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L. L. MCKINNEY

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MAKE YOUR MARK  
NEW YORK

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Writing books takes a whole lot of work,  
Lots of love and a few minor quirks.  
So let's all do our part  
To not steal people's art,  
Because that's just the move of a jerk.

This book's special, so treat it with care.  
Please don't steal it, or hurt it, that's fair.

Magic rests in these pages  
To curse you for ages,  
So all pirates had better beware.

## Prologue

# ' T W A S B R I L L I G

'Twas brillig, and a mortal's tones  
Did stretch a day beyond the braced;  
A princess slain, dead to her bones,  
A world distraught, a knight disgraced.

Portentia, Queen of Wonderland,  
A crown of grief upon her soul,  
Vowed to repay the world of man,  
With mother's tears and pain untold.

Addison, keeper of the realm,  
Now plagued with guilt from duties failed,  
Swears to uphold his Lady's whelms,  
Unyielding faith, but conscience veiled.

And so, they two a war will wage,  
The Black Queen and her trusted Knight,  
For all to know a mother's rage  
And all to feel her daughter's plight,

While sibling girls of white and red  
align against their mother's will.  
They share her pain, their sister dead,  
But they would not innocents kill.

The Queen's defeat is at their hands.  
They strip her of her powers black,  
then bind her to the Nightmares' lands  
and split her crown and all it lacks.

Behold the Heart! Behold the Eye!  
For here the Black Queen's power sleeps.  
Leave them to rest, and by and by  
The world will mend the broken deep.

For if these artifacts awake,  
Surely then, too, the Queen shall rise.  
And all will suffer in her wake  
Beneath the blood-soaked, screaming skies.

Beware the Heart! Beware the Eye!  
Beware the Blade so Black!  
He left it dead, and with its head  
He went galumphing back.

# One

# G O N E

**A**lice couldn't run. She couldn't hide. All she could do was sit there as her mother *went*. *In*.

“Must be out your got. Dayum. Mind. Just doing whatever you please.” Mom paced in front of the coffee table, her steps barely muted by the carpet. She'd kicked off her heels and abandoned one near the door while the other lay over by the fireplace. This alone was a sign Alice was well and truly screwed. “Like you run things 'round here. Like you pay bills, do you pay bills?” Mom whirled on Alice, who had pressed so far back against the couch she felt she might slip between the cushions and be lost.

“No, ma'am.” Alice's voice sounded as small as she felt in the face of her mom's fury.

A little muscle in Mom's jaw jumped as she ground her teeth together. “I can't hear you.”

“No, ma’am,” Alice managed, louder this time, the words thick with the emotions coursing through her. Fire licked at the center of her face, and a feeling like fingers around her neck closed off her throat. She just wanted to go to bed. Couldn’t she go to bed?

“Got the school calling me ’cause you decided you just wasn’t gone show up, I guess. Now I’m missing work, and for what? For *what*, Alison? Knowing I didn’t raise you like this, *knowing* this wasn’t gone fly. Then walk in here covered in lord knows—what is that mess?” Mom flapped a hand at Alice, indicating the black splattered against her clothes and skin. “And *what* is that smell?”

Alice stared at the stains. Yeah, that inky shit stank to high heaven, but that wasn’t why her eyes started to water. It wasn’t why her chest went all tight, like the space was suddenly too small for her lungs. She smoothed her fingers over the rusty red splotch on her shirt. A handprint hidden under all the other yuck. *His* handprint.

The heat behind Alice’s eyes filled the rest of her face.

“I know you not ignoring me.” Mom’s tone went razor sharp.

Alice wanted to answer, but the words tripped over her tongue and hit the back of her teeth. What escaped instead was some sort of whine.

Mom’s eyes widened slightly. Her arms unfolded from where she’d crossed them under her chest, and she shifted as if to reach out to Alice, but lifted a finger in warning instead. “No, ain’t no crocodile tears gonna fix this.”

The tears came anyway. They welled up and spilled over

Alice's cheeks as she stared at the floor while fighting to keep from all-out sobbing. The carpet's shaggy white tufts went brown and green, the memory of the shredded football field dancing in and out of her vision. The rumbling snarl of Fiends and the shriek of clashing weapons filled her ears. Her heart knocked against the inside of her chest, its *thump-thump* rising to join the crash.

Voices surfed the waves of chaos.

*"Side, on fire!"*

*"I-it'll be okay. You'll be okay."*

Lies.

*You lied to him.*

She flinched. She hadn't meant to lie. She gave everything she had to try and save him! The Black Knight, he was the one that didn't keep his end of the bargain. He was the one that let those monsters tear her friend apart! Chess was gone because of *him*.

*Maybe, but Chess would be at home right now if you hadn't pulled him into this.*

"Alice," Mom barked.

*If it wasn't for you, he'd still be alive.*

A buzzing prickled beneath Alice's skin, spreading over every inch of her. It pressed at her temples and filled the space behind her eyes.

*You did this. You killed him.*

Her vision darkened at the edges. Her jaws throbbed, the muscles so tight her teeth ached. She couldn't cry. She couldn't—if she did, she wouldn't stop.

*Just like Dad.*

The sobs tore free. Hard, unforgiving things that clawed their way from the depths of her. They stole her breath, shook her frame, and bent her in half until something deep inside cracked open and bled familiar shades of shame, anger, and regret.

Fingers played against Alice's shoulders before the cushion beside her dipped with sudden weight. The smell of floral perfume reached her before Mom's arms tucked around her.

*Let me go!* Alice wanted to scream, but she could only cry and gasp and cough and cry some more.

"Come 'ere." Mom drew Alice up, then guided her deeper into her embrace. "I don't know what's going on. You don't tell me nothing, you just out running these streets. Is something happening at school?" She rubbed at Alice's back, her fingers pressing steady circles between her shoulders. "Talk to me, baby."

Talking. That wasn't possible. The very idea of words shriveled in Alice's mind. Whatever managed to make it to her tongue just dissolved entirely. A groan slipped free, muffled against Mom's shoulder, but that was it.

"Okay, baby, okay." Soft shushes and faint humming filled the silence between hiccupped sobs. Every now and then a whispered *Jesus* accompanied them.

