

# THE ABSINTHE LABYRINTH



JAMIE PACTON

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE ABSINTHE UNDERGROUND

**ALSO BY JAMIE PACTON**

*The Vermilion Emporium*

*The Absinthe Underground*

*Furious*

*Lucky Girl*

*The Life and (Medieval) Times of Kit Sweetly*

*Homegrown Magic*

## PRAISE FOR JAMIE PACTON

“What a treat to return to this world, which is as enchanting and wondrous as it is deadly! I never wanted to leave it behind. Like a faerie spell, *The Hyacinth Labyrinth* will ensorcell readers with its lush atmosphere; swashbuckling heroines; and sweet, slow-burn romance.”

—Allison Saft, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Wings of Starlight*  
(on *The Hyacinth Labyrinth*)

“A thrilling magical romp with an enchanting mixture of whimsy and adventure. There’s nothing more perfect than stories about girls with swords and tiny dragons and Jamie Pacton delivers the most delightful tale imaginable!”

—CG Drews, *New York Times* bestselling author of  
*Don't Let The Forest In* and *Hazelthorn* (on *The Hyacinth Labyrinth*)

“*The Hyacinth Labyrinth* soars with warmth and whimsy! Equal parts cozy fable and magical DnD adventure, readers will be utterly charmed by Hyacinth’s and Chloe’s story.”

—Erin Cotter, author of *By Any Other Name* and *A Traitorous Heart*  
(on *The Hyacinth Labyrinth*)

★ “In this haunting tale . . . Pacton weaves a romantic and thrilling story of ambition, magic, and peril. Sybil and Esme’s chemistry is palpable, and Pacton’s lush portrayal of Severon as a city filled with art and beauty reminiscent of fin de siècle Paris adds additional layers of enchantment.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review (on *The Absinthe Underground*)

“An enchanting romantasy brimming with glittering, intoxicating prose and wild Fae magic. These quick-handed thieves will steal your heart from your first meeting.”

—Elizabeth Kilcoyne, author of William C. Morris Award finalist *Wake the Bones* (on *The Absinthe Underground*)



★ “[A] unique examination of class inequality and exploitation set against a provocative landscape . . . a hauntingly romantic fantasy adventure.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review (on *The Vermillion Emporium*)

★ “A fantasy novel clothed in romance and adventure, *The Vermillion Emporium* weaves together themes of loyalty and destiny, delivering a heartfelt and dazzling triumph.”

—*Foreword Reviews*, Starred Review (on *The Vermillion Emporium*)

