you believe this?”

He was adorable. I was in so fucking deep. I was in so much goddamn trouble.

Theodore Morrow pulled me in close, his lenses tinting his gray eyes a pale Occultech blue. Like a thousand times before, I wondered if this was when we would finally kiss.

“The stalls only go so far,” he shouted above the din of the bazaar. “It stops there, then it’s brick and mortar shops all around for blocks and blocks.”

He pointed toward the edge of the bazaar, the crowd thinning as shop windows glinted in the near distance.

“I wish we could stay and browse,” he continued, “but we need to get a move on.”

“I thought you said you were going to show me around,” I shouted back.

He pulled me to the edge of the bazaar. We paused by the gray brick of a curiosities shop, taking a breather away from the chaos of the central market.

“Sure, but we didn’t come to shop, remember? This isn’t a date, Frost.”

“Hah,” I said, catching my breath, disguising my disappointment. “Not a date. Of course not. That’s ridiculous.”

“And besides, Sakamoto already set a limit on my card. We’re here to visit the guilds.”

He clapped me on the shoulder, pointing even farther out of the concentric ring of shops that bordered the grand bazaar. The architecture of the Black Market’s shops was anachronistic enough, at least by mundane standards, almost in the style of a medieval fantasy theme park. Certainly a deliberate decision, all to make the shopping experience even more memorable.

But the buildings on the outermost ring of the dimension were stranger still. The Nomicon Valley corpos had nothing on the magical marvels of the Black Market.

“That’s guild headquarters for the Flickering Flame,” Morrow said, pointing at a tower that resembled a candle, down to the fire at its apex that did indeed flicker like the flame on a wick. “The guild of chandlers. What I do with scrolls, they do with candles.”

Candle magic! I’d heard of this stuff before. Light one up and off go the fireworks. A candle could be a sneaky lavender-scented sleeping spell, a

noxious poison gas trap, or even a bomb in the shape of a tea candle.

“And that’s Mother Dough,” he said, pointing at the grandmother of all witch’s huts. “Can you guess what they do?”

It looked like someone’s grandma had been allowed to go buck wild designing the coziest oversized cabin, all thatch huts and chimneys, like a building complex cobbled together from an enormous quantity of fairytale cottages. The name, the smoking chimneys, the scent of baked goods and sugar in the air?

“I might be stupid, but I’m not *that* stupid, Morrow.” I checked the cottage monstrosity one last time, then gave him a sidelong glance. “It’s the guild of bakers, isn’t it?”

“Look at that,” he said. “So you’re not just a pretty face, after all.”

I chucked him on the shoulder, doing my best to pretend I was pissed off. He laughed, then pointed at the next guild building, his mouth going a mile a minute. I bit my bottom lip and tried not to smile. His eyes twinkled with excitement as he pointed out one guild after another.

“And that’s my guild. Look!”

My jaw dropped. I couldn’t decide whether I was more surprised by the building or by the revelation that Morrow was a member of one of the Black Market guilds. But should it have been so surprising? Theodore Morrow was a professional, perfectly crafting and copying his own scrolls, organizing them in that beautiful card catalog perched above his desk.

This last HQ resembled a library, its exterior a regal, polished wood. Open books flew about the guild’s atrium, using their covers as wings. Scrolls and parchment wove in and out of the great wooden pillars. A great serpent made entirely of a sheaf of documents rippled in the breeze as it flew out of the atrium and in through an open window.

Morrow beamed at me, watching expectantly as he looked from my face to the library and back. So this was what he meant about showing me around. The eagerness in his smile was just another thing to add to the long list of what I really, really liked about Theodore Morrow.

“That’s — honestly super impressive, Morrow. The guild of scribes? I should have guessed.”

“Thank you. We’re called the Thousand Hands. Fantastic place. Scribes, calligraphers, anyone who works with paper and ink, really.”

He stood arms akimbo, staring up at the great library, eyes bright with fondness.

“The guild’s true test is to demonstrate your mastery of your chosen discipline. Calligraphy, illuminating manuscripts, whatever. An initiate must wear a white robe — and only a white robe — while crafting their masterpiece. Not a drop of ink must be spilled. Naturally, you only pass if you walk out with a pristine robe.”

“And how did your test go? I’m guessing you passed?”

Morrow chuckled. “With flying colors. Now, come on. I truly wish I could keep showing you around, but we’ve got places to be.”

I trailed after him, giving the grand library of the Thousand Hands one last look, wistfully imagining Theodore Morrow wearing a white robe.

And only a white robe.

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CHAPTER 13

We finally reached our destination, another guild at the edge of the hub, home of the exact jewelry experts that Freyja had hinted at.

Marquise & Empress specialized in the craft and study of ensorcelled jewelry, the art of embedding spells and enchantments in stylish wearables. A brooch to make you less noticeable in a crowd, a set of cuff links that fire lightning bolts — an accredited member of Marquise & Empress can create the perfect valuable vessel for your spellcasting needs.

For the right price, of course.

Their guild headquarters reminded me of a palace from a bygone age, the kind of place that invaders would gladly ransack for its architectural embellishments alone. Like a Fabergé egg, truly, its exteriors gilded and gleaming in the sun, jewels encrusting every available surface, the windows faceted and vibrantly hued like cut gemstones.

How the guild members swanned around while weighed down with so much jewelry was beyond me. I knew that trends changed, that style was cyclical, but this bordered on the ridiculous.

Alexandra Thorpe at the Happy Links Too opening had nothing on these people. Maximalism was in. I thought this one woman was dressed in full chainmail armor until we passed her in the corridor. How many chains, bracelets, and necklaces did one person really need?

The halls of the guild building were suspiciously unguarded for a place that was literally embedded with precious materials. Experience had shown me how to look out for plainclothes enforcer mages, but there weren't any on the premises.

The closest thing to security they had were crystalline orbs suspended from the ceiling, swiveling and rotating as visitors and guild members alike maneuvered the halls. I squinted at one of them, then blinked. It blinked back.

It was the very absence of defensive measures that meant you had to be especially careful in a place like this. Kind of like the Occultech building, which I'd only recently confirmed had some extremely terrifying wards installed on the premises. Doris had mentioned something about a trap that could blow someone's legs off. Very violent, very Occultech.

Morrow and I had planned to step into the very first guild member office we found, judiciously avoiding the extravagant jewelry stores that seemed to wait around every corner. Then around the next corner, a man standing next to a stack of leather trunks and suitcases waved us over. This was the last person I expected to represent the guild of jewelers, a muscular middle-aged gentleman who wasn't at all afraid to remind the world of how well-built he was.

Wearing his vaguely tactical cargo pants with more pockets and pouches than I'd ever think of needing, those rugged boots, he reminded me more of an adventurer than a jeweler or a gemologist. His open vest did nothing to disguise his chiseled arms, chest, and abs, and the grin behind his week-old scruff told me that he liked that I liked what I was seeing.

As we made our introductions I could tell that Morrow was standing a little bit taller, holding his shoulders a little bit broader. I bit back an amused smile.

"Flint Lockstone," the man said, his chest puffed out, arms akimbo in a heroic pose. "Adventurer, jeweler, and accredited peer to all these other pretentious jerks." He nudged his head at the cumbersome collection of luggage that stacked all the way up to his shoulder. "Just getting ready for another adventure."

"Don't get me wrong," he continued. "It's a steady gig. Keeps me going between expeditions, keeps said expeditions funded, lets me go on plenty of hunts for magic relics and cursed knick-knacks. I mean, the networking's worth it, and the guild crest on my chest makes me look a little more professional."

I glanced at his vest, failing to find any hint of a Marquise & Empress emblem there. He clucked his tongue and winked.

"Made you look."

I tittered like a schoolboy. Morrow scowled.

“Mr. Lockstone,” Morrow said, “we’re here to investigate a disturbing phenomenon that’s affecting our city. A corporation is selling unusual charms to mundanes. These pieces of jewelry appear to be warping their minds.”

Morrow pulled out his little Happy Links drawstring bag. Flint leaned in for a closer look, plucking out a few of the charms. He reached into his pocket and produced a jeweler’s loupe, turning the charms this way and that as he examined them, taking particular interest in a beach ball.

“We’re having a hell of a time understanding these things,” I said. “The charms put their wearers into a trance state if they perform any activity related to the charm’s design itself — like going to the beach or whatever. And they appear to affect both mundane and magical people. We also have reason to believe that divine magic is involved.”

I had carefully left out the part where we knew Loki was behind it. Because did we, really? The involvement of powerful charm magic made the parallel too convenient to ignore. With or without the magpies, the cultists in their red hoodies, this still felt too much like the Goddess of the Valley’s doing.

“Fascinating,” Flint said, shifting gears from adventurer to jeweler. “The enchantment remains inert until its wearer performs a very specific trigger. I’d go so far as to classify these as cursed objects.”

Which naturally did nothing to dissuade me from suspecting the Goddess of the Valley’s involvement. The binding curse she’d used to try and enslave me, that quick hex she used to control Morrow’s mind. I didn’t like where this was going.

“But the resources it would take to manufacture so many of these things boggles the mind,” Flint said. “They’re selling them in your city, you say? People are actually buying these things?”

Morrow nodded. “In the hundreds by the day, if not the thousands. And that’s just Nomicon Valley. Happy, Inc. is a multinational operation. Who knows how many people have gotten their hands on these charms already?”

“Fucking corpos,” Flint said, dropping the beach ball in Morrow’s hand. “No offense. Probably. I don’t know. You Occultech people don’t exactly have your hands clean, either.”

I pursed my lips and shrugged. “It’s a living. But we still uphold the Accord. The retrieval work we do keeps dangerous magical objects

contained where they won't hurt the general populace, mundane or otherwise. Occultech's reputation is far from spotless, but we wouldn't be here if we didn't care about keeping people safe."

I interpreted Morrow's quirked eyebrow as tacit approval. Maybe he even looked a little impressed. I felt myself standing two inches taller.

Flint assessed us in thoughtful silence, eyes traveling between our faces, his jaw clenched, his arms crossed.

"I don't think I can help you."

"Seriously? Just because we work for a corpo?" Morrow thrust his hands toward me. "Even after his impassioned little speech?"

"Hey!"

"It's not that," Flint said. "Loath as I am to admit it, this is out of my wheelhouse. Out of anyone's wheelhouse here at M and E, in fact. I swear I'm not being a snot-nosed prick, but we specialize in deeper, smaller-scale studies of enchanted wearable art. Handcrafted stuff, I mean."

I frowned. So the guild only cared about the artisanal stuff. Like small batch beers, a couture collection. I could finally see why Flint saw his peers as pretentious, even if he was kind of like them himself, try as he might to avoid the elaborate trappings of the average guild member.

"But I can refer you to someone who might know more. These charms are mass produced, so you're better off talking to someone who's more familiar about manufacturing. Head over to the guild of artificers, the Halls of Making. It's right on the Black Market's rim, too, like two minutes away. You can't miss it."

"Thank you for your time," Morrow said, slipping the drawstring bag into his pocket. "We still appreciate the help you've given us."

Morrow was professional enough that I couldn't really tell whether he was being sarcastic. Flint either didn't care as much or didn't notice. He just rubbed the tips of his fingers together.

"And time is money, fellas. It's not much, but it's courteous to pay a guild member a little gratuity." His eyes slid down, then up Morrow's body. "You'd know about that, wouldn't you? You're a guildie yourself."

How Flint could even tell — oh, wait. Of course. That loupe had other applications, after all. It wouldn't take the strongest enchantment to see the bandolier of scrolls hidden behind Morrow's jacket.

Oh, dang. What else could Flint see in there? Did his eyes cut toward me for just a second? I shifted from one foot to the other.

“It doesn’t have to be much, you know. Just a token. Tell you what — I’ll do you a special, just for today.” He tapped the side of his jaw, chiseled as sharp and strong as a gemstone. “Quick peck on the cheek. From the little one.”

Oh, cute. That was me, the little one. I rubbed the back of my neck, glancing at the top of my shoes as I took one small step forward.

“Do you take credit?” Morrow said through gritted teeth, digging into his jacket for his poor, overworked Occultech card.

Flint Lockstone smirked, then winked at me. Had this near-total stranger just wingmanned for me?

As promised, the next guild was only minutes away. My brow furrowed at the sight of its HQ. This didn’t make any sense.

“Morrow — maybe we’re going around the rim the wrong way? This looks more like the headquarters for the flower guild.”

The guild of flowers — the Garland — was known for more than just blossoms, rather a full outfit dedicated to the study of arcane botany. Their members traveled the world and dimensions beyond, collecting and breeding rare varieties of plants, fruits, and flowers, many of them magical.

“No, we have the right place,” he said. “The Halls of Making. But you’re right. This isn’t quite what I expected to find here.”

When I thought of artificing and arcane engineering, my mind went to cogs and gears, smiths and forges, not these twisting towers of what appeared to be giant beanstalks that spiraled into the sky. There was something organic about these structures, as if they’d grown out of the earth itself. Their exteriors were carpeted in colorful flowers, making the guild look like an enormous art installation, an absolute explosion of gorgeous blooms.

This guild was markedly quieter than the others, fewer people milling about, popping in and out of doorways carved into the bases of the stalks. Peering in I could see that they were all hollow, all of the artificing equipment and machinery set up inside the flowery buildings.

Before I had a chance to hail any of the artificers, a levitating crystal stopped just short of our faces, like two slender pyramids glued together at the base, spinning and gleaming in the sunlight.