Jesus had nothing to do with it, Alice wanted to say.

Eventually, the sobs died away enough for Alice to cobble together a couple words. "H-he's gone." She coughed like she was six years old again. Snot slipped over her lips, between them. She rubbed at her mouth. Her throat burned.

“Who’s gone?” Mom smoothed hands over Alice’s braids, then wiped at her cheeks. “Is this about your daddy?”

Alice shook her head. The action made her dizzy and left wet, slick patches on what felt like one of Mom’s really nice shirts.

“Look, whatever’s going on, you don’t have to deal with it by yourself.” The arms around Alice tightened in a squeeze. “We’ll get through it. Together, okay?”

A sudden edge of anger scissored through her thoughts. *Together. What, like with Dad?* There wasn’t much “togetherness” in dealing with her father’s death.

“But you gotta tell me, baby. I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me.”

That anger sharpened. Alice had tried to approach her mom after Dad died, but the woman either retreated so far into herself it was like she was looking for Narnia, or she threw herself in the opposite direction and got lost in her work. Meanwhile, Alice ended up crossing into another world and killing shit as a hobby.

And say Alice *did* have a sit-down with her mom or whatever, how in the hell was she supposed to explain any of this? Hatta, the pub, Wonderland? Chess . . .

Would Mom even believe her? And if she did, what then? She’d probably forbid Alice from going to Wonderland or seeing her friends. She might go off on some mess about how she believed Alice believed what she was saying, then make her “talk to someone” about it. Maybe she’d yell at her for making shit up and never trust her again.

Or maybe, just maybe, Mom would understand for once, or at least try to. A small, hopeful part of Alice latched onto that barest sliver of a silver lining. Maybe all this could be one less thing she had to carry, to hide. Maybe it *would* be okay. Mom wasn't a liar, like her.

But Alice had no idea where to start.

*Begin at the beginning*, something whispered against her mind. A gentle touch. A calming press.

The night Dad died. The night she met Hatta. The night everything changed.

Her racing thoughts settled on the memory. It was so crisp and clear in her mind she shivered at recalling the cold press of stone against her back. The stink of the fetid puddles and heat-soaked dumpsters nearby stung her nose. She could practically taste the salt of her tears. Then a beast slithered out of the throbbing dark, followed by a monster slayer, an invisible boy bright and shining.

*Begin at the beginning.*

Alice took a slow, deep breath. She sniffed and swallowed and swiped at her nose "I—I . . ."

"Yeah, baby?" Mom encouraged.

Alice licked her lips. "It . . . a-after Daddy . . ."

"Take your time."

Her throat closed up, *again*.

The rest of the words refused to come. They gathered at the back of her tongue, piling on top of each other like rocks after a landslide, heavy and broken. It was as if part of her still wanted, needed to keep the secret.

Something shifted in Mom's expression. The corners of her mouth turned downward, and Alice felt the tightness in the arms still wrapped around her.

*Get it together, Kingston.* She had to say something.

Janet Jackson and company belted *We are a part of the Rhythm Nation* from Mom's pocket. She huffed in annoyance before pulling her phone free. "It's Courtney."

Alice blinked, surprised. Court just left not twenty minutes ago, after getting her own cussing-out. The flutter between Alice's lungs agreed. Something was wrong.

Mom slid her thumb across the screen. "I can tell her to call back, so we can finish talking."

"She probably left something." Alice hoped she didn't sound too eager as she wiped at her still-aching face. "Or I left something in her car."

Mom squeezed Alice, rubbing at her arm, and lifted the phone. "Yeah, honey?"

Court started screaming.

Mom jerked the phone away from her ear, her expression twisting, before telling Court to calm down and try again. Alice couldn't make out what she was saying, but whatever it was, it didn't sound good. The fluttering in Alice's chest turned to full-on flailing.

A frown wrinkled Mom's forehead. "Chester is where?"

Alice's insides went cold.

"A what? Oh lord, hang on, baby. Here." Mom held out the phone. "I can't understand her."

Alice reached for it, her fingers shaking. She didn't want

to take it. Whatever was going on had to be bad, and she was so done with bad, but Mom was already pressing it into her hand. Chewing at her lower lip, she lifted it to her ear. “Yeah, Court?”

“Alice! Ohmigod, I’m coming to get you.”

“Wait, what? Why?”

“Something happened with Chess, we need to go to the pub.”

“Som—” Alice blinked rapidly, her brain misfiring for a second. Did she hear that right? “With *who*?”

“Chess! Hatta called and said we had to come back, right now.” The rising panic in Courtney’s voice mirrored Alice’s. “Then someone started hollering and he hung up.”

Alice shook her head. “No . . . he’s not . . .” Her chest tightened all over again. She couldn’t catch her breath, and it left her with a feeling like water sloshing around her thoughts.

Mom leaned forward to catch Alice’s attention. “What’s going on?”

“I tried calling back,” Courtney said. “But no one’s picking up!”

For a few seconds, Alice couldn’t remember how to speak. Her mind was working so fast trying to keep up with what Courtney was saying, what Mom was saying, with her own thoughts, and it kept misfiring.

Something happened with Chess.

Hatta said to come back.

But Chess was dead.

They had to hurry.

Chess . . .

“O-okay.” Alice finally managed, one hand pressed to her mouth. She shut her eyes and tried to focus on breathing as the burn of tears made a comeback.

“I told your mom Chess was in an accident and we’re going to see him. I—I didn’t know what else to say!”

“Okay,” Alice repeated, her voice thin.

“Shit, this is so fucked up.” The sound of sniffles and whimpers carried over the phone.

“C-Court?” Alice croaked. She swallowed to ease the ache in her throat.

“I’m okay! I’m okay.” Court sniffed again and whispered something Alice couldn’t make out. “I’m okay. ETA two minutes.”

“O—” Court cut the call. “Kay.” Alice lowered the phone. Her heart buzzed in her ears as her mind continued to tumble over everything. Something was wrong with Chess. But Chess was dead. Hatta said to come. Something was wrong. Hatta said . . .

Bad. All bad.