To Starlight Kingdom

Moonshadow Kingdom

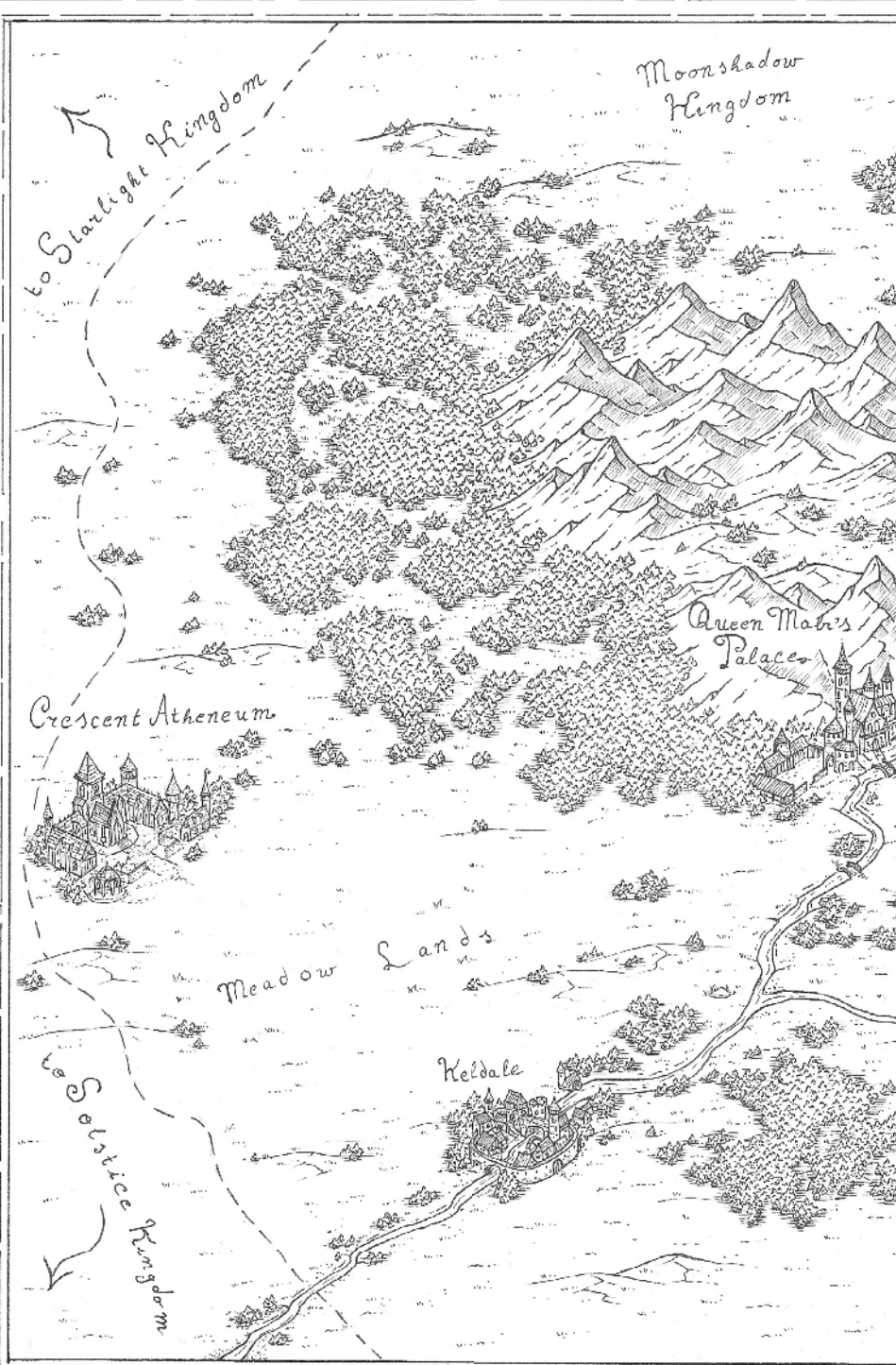
Crescent Atheneum

Queen Mab's Palaces

Meadow Lands

To Solstice Kingdom

Keidale





Mossley River

Swamplands

Hyacinth Cottage

Mushroom Town

Hall of the Mountain King

The Labyrinth

The Wall







THE HYACINTH  
LABYRINTH

JAMIE PACTON

PEACHTREE  
TEEN



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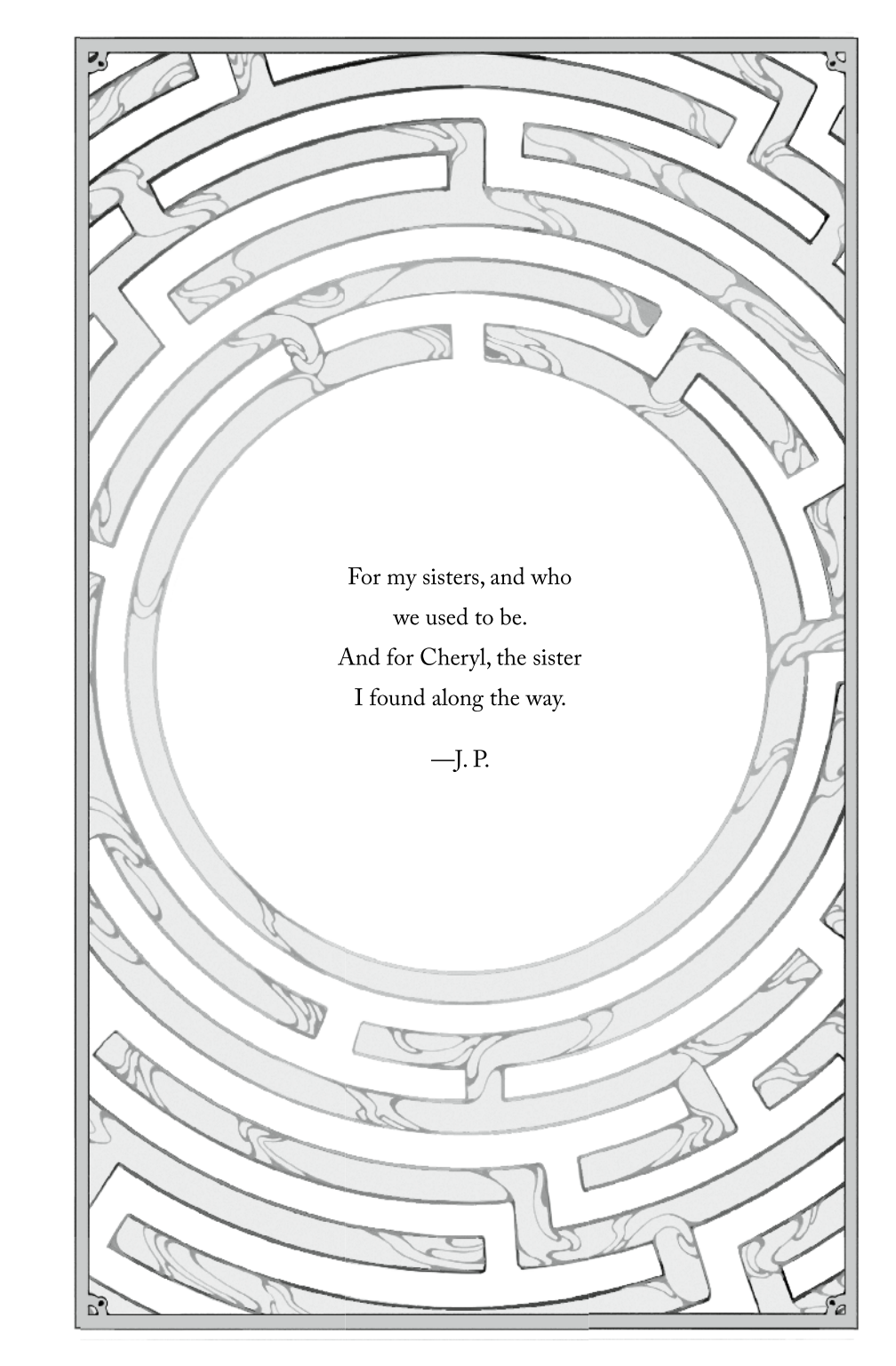
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For my sisters, and who  
we used to be.  
And for Cheryl, the sister  
I found along the way.

—J. P.



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although *The Hyacinth Labyrinth* is a standalone, it's set in the world of *The Vermilion Emporium*—where we first meet Chloe and her sister Anya. More specifically, it's set in the Fae world from *The Absinthe Underground*, where we encounter Chloe again and first meet Princess Hyacinth. You don't have to read these books in order, but if you have, then it's helpful to know the events of this story take place several months after what happened in *The Absinthe Underground*.



## CHAPTER ONE

### *Hyacinth*

The Solstice Ball was in full swing, and Princess Hyacinth Bramblefen, the youngest of Queen Mab's daughters, couldn't wait to leave.

"Bramble and marsh," she grumbled under her breath as she stood on the dais at the front of the ballroom. "You'd think the High Fae had never seen a party in their near-eternal lives."

Hyacinth scowled and her full-moon eyes tracked dozens of High Fae nobles swirling around the queen's dance floor. The dancers moved in a kaleidoscope—no, *landslide* was a better word for it—of feathers, silks, mosses, berries, and sparkling dew-spun dresses and suits. Elaborate masks hid the dancers' faces, and jewels glittered in their hair, on their horns and clothing, and across their rain-bowed complexions. A pixie string