Uh-oh. This was what I meant about security. This was probably one of their sentries that patrolled the grounds to make sure no one snuck in to

steal the secrets of artificing. I fully expected the crystal to blaze red and blue while blaring like a siren.

Instead it trilled at us in a cheerful voice, sparkling in a series of vibrant colors.

“Hello, there! Welcome to the Halls of Making. How can I help you today?”

“Oh, um,” I stammered. “Hello. You artificers sure are full of surprises.”

More colors glimmered from the crystal’s many facets as it laughed. “That’s very kind of you, but I am not exactly a guild member. Not of this guild, at least. I was just dropping off some muffins.”

I could tell that Morrow was also caught off guard, but he made an admirable effort of ignoring the absence of both muffins and appendages to carry them with.

“My name is Theodore Morrow, and this is my partner, Jericho Frost. We’ve come to consult an artificer about some unusual trinkets circulating in our city.”

“Oh, here’s me forgetting my manners. My name is Lore. I highly recommend speaking to Jackson Pryde, in that building, right over there.” A beam of light projected from the crystal like a laser pointer to indicate the building in question. “He should be able to take a look at your problem. Sometimes he pretends to be busy to look important. If he does, tell him I sent you.”

I chuckled. “We will. Thanks for your help, Lore.”

In the fraction of a moment that I considered asking Lore who or what he was — both very rude questions, I acknowledge, but I was so, so curious — he trilled a friendly, “You’re most welcome!” and zipped off into the street.

Morrow blinked at the crystal as it disappeared into the crowd, then blinked at me. “Well, that was — different.”

“You’re telling me. Come on. Let’s go talk to this Jackson guy, see if he can’t answer some questions.”

Questions about the charms, obviously, but also about the friendly levitating crystal who’d greeted us.

Lore could have told us to follow the scent of freshly baked muffins, their sweet smell of brown sugar wafting out of the building. Machines lined the walls, the ambient clicking and clanking like white noise in the

workshop. Large wooden tables laden with tools filled the rest of the room, each one holding an artificer's work in progress.

Morrow and I carefully navigated the workshop, tiptoeing around the detritus on the floor: scraps of leather, twists of wire, a scattering of brass screws. We found our quarry deeper in the workshop, his hand deep in a large picnic basket as he groped around for his second brown sugar muffin of the day. Or so I assumed. Just guessing.

"Jackson Pryde?" I said.

The man with the crumbs in his mustache spoke around a mouthful of muffin. "Who's asking?"

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CHAPTER 14

We were three for three. Every Black Market guild member I'd met just happened to be blistering hot. First there was Theodore Morrow, and then Flint Lockstone, and now, the very sweaty and possibly inappropriately dressed Jackson Pryde. Was there something in the water? What were they feeding these guildies?

Not to judge Jackson or anything, but he was only wearing a black tank top, blue jeans, and work boots. Very little protection from any potential accidents in the workshop, but maybe he was just that skilled in artificing. Not that I had any reason to complain.

Either these artificers built plenty of muscle naturally from banging hammers and turning wrenches, or Jackson made sure to take time after work to hit the weights. Woof. Black curls fell in ringlets over his eyes, glossy from sweat or some hair product, I couldn't tell, but it still had the effect of making him hotter. Smoldering. That was the word.

In my peripheral vision, I could tell that Morrow was once again holding himself taller, flexing every muscle in his body so tightly that his face verged on constipation. I knew I shouldn't get used to his curious brand of not-so-subtle jealousy and possessiveness, but it felt nice to be — wanted? Was that the word? Valued? Protected?

"I'm Jericho Frost, and this is my associate, Theodore Morrow." Using the same script as Morrow. Nice. He wasn't going to call me his partner, I wasn't going to, either.

"We're from Occultech," Morrow added. "There's something unsavory going on in our city — arcane distortions everywhere — and it's affecting

the mundanes. We were hoping you could help us with our — ”

“Out of the question,” Jackson said. “Don’t work with corpos. You’ll have to take your business elsewhere.”

“Flint Lockstone sent us,” I said. “And Lore, too. They said we should at least ask.”

He waved his hand dismissively. “Flint’s a pain in my ass, and Lore’s nice to everyone. Doesn’t mean you’re worth my time. On my lunch break. Come back later. Maybe never.”

“Jackson Pryde,” a voice said. “Don’t be so rude.”

A second man stepped out from behind some machinery, wiping his hands off on a rag. He hadn’t been hiding there, exactly, probably working on something at a separate worktable, but he’d obviously been listening.

“At least hear them out, Jack,” the man said. “They need your help to help other people. That’s worth at least a minute of your time.”

Jackson glanced at the muffin still clutched in his hand, looking like a bear who’d been caught rifling through a picnic basket. He chewed twice more, swallowed, then glumly put the muffin down.

This second man was about Jackson’s age, which meant they were both around my age, too, mid twenties or so. The premature salt-and-pepper of his hair had the odd effect of making him look even younger, the stark white mixed with jet black. He was handsome in a different way, a cool confidence in his demeanor that bordered on intimidating.

In a basic, though well-fitting gray T-shirt, he was more slender than Jackson, his hands not nearly as rough or chapped from working with tools and sturdy materials. The long fingers, their graceful motions even as he tossed the dirtied rag into a corner — this man was a mage, and a highly skilled one, at that.

“Xander Wright,” he said by way of introduction. “Flint Lockstone is a bit of a character. He’s a handful, but he means well. And Lore — well, Lore’s a good guy.”

Jackson must have noticed the curiosity on my face, how I was biting the inside of my cheeks to stop myself from blurting out a barrage of stupid questions. He lit up, swiping the back of his hand across his mouth.

“Lore is an artificer’s intelligence. My father’s invention, in fact. He’s basically family. It’s not just cogs and gears around here. Artificing can be practically anything. Talking crystals, hover boots. Sky’s the limit.”

“That’s honestly so badass,” I said, encouraged when I caught the twinkle of pride in Jackson’s eye, knowing that returning his enthusiasm would only get him to talk more.

I’d seen the same look on Morrow’s face whenever I asked him about his scrollwork. Like him, Jackson was a craftsman. Like any of the many guild members, really — an enthusiast, a huge, passionate nerd when it came to discussing his trade, his art, his favorite thing in the world.

“Does that make him your familiar?” I asked.

Jackson chuckled. Even better than a smile. Good. He was warming up to us.

“Lore’s more like a brother to me. I don’t do magic — *can’t* do it, actually — so I have to count on devices that make magic for me. Technically, I wouldn’t have any use for a familiar. That’s more Xander’s territory.”

Jackson looked up at Xander with a warm, sugary smile on his lips.

“But Xander doesn’t need a familiar. No offense to anyone who uses them, of course, but he’s plenty powerful on his own.”

Xander squeezed Jackson’s shoulder with a small laugh. “He’s exaggerating. But Jack is right. Artificing brings a lot of benefits for those who need a little extra oomph for their magic. It’s incredible. I’m not sure how long you had to chat — he’d talk your ear off if he had the chance — but Lore is actually a member of the baker’s guild.”

My jaw dropped. An artificer’s intelligence, a member of Mother Dough? They weren’t kidding about fulfilling wishes at the Black Market. It would be so cool to have my own little flying buddy who could magically bake me a batch of muffins. Sort of like Scrimshaw, minus all the godawful farts.

That didn’t sound like such a bad deal at all. And the amplification of power, having a backup battery from which to draw arcane essence — how had I turned such a quick one-eighty about familiars since our conversation with Scrimshaw?

“Now, how can Jackson help you gentlemen?” Xander asked.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” Jackson said, looking up at Xander with a pout. “What did you guys need help with, exactly? And did either of you want a muffin?”

Nice of him to ask, and very tempting, but Morrow politely declined for us both. He pulled out his drawstring bag and poured some charms into his

hand. Jackson squinted at them with an incredulous expression.

“And you’re telling me that Flint sent you to me for an assessment? This is supposed to be his territory. Isn’t this technically jewelry?”

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I shrugged. “He said something about how the jewelers are more about — I don’t know, bespoke pieces or something fancy like that.”

Jackson made a face. Xander chuckled.

“The distinction he made was that these charms are clearly mass produced,” Morrow quickly added. “Which is why we needed someone who knows all about manufacturing magical objects instead of enchanting them on a smaller scale.”

“He’s right, Jack,” Xander said. “Halls of Making and all that.”

Jackson held out his hand, his lips pressed in a thin line. “Yeah, yeah, I get it. Hand them over, already.”

We explained what the charms did to both mundane and magical people, down to the odd conditions that seemed to flip a switch in anyone who wore them. I could see the spark of professional curiosity in Jackson’s eyes. Xander had approached the workbench, too, leaning in for a closer look.

“The charm we’re really worried about is the full moon,” Morrow said. “Who knows how many people own them, and who knows what’s going to happen then?”

“Hmm,” Jackson said, turning the charms this way and that, pinching them between his fingers. “Hmm.”

“They’re certainly magical,” Xander said. “I can sense them buzzing all the way from here.”

“There’s something else you should know,” I said, looking to Morrow. “We mentioned that these are being sold by a rival corporation, Happy, Inc. What we didn’t mention was how we recently discovered that the corpo is run by a god. Loki, to be specific.”

Jackson flinched. The charms tinkled onto the workbench as he dropped them. See? A sensible man. I wasn't the only guy in the arcane underground who knew to be cautious around entities.

"That would have been helpful to know beforehand," he grumbled.

"It's very strange," Xander said, reaching out to pick up one of the charms. Jackson watched him warily, but made no attempt to stop him. "Because I don't really sense any trace of divinity around these things."

I cocked an eyebrow. "But Loki's the one selling them. He did say that he had a whole line of people producing them — an entire factory, I'm imagining — but, you know. Trickster god and all that. I just assumed he was lying."

"He still could be," Jackson said. "But there's one way to find out."

He reached for a pair of goggles above his workbench — no ordinary glasses, either, the lens like gemstones with the color and clarity of ice. Like Morrow, Jackson somehow looked even handsomer with glasses on, or something spectacle-adjacent, at least. Meanwhile, I just looked like a dork. I took a quick moment to study Xander's face, positive that he would look great in glasses, too. It just wasn't fair.

How I'd missed the heavy leather and metal glove in the corner of Jackson's workbench I'll never know. Maybe it was how it blended in with the rest of his projects, somehow maintaining a similar aesthetic with everything else, like a modern technological twist on the medieval. The man stuck to his branding, if nothing else, but something told me that the goggles and the glove weren't just your average workshop tools.

"Fancy glove you've got there," I said. "Almost looks like you could knock someone's lights out with it."

"I have," Jackson said, picking up a handful of charms with his gloved hand.

"It's his Gauntlet," Xander said. "His favorite invention. I'd stand back a little, if I were you."

Morrow and I did as we were instructed. Jackson stared at the palm of his Gauntlet for a few seconds. I gasped when tufts of blue fire danced along its length, terminating like candle flames on the tips of his fingers. Then he clenched the Gauntlet, pulverizing the charms in his fist.

The magic stored in the charms flashed, crackled, then fizzled. The flames snuffed out. Morrow cleared his throat.

“Not to be rude, but whatever you’re doing, I hope it’s worth sacrificing our specimens.”

“And you could have hurt yourself!” I said. “That’s so risky of you to go crushing magical items just like that. Those things could have blown up in your face.”

“Can’t do magic,” Jackson said, still hyperfocused on the powdered charms in the palm of his hand. “But can’t be hurt by it, either. I mean, it hurts like hell, but it won’t kill me. You know what? Don’t worry about it.”

Xander shook his head. “He’s right. It’s this whole thing. Don’t worry about it.”

Jackson sifted through the golden dust with the tip of his finger, three piles of them sitting in a row on his palm. His brows knit tighter as he grunted, squinting through the ice-blue gemstones of his goggles. He raised the Gauntlet, offering Xander a closer look.

“You seeing what I’m seeing?” Jackson asked.

Xander pinched a bit of powder from each pile, rubbing it between his fingertips.

“Oh, dear,” he muttered.

“You guys,” I said. “The suspense is killing me.”

Jackson removed his goggles, setting them down on the table with a clink. “So Loki told you that a whole team of people made this. Like an entire production line.”

Morrow and I nodded.

“You were right to doubt him, at least,” Xander said, “because these charms weren’t manufactured by different people. Their arcane signature all feels the same.”

A shiver ran down my spine.

“They were all enchanted by a single person,” I said.

And I had the most horrible inkling of who that person might be.

CHAPTER 15

She was alive, then.

The roar of the Black Market's bazaar did nothing to sway me from my thoughts. We'd thanked Jackson and Xander and left them to their devices, Morrow and I silent as we strolled back to the dimension's boulevard, heading for the portal.

It was stupid of me to hold out hope that Freyja had actually wiped the Goddess of the Valley off the face of the earth. But as I was starting to learn, not all gods were built the same, not even those from the same pantheon.

Loki, for example, had concentrated all his energy on building Happy, Inc. over the decades, raising up his own temple. Freyja was flightier, powerful enough that anything beneath her simply escaped her notice. Which was a nice way of saying that the goddess was a little lofty, a little loopy, maybe a bit of an airhead.

But there was still the problem of the third god.

"I want to say that we should have known," I said at last. "Wishful thinking, though. Part of me was so hoping that she was dead."

Morrow shrugged. "Director Sakamoto said as much, that we should stay alert. But I thought the same as you. Rather, I hoped. So now there's another god in the mix."