“Alison!” Mom snapped her fingers in Alice’s face. The sound sent shards of pain dancing behind her eyes. “What’s happening?”

“U-um, Chess.” The words got stuck again. She pressed her hands over her face and groaned. Her fingers came away wet with fresh tears. “S-something—oh my god. He was in an accident? Court’s coming. We’re gonna go see him. Please, Mommy.” Her voice cracked on the plea. “Please. I—I—I know, I’m grounded, but I have to see him. It’s bad. It’s real bad, *please*. Please.”

Mom pinched her lips together and held Alice's gaze, her brown eyes questioning. For a perilous stretch of seconds, the only sound was Alice's harsh snuffles and choked breaths. Mom licked her lips and glanced to the side before sighing through her nose.

*She's gonna say no.* Raw, unrelenting panic jolted through Alice and knocked an equally unforgivable idea loose. "O-or! You can take me. He's at Grady."

The small sound Mom made at the mention of the hospital sent Alice's stomach plummeting. It was a low blow, and god, she felt a whole ass for doing it, but she *had* to get out of here.

Swallowing the sour taste at the back of her throat, she pressed on. "You can drop me off on your way back to work, and I'll call when I'm ready."

Another handful of seconds passed.

Mom pursed her lips and leveled a look at Alice. She opened her mouth, and the blast of Courtney's horn made them both jump. Mom shut her eyes, pushed to her feet, and started pacing in front of the coffee table again.

Alice glanced at the clock. Both hands stood nearly straight up, putting the time at just noon. "Or you can, um . . . pick me up when you get off. Please," she pressed. She had to sell this. Sniffing, she wiped at her nose. "Court can bring me home, whatever works, I just need to—"

Mom lifted a hand, gesturing for quiet. She paced a bit more. Her shoulders hitched when Court blew again, but Mom remained focused on Alice. "I don't know what's going on with you. And I hate thinking I can't trust you."

Alice couldn't deny she had that coming, but it still hurt to hear it. She fought to hold her mother's gaze.

"But you're not leaving me much of a choice here, Baby Moon," Mom continued.

"I know." The words leaped free before Alice even realized they'd hit her lips, her mouth suddenly dry. "I know. I—I'm sorry. I just . . . there's a lot—"

Another blast from Court's horn. Mom grunted before stalking over to the door, yanking it open, and stepping partway onto the porch. "I will rip that horn out and choke you with it, lil girl!" Then she turned back to Alice, letting the screen bang closed behind her. She eyed her a bit longer before jerking her head toward the door. "Come on."

With her heart in her throat, Alice hopped up, grabbed her bag, and hurried after her mother, who padded down the front steps. Her feet had to be freezing—panty hose didn't do much protecting from the cold. Alice followed close behind as they headed down the driveway, toward Court's Camaro.

Court's wide green eyes, red and puffy from crying, watched them approach through the passenger side window, which she rolled down after Mom twirled her finger.

"Here's the deal." Mom bent forward so she could meet Court's gaze, then glanced back and forth between both girls as she spoke. "The *instant* you get to that hospital and find out how Chester is doing, call and let me know, and not from Courtney's phone. Use the phone in his room, or the nurse station, or information booth, or security, or something, I don't care. Then you can sit and visit for a little while. Just a little

while.” Mom looked to Alice. “Your ass is in this house by three o’clock. Not three-oh-one.”

“Yes ma—” Alice started, but fell silent when Mom lifted her hand again.

“I’m not playing with either of you. This is it. Last damn chance. If you mess this up, you two won’t see each other outside of school until college.” She swung a manicured finger back and forth between the girls like the sword of Damocles. “I mean it. I love you, Courtney baby, but you will *not* be allowed in this house for the rest of the damn year.” The finger stopped at Alice. “And I’m putting bars on your window. Don’t. Test. Me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” both girls chimed together. Alice’s voice shook almost as much as she did.

Mom tucked her hand into the crook of her elbow, arms folded again. “What time I say?”

“Three o’clock,” Alice answered.

Mom peered into the car. “What time I say?”

“Three o’clock,” Court answered as she swiped at her flushed cheeks. Her whole face was bright red.

Mom stepped back and gestured for Alice to get in the car, which she scurried to do. She was fastening her seat belt as Mom practically leaned in through the window to stick them both with a healthy dose of side-eye. “*What* time did I say?”

“Three o’clock,” the girls said together.

With a nod, Mom threw an arm over Alice to give her one of those awkward half hugs that she did her best to return. “Drive safe.”

Court waited until Alice's mother had backed up a few feet before pulling off. Neither girl seemed to breathe until they turned the corner, but Alice could feel her mother's glare following them, like heat from Nana Kingston's comb on the back of her neck. Court kept her eyes on the road, her grip on the wheel so tight the color had drained from her knuckles.

"What all did Hatta say?" Alice asked, anxiety crawling through her. She fought to keep her breathing even, but it felt like her whole body had turned against her, still trembling as she sunk farther into the seat.

"S-something happened with Chess a-and, um . . ." Court took quick, deep breaths and blinked rapidly. "And we needed to get back there right now."

"What kind of something happens with a . . . a—a dead . . . He's dead . . ."

"I know!" Court slammed her fist on the wheel. "That Duchess woman started screaming in Russian and Hatta hung up! I don't—" She pursed her lips and stared ahead.

*Shit.* Alice glanced around. "Where's your phone?"

Court pointed to the cubby under the center dash. Alice snatched the phone up, punched in the lock code, and hit the pub's number.

It went straight to voice mail and Alice's body went tight. A wave of . . . of rage washed over her. How the hell you say some shit about someone's dead friend, hang up, then don't answer when they call back? Alice had to force herself to relax or she might crush Court's phone like she did hers. She waited a bit, then hit redial. It rang this time. And kept ringing.

Voice mail.

She tried again, her knee bouncing.

Voice mail.

“Damn it!”

On the fourth try, someone finally picked up.

“Looking Glass.”

Alice’s heart jumped at the sound of Hatta’s voice. There was an edge to it, an unease that plucked at the already frayed whispers of remaining strength barely holding her up. “Hey, it’s me. What’s going on?”

For a moment the line went so quiet she thought the call had dropped. She even pulled the phone away to double-check. Then Hatta said the absolute last thing she could’ve expected.

“Chess is gone. And he took Maddi with him.”

## Two

# HELLA

“**W**hat do you mean *gone*?” Court jerked the car to the side, dodging around a slower truck as she shouted the same question Alice had asked Hatta a few minutes ago.

“That’s what Addison said,” Alice murmured, her mind buzzing as it worked to fit information together. “That Chess got up and walked out into the middle of the pub.” She’d understood his words, but they didn’t make any sense.

Court glanced back and forth between Alice and the road repeatedly. Each time she snapped her head around, the crease between her brows smoothed, until it vanished and her eyes went wide. “Wait . . . he’s *alive*?”

The girls stared at each other, as much as Courtney could while trying to drive. Neither of them said a word. A swell of joy surfaced in the sea of Alice’s confusion. Her heart fluttered, filling her chest with this dizzying, fizzy sensation.

“He’s alive,” Alice eventually repeated, for Court as much as for herself. “He’s alive!” A smile broke over her face, and a laugh followed. “He’s alive!”

“Yes!” Court slapped the wheel. “Yeeeeeeeeeeeeesssss!”

Alice screamed, which melted into sobs, and those bubbled over into laughter. She doubled over and shouted into her knees, her eyes stinging, her fingers pulling at her hair. Chess was alive.

Court rubbed at her back, babbling something, Alice couldn’t hear her. Alice sat up, wiping at her face, then leaned over to wrap her arms around her best friend. Oh god. Chess was alive.

*Thank you! Thank you . . .*

Alice pulled back into her seat. She shook out her hands as pins and needles danced through her limbs. It felt like she’d been dunked in ice water then hung out to dry.

“H-how?” Court squeaked.

“I—I don’t know.” Alice closed her eyes and tilted her head back against the rest. “I don’t know.” It wasn’t possible. She’d watched him die. She’d felt him . . . felt when the last of him faded, and all that was left was his torn body still bleeding in her arms.

“Maybe it’s some weird Wonderland shit,” Court offered.

“Lot of that going around.” Magic was the first thing that came to Alice’s mind. Maybe he was under a spell, or possessed? That . . . massive Nightmare she fought last night had formed right on top of his body, swallowing it. Then, for a moment, the monster had had Chess’s eyes. Alice thought she might’ve imagined that part, but now? Now she wondered

if maybe any of that had something to do with whatever was going on. And if that was the case, this might not be the blessing she thought it was.

“But he’s gone,” Alice said. “And he took Maddi.”

The smile melted from Courtney’s face. “Took her? Like kidnapped?”

“According to Addison. He said he’d explain in person. Easier that way or something. But they’re both gone.”

Silence descended. Uneasiness rose between them, devouring the joy they’d shared seconds ago. A headache wormed its way behind Alice’s eyes, and an ugly, black feeling filled her middle. The number of times Nightmares messed her up, Maddi had been there to make it better. Maddi was the one who got her back on her feet with her potions and salves. Maddi watched over her when she was lying in bed, beat all to shit. Alice didn’t understand what the Poet was saying half the time, but that didn’t matter. Maddi was her friend.

This couldn’t be happening.



The pub door banged shut, and Alice froze at the top of the steps that led down into the bar.

“Whoa,” Court murmured, voicing Alice’s own shock.

Glass littered the floor in massive shards and glittering flecks. The splintered remains of a barstool and a couple chairs were strewn about. A table had been halved, one part tossed to the side, the other nowhere to be seen. Behind the bar, some of the shelves were cracked in half. Broken bottles and shattered

sections of the mirror spilled onto the counter below. Pools of amber and clear liquid peppered the floor. Some of the paraphernalia had been ripped from the walls, leaving holes in the plaster in a few places. One of the TVs lay cracked and dark against the floor. The tangy smell of booze clung to everything.

Two pairs of blue eyes looked up from where the Tweedles sat on the small step up into the area with the pool table. Blood smeared Dem's left cheek, and he cradled that same arm, while Dee sported a freshly blacked eye, still mostly swollen shut. A matching set of bruises was already starting to purple against their pale skin.

On any given day, Dimitri and Demarcus Tweedlanov were not to be fucked with. They were a well-oiled team of monster-killing murder machines, and they'd been Dreamwalkers *years* longer than Alice. Seeing them like this? Clearly on the receiving end of a beatdown? It shook something inside her. They were the strong ones. They were the steady ones. And right now? They looked less like defenders of the realm and more like two boys who'd gotten their asses handed to them on a playground.

"Must've been a helluva fight," Court murmured.

"Who you telling?" Alice said.

The Duchess knelt in front of them, a first aid kit opened near her feet. Her rope of red hair swept across her back as she leaned in to inspect Dee's eye, murmuring something in Russian. Anastasia Petrova was also not to be fucked with. She trained the twins after all, same as Hatta trained Alice, and was usually a bit of a hard ass. But she spoke gently as she looked to their wounds. It was . . . interesting seeing her like this.

Alice moved down the steps, picking her way through the mess and toward the three of them. “You guys all right?”

“I’ve had worse.” Dem winced. His puffy jaw meant talking probably hurt.

“Shhh,” the Duchess hissed before applying a salve to a cut Alice noticed as she got closer. He grunted in return but remained otherwise silent.

“Your friend is good fighter, for a dead guy.” Dee looked less happy than his brother about the new scars they would no doubt be sporting, his brow furrowed despite it scrunching up his shiner.

“About that,” Alice started.

“Addison wanted to know when you arrived.” The Duchess didn’t glance away from her work on the twins. “He’s in his office.”

Alice nodded, even though the woman wasn’t looking at her, and glanced at Court. “I’ll be back, with answers hopefully. Help where you can, yeah?”

“I’ll be here.” Court moved toward the bar, setting her purple Brahmin on the counter. She still hadn’t put on any makeup today, and her face was bright red from the cold and the fight against tears.

Alice headed for the hallway, glass crunching beneath her shoes. It was impossible to avoid all of it.

Behind her the Duchess spat something in Russian followed by a low “Stop fidgeting.”

“What can I do?” Court asked.