"This is a damn mess," I said, glancing around the bazaar. "What I wouldn't give to just walk into the crowd and disappear right now, let this all be someone else's problem."

“You don’t mean that,” Morrow said with a small smile. “You care too much to leave Nomicon Valley — hell, potentially a very large segment of humanity — up to someone else.”

I scoffed. “You’re supposed to enable me sometimes. You don’t have to be right all the time. I hate that you know me a little too well now.”

Morrow smiled harder, placing his hand on my shoulder. “If it means anything, I’m glad that I’m going through this mess with you. I can’t imagine suffering through all this with anybody else.”

A little bit of that gooey feeling wriggled around in my stomach, like glowing butterflies. “That’s really sweet of you, Morrow. Like, in a pretty fucked-up way, but it’s still very sweet.”

His hand was still on my shoulder, his smile faltering only the slightest as a different sort of look took over his face. Oh, shit. Right here, in the middle of the boulevard?

At the end of the cobblestoned lane, the portal away from the Black Market hummed. Around us clamored the call of merchants in languages I’d never even heard of, the song of birds from different dimensions, the zing of otherworldly musical instruments.

Yet all I could hear was the thumping of blood in my temples, and — yes, I was sure I could hear it. The frantic beating of my own heart.

Morrow took one step closer, his body shielding me from the sun. I realized I was tilting my head very slightly back to look at him, to gaze into his eyes. Huh. Maybe the bastard was right. Maybe I wasn’t six feet tall, after all.

Theodore Morrow’s face drew nearer. I swallowed hard, then licked my lips.

“Is that Jericho Frost and Theodore Morrow?” came the lilting, friendly greeting, a familiar sweetness delivered with just the faintest hint of malice.

Xavi Ximenez came trotting down the lane, beautiful and tan as ever in a plain tank top, the bulging muscle of his shoulders glowing bronze in the dimension’s sunlight.

I clenched my teeth at the thought that we’d been caught almost — well, doing what, exactly? Then I clenched my fists at the thought that Xavi had so rudely interrupted whatever was about to happen. I recorded this deeply in my memory, etching the incident into my brain the way a blunt pencil digs desperate furrows in a notepad. Xavi couldn’t go teasing me

about having terrible game when he was, at least in this instance, the chief cockblocker.

The secondary cockblocker ambled into view, though to be fair, he hadn't called out deliberately to interrupt, again, what might have been something interesting and exciting. Houston was wearing an off-white cowboy hat, a brown suede vest over a white tank top, and jeans that fit him criminally well. He waved excitedly at us, like he was genuinely happy to see me and Morrow, which he probably was. Sweet guy. I waved back with a sheepish smile.

Xavi bounded up to us, all innocence and perfect white teeth as he leaned in to hug me, then squeezed Morrow on the arm.

"Fancy seeing the two of you here," he said. "Out on a hot date?"

Morrow chuckled. "Are you talking about yourself? You and Houston here are looking quite hot. Er, I mean you're dressed perfectly for the hot weather. And are probably on a date."

The way he stammered through his reply, the way he carefully avoided the question of whether or not the two of us were on a date — somehow it didn't annoy me like all the times he'd feigned ignorance before. Something was absolutely about to happen back there. I forced a smile on my face as I turned to Xavi, engaging all my muscles to keep my body tense and stop me from reaching out to knock his block off.

"We came here to consult with a couple guilds about the charms, actually," I said.

Houston's eyes lit up. "Well, isn't that a coincidence? Xavi and I came to do the same."

Xavi slid his finger against the corner of his mouth, then gave me a meaningful wink. "Oh. We came all right."

Morrow blushed tomato red. I narrowed my eyes at Xavi. Houston, bless this golden retriever of a man, just kept on smiling like he'd heard none of Xavi's obvious innuendo.

"The guy we met was dressed like me," Houston said, holding his arms out to either side. "Really nice man named Flint."

I rolled my eyes. "From Marquise & Empress? Yeah, real swell guy. Did he try to make you pay him with a kiss on the cheek, too?"

Xavi cocked an eyebrow. "Um, no. Wow, Echo, what have you been up to, really? Getting lucky in the Black Market, are we?"

"Well, I could have," I said, shooting him a death glare.

“But he couldn’t help much with the charms,” Houston said, “so he sent us off to find someone else to consult at Hammerhearth.”

Morrow scratched the back of his head. “The guild of blacksmiths? Well, that’s funny, because he sent us to the guild of artificers.”

I looked between the two of them, tempering my annoyance when I realized something. “You don’t suppose this is Flint’s way of helping us, do you? Like he was trying to get us to see different people for multiple angles on the situation.”

“Except he couldn’t have known that we were friendly with each other,” Morrow said. “Well, apart from the fact that we represent corpos from the same city.”

“That must have been enough to tip him off,” Xavi said. “Either he knew that we would exchange information or butt heads when it came down to it. Either way, we’ve got a couple of perspectives on the situation. You start.”

We told them about how Jackson and Xander determined that the charms had all been enchanted by the same person. A man from Hammerhearth told them about the mix of materials used to create the charms. The resulting alloy maximized the hypnotic quality of their enchantments while also dampening their magical radiation.

“Flint sent us in the right direction, I think,” Houston said. “They’re top-notch blacksmiths and metallurgists over at Hammerhearth, after all. No better people in the Black Market to tell you about the properties and value of various metals.”

Xavi chuckled. “Or the price. Turns out the stuff they use for the charms are cheap as dirt, too. Happy, Inc. really knows how to turn a profit.”

I scoffed. “I believe it. Loki wouldn’t be doing this if it wasn’t so profitable, on top of giving him leverage over the human population.”

“Sorry,” Xavi said. “Did you say Loki?”

“Oh,” I said. “I forgot to mention.”

I had to clap my hand over Xavi’s mouth as Morrow and I explained the god’s involvement. Trust a drag queen to wildly overreact, but to be fair, it was all pretty crazy to begin with. Houston stood by in silence, his eyes darting around the bazaar like he was trying to fit different pieces of the Happy Links puzzle together.

“All this,” he said, “and we still don’t know what Alexandra Thorpe — sorry — what Loki is up to.”

“The only thing we can count on,” Morrow said, “is that it’s bound to be something horrible. Come on. We can talk more back in Nomicon Valley. Preferably someplace no one can hear.”

He carefully avoided looking at Xavi when he said that, but we all knew what he meant.

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CHAPTER 16

The traversal of magical portals took many forms, depending on the personalities and aesthetics of those who built them, sometimes even depending on the temperament of the pocket dimensions they led to. You heard that right. Some of these places could think for themselves.

Sometimes the tunnel between worlds was as idyllic as walking through a glade. Or maybe it was a mind-bending jaunt through a hall of mirrors. The way back out of the Black Market was through a passage that, quite appropriately, appeared to be crafted out of black velvet, the deepest shadow. The passage deadened our footsteps until all I could hear was our breathing. My nerves on edge, I heaved a sigh of relief when Xavi spoke up to break the silence.

“About all of these charms being enchanted by the same person. You don’t suppose they have someone locked in a basement doing it all by themselves, do you? Like the lady in Rumpelstiltskin stuck in a room spinning straw into gold, day in and day out.”

“Actually,” I said, “we kind of have a hunch about who it might be. Morrow and I weren’t so sure at first, but we’ve seen this kind of magic before. Charms that charm people? It has to be that sorceress we fought at Occultech HQ. The Goddess of the Valley. Lady Paralumen.”

“You’re kidding,” Xavi breathed. “Didn’t you guys slaughter all her followers? You’d think we’d be past that shit by now.”

“Slaughter is a strong word,” Morrow said, “because most of them were suppressed or detained. The only casualties were those whose life force Paralumen drained when she attempted to usurp a goddess’s station.”

Houston, I noticed, hadn't actually said anything. I distinctly remembered that he and Angelica had detained their own little cadre of Paralumen's magpies. If I knew anything about SeraphiCorp, all of them would have been turned loose after a thorough interrogation, which very likely also involved a fiery sermon.

Just when I thought that the gloom of the tunnel was becoming far too oppressive — almost suffocating — a glimmer of light twinkled just past Xavi's head.

"Oh," I said. "Are we almost out of the portal? I didn't realize."

Houston gasped. "That's not the exit."

The light shone brighter, almost blinding in the darkness of the portal passage. I shielded my face, the radiance searing into my eyeballs, just as I saw a hand reach through the widening gap. Before I squeezed my eyes shut, I glimpsed wicked red fingernails and the crimson sleeve of an ornate robe.

Lady Paralumen.

The light exploded so violently, like high beams pointed straight at my face, as if the sun itself had appeared in the tunnel. Morrow and Houston shouted in pain. Xavi yelped, then cried out, his voice trailing farther and farther.

She was taking him.

I gritted my teeth, stumbling forward even as the light pierced my eyelids. I forced my eyes open. In the white-hot blaze I could barely see the silhouette of Paralumen clutching Xavi's face in her hands, like a dragon's talons about to crush a man's skull.

Those same hands had ripped open an entrance to the Black Market's tunnel. However powerful Paralumen was before, she was so much stronger now. I stumbled toward them aimlessly. Xavi needed my help.

"Get away from him, you witch!"

With apologies to actual witches, because I recognized that Paralumen was something so much worse. A sorceress, a goddess, a pain in the ass. The blinding light abated, leaving only the blistering gap in the tunnel that Paralumen had ripped open with her bare hands. With her *bare hands*. What was worse than a class Alpha threat? Did Occultech's threat designations even go that high?

She released Xavi's face before I could even get to her, pale pink filaments of magic trailing from her fingers as she broke contact. Horror

wrenched in my belly. This was similar to the spell she'd used to hex me, maybe a modified version of the magic she'd used to take over Morrow's mind. Which meant that —

"Scatter!" I shouted, backpedaling away from Xavi when I saw the petal-pink glow of charm magic in his eyes.

Paralumen drifted back and away, retreating through the tear in the portal tunnel. I searched her eyes for the same pink light of her charm magic, to find the triumphant sneer that no doubt curled her lips. But I saw nothing, only a blank, glassy expression, her eyes dull. It seemed too familiar, reminding me of the entranced faces of the mundanes who'd worn Loki's charms.

And not a single gloating word uttered, either. Nor any words used to cast her spell that had so quickly dominated Xavi's mind — silent casting, something most commonly associated with extremely skilled spellcasters. Wherever Paralumen had been hiding, whatever she'd been up to, it was clear that her power had grown by leaps and bounds.

Xavi hissed a spell word under his breath and stalked toward me, Paralumen's magic fully taking root in his brain. The tips of his fingers blazed bright with lethal magic. I'd seen him enchant his acrylic nails in drag before, his spell making them powerful enough to rip through magical barriers, even through the warded, hardened defenses that separated his family's precious backroom library from the rest of the world. I gulped, nearly tangling my legs as I stumbled backward, looking over my shoulder at the others for signs of a spell — any spell — to copy.

The coil of rope whizzing past my head took me by surprise. Even as it unfurled to its full length, the end doubled back on itself, tying a knot like an intelligent, autonomous tentacle, forming a lasso. Houston's enchanted rope looped cleanly over Xavi's body, tightening as it reached his midsection to trap his arms. He bared his teeth and snarled, wriggling like a badger as he maneuvered one glowing hand into position, then slashed the lasso into fibers.

"Oh, fuck," Houston muttered, dropping his ruined rope. "Didn't think I could be more attracted."

"This is no time to go perving over my best friend. Do something. Just don't hurt him."

Houston reached for the guns holstered at his hips, the six-six-six shooters he'd kept from his time at Jackal & Ashby. I clapped my hands

over his.

“You can’t just shoot him! I said not to hurt him, didn’t I?”

“Hexed bullets, remember? They’ll wear him down, but they won’t hurt him.”

It still didn’t feel right for Houston to open fire on the guy he was dating. There was just something unsettling about a guy pointing a gun at my closest friend in the world.

Morrow patted down his jacket, searching frantically through his bandolier for a scroll that might help. I stared at him pleadingly, praying for him to pipe in with some bright idea to save the day, some spell I could copy to help restrain Xavi without maiming him.

“All I’ve got is firepower and a bunch of shields,” Morrow said. “I thought we were just visiting the Black Market. Wasn’t expecting this.”

Xavi was only several feet away now, a globe of arcane light gathering and spinning in the palm of his hand. I’d missed his incantation, but I wasn’t about to copy his spell and throw it back at him, anyway. I’d seen what his offensive magic could do.

Xavi brought his hand to his lips and blew a kiss. The globe of magic drifted past his fingers, picking up in size and speed as it hovered through the space between us.

“Shields, then!” I yelled. “Holy shit, Morrow, please hurry!”

He whipped out the right scroll, lips moving at lightning speed as he read out the words to the shielding spell. I snatched phrases and gestures out of the air, duplicating the force field as Xavi’s spell zoomed closer and closer.

Light flashed as Morrow’s force field sealed shut over the three of us, a glassy clank reverberating through my teeth. I hurled out my copy to form a second layer, the dome of force seeming so fragile and thin compared to the barrier Morrow had erected.

His shielding spells were only designed for personal defense, which meant that he was stretching this spell thin by casting it over me and Houston, too. My copy was definitely more delicate than the original, but it would have to be enough.

Xavi’s orb of magic approached fast, as big and as bright as the moon. I gripped Houston’s shoulder with one hand and grasped Morrow’s hand in the other, bracing for impact.