Alice, already partway down the hall, couldn’t hear if any of them answered. As she walked, she wondered where

Odabeth and Xelon were. She didn't figure there was much the daughter of the White Queen, heir apparent to one of the dual thrones of Wonderland, and her Lady Knight could get into in midtown Atlanta. Then again, maybe royal beings from another realm liked to sightsee? She didn't have much time to dwell on it, stopping outside the open door to Hatta's office. She lifted a hand to knock against the frame, though paused as she took in the sight of him.

Sitting behind his desk, Hatta bent forward so his elbows rested against his knees. His head bowed, he held his face in his hands, dark green strands of hair falling between his fingers. He looked so . . . broken? So not like his usual, sarcastic, charming, brighter self.

In all this time Alice had known him, from meeting him the night her dad died, through his training her to fight Nightmares, then the two of them working together to protect the Western Gateway, she'd never seen him looking so defeated. Well, that wasn't 100-percent true. She'd catch glimpses of him here and there, when he'd be in his office or behind the bar, and he'd get this far-away look on his face. Like he was someplace else. He used to stare in that fancy mirror of his with that expression. Before said mirror was discovered to be part of a shattered artifact of dark power and used to reforge that artifact, thanks to deception, a tiny bit of betrayal, and . . . yeah. Man, this past week had been a lot.

Across from him, the locker in the far corner hung open, and inside it, suspended in the air, was the Vorpall Blade. Sheathed, the blade so black didn't drink up the pale office light, but darkness thrummed along the length of it, waxing

and waning just so, painting the air around it with a shiver of shadow. The weapon was supposed to be one of a kind, from Hatta's days as the original Black Knight. The new Black Knight had one, too. Hatta's was bigger. A bit scarier, too. There was a joke in there, somewhere.

"Did it used to do that?" Alice asked.

Hatta's head snapped up and he spun toward her, banging his knees against the desk in the process. "Shhhhhhh . . . mmph."

She winced in sympathy. "Sorry."

"No worries." Standing, Hatta closed and locked the cabinet doors. The key vanished into his pocket as he did a little sidestep Alice was sure was supposed to mask a wince—he was still wrapped in bandages and pretty banged up after the fight this morning—but it didn't work. Coming around the desk, he tilted against the front of it and released a slow breath that was damn near a groan. "What were you saying, luv?"

"The Vorpall Blade." Alice pointed at the now closed locker. "Did it used to do that?"

"Do what?"

"That *whonm-whonm* thing with the light." She flexed her fingers in the air to emphasize her attempt at describing what she'd seen. "I mean, I know it sucks up light, but this was different. Like the dark part of it was having trouble staying on? I don't know."

Hatta arched an eyebrow slightly, glanced at the locker, then back to her. "It's not doing anything special."

Alice had only ever seen the Vorpall Blade, Hatta's Vorpall Blade, a few times, but she'd definitely have remembered if it

did whatever that was. She pulled her mouth to the side. “We still keeping secrets, then?”

“About what?”

She thrust her hand toward the closed locker. “Don’t tell me it wasn’t doing something funny, Addison. I know funny acting when I see it, and that sword was acting funny.”

A shade of his usual smile pulled at his lips. “Do you, now? In any case, the Vorpall Blade isn’t behaving oddly at all. At least, not for how it should be behaving.”

*That’s how it is, then? Okay.* Grunting, she wrapped her arms around herself. “If you say so.”

“I do.” Hatta looked her up and down with those multi-colored eyes of his. It sent warm fuzzies through her. “But that doesn’t mean you don’t.”

“I don’t what?”

“You don’t say.”

“*What?* No, never mind. What happened to Chess?” The fuzzies fizzled out, replaced by an ugly twisting somewhere near her center that warred with the excitement from before. Her friend was alive, even if he was . . . she wasn’t sure. “What you said on the phone didn’t make no kinda sense.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know the answer to that, milady.” Hatta’s tone was polite enough, but the way his eyes darkened, how the color fled to their very edges and the faintest spark of fire flickered to life at their center, told a completely different story. “Or why he took Madeline captive.”

Alice’s throat worked at a lump forming at the back of it. “This has to be the Black Knight, right? I mean he stabbed Chess with that sword and it did something to him. Plus, he

was d-d . . . in no condition to do nothing like this. Not on his own.”

Hatta’s shoulders sagged, and a touch of the visible fury faded from his gaze. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. Come. It’s better you hear the recounting firsthand.” He moved to step past her.

Out in the bar, everyone was doing what they could to try and straighten things up. Dem held a trash can while Dee tossed in broken and empty bottles from the back of the bar. The Duchess righted tables and chairs that hadn’t been smashed, and Court swept twinkling shards into small piles along the floor. The four of them looked up and paused in their respective tasks.

“Gentlemen.” Hatta moved to take the trash can from Dem. “Glad to see you’re back on your feet.”

Dem snorted. “I keep telling you we’ve had worse.” He started to fold his arms over his chest but looked to think better of it when something popped, making him flinch. Instead, he pressed one hand to his side. “And we weren’t trying to hurt him.”

“Uspokoysya.” Dee looked from his twin to Hatta. “We’re fine.”

“Mmm. In that case, please bring Alice up to speed on what happened this morning.” Taking the trash can with him, Hatta moved behind the bar. He set it aside and started, of all things, to gather up glasses and bottles to mix drinks.

The twins shared one of their creepy glances, then turned to her.

The Duchess kept cleaning. Court had paused, eyes on the boys as well.

“We had just gotten back from taking care of things at the field,” Dee started. “The place was a mess, but we did what we could.”

New guilt wormed its way through her. Here they were cleaning up after her. Again. Today was definitely a Category Five on the You Done Messed Up chart. “I’ll go back and purge everything soon as I can.”

“It should be fine for at least a few days,” Dem said.

“We hope. There is no telling with Nightmares on this side of the Veil.” Dee looked to the Duchess, as did his brother.

As if sensing their stares, she glanced up, but only briefly before returning to her task. “I would suggest within the next twenty-four hours. Let us not take any chances.”

Alice nodded. It might take a bit of finagling with her mom to get it done, but she’d manage. She had to. “You were saying?”

“We heard a shout.” Dee frowned, or tried to. It was more a grimace, thanks to the black eye. “Then footsteps. It’s your friend.”

“Your dead friend,” Dem muttered. “Only not so dead anymore.”

“He has Maddi,” Dee continued. “We’re surprised, but ask if she’s okay because she does not look okay. So I grab his shoulder. He did this.” He touched fingers lightly beneath the shiner. “I didn’t even see it coming.”

“I make a move on the asshole.” Dem picked up the story.

“That asshole is my friend,” Alice said.

“That asshole punched my brother.”

“Point,” Alice conceded, not in the mood for a fight. She gestured for Dem to continue.

“He drops Maddi and turns on me. Guy is fast. Really fast. And strong. I almost cannot keep up, because I don’t want to hurt him, since he’s your friend.”

“We try to pin him down. He just—” Dee waved with his good arm, the other in a makeshift sling. “Throws us off. I hit the wall.” He pointed at the broken shelves and cracked mirror behind the bar.

“I hit the table.” Dem pointed to a pile of wood pieces.

Alice was having a really hard time trying to imagine Chess—who’d never so much as raised his voice for as long as she’d known him—fighting not one, but both Tweedles. And winning.

“We don’t need details, mal’chiki.” The Duchess tied off her now full trash bag and set it aside. “Skip to the important part.”

“Right,” both respond, chagrined.

“There was something wrong with his eyes,” Dem said. “They were black, with circles around them.”

“And he wouldn’t answer us when we tried to talk to him. Just kicked our asses—”

“Not mine.”

Dee shot a glare at his brother. “Kicked our asses, picked up Maddi, and went out the door. Then disappeared.”

“Poof.” Dem wiggled his fingers in the air. “Left black goop all over the sidewalk.”

“Like from Ahoon,” Dee offered. “Remember what we found in that house?”

“I remember.” She wouldn’t be forgetting that trip anytime soon, especially since it was when the Black Knight jumped her

and started all this mess. He'd been waiting for her, had probably planted that goop to draw her out. If she had quit beforehand like she planned, would things have gotten this far? Maybe if she'd walked away without taking one last mission, he'd still be waiting, and Chess and Maddi would be here and fine. The dark, twisty feeling from before flared with a vengeance.

"That stuff was also all over the battlefield." Dem polished off his drink in one go.

Dee took his much slower. "Purged with little problem, though."

"We found the twins afterward." Hatta moved to offer a couple more drinks to the boys, who reached for them with eager thanks. "I tried to pick up any possible trails, but it was too late."

Dem tapped the bar for yet another refill, earning a few words from his twin, likely something about slowing down. The two started bickering in Russian.

Hatta poured another round, his expression pinched in concern.

"What *is* that goopy junk?" Alice asked. The twins had taken a sample in Ahoon, and she'd all but forgotten about it after everything went sideways. "Is it doing . . . whatever is happening to Chess?"

"It's called Slithe, and perhaps." Hatta took a deep swig of his own drink. "Think of it as Nightmare blood. If blood was also flesh, skin, bones, organs, all of . . . that."

"So, Nightmare juice?" Alice scrunched her nose as an uneasy feeling filtered through her.

Hatta rolled his shoulders. "Yes. And no. On its own, Slithe is simply Slithe. It's relatively harmless and flows through

Wonderland like water. It's only in the Nox, where there's a high concentration of fear, anger, pain, all of the negative yuck of the human psyche, that Slithe becomes toxic enough to form Nightmares."

Alice frowned, memories of this morning flooding her thoughts. She tried to recall if there was something, anything, that might help them figure out what was going on with Chess. "The Black Knight summoned a bunch of that stuff on the field. It swallowed Chess and became whatever the hell that creature was. If Slithe is natural to Wonderland, what's it doing here? In our world? What's it doing to Chess?" She managed to keep the edge of fear from her voice, but just barely.

"Everything natural to Wonderland comes from this world," Hatta said, like it was supposed to be common sense and *not* them talkin' 'bout the goings-on of a secret realm hardly no one knew existed. "As far as what it's doing to your friend, I'm not sure."

The Duchess said something in quiet . . . was that French?

Hatta's brows lifted. "Whitechapel?"

The Duchess nodded, her expression drawn.

Hatta stroked at his chin before shaking his head and responding. In French.

*What the hell?*

The two of them went back and forth a little before he finally said something that seemed to placate her. Then he poured himself a second drink, which she swiped for her own, ignoring his annoyed look.

"Um . . . what was that?" Alice asked.

"What was what?" Still glowering at the Duchess, Hatta

didn't bother getting another glass and instead capped the bottle.

"Whatever y'all said just now. About Whitechapel?"

"Old business." Hatta set the bottle to the side. "Let's focus on the matter concerning your friend."

Alice got the distinct feeling she was being brushed off, but as much as that irritated her, she agreed they needed to concentrate on whatever was going on with Chess.

Court slid onto a stool beside Alice. "Y'all told us he was dead." There was an accusatory bite in her tone.

"There was no pulse. Maddi and I both checked." Hatta licked at his lips then pressed them together. "We truly believed he was gone, otherwise we would've treated his injuries. However, given present circumstances, it's possible we made a mistake, and he was merely comatose."

"That's one helluva nap," Court murmured.

*He felt dead, though.* And the way his eyes had gone dull? Staring at nothing? A chill slid down her back at the memory. That wasn't a coma. She rubbed at the goosebumps rising on her arm. "Can . . . can Slithe bring back the dead?"

"No," Hatta answered, a little too quickly. "If it were possible, there never would've been a Black Queen, or a war."

*He's right,* Alice realized. If there had been a way for Portentia to resurrect her daughter, she never would've given herself over to the darkness of the Nox.

"A what now?" Court asked.

"Okay, so, you know how Odabeth is a princess?" Alice asked. "And there was a war in Wonderland a long time ago?"

Court nodded.

“Her grandma was Portentia of Harts, High Queen of All Wonderland, and everything popped off when one of her daughters . . .” Alice glanced at Hatta. He met her gaze, his expression calm but his jaw tight. *Sorry*, she wanted to say, but she looked back to Courtney and continued. “Died suddenly. No one knows what happened except she’d been playing with a human girl right before they found her.”