The spell struck with all the force of a bomb blast, shattering both of our shield layers on impact. I cried out as fragments of the barrier rained down over our heads, the shards dissipating in thin air. My eyeballs ached against the light of the orb, but as my vision swam into focus I caught a glimpse of Xavi's glowering face.

"Xavi, please!" I shouted. "It's me, Echo, your best friend. Remember? You have to fight this!"

Barely a twitch of understanding in his eyes, zero reaction. How was I supposed to knock him out of it? I'd dispelled Morrow's entrancement by invoking his beloved Carly Rae Jepsen. I briefly considered grabbing Houston and doing something filthy to him, but how would making an already enraged Xavi jealous bring him back to his senses?

And then Houston opened fire.

I flinched at every shot. Translucent bullets zinged through the air, the hexed ammunition designed to strip away bits of a target's spirit until they were too exhausted to keep fighting. But something feral had taken over Xavi's body, his instincts and reflexes far speedier than I thought possible.

His clenched jaw, the dedicated fury in his eyes, how he flitted so effortlessly from side to side and dodged every bullet. — it was frankly a miracle. Paralumen's magpies and their fucking miracles.

Houston cried out when Xavi took a final springing leap straight toward him. Their bodies crashed together, Houston's revolvers clattering uselessly away. Pinned to the ground and vulnerable, all he could do was fight off Xavi's fists.

Morrow and I fell upon Xavi, struggling to pull him off. He was so strong, far stronger than he had any right to be, veins and muscles bulging in his neck. An incantation ripped in a guttural burst from his throat. It was that one spell again. Despair choked my throat as I repeated the words to myself. I didn't want to hurt Xavi, but I couldn't let him kill Houston, either.

Xavi's fingertips glowed again as he reached for Houston's head. I raised my hand, my fingernails burning bright. Where could I strike? Where could I jolt him with enough pain without leaving permanent damage? But as Xavi moved to grab Houston's temples, Houston did the same, grabbing the back of Xavi's head. He lurched upward, their mouths crashing together.

My jaw dropped. The spell faded from Xavi's fingers just as it faded from mine. The hateful growling in his chest turned into a low purr of

satisfaction, his hands tangling in Houston's hair as the two of them kissed torridly right there on the floor of the tunnel.

I thought back to how Morrow had tried to choke me to death under Paralumen's spell, how I'd considered kissing his face off to bring him back to sanity. My insides burned with annoyance. He watched Houston and Xavi make out for a moment, then turned to me with bright red cheeks. His embarrassed expression fell for a second, turning to concern as he met my scowl.

"Now what the hell did I do?" Morrow asked.

"Nothing," I snapped. "Absolutely nothing."

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CHAPTER 17

I sank halfway into the sofa, my muscles like gelatin. My bones felt so heavy, weighing me down and pinning me to the cushions. I thought I might never get up again. Part of me was okay with that. This was probably what people meant when they talked about being bone tired.

The battle with Paralumen had taken us completely unawares. But did we really have an excuse anymore? Even Morrow hadn't exactly loaded up on scrolls like he usually would. But who would have thought that the Goddess of the Valley would strike in a portal tunnel, of all places? Fucking up a thoroughfare, fucking things up for everybody else in the process, like dropping a piano on a highway.

But again, no excuses. Paralumen was on the prowl, and while Loki hadn't exactly tried to squish us like bugs outright, we knew that he was dangerous. Lesson learned. Morrow and I needed to be armed to the teeth from now on. Spatial awareness. Always on the alert. If you stay ready, you don't gotta get —

The doorbell rang. I shifted among the cushions, my body somehow sinking even deeper into the sofa. That was lunch, but even the promise of delicious food couldn't lure me out of my plush little pillow fortress. I hated knowing that it wasn't just exhaustion dragging me down.

It was hard to ignore the despair, so thick and heavy in my chest. The awful understanding that Paralumen could claw her way so easily into our minds — into Xavi's, of all people? Xavi who was probably somewhere getting comfort-fucked by Houston. Good for them. At least someone was getting some.

Plates clattered in the kitchen, then the faucet squeaked as it twisted shut. I hadn't even noticed that Morrow was doing the dishes.

"I'll get it," he said, no doubt just as tired as I was, no doubt judging me for transforming into a puddle of jelly.

The front door clicked open, then shut, the rustle of plastic and waxed takeout boxes almost tempting me out of my lair. Plastic rustled again as Morrow opened everything and laid it all out on my tiny dining table.

He came over to nudge me with one socked foot. When I grunted in response, he nudged hard enough to push me onto the other half of the sofa. I glared up at him.

"If you really think I'm going to come over and spoon-feed you, you've got another thing coming."

I let him drag me over to the table, the smell of steaming-hot ramen, crisp tempura, and perfectly seared gyoza finally reenergizing me, at least enough to shove portions of it all into my mouth. Morrow ate quietly beside me, chewing like a civilized human being as I all but snarfed and snorted my way through my share of the Japanese lunch that he'd so generously put on the company card.

He set down his chopsticks, watching me deliberately as he swallowed his last mouthful of teriyaki chicken and rice. Ugh. I'd been holding off on discussing the events at the Black Market, but we had to.

"So," Morrow started. "That was a whole thing."

"Tell me about it."

"This is bad," he said. "The fact that she was able to pull that off, first of all, but also how brazen the attack was. That she's so willing to destroy infrastructure and put people in the underground in danger? This is a whole new level of villainy."

"Shouldn't we tell someone about the damage in the portal?" I asked. "It's like she blew a hole in a tunnel, except the tunnel feels like a hose and the passengers are water. Oh, god. Won't people get sucked out through the breach? Like a hole in an airplane. Won't they get randomly tossed into different dimensions?"

"Don't underestimate the Black Market. I can't begin to explain how it works, but the climate in there, the time of day — it's all under the dimension's control. You know how they have a sun? That's not our sun. The dimension's going to be fine. I'm sure the powers that be have rerouted energy toward repairing the tear already."

I didn't press any further, because this sounded like just as much of a knowledge gap for Morrow as it did for me. Identifying who was really in charge of the Black Market would be just as challenging as figuring out why, exactly, Occultech existed.

Oh, sure. Director Sakamoto had told us about the corpo's earliest days as a cult, how the prized Viridian Tablet had always been a record for storing names. I remembered how she'd once told us that names no longer had the power that they used to.

Then why did Paralumen show up when she did, seemingly at the very mention of her name? It could have been coincidence. Maybe she was tracking us the whole time we were tracking her, or maybe Loki had sent her after us, using his divine magic to — ugh — divine our location.

Either way it was painfully clear now that they were working together — or that Paralumen was working for Loki. The glazed look in her eyes, the fact that she wasn't gleefully monologuing the way she used to. Was she under Loki's control? Could she have crafted a charm so powerful that Loki commandeered it and used it to break her mind? Perhaps Paralumen had crafted the very chains that bound her to his will.

"Just be glad that we ran into Xavi in boy clothes today," I said. "If he was walking around the Black Market as Xtra Xtra — hoo, boy. One of us would be missing a limb, at least."

We'd been very, very fortunate that Xavi wasn't wearing drag, which he wouldn't be whenever the sun was out, anyway. Xtra Xtra didn't do daytime drag unless she was being paid very, very well.

Something about being in drag elevated Xavi from a competent mage to an extremely deadly one, as if the ceremony of putting on all that makeup, padding, and fashion augmented her magical abilities. In many ways, there really was something ritualistic about queens getting into full drag.

The headdress, the regalia, the warpaint — like someone preparing to go into battle. And considering all the absolute bullshit that drag queens have to put up with, I wouldn't be surprised if magical drag queens everywhere didn't get a boost of power from the act of assuming their fantastical alter egos.

"It's not just me though, right?" I said. "Did you notice how dull and lifeless she was in the eyes? She had every opportunity to gloat, especially with how she'd dominated Xavi's mind. But nothing. Didn't seem normal to me at all."

Morrow shook his head. “It’s bad. I think it’s clear that she’s in deep with Loki, but not in the way she might have expected. Kind of ironic for someone who’s mastered charm magic to fall into the trap of being charmed herself.”

I sucked down the last of my iced green tea. “I’m just tired, honestly. If I didn’t know they were endangering both mundanes and the magical community — anyway, thanks for lunch. That really hit the spot.”

“Sure, sure. And fine, we can change the subject for a spell.” He thumbed his phone’s screen, flicking absently, as if pointedly avoiding my stare. “So did you get the playlist I sent you?”

I cocked an eyebrow, feeling a flutter of something warm in my belly. “Playlist? What playlist?”

“I promised you a playlist of my favorite Carly Rae Jepsen songs a little while back. You know, so you wouldn’t think she was just a one-hit wonder and all.”

Warmth spread across my cheeks. This was some real high school shit, but damn if it wasn’t hitting me hard. I had it bad, man.

“I’ll check it out once I have a minute.” With a wry smile, mostly to cover for my blush, I added: “I’m not sure if you noticed, but we’ve been kind of busy lately.”

“Right, right,” he said, slipping his phone into his pocket, rubbing the back of his neck.

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Morrow and I both had our weirdo moments, but his little display of vulnerability was too awkward, too cute. I stared at my empty cup, at the bits of rice on the table, anywhere but his face. He ambled over to my desk, scratching his forearm, hand encircling and rubbing his wrist as he similarly made an effort to avoid my gaze.

I snuck a glance as he curiously perused the chaos of my workspace. He reached for the fragmentablet, paper rustling as he brushed some

photocopied documents aside. He turned it over in his hands, testing its weight.

“So have you ever tried reading it?”

I scoffed. “Why would I bother? It feels so good to get all those fragments out of my head. I don’t see why I should risk putting them all back in.”

“Fair enough. I just figured you’d be a little curious about learning more magic.”

“Hah. Fair enough.”

He wasn’t wrong, of course. We did share a common curiosity for arcana in all its forms. I glanced over at my blasted war zone of a workspace with fondness, and maybe the slightest hint of disgust.

Parchment, drawings, books scattered everywhere, nothing at all like Morrow’s card catalog of meticulously sorted scrolls. But again, hard pass on the tablet. I had a hard enough time keeping my brain from unraveling.

“May I?” Morrow asked, holding the tablet face up.

“Knock yourself out.”

Occultech had designed the device a lot like an actual computer tablet, or one of those e-readers. Morrow sat at the table and tapped the screen to wake the display. He hummed and muttered as he turned the pages, enough to make me want to read over his shoulder.

He sounded like someone who was trying to tempt a toddler into trying a new dish by making delighted, appreciative little noises. And of course, like a gullible boy, I came over to see what was so special about his stupid olive oil roasted broccoli.

I watched him flip through the tablet with a suspicious side eye, totally paranoid about the as-yet-unknown effect of reabsorbing these fragments into my poor little hamster brain. So far, simply looking at the strings of letters and glyphs on the page didn’t make me feel any worse.

“It’s all inert,” Morrow said. “No power in the words. There’s no real rhyme or reason to any of it. So they’re not really spells. Not deliberately written out, you know, like someone stringing together a sentence — subject, verb, etcetera? The grammar’s all wrong.”

“Sure,” I said, nodding along. I was just happy to learn that simply looking at the tablet wasn’t going to break my skull open.

“But it’s so interesting seeing how some of these fragments fit together. I wonder if you could piece together new spells from all these

combinations.”

“Like those fridge magnets. You know, the ones with all the words, then you try to rearrange them to make a poem or whatever? Except everyone just writes dirty messages instead.”

“That’s a pretty fair comparison, actually.”

He slid his finger across the screen, carefully studying every new page. I watched the creases in his forehead as he read, the way his mouth pressed into a tight line, his eyes barely blinking.

Morrow was conventionally attractive, sure, but time and again I found myself extra enamored when he showed his nerdier side. The precision of his scrollwork, those glasses that he kept on his desk, and now, his nascent theory of potential random spell generation.

It was all I could do to stop myself from placing my hands on his broad shoulders so I could lean in even more, pretending to be interested in the emanated waste products of my mind.

And then he turned the page again.

I froze. Morrow held his breath. There on the page, interspersed between the words and phrases, was his name. Theodore, or Morrow, or Theodore Morrow, every variation written over and over, copied again and again.

I snatched the tablet out of his hands. He didn’t move, hands in midair as if still holding the tablet. His eyes did glance sideways, though, inspecting my face for some kind of response.

“That’s enough studying for one day,” I said, stammering. “All work and no play, you know what I mean?”

“Sure,” Morrow said, nodding along with forced enthusiasm. “And that’s probably why my name keeps appearing in the tablet. Because we spend so much time together. And you keep thinking about work.”

“Oh, you saw that,” I said, an artificial, high-pitched squeak in my voice. “That’s probably what it is, since we’re partners and all.”

“Right,” Morrow said. “Of course. Because we’re partners.”

He got up from the table, but I was still standing behind him. I doubled over with an “Oof” when his chair struck me in the stomach. He caught me in his arms. The fragmentablet flew out of my grasp and landed among the couch cushions.

“Oh,” I breathed, my body pressed against his, the tautest, most muscular parts of him kneading into me.

“Oh,” he breathed, his face too close to mine. His body, his heat, his name over and over in the fragmentable, on my mind, on my lips.

“Morrow, I — ”

“Yeah,” he said. “I — I mean — ”

The palm of Morrow’s hand pulsed with pale blue light. My heart plunged into my stomach.

“You should get that,” I said.