“Wow . . .” Court murmured.

“Yeah. The Queen was devastated.” The image of Portentia weeping over the tiny crystal casket would be stuck in Alice’s mind forever. “So much so, she went to the Nox, the part of Wonderland where Nightmares are born, and tried to use that power to resurrect her little girl. But she failed, and the darkness consumed her. She became the Black Queen, and she blamed humanity for her loss. So she set out to destroy the human world, which would’ve destroyed Wonderland. Her own daughters—including Odabeth’s mom—had to fight her to save everyone.”

Courtney lowered her hand from where she’d pressed it over her mouth. “That’s some heavy shit.”

“Tell me about it.” Alice couldn’t imagine the pain of losing a child. Losing her father was bad enough; she saw what happened when her mom just thought about it. Mom would definitely go off the deep end if anything happened to her. “So, if the Slithe didn’t do this to Chess, what did?” Alice asked, pushing away the sickening mental image of her mother crying over her casket.

*Bzzzzt. Bzzzzt.* Court’s phone rattled against the bar top. She snatched it up and glanced at the screen. All color

drained from her face. She lifted wide eyes to Alice. “It’s your mom.”

Instant panic wrapped Alice’s mind, tight and suffocating. *Shit!* She’d forgotten they were supposed to call!

“Should I answer?” Court asked.

“Yes!”

“But we don’t—”

“If it goes to voice mail, that’s both our asses.”

“What is going on?” Hatta asked.

“I was supposed to—hold on . . .” Alice trailed off as Court tapped her screen.

“Hi, Mrs. K. Yeah, we’re here. No, we haven’t seen him yet. Yeah, she’s right here.” Court held the phone out and mouthed, “Sorry.”

Alice took a steadying breath. Just the potential fate of the world hanging on this, no big deal. She pressed the phone to her ear. “Hey, Mom.”

“*What* did I tell y’all?”

“I’m working on it. I’m at the information desk right now staring the receptionist lady in the face.”

“Put the woman on the phone.”

“On . . . on Courtney’s phone?”

“Now, Alison.”

“Okay, one second.” Alice hit mute and screamed into her arm. This was not happening. This. Was. Not. Happening.

Court winced in sympathy. “That bad?”

“She wants to talk to the receptionist.”

“But there’s no receptionist.”

“There’s no receptionist!” Alice didn’t mean to scream in

her friend's face; it was just—volume control was a thing of the past, like her life was about to be. She spun in another circle and screamed again. Everyone stared at her, their eyes wide. Hatta, the twins, the Duche—the Duchess!

And like that, an idea was born. A bad idea. A horrible idea. Terrible, really, but it was the only one Alice had.

Clutching the phone in both hands like a set of prayer beads, she half slid, half fell off her stool and hurried over to the Duchess, who actually recoiled a bit. “My mom thinks we went to the hospital to see Chess after he was in a car accident. It was the only way she’d let me leave the house. I need you to pretend you’re the receptionist and tell her we’re at Grady.”

The Duchess’s gaze fell to the phone, and her nose wrinkled. “You want me to lie to your mother?”

“Yes! If you don’t, I’m on lockdown until I go to college, and probably even then, meaning I won’t be able to help figure out what happened to Chess or Maddi.”

“Alice?” Mom’s muffled voice called. “Alice, pick up this damn phone.”

Instead, she pressed it closer to the Duchess. “Help me, please.”

At first the Duchess stared at Alice like she was a stain on a nice blouse. She eyed the phone, then held out her hand expectantly. “What is your friend’s full name?”

“Chester Dumpsky.” Relief poured through Alice. “The hospital is called Grady Memorial.” She unmuted the phone, then offered it over.

“Mmm.” The Duchess cleared her throat and held it up to her ear. “Hi, this is Anne Smith with the Grady Memorial

information center. Why, yes, she sure is, standing right here in front of me.”

The Southern accent that came outta that woman was so stereotypically thick and syrupy she sounded like a KFC commercial. Alice did not expect that, and neither did anyone else, given the looks on their faces.

The Duchess kept it up, unbothered by the room’s collective what-the-fuckery. “She asked to visit a Chester Dumpsky. Yes. Yes, he came in earlier this morning after a collision. I’ll have a room number for her here shortly. Why, yes, ma’am. Of course. Here she is.” The fake-ass smile on the Duchess’s face vanished as she held the phone out.

Shook, Alice picked her jaw up and took the phone back. “Hello?”

“Three o’clock. Tell Courtney to text me when you hear how he’s doing.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Bye, baby.”

“Bye.” Once the call ended, Alice’s legs gave out, and she dropped into a crouch, her arms folded up over her knees. “Ohmigaaaaaawd.” That was uncomfortably close. Like, when someone looked at you through the crack between the stalls in the bathroom levels of uncomfortable.

“She bought it, huh?” Court asked from somewhere above her.

“For now.” But she wouldn’t be able to keep this up. Not with things escalating like this. And man did she want this to be the last time she’d lie to her mom like that, but who the hell

was she kidding. Lifting her head, she breathed a “th-thank you” to the Duchess, who simply shrugged.

“Now that that particular crisis has been averted.” Hatta came around the bar to offer Alice a hand up. His smirk sent another flutter through her. “We need to make some adjustments to our plan, which is why I asked you and Courtney to return. And to give you these.” He squeezed Alice’s fingers before pressing the leather strap of her dagger belt to her palm. “Can’t have you out there unarmed. Keep these on you as often as you can.”

“New?” Alice asked, a little surprised as she pulled one of the weapons from its sheath. The light caught in the silvered glass blade, highlighting the faintest whisper of webwork cracks.

“Afraid not,” Hatta said, confirming her suspicion. “Just a patch job, but they should hold. You’re much Muchier than you were before. Plus, I don’t think a sword would fit in your backpack.”

“True. Thanks.” These were small enough to fit in the bottom of her pack if she wrapped them in the pair of emergency sweatpants she kept in case of surprise!periods and monster-gut stains. “So, what’re these adjustments that need to be made?”