“Sorry,” he said, meaning it. He stared into his palm, brow knitting. “This looks urgent. Oh. Uh-oh.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“More like who. It’s Director Sakamoto.”

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CHAPTER 18

Morrow pinched his fingers, then spread them, a thin beam of ghostly blue light radiating from the implant in his palm. The projection wavered into an upside down pyramid, out of which stared the faintly flickering bust of one Enyo Sakamoto.

“Morrow! Good. You’re awake.”

He checked his wristwatch. “Director, it’s only after lunch.”

She waved her hand impatiently. “I don’t know what hours you like to keep. Time was when our recruits never slept at all. Ah. Those were the days.”

Trust Director Sakamoto to underline the ‘cult’ in Occultech. She’d claimed that it was how the corpo started, after all.

“You must have a reason for calling, Director,” Morrow said patiently.

Sakamoto zipped back to the present, her gaze focusing on him even as her image went on its weird rotation, the hologram slowly pacing its way through a three-sixty turn.

“Oh, of course. We have an update on the whole Happy-Loki situation, and I’ll need you to inform Frost, pronto, because — oh. Hello there, Frost.”

Her hologram had spun to face me at just the right time, a quizzical look on her face as she scanned what she could see of my body. Her eyes darted left, then right as she took in my apartment.

“Huh. I thought there was something different about your apartment, Morrow.”

He cleared his throat. I threw him a puzzled look.

“She calls you at home?” I muttered under my breath.

He threw me a warning glare, as if it was any surprise that this woman who understood neither human sleep cycles nor the concept of personal space would hesitate to call her subordinates at any time of day.

“I see that the two of you have been spending more time together,” Sakamoto said, the tone of her voice suspiciously even. “That is most commendable. Why, I’ve read that knowing the ins and outs of your peers can be most beneficial for a working relationship. Especially the ins.”

“So good to hear from you, Director,” I stammered, cutting her off before she went off on a ramble about human insides. “What was it you wanted to tell us about Happy, Inc.?”

“Yes, of course. It seems that Alexandra Thorpe — that is to say, Loki — does indeed pay their employees well, though not enough to guarantee the tightest lips. It appears that a hefty supply of Happy Links charms are sequestered in a warehouse somewhere in the city. The boys in surveillance are tracking down the precise coordinates as we speak.”

“That’s outrageous,” I said.

Somehow I hadn’t considered the possibility, mostly operating on the likelihood that the charms were being trucked or flown in from somewhere else. A different city, or wherever they were being manufactured. But now that we knew Paralumen was helping Loki with the charms, it all made sense.

“There’s something we do have to report to you, Director,” Morrow said.

He told her about the attack at the Black Market. The sour-lemon pucker that took over Sakamoto’s face said everything we needed to know.

“So this self-styled goddess is still in the city, and she’s helping Loki create these things? All the more reason to strike now.”

“Now?” I blurted. “You want us to attack the warehouse?”

“Tonight,” Sakamoto said. “The sooner, the better. Lest you forget, gentlemen — a full moon is approaching.”

I chewed the side of my thumb. “And we’ll be getting plenty of backup at the warehouse, right? A squad of field agents? Some Occultech gadgets? Um. Doris, at least?”

“Terrible idea,” she said, waving her hand again. “The reason you’re striking at night is to take them by surprise. The smaller the team, the better,

to attract as little attention as possible. A quick operation, in and out. You two would know all about ins and outs, wouldn't you?"

In my peripheral vision I could see Morrow's ears burning bright. I rushed to fill the awkward silence.

"Again, Director, maybe you have some tech to lend us that will help. Some top-secret Occultech super weapon, maybe."

Her hands that we couldn't see slammed on her desk, her imaged vibrating from the wave of power that pulsed throughout her office.

"Who told you about that? There are no secret super weapons at Occultech."

'Weapons,' plural. Of course. No chance she was going to let two lowly grunts borrow some deadly prototype, even if one of those grunts happened to be one of her favorite field agents. Still, it was worth a shot.

"Not to worry," she added. "I'll be there to lend my support. Ah, in spirit, that is."

I frowned. Sakamoto's idea of working support for a mission meant loudly announcing her master plan over a PA system, or making video calls with the most awkward timing, or barking orders through one of her terrifying ocular drones.

"Yay," I said weakly. "Good to know, Director."

"I'll update you just as soon as I receive the coordinates. So. The two of you look quite cozy. I see the conquered remains of a lovely meal on the table. Quite the lunch date you've had today. I wonder if you shared a lovely breakfast, too."

"Goodbye, Director!" I blurted, hurriedly closing Morrow's hand into a fist and dismissing the hologram before she could say anything else.

Morrow glanced at my hand covering his. I slipped my hand into my pocket. If something had been about to happen between us at the Black Market boulevard, there was no way to misinterpret what was about to happen before Sakamoto called. But about that.

"We should get ready for tonight," Morrow said. "We'll wait on the director's intel, then reconvene. Get plenty of rest."

"Sounds like a plan. We can ride together. Pick me up?"

The way he smiled sent that gooey sensation throughout my body again. "It's a date."

Morrow left not long after, leaving me to my thoughts. Surely Sakamoto had something up her sleeve. She did say that she liked us enough not to

throw us as fodder at the Happy Links problem. Briefly I wondered if the other corpos had their equivalent of oblivious leaders. I couldn't imagine anyone being stranger than the director of Occultech herself.

Still, with or without Sakamoto's help, Morrow and I would need all the firepower we could get. I swallowed uncomfortably as my attention drifted to the shoebox still sitting on the dining table. Morrow had politely ignored it, only pushing it aside to make space for all the food.

I licked my lips as I lifted the lid, sullenly staring at the orange gemstone still trapped in the mason jar. It seemed to stare back at me like a single judgmental eye. Was this like removing the lens cap from a camera? Was Freyja watching me?

Surely it couldn't hurt to ask her, at the very least. Fight fire with fire, as the saying goes. Kill or be killed. Whatever Freyja wanted to teach me might just give us a fighting chance.

My hands shook as I untwisted the jar lid. I poured the gemstone into my palm, as warm as if it had been left out in the sun. I placed it gently on the floor, taking a deep, steadying breath as I lifted my knee. I shut my eyes and stomped.

The gemstone shattered with all the glassy splintering of a hollow crystal egg. I held my breath. Maybe I would plunge into an astral hole, like Alice tumbling into Wonderland. Or maybe I would find myself in another portal passage like the one connecting to the Black Market.

I kept my eyes shut, still anxious about my interdimensional trip. But the warmth of sunlight on my skin and the bracing smell of fresh air was too tempting. And what was that sound that synced with the balmy breeze blowing through my hair? The tinkling of chains?

I opened my eyes and gasped. I stood in a meadow of grass as green as emerald, stretching out far into the horizon. The fluffiest white clouds drifted through the perfect blue of an open sky. And there, glinting in the sunlight, dangling impossibly from nothing, were great golden chains heaving with massive gemstones.

"Holy shit," I muttered.

"Well, I might have chosen some prettier words," Freyja said, "but yes. Holy shit, indeed. Welcome to my domicile."

There she stood, about twenty feet away from me, dressed in the same sheer gown and ornate jewelry as before.

“Sorry the place is such a mess. I don’t really get much company these days.”

“No, no. Not at all. Your dimension — er, domicile is gorgeous. Wait. What do you mean by ‘guests?’”

She shrugged. “Oh, you know. Humans like you, sometimes other mortals. Nobody really pays attention to us entities anymore. But speaking of which — yes, other entities, too. Mostly gods of magic from other pantheons. Well, we’re not exactly friends. More of a book club. Yes. Sharing knowledge, gossip, that sort of thing.”

“Whoa. You all hang out? So there’s clubs for gods and entities out there? Nifty.”

“Organizations. Yes. Nifty. We need to stick together, what’s left of the entities of earth. Not all of us are lucky enough to have our own public relations department.”

It was exactly as Loki had described, how the gods had lost so much in the modern age. It was nice to know that the entities had their own support system — someone in your court, someone to remember you. Everything fades faster when the world forgets its name.

“So you all band together, then? Like, a bunch of magic gods all in one club? That’s so cool. Is Thoth there? What about Hecate? What’s she like?”

“We’re all united by a common interest in the more mortal kind of magic user, especially those blessed and burdened with unusual gifts.” Freyja wrinkled her nose. “You’re asking far too many questions. Buying time. You’re only delaying the inevitable, you know.”

She caught me redhanded. Red-faced. Both, really.

“Fine. I’ve never had a formal magical lesson, you know? And it’s so much more intimidating when my first lesson is going to come from the Norse goddess of magic herself.”

“Flattery will get you — well, several places, actually. I’m not above accepting an apple from a student.”

I reminded myself what this was all for: a fighting chance against an actual god. I cracked my knuckles and shook out my arms.

“Okay. No apples today. Just a lesson. If you think I’m ready, then I guess I think I’m ready, too.”

I wasn’t sure what I was expecting. Maybe a lecture, something about magic theory, some quick drills.

Freyja twiddled her fingers, ribbons of light following her every gesture. “Then we begin.”

I gawked. “That’s it? No enrollment period? No signup with admin, no campus tour, no freshman orientation?”

“You’re adorable, Jericho Frost. That’s why I like you so much.”

She raised her hand. Her smile dropped. Arcane light in all the colors of the visible spectrum shimmered around her fingertips.

“Prepare yourself.”

“What? Here? Right now?”

Wordlessly, without so much as a whisper or a gesture, Freyja flung her hand forward, hurling a javelin of sparkling force. Like the inside of a gemstone, or the places where the colors of a rainbow meet.

My heart pounded as I dodged and rolled out of the way. Somewhere behind me the spear of light exploded against the ground, throwing up a crater of debris, showering me in soil and bits of grass.

I sputtered, wiping my face and spitting out a clod of dirt.

“No fair! You’re taking me straight to senior-year stuff. How am I supposed to copy your magic when you’re using spells without words and gestures?”

Never mind the fact that this was a goddess casting spells straight at my face. How was I supposed to copy divine magic? Unless — was she lowering herself to mortal magics? Either way, we had to level the playing field.

Freyja’s mouth puckered. “All I’m hearing is whining, and also the part where I think you called me a senior. Very well. Something simpler to start, then.”

Her lips rushed through the incantation, her fingers a blur as she conjured a smaller bolt of magic. If the first shot was a javelin, then this was closer to an arrow. Good. At least it wouldn’t blast me into chunks on contact. And as fast as her mouth and fingers were going, at least this time I could actually glean fragments of a spell to copy.

“What have you learned about the principle of projectile nullification?” Freyja suddenly asked.

“A lecture, now?” I shouted.

My mind raced through the scraps of arcane knowledge I’d gleaned over the years: photocopied pages, notes scrawled on the back of napkins, what little that counted as my informal education.

“That, um, if two magical projectiles — bolts, orbs, whatever — meet in a head-on collision, and they’re of roughly equal power, there’s a good chance they’ll dissipate on contact. They’ll just snuff each other out.”

“Excellent. Which means that you won’t have to waste your arcane essence on a shielding spell, provided your aim is true. Information that may be far more useful if you knew how to cast your own projectiles and shields to begin with.”

I would have scoffed, but I had nothing to stand on. The lady was right. If anything, I should have been begging her to teach me the fundamentals of casting instead.

“With all that said, let’s see you handle this.”

She flung her arm forward, casting the arrow straight at me. Though smaller, this missile flew far faster. Blood thumped in my temples as I recited and copied what I remembered of her spell. I flicked my wrist, casting a smaller, less flashy version of her projectile, the colors not as crisp, its tip not as sharp.

It sang through the air to meet Freyja’s arrow. The missiles sparked and sizzled as they clashed in midair, then vanished with a loud crack.

“Hell yeah,” I whooped. “I did it!”

“Indeed,” Freyja said, eyes dull, voice impassive. “Again.”

“What? Right now?”

She didn’t repeat herself. She repeated her spell instead. Freyja slung an arrow from each hand, a twinned volley of deadly god-fire. Her blank expression, the ruthlessness of her every incantation, the precision of her gestures — this was a goddess of magic at work. And this was her holding back.

Each time, I snatched her magic out of the air and met it with my own duplicate. By the end of the last copy, my head was throbbing, my casting arm numb and limp. How was I supposed to go on a mission with Morrow in this state?

“Hold up,” I cried out, forming my two hands into the letter T. “Time out. I thought you said you were going to teach me how to copy divine magic. I already know how to copy the regular stuff. Why don’t you use your goddess powers on me so I can learn how?”

Freyja quirked an eyebrow. I thought I glimpsed the faintest trace of admiration in her eyes.

“Who said I wasn’t?”

My jaw dropped. I stared at my hands. I'd done it without even knowing. I'd copied Freyja's spells.

Her face hardened once more. She raised her arm, her handful of divine magic crackling with power.

"Again."

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CHAPTER 19

I rubbed my forearms and elbows, my leather jacket squeaking as I struggled to keep myself warm. Nomicon Valley didn't really get that chilly in the evening, but it was past midnight out in the industrial district, all cold cement and steel shutters. An extremely rude breeze blew through the gaps between the warehouses, as if channeled and funneled in exactly the right configuration to keep me refrigerated and very uncomfortable.

Morrow stood motionless beside me in his regulation suit and tie, looking as unbothered as ever. The only real difference I'd noticed was the bulge underneath his suit. No, not like that. Under his jacket. That bandolier was stuffed to capacity. It looked like he'd brought even more of his scrolls than usual, which did give me some comfort.

We'd parked a significant walk away from the warehouses, and where we stood itself was a significant walk away from the Happy Links warehouse. Provided Occultech's intel was good, of course, but I'd never had any reason to doubt the boys in surveillance before.

This was the first time I'd found myself hoping they were wrong, though. Even with Freyja's extremely exhausting first lesson — followed by a long, hot shower and a very long session with the fragmentablet — I still felt woefully unprepared.

I stared at the side of Morrow's face, both admiring his stupid handsomeness and stewing jealously over the fact that he was keeping so cool and calm. How did he do it?

"So do you really think they're coming?" I asked.

Morrow checked his wristwatch and tapped his foot. “Give them a little more time. They’ll be here.”

The signature ghostly blue of Occultech technology reflected in his eyes, the holographic lenses of his ocular pendant shimmering. Paralumen had caught us unawares with her dirty blinding tricks before, almost as bad as throwing sand in someone’s eyes. I couldn’t very well go on a mission wearing aviator sunglasses at night, but at least one of us would be resistant to her nasty magical flash bangs.

I shivered as the wind picked up, leaves and dust spinning in a miniature whirlwind. And then I heaved a sigh of relief at the very first sign of feathers on the breeze, as the flurry swirled and obscured the streetlight, casting shadows like a cloud of moths.

Whether or not Sakamoto helped us, we were going to need some backup. This was a mutual decision on my and Morrow’s part, something we might never have arrived at in the early days of our partnership. We were — all four of us — on the same side of this issue, after all. Sakamoto didn’t have to know.

Houston ambled out of the blizzard of feathers wearing his signature lopsided grin and one of his fringed suede jackets. Angelica paced forward in a stylish pair of silvery boots and, as always, a gorgeous outfit that resembled a mix of religious vestments and a modern take on medieval armor. This time it was a white leather trench coat worn over what appeared to be a sculpted leather breastplate.

Trust Angelica to actually gear up for battle. I knew she could conjure a sword, but I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that she was smuggling a combat knife and some guns under that coat. And I’d never seen anyone look so fetching in white leather. Well, except for that one time at that leather bar. And that one theme night at Club Debussy. You know what? Forget I said anything.

“Thank you for coming,” Morrow said.

I brushed a feather off my cheek, smiling as our friends from SeraphiCorp approached.

“You guys are the best. You can’t imagine how glad I am to see you.”

Houston grinned. Angelica made her best attempt at a friendly smile.

“And what about me?” said another voice, accompanied by the clicking of stiletto heels.

“Oh, no,” I growled. “You, not so much.”

The last of the feathers dissipated to reveal the extravagant Xtra Xtra. Nothing too elaborate this time, just one of her enormous brunette wigs that was so varnished and lacquered that it could probably stop bullets, plus a leopard-print catsuit and some thigh-high leather lace-up boots. She looked just about ready to infiltrate a particularly gaudy furniture store, or maybe work a shift at a jungle-themed restaurant.

I threw Houston an accusing glare. He just shrugged. "Hey, I couldn't stop her if I tried. And trust me, I tried."

"Hard," Xtra Xtra purred. "Houston here can be very persuasive, but if you think I'm going to pass up an opportunity to chokeslam the lady who hypnotized me, think again."

"That's exactly why I don't want you here," I snapped. "I can't stand the idea of her taking over your mind and throwing you at us again. I copied your spell in the portal passage, did you know that? I was going to cut you open with my bare hands to hurt you and snap you out of it."

Xtra Xtra reached out to take my hands in hers, the softness in her expression somehow evident through all the makeup.

"And I would have thanked you for it. We won't make the same mistake twice. We're going to play keep-away this time. No more ambushes."

Morrow tapped the side of his lens, which wavered slightly when his finger passed through. I frowned. Of course, we had to be extra vigilant. Everyone on high alert. Stay ready, etcetera.

"Listen," Xtra Xtra said. "Not to be gross, but we're all in this together. This is my city, too, and I want to fight for it. Let me help you."

Morrow squeezed my shoulder. "We need all the help we can get, and she's already here. You can't sent the lady home when she's already dressed for the party."

"See? Theodore gets it." Xtra Xtra batted her lashes at him, then threw me the puppy-dog eyes again.

"Fine." I sniffled. "You're a manipulative bitch, Xtra. And maybe that's part of why I love you so much."

She rolled her eyes. "Gross." In a hesitant mumble, she added: "Yeah, I love you too, I guess."

Angelica strutted forward, chest thrust out, immediately assuming the role of squad leader.

"Heartwarming. If everyone is done exchanging emotions, we have a city-wide threat that needs to be stopped. Or perhaps it's international at this

point. To be determined.”

She and Morrow strode side by side as they led the way to the Happy Links warehouse, the corpo field agents taking the lead. I kept my hands in my pockets, my fingers curling and uncurling as I tried to recall the motions of Freyja’s projectile spell.

She was right, of course. It would only benefit me to learn a couple of basic spells. Too late for that now. And my mimicking talent, par for the course, had already ejected the incantation for the spell from my mind. Some of the words were probably already scrawled on a fresh page in the fragmentablet.

The warehouse resembled any of the others in the compound, unguarded at least on the outside thanks to the boys in surveillance. Whoever was on duty was probably passed out on the cement somewhere, lulled by a sleeping spell.

Morrow muttered into the palm of his hand, one finger on his auricle like he was speaking into an invisible headset. I clenched my teeth, cringing as I expected the shutters to creak and clank open.

But trust surveillance to know exactly the right targets on which to cast their spells. A series of metallic thunks from the side door signaled the sliding of bolts, some padlocks and chains hanging uselessly on its outside. It looked like a pair of bolt cutters had bitten straight through.

The door faintly creaked as it opened into pitch darkness. So far, so good, especially with Occultech surveillance on our side. But I still couldn’t help thinking that this was all a little too easy.

We wove our way among the crates, a maze of pallets arranged all across the floor, dozens upon dozens. Ahead of me, Morrow was already sifting through his bandolier. He’d mentioned bringing a powerful flame spell. Between his scroll and my duplicate, we could start an inferno hot enough to make those dorks at Jackal & Ashby jealous.

In the darkness, I couldn’t help registering the sound of high heels. More power to Angelica and Xtra Xtra if they could fight in stiletto boots. Two pairs of them click-clicked as we steadily penetrated the gloom.

It was the third set of clicks that made me freeze in place.

Someone snapped their fingers. I blinked hard against the sudden harshness of fluorescent light cascading throughout the warehouse. Blinding lights from high up in the ceiling beamed down on us, revealing the staggering breadth of the room, how it stretched impossibly onward in

all directions, so much bigger than its concrete exterior would have us believe.

And standing where two lanes between the infinite pallets intersected was Alexandra Thorpe herself.

“Thieving rats,” she said. “I knew I’d find you here.”

She’d spoken with more humor than actual anger in her voice. Because what threat did we pose to her in the first place? She was right. We were rodents, and she was a very large and very hungry cat.

“But how?” Morrow asked, his voice and his faith in surveillance faltering.

This was standard corpo protocol. Surveillance would have probed the area again and again to identify security both mundane and magical, scrambling cameras and nullifying defensive wards. Angelica and Houston would have tapped the equivalent SeraphiCorp departments to scour the premises, too. Clearly, all that preparation hadn’t been enough.

Alexandra laughed. “I am a god, gentlemen. I can be everywhere I like, all thanks to the power that fuels me. My deepest gratitude to the gullible people of Nomicon Valley. All that accidental worship really does keep me well fed.”

“We don’t need a refresher about how you thrive on attention, Loki,” I said. “We’re here to end this.”

The god laughed. “You and what army? All I see is a measly, miserable force of corpo lackeys. I met all of you at the Happy Links Too launch, didn’t I? Ah. But I see that you’ve brought a guest. Are you dressed as some sort of sultry spy? It’s not a very convincing disguise, is it?”

Xtra Xtra’s eyebrow twitched. “Oh, please. As if I’m the only one here who likes to dress as a woman. And didn’t you get railed as a horse that one time? Enough with the shenanigans. Show yourself.”

Alexandra Thorpe grinned. “My pleasure.”

She flung her hand forward. The world rippled as if an invisible veil had been ripped from its hooks, the warehouse warping and wavering as reality itself bent to her will. Lights flickered. The walls cracked. The floor trembled.

Every last crate in the warehouse splintered all at once, unleashing their contents in a tinkling rush. The cement floor disappeared under the tide of golden trinkets. The concrete beams, the lights high up in the ceiling, even the forklift I’d spotted in the corner had vanished. Instead of a warehouse,

we were standing in a feasting hall, the cold of cement replaced by the warmth of carved wood, the scent of woodsmoke in the air.

Sitting on an ornate wooden throne was Loki in his true form, the guise of Alexandra Thorpe once again cast aside. But another woman had appeared in our midst.

The Goddess of the Valley breathed heavily as she knelt atop a mountain of charms, sifting through the trinkets with her fingers. Each charm she touched glowed momentarily pink, infused with her magic. Frantically she crawled from one pile to the next, raking her fingers through the endless hoard, like someone on a deadline — like someone spinning straw into gold.

Loki chuckled softly as he watched Paralumen at work. This was all his doing. The dark circles under her eyes, the way her hands trembled — she might have aspired to become a goddess, but she was still human. When was the last time she slept, rested, or ate?

Not once had I thought that I would feel sympathy for Paralumen, but no one deserved this. This candle stub of a woman was dangerously close to burning out. Sociopathic sorceress or not, her life was still worth saving.

“Ah,” Loki said. “I see you’ve all noticed my little helper.”

“This is revolting,” Angelica said, her voice shaking with anger. “Inhumane.”

“Release her,” Morrow said, one hand in his jacket like he was reaching for a loaded gun. “Or we’re going to make you.”

The god rolled his eyes. “Spare me your empty threats. Speaking of threats — why should you care for her well being? Wasn’t she a very real danger to your precious city in the first place? Ask me how I know.”

My blood ran cold. Even before all this business with the charms, back when Paralumen was gathering her crimson flock, all those arcane distortions — Loki was already pulling the strings. What had he promised her? And now, what had she become?

“What are you going to do with her?” I asked, dreading his answer.

Loki parted his hands, smiling and shrugging like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Do I really need to spell it out? I’m trying to build a better goddess.”

CHAPTER 20

“Her cultists,” I said. “The magpies. Every single person wearing a charm is a magpie. You’re feeding on their essence.”

Loki rose from his throne and gave a mocking bow.

“Correct. Congratulations on finally putting everything together. The trances make them calmer. It’s easier to draw blood when someone is relaxed. The principle is the same.” He wrinkled his nose at Paralumen. “The charms that make them angry, though? We still have to work on those.”

“But why would you create competition for yourself?” Morrow asked. “You told us back at the hotel. It’s all about worship and attention. Why risk dividing it and giving it all to someone else?”

“Details, details.”

The god folded his hands behind his back as he approached the pile of charms where Paralumen knelt. They tinkled to the ground in glittering handfuls as she raked her fingers through again and again.

“I told you already. I’m interested in what it might take to elevate a particularly ambitious sorceress to the level of an actual deity. And so we bolstered Lady Paralumen’s natural ability to charm others, allowing her to harvest her own crop of worshippers.”

The magpies. The crimson hoodies. All of her devotees. Their zealous belief in their human goddess had actually given her enough power to bestow them with miracles, the pseudo-magical abilities they’d used in the Battle of the Basement.

Every prayer reinforced the terms of an unwritten contract, devotion in exchange for a miracle: a transaction. It was just like Scrimshaw said. A mage didn't need to limit themselves to a single familiar.

But no miracles for the charm-wearers. Not yet, at least. Maybe the charms were only designed to work one way. Or maybe they hadn't refined the enchantment. If every single charm-wearer received Paralumen's blessing, an accursed miracle? Total chaos. Hell on earth.

"Didn't you already have your hands full running your stupid company?" I asked. "Now you've got your hooks in these people, sitting on top of your fucked-up corporate ladder."

Loki pressed the tips of his fingers together, shaping them into a triangle.

"I'd say it's more of a pyramid."

A tense silence hung over the room. Angelica's heels clicked as she stepped forward.

"Then there are others," she said. "Paralumen is only one of your experiments."

"Do you remember how the Goddess of the Valley intended to ascend with a ritual? Before you ruined our plans, of course. She was supposed to replace someone in my pantheon. A goddess of magic." He leered at me. "You may have heard of her."

"Wait a minute," Xtra Xtra said. "So you're planning to replace your entire pantheon with gods you created yourself? A whole squad of gods under your command — and you're planning to replace Odin himself."

The god clapped, grinning hugely.

"Then it appears that we're finally all up to speed."

Houston cursed under his breath. "That's called cheating. You couldn't make it as a creator god, so you're just going to steal his post?"

The god's smile faltered as he stared daggers straight through Houston's skull.

"You know, you've got a massive ego," I said. "Is that why you brought us here? Is this your twisted version of Valhalla? Where the hell are we, anyway?"

I'd hoped he wouldn't notice that I was buying time, for Morrow, most of all. His fist wasn't buried in the palm of his other hand out of frustration. He was fiddling with his implant, no doubt trying to reach Sakamoto.

He touched one finger to his auricle the way he'd done before. We locked eyes for a moment, the hardness of his gaze and the subtle shake of his head telling me all I needed to know. Wherever in the universe we were, all communication to Occultech had been cut off. We were on our own.