“I have decided to return to Saint Petersburg,” the Duchess said before Hatta could answer. “I fear I have left my Gateway unprotected for too long, a worry compounded by the presence of so many Nightmares on this side of the Veil. However, the boys will remain, as our focus will now be divided.”

“Divided?” Alice arched an eyebrow.

Hatta nodded. “You, Xelon, and the princess will return to Wonderland to begin looking for the Heart.”

Alice’s own heart kicked against the inside of her chest. Christ, she’d forgotten all about the Eye and the Heart for a second! The Black Queen’s powerful artifacts that she used to build an army of Nightmares to try and wipe out the human world. Those same artifacts were used by her daughters to seal her away after the war.

The Black Knight was after them—it’s why he started all this, no doubt intending to bring his Queen back. They couldn’t let that happen. That and they needed the Heart in order to cure Odabeth’s mother and Addison of the Black Knight’s poison. The only way to find the Heart was with the Eye, and worry for Chess and Maddi had tossed the plan right outta Alice’s head. “So the Eye is okay?”

“It and the princess are fine.” Hatta jerked a thumb over his shoulder, toward the hall leading to the back. “She and Xelon were resting when your friend made his escape.”

“He had to be under the Black Knight’s control.”

“Maybe.” The Duchess stroked at her chin like she was in some sort of TV show. “If he was, it makes little sense that he would focus on capturing Madeline instead of attempting to retrieve the Eye, as it was his primary objective. It seems even in defeat the Imposter remains one step ahead of us.”

“Which is why both you and Xelon need to accompany Her Majesty to Findest as soon as possible.” Hatta’s expression darkened. “Madeline knows our intentions, and she’s a strong one but . . . it’s smart to make moves just in case.”

*In case he pulls the info out of her. Poor Maddi . . .* “How long does it take to get to Findest?”

“Longer than it took to reach Legracia,” both Dee and Dem said together.

That journey was nearly a week in Wonderland, and a couple of days out here. Being gone for that long was *not* gonna fly, especially not after the way Mom chewed her out this morning.

“Meanwhile, the Tweedles will take up search efforts for Madeline and your friend,” Hatta continued. “I’ll aid them on that front.”

Alice nodded, her mind still working over just how she was going to work all of this out with her mom. “I need a day to get ready. To get my mom ready.”

“We can come up with some excuse to buy you some time.” Court set a hand on Alice’s back as she came around her other side. “If anything, I’ll kidnap you or something. Go on a road trip without letting you out of my car.”

“She’ll definitely send the cops after you.”

“I’ll just cry some white tears, and they’ll let me go. Easy peasy Becky cheesy.”

Alice blinked before busting out laughing. She had no idea why, but that was the funniest thing she’d ever heard. And just when she felt it dying down, the vaguely confused look on Hatta’s face only made her laugh harder. She was practically doubled over and struggling to breathe by the time she regained control. “Lord, I love you.”

Court squeezed her shoulders. “Love you, too.”

“Okay.” Hatta glanced back and forth between them.

“Tomorrow, then. I know it’s soon, but we can’t risk anyone getting to the Heart before us.”

Alice threw a glance at the purple cat clock, which had managed to stay in place high on the wall behind the bar, but it still appeared to be broken, or out of batteries. “We probably need to get going. I’m supposed to be home by three.”

“That reminds me.” Court pulled out her phone. “Telling your mom Chess is stable but unconscious.” The “keys” clicked under her thumbs.

“I’ll walk you ladies out.”

Alice said a quick good-bye to the twins and the Duchess, all three of them going back to cleaning up, before she hurried after Courtney and Hatta, who’d already stepped out onto the sidewalk. Even in the sun, his skin was still a sickly sort of pale. The green of his hair appeared dull, and the circles around his eyes had darkened. “Listen, I’d hoped we’d get at least a few days to try to recover, but we can’t afford the time now. I’m sorry.” He shoved his hands into his pockets.

“It’s not your fault.” Somehow, she felt it was all hers. Still hers. Always hers. She let her friends get involved in this, and now? Now one of them was under some sort of zombie spell. And to think she’d been about to tell her mom about all this. Like hell that was happening now.

“No one’s fault, but I’m still sorry. These can both be a thing, you know.” His smile widened as he reached to set a hand on the side of her face.

Court made a soft sound and spun on her heel. “I’ll bring the car around,” she called as she hurried toward the parking lot.

Alice shook her head, gazing after her friend before

turning back to Hatta. Eyes flickering over his face, she pushed onto her toes as he bent forward. Their lips met, and a wave of warmth moved through her. The funny flutterings from before returned, dancing up and down her spine, along her arms and legs. His arms slipped around her waist, and hers wrapped around his neck, their bodies meeting in the middle. Her fingers slid into his hair, and his danced up her back, earning the faintest shiver. The kiss was slow, careful; he was still healing.

When he pulled away, Alice could barely hear anything over the beating of her heart. She pressed another quick kiss home for good measure. This was really happening. One good thing to come out of all this mess.

The sound of the Camaro rumbling toward them made Alice draw back, but not too far. Her hands slid along his arms, minding the bandages. “Now I have to figure out how I’m going to get away from my house long enough to go on another mission so soon.”

“Still in trouble?”

“All the trouble.” She withdrew from him reluctantly as the Camaro pulled up.

Hatta held the door open as she climbed in, then closed it behind her. “Be safe, ladies.” He waved as Court drove off.

Once they were on the road Alice shoved her fingers into her hair and tugged. Tomorrow. How the hell was she going to manage any of this by tomorrow?

They reached a red light, and Court tapped her fingers against the wheel. “So, it really might come down to me fake abducting you to get this done, huh.”

“Maybe. I got no other ideas right now.”

“What if we kept driving? You hang out at my place, and I don’t even take you home until after you get back.”

“I can’t do that to her. And I can’t be responsible for what she’ll do to *you*.”

The corners of Court’s lips pulled back in a grimace. “That bad, huh?”

“Courtney, you know my mom.”

“Yup, yup. So, on a scale of one to ten, just how screwed are we gonna be at the end of all of this?” Court asked as she guided them through traffic.

“Hella.”