"Does it really make a difference?" Loki said. "It isn't going to matter once I obliterate all of you. Actually, why bother lifting a finger?"

He snapped his fingers at Paralumen.

"You. Kill them all."

She flinched, then grasped at her temple in pain. Then all at once her exhaustion faded, replaced by the same dreadful dullness we'd seen in the Black Market passage. Charms chimed musically as they struck the ground, as she slid off the pile of trinkets like a snake.

One of her many hairpins glowed when Loki issued his command. *That* one. If we could remove that hairpin from her hair the way we'd removed charm bracelets from the other victims, then maybe we could knock her out of her trance. But good luck to all of us when we were supposed to go on the defensive.

"The god," Angelica barked with all the conviction of a commander on a battlefield. "Take him down and he loses his grip on her."

Houston drew his revolvers. God, those two really worked together like a well-oiled machine. His guns banged, hexed bullets heading straight for Loki.

The god only cocked an eyebrow, either too arrogant or too unfamiliar with the concept of hexed ammunition to even attempt to dodge. Instead, he waved his hand with a little yawn. The bullets slowed in midair until he could simply sidestep them.

None of us had heard Morrow muttering an incantation, too late for me to copy. A volley of thorns zinged past Loki's face so fast that he didn't have time to repeat his slowing spell. One of them grazed his shoulder, another, the side of his cheek. Droplets of blood bloomed on his skin.

Loki scowled. Still poised to strike, Paralumen froze in place, wrinkling her brow. Could merely injuring the god loosen his hold over her mind?

But no time to think. Loki's hateful gaze fell upon Morrow. My stomach wrenched. The god's lips sped through ancient incantations, his fingers inscribing runes in midair.

A spear of glowing green energy formed in his hand. Somehow, Freyja must have predicted that he would use this exact spell. Goddess of magic

indeed.

I uttered a small, silent prayer of gratitude to the goddess even as I copied Loki's magic. The essence drained from my body, dull pain shooting through my limbs. But I knew what was coming. There was no way Morrow was going to die on my watch.

Loki hissed a final word as he hurled his lance. Morrow's eyes widened as he scrambled for a shielding scroll. I flung my hand out, a paler, smaller version of the javelin zipping through the air to meet Loki's in flight.

Thunder cracked through the room as the projectiles clashed and vanished, Freyja's lesson on projectile nullification demonstrated to full effect.

I tried not to let the awestruck goggling of my friends get to my head. I did, however, enjoy the look of offended surprise on Loki's face.

"Didn't know I could do that, did you?" I said, my tired panting somewhat diminishing the coolness of my divine copying.

Loki crooked his finger at me.

"Kill them," he snarled, even angrier this time. "But kill him first."

Morrow was muttering something again. Lilting tones, sibilant whispers, hissing breaths. Holy crap. He was speaking the language of elementals. This wasn't stuff that humans could just pick up on the fly, something that needed dedicated study to grasp. And that made it so much more difficult for me to mimic his magic.

But as power surged through my fingers and the wind picked up into a howling gale, I realized that I'd successfully pulled off my copy. Morrow and I thrust our arms forward, beating Paralumen back with a gale so strong that it crashed against her like a wall of solid air.

She snarled in anger as the spells buffeted her toward the far wall, comically depositing her in Loki's vacant throne. The god himself stood stalwart, unmoved by the arcane wind, his eyes steely as he gazed from me to Morrow and back.

I held back a grin. Not to get too cocky — we were only mortals, after all — but I had to wonder if Loki knew exactly what kind of mortals he was dealing with.

Paralumen quickly regained her bearings, moving inhumanly fast as she crossed the floor toward us. Morrow cursed. I copied that, too. We'd blown our load too early. Sorry for the imagery.

A can of setting spray materialized in Xtra Xtra's hand. She murmured an incantation as she pumped the noxious fumes into the air. I groaned as I instinctively copied that spell, too.

This was familiar, a drag queen sorceress's own version of a shielding spell. Sure enough, after clenching her fingers and finalizing the gestures, the mist coalescing into a gleaming barrier.

"It won't hold for long," Xtra Xtra said, "but it should buy us some time."

Paralumen clenched her teeth in fury as she banged her fists against the barrier. The protective dome clanged as if we were standing inside a ringing church bell. Spell fragments and the excruciating noise — my head could explode at any moment.

"Goodness gracious," Angelica said, backing up a step. "She's furious."

"Well," I said, "Morrow and I did try to splat her against a wall."

"It was worth a shot," he said.

"And not a single hair out of place," Xtra Xtra said. "If we survive this, I'd love to ask about where she gets her wigs. If I don't kill her first, that is."

"It's not a wig," I said. "We've seen her hair down. She actually has pretty good hair."

Angelica clapped her hands to call for attention as the barrier gonged and gonged again. "Enough bickering. It's the charm we want."

The ornament in Paralumen's hair glowed and pulsed with her every violent effort.

"Houston," Morrow said. "Do you think you can shoot it off?"

"Or maybe lasso it?" I asked.

Houston shook his head. "Hexed bullets don't work that way. They'll just pass through. And I'm flattered you think I'm that talented, but I may as well lasso her by the neck."

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“Heads up, people,” Xtra Xtra shouted. “I think we really pissed her off.”

Glowing talons extended from the tips of Paralumen’s fingers. The beginnings of a feral smile curved the corners of her lips. This woman could rip holes between dimensions. Destroying Xtra Xtra’s force field was child’s play, a cat shredding a cardboard box.

Huge fractures appeared in the barrier with Paralumen’s every slash. Silver light flashed as a feathery shield and sword appeared in Angelica’s hands.

“Stand your ground, gentlemen. And Xtra Xtra.”

“Will do,” Xtra Xtra said. “And thank you.”

Her fingers curled as she prepared to fire a bolt of magic. Houston’s revolvers clicked. Morrow unfurled another scroll. And I entered standby mode, waiting for the right spell to copy. Jagged fragments spun in my brain like buzzsaws.

“That’s it,” Loki said, rushing the barrier, eager to watch our evisceration up close. “Kill them. Kill them all.”

He was conjuring something, incanting words and tracing gestures that looked awfully familiar: Alexandra Thorpe’s spell from the Grand Harrington Hotel. Fuck. He was going to freeze time.

My eyes bulged out of their sockets as I watched him intently, terrified of missing a single detail. I engineered my own copy, knowing the pressure of duplicating even more divine magic would likely split my skull open.

The icy gleam of time magic pulsed from his hand, spidering in a circle around us like frost on glass. Summoning every last ounce of my essence, I hurled out my copy.

To my complete shock, my duplicate shimmered even brighter. The god gasped as my dome of translucent frost encircled and encased him in a glassy bubble. He froze in place. His spell fizzled out.

That was all the time we needed. My knees buckled. I collapsed, but Morrow caught me in his arms.

“Now,” I told my friends, panting, struggling to stay conscious. “Attack him now.”

Paralumen reared back, one hand in the air as she prepared to finally crack the barrier open. When she twisted at the hip, I gasped. When her talons raked through Loki’s chest, leaving wet, angry gashes, my jaw fell open.

The time bubble shattered. Loki slid to the floor. Droplets of his god's blood stained the wood, seeping into the grain, slipping between the cracks.

"Did you truly believe that you could dominate me?"

"You were pretending all along," Loki choked out.

The goddess laughed. There was the Paralumen I knew.

"Heel. Stay."

Loki cried out, brought even lower by the crushing weight of Paralumen's arcane commands.

"I pretended to submit to your will. I needed a closer look at how an entity of your stature operates. It took me long enough to assess your strengths and weaknesses. If you only knew what it took for me to tolerate your hideous personality."

Loki winced in pain, then chuckled hoarsely under his breath.

"Funny. Everyone says that's my best trait. The only redeemable thing about me, to be sure."

A trickster god through and through, still making his stupid jokes through his grievous injury.

"The most important thing I learned," the goddess continued, "is that your ego is the only thing greater than your deific power. It is hubris, in the end, that has brought you low."

She pulled the glowing hairpin out of the elaborate nest of ornaments in her hair. A load-bearing accessory, apparently, because her hair fell about her shoulders and down her back in a black cascade.

"Did you think that this trinket was enough to control me?"

"You imbued it with your magic," he said, "and then I imbued it with mine. I thought —"

"You thought wrong. I am stronger than you think. I have always been in full control of my faculties." She closed her hand into a fist, crushing the ornament into useless, glittering dust. "You underestimated me, you old gods and your arrogance. The new gods will not make the same mistakes."

A shiver ran down my spine. The others — who were they? *Where* were they? She wanted Loki out of the picture, to seize his plan and build a pantheon of her own.

Paralumen stepped forward on bare feet, the tips of her fingers glowing with arcane fire. Loki could not resist when she placed her hand on his head, when she sank her fingers through his skull. He cried out in agony, saliva dribbling down the side of his mouth as he convulsed.

I didn't think my feelings on both our enemies could flipflop so quickly in one night. Loki was a grade A asshole in his own right, but Paralumen was literally picking his brains. My fragmentation was nothing compared to this. Everyone on my side of the hall hesitated. To see what else would happen? In hopes that one god would take out the other?

Loki thrashed, flailed one last time, then went limp. Paralumen retrieved her hand, her fingers no longer bathed in light.

"Admittedly, the trickster god is far too powerful for me to control. I have not taken over his mind, but I *have* taken *something*."

Loki groaned as he clutched at his skull. Bloodless, no wounds, no signs of penetration.

"How much?" he said through gritted teeth. "How much of my power have you taken from me?"

A sneer curved the corner of Paralumen's lips, her eyes shining brilliant white.

"Enough," she whispered through a radiant smile, divine light spilling from her mouth.

A great crack split the air. The walls of the feasting hall buckled and splintered, as if under siege from catapults, from massive battering rams. The ground trembled. I swayed and stumbled, only avoiding a fall because of Morrow's support.

Paralumen hovered off the ground to avoid the quaking. Nowhere to run, unless she was planning to rip her way out of this dimension, too. Her eyes flitted around her, searching the walls for answers. She was distracted. Good.

"Now!" I shouted.

Houston's revolvers unleashed a hail of bullets. Angelica followed with a storm of razor-sharp feathers. Xtra Xtra thrust her arm forward, a globe of blinding energy erupting from her hand.

Morrow gestured and chanted, his voice like the rasp of glowing coals turning in a brazier. Not just a plain fireball, but something bigger, something stronger, like the blast of wind. A blazing bulb of flame spun in the palm of his hand, blossoming fuller and brighter as he gathered his magic. Holy shit. I knew he talked about burning down the warehouse, but this was something else.

I squeezed my eyes shut, then opened them wide, fighting the pounding in my skull. One last spell. I could do this. I held my hand out, copying his

gestures. The magic ripped through my body like molten metal, so much power threatening to split my skin at the seams. I gasped as sweat beaded along my forehead.

How had Paralumen handled the influx of a god's power? I felt like a cup about to overflow, or more appropriately, a jar about to shatter. I clenched my teeth and copied Morrow's magic anyway. Now or never. We unleashed our fireballs at once, our concentrated power launching them with the speed and size of actual cannonballs.

Flames roared, feathers whistled, and bullets zinged.

Paralumen bared her teeth, fingers curled as a force field gleamed around her. Despite my exhaustion, my lips curled into a smile. Good luck handling all our magic.

And then the walls of the feasting hall finally collapsed. An explosion of wood and sawdust, and then a clamor of voices erupted from the world outside. The ripple in the air, the tingle of magic — a dimensional shift?

We were back in the warehouse, surrounded by a dozen Occultech agents. Glass smashed as more of them came swinging in through windows high up in the warehouse, rappelling in with magic ropes connected to nothing.

Dozens of magical projectiles in every color of the visible spectrum exploded from all around us, each speeding in a deadly shriek toward the Goddess of the Valley. Teeth bared in fury, she spun and vanished in a column of crimson smoke. I averted my eyes as the spells smashed together with an unearthly bang.

As one, the Occultech field agents swarmed the still-prone Loki. He breathed heavily as he pushed himself up on his knees, severely weakened, but still strong enough to scan the room with hate-filled eyes.

No matter how much Paralumen took, he was still a god. He surely had enough power left to defend himself — or to fold every field agent in the room like a greeting card. I clenched my teeth, fearing the worst.

Instead he disappeared in a spout of greenish flame.

I ran my fingers through my hair, nails raking across my scalp. Morrow clenched his fist. We'd fucked up the operation. All we had left was a warehouse full of worthless trinkets.

And both the gods were gone.

CHAPTER 21

Streams of cool water trickled from the waterfall in Director Sakamoto's office. She paced back and forth behind her desk, arms crossed, eyes fixed on our faces.

"Well, gentlemen? I supposed I owe you an apology."

Morrow flinched. My ears perked up. I sat up as straight as I could in my slippery plexiglass chair from hell. An apology, from Director Sakamoto?

"Is what I would say," she continued, "if I didn't already know that this was the fault of the field agents' office at large."

I deflated again. That was way too good to be true.

It was the day after our infiltration of the warehouse — the afternoon after, in fact — but Morrow and I were still exhausted.

We'd slipped out amid the chaos of so many Occultech field agents swarming the warehouse. The feathers lingering in the air meant that Angelica had very judiciously teleported herself, Houston, and Xtra Xtra somewhere far away.

Morrow cleared his throat. "Respectfully, Director, it sounds like surveillance still did the best they could. And the field agents — I'm sure they tried."

Sakamoto scoffed. "All personnel converged on the Happy Links warehouse as instructed, but no one anticipated a dimensional shift. Trickster gods and their antics, honestly."

"Kind of a sick trap," I said. "Literally. I'm honestly shocked that the shift didn't make me sick on the spot. Still, I can't help thinking that it

could have gone so much worse.”

“Worse, indeed. Your backup arrived only moments too late, but they wasted too much time assessing what appeared to be an empty warehouse. That it took so long for the field agents to identify the barrier and breach it suggests that the department is in need of — supplementary training. Yes. That’s what we’ll call it.”

At least we knew that Sakamoto cared enough to send backup at all. Too little, too late, but it’s the thought that counts, or something like that.

“So the charms,” Morrow said. “I’m hoping at the very least this means that we’ve cut off the local supply to Happy Links.”

“Our agents scoured the warehouse and attempted to confiscate their entire stock. In a happy turn of events, perhaps because both of the gods fled, all of the charms disintegrated. Simply metallic dust now. The same has been observed of charms that are already in circulation. That *were* in circulation, that is. Loyal Happy Links fans finding piles of dust on their dressers, smears of glitter on their wrists, around their necks — oh, to see the look of defeat on Loki’s face.”

She settled into her chair, wearing the smile of a jungle cat. I’d never seen Sakamoto look so satisfied.

“The brand is ruined. This catastrophic failure has left a permanent mark on Happy, Inc.’s reputation. The next step is to chase the corpo out of Nomicon Valley entirely. But that is a problem for a different day.”

These were the consequences of playing with the curtain separating the magical from the mundane, or in this case, of flagrantly violating the Accord. Some part of me believed that Sakamoto wouldn’t have judged us too hard for working with SeraphiCorp. Oh, she’d yell at us for the better part of an hour, but the enemy of my enemy — you get the gist.

By the time Sakamoto had finished with our debriefing, it was time for people with real jobs to clock out. Down in the lobby, Morrow nudged his head toward the street.

“Beer o’clock?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes.

“Beer o’clock, really? You’ve never worked a nine-to-five in your life. Come on, you huge dork.”

We took his car to Club Debussy, having promised to meet everyone there. We were mostly quiet on the drive over, maybe from the shared relief

of having survived the incident at the warehouse. But as we pulled into the parking lot, Morrow loudly cleared his throat.

“You’re making a stupid face,” I said. “Focus on the road.”

“So. Kind of obvious that you got a little help in the goddess department.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, kind of obvious. It was important, though. We needed all the help we could get. I just hope I know what I’m doing.”

His hand reached over from the gearshift, like he was about to pat me on the thigh, but he rapped his knuckles against the dashboard instead.

“I think you know what you’re doing. And by the way, how you copied Loki’s spells — that was pretty hot. Cool! I mean, pretty cool.”

“Hah, cool, yeah,” I said, staring dead ahead of me, unembarrassed about how I was blushing bright red because I knew for sure that Morrow was blushing even brighter.

It was Pop Diva Night at Club Debussy, which I always found a little funny, because wasn’t it always Pop Diva Night at a gay bar? Each of the performers had dressed as a different pop icon: Anna Phylactic as Britney Spears, Effie Penn as Lady Gaga, and Xtra Xtra as Olivia Rodrigo.

We found Houston and Angelica at a booth by the stage. I almost fell over when I saw that she was wearing just a plain white tank top and faded jeans. Still gorgeous, of course, but holy shit. She gave an embarrassed shrug.

“It’s my day off, okay? I can’t be gussied up twenty-four seven.”

Houston restrained a chuckle, but who was he kidding? He was wearing pretty much the same outfit, the pair of them like models out of a ’90s Calvin Klein ad.

Xtra Xtra swept out of the dressing room and posed by the table arms akimbo, Xavi Ximenez as Xtra Xtra as Olivia Rodrigo as Wonder Woman. Houston stood to peck her on the cheek, but she held him at arm’s length.

“I worked way too hard on this makeup, baby,” she said. “Once the night is over, we can suck face all you want. Hell, I’ll suck even more than just your face, but you already knew that.”

Houston grinned at me and waggled his eyebrows. I frowned, then frowned harder when his eyes darted toward Morrow.

“See you guys later,” Xtra Xtra said. “My number’s coming up.”

She shot me and Morrow a wink before heading for the stage. If I frowned any harder, my face was going to cave in on itself.

We ordered drinks, and — typical corpo employees — within five minutes we'd already devolved into work-related conversation. But again, as people with no nine-to-fives, this was the closest to water cooler talk as we'd ever get.

And then ten minutes after that, the pretense of ordering professional-presenting drinks like martinis and whiskeys quickly devolved into enjoying the prettiest, fruitiest cocktails available at Club Debussy. My nice, frothy piña colada was delicious. Houston lovingly admired the layers of his Tequila sunrise. Xtra Xtra joined us right after her number, strutting over with a ridiculously oversized frozen strawberry daiquiri.

Yes, we were putting Yoanna Hangover through the wringer, but she looked pretty happy about it. Excited, even, a talented bartender and a proud artisan, just like the guild members of the Black Market. And just like Anita Cocktail, for that matter, who was presumably still on vacation, baking under the Caribbean sun.

“All I’m saying is that the goddess is somewhere out there plotting something awful.” Droplets of Angelica’s lime margarita splashed the tabletop as she gesticulated. “You know who I mean. The nasty one with all the hair.”

She swiped her finger across the rim of her glass, pinching a bit of wet salt and flicking it over her shoulder. Everyone at the table had carefully avoided mentioning Paralumen’s name. It was a silly superstition at this point, except experience had shown us that speaking it out loud tended to bring the world crashing down around us.

“And what I’m saying,” Xtra Xtra said, “is that it’s entirely possible that she’s still hounding Loki, too. To suck out whatever she didn’t get to suck out of him the first time.” She paused to take a sip of her giant drink. “Or like sucking the brains out of a prawn head. Or like sucking a guy off until he — ”

“We get the point,” I said. “I’m just hoping that Loki has actually turned tail and fled. No way he’s staying in Nomicon Valley after all this. If he’s smart, he’ll be in another country hiding out in a different, more heavily fortified Happy, Inc. building. Or maybe one of his stupid pocket dimensions.”

“My concern is how the balance of power has changed between them,” Morrow said. He reached for a shot of vodka, lining it up beside his rum and coke and a half-empty glass of Long Island iced tea.

Wait. How many drinks deep was this boy again? He seemed to be holding his liquor just fine, except for a little extra redness around the cheeks. Rosy, adorable, annoying.

He held up the Long Island. “Think about it this way. This is Loki. This is how much power he had.” He picked up the shot glass. “And this is what’s-her-face. Or this used to be her, before she siphoned his power.”

I watched in horror as Morrow tipped the shot into his rum and coke, then poured some of the Long Island into the same glass. Houston winced at Morrow’s nightmare concoction.

“But now they’re both this size,” Morrow said. “You get what I’m saying? The small glass stole some power from the large one. And now we have two mediums. A weaker old god, and a stronger new god. Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

I detested the question, as if my brain hadn’t been injured enough. The others stayed silent as well, assessing, undecided. Morrow shrugged when he realized he wasn’t going to get an answer.

“I know, right?” he said. “Same.”

Then he drained his Franken-cocktail in a single gulp. I would have been so grossed out if I didn’t find the bobbing of the lump in his throat so sexy.

But at least that signaled the end of the work talk. Angelica had wandered off to chat with the bouncer, Frances McDoorman. They appeared to be exchanging notes on grappling and unarmed combat. Xtra Xtra and Houston had mysteriously disappeared, leaving just me and Morrow at our booth.

I twiddled my thumbs, suddenly awkward despite all the time we’d been spending together. He was slightly tipsy, and very, very warm, the heat of his body radiating against me even though we were sitting a perfectly acceptable distance apart on the same banquette. He smiled contentedly at nothing, absently bobbing his head to the music.

“So if this is supposed to be Pop Diva Night,” he said, “I’m a little surprised — and offended — that they don’t have anyone impersonating Carly Rae Jepsen.”

“Oh my god, Morrow, not this again.”

“Yes, this again. You have to promise to listen to the playlist I made you, okay? I worked really hard on it.”

He pouted. My stomach did a cartwheel. And then a guy in a buzz cut and a very tight tank top stopped right at our table, waggling his eyebrows at me.

“Hi there,” he said, grinning out of the corner of his mouth. “I saw you from across the bar.”

“He’s with me,” Morrow immediately said, firm but polite. He slung one arm over my shoulders, his muscles tightening as he pulled me closer. The little flicker of warmth that danced in my belly whenever Morrow was around roared into a four-alarm fire.

The guy with the buzz cut put his hands up and smiled, saying something like, “Y’all have a good night.” The fuck if I could remember, I was too busy burning like a wildfire.

“I’m with you?” I asked Morrow.

“Of course, we are. Physically, that is. Together. Right here. So you’re with me.”

The confusing blaze of fondness and desire burning through my body erupted into anger. I shook his arm off and twisted my whole body to face him. He inched away, a concerned look on his face. I think he gulped a little, too.

“You’re driving me absolutely insane, Morrow. Maybe it’s the piña colada talking, and I’m going to regret saying this, but I’m going to regret not saying it even more. All these mixed signals, it’s like you’re flirting with me, except you’re not, and — fuck, this could ruin everything between us. For work. As friends. Everything. But I have to do this.”

I took a deep, bracing breath, inhaling all the oxygen in the club. Fuck it. Now or never.

“Do. You. Like. Women?”

Morrow blinked, swallowed hard, licked his lips. “Um. Yes.”

It felt as if I’d been dropped in a bucket of ice-cold water. No. A refrigerated bowl of leftover oatmeal. The disappointment was thick, cloying, and kind of gross.

“But I think I might like guys, too.”

My heart thumped. “Oh?”

“Yeah. But I don’t think I’ll know for sure until I kiss one.”

“Oh.”

Morrow rubbed his hair, a few of those soft, golden strands I liked so much falling just over his eyes. I liked those, too, piercing and gray,

especially when his gaze lingered, when he looked at me just a little too long.

He was looking at me *way* too long.

He shifted closer, his arm finding its way over my shoulders again, firm, but polite.

“Until I kiss *you*, I mean. Specifically. If that’s okay with you.”

Breathing suddenly felt like the hardest thing in the world.

“You’re spoiled for choice, my dude,” I said, deflecting like a weirdo. “Tons of hot guys in here, and you — ”

“Frost,” he said, taking my chin in one hand. “For once? Shut up. Just shut the fuck up.”

And so I did, his kiss sealing the rest of my excuses away, his lips stronger than any quieting spell. And so soft, too. The liquor-sweet of his mouth, the faint paper, incense, and musk of his perfume, the fine hairs at the base of his neck.

When did my hands go searching? When did *his*, for that matter? The arm around my back stayed stiff and insistent, as if locking me in place, to make sure I didn’t, couldn’t go anywhere.

The hand on my chin had found its way to my chest, the strong pads of his fingers searching through the worn cotton of my shirt, one of them accidentally, maybe, brushing against my nipple.

I moaned into his mouth. Not the first time I’d made out with someone in public, but this was Theodore fucking Morrow. If he didn’t stop soon, this would be the first time I’d come in my pants in public. I wanted to clamber over him, straddle his thighs, leave so little space between us that he’d forget how breathing worked, too.

And I wasn’t even a little close to tipsy, but the taste of Morrow, the smell of him, his intoxicating fucking presence — I wanted to stay here forever. This moment, this heat, my eyes closed and the club, the city, the universe spinning around us.

I liked it, okay? I fucking liked kissing him. And as soon as he pulled away, as soon as I embarrassingly lurched after him, I knew I wanted to do it again. And again, and again, and maybe put my lips on other parts of his beautiful body, too.

Such a cliché to say that I saw stars, but what I really saw were the pulsing strobes of the club, the flash of colorful lights on half-empty glasses, reflecting from the disco ball that spun above the dance floor. I

blinked, and I thought I saw a diminutive blond woman dancing in each of its mirrors, a teasing grin on her lips.

I blinked again. She was gone. Whatever it was that Freyja wanted to talk about, it would have to wait. Couldn't I have a moment to myself? And this moment, of all moments! Forget the hundreds of mirrored Freyjas, and fuck that medium trickster god, and fuck that medium wannabe goddess, too.

For one night — just one measly night — I wanted to be free. This was about me, and Morrow, and us, about the fragmentable telling the deepest of my secrets, his name on my mind, and now his taste lingering on my tongue. Things were finally happening. I wanted them to keep happening.

“Okay,” he breathed, his hand trailing down to my waist, his grip insistent, possessive. “So I think I like boys, too.”

“About fucking time.” My hand on his chest, my head against his, my mouth hungry for more. “But maybe focus on this boy for now.”

“Anything you want. Everything you want.”

Theodore Morrow was everything I wanted.

So I kissed him again. And again. And again.

END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi, I'm Nazri, a Filipino-Malaysian author based in California. I can curse and converse fluently in three languages, but I only write in English. I can also speak just enough Sindarin and Valyrian to impress absolutely no one.

I love writing heroes who use their wits, style, and wildly unpredictable magic to save the day. And when they aren't too busy fighting evil, they might even find true love.

To see more of my work, read chapters of ongoing books as I post them, or simply say hello, visit me online at nazrinoor.com or patreon.com/nazrinoor.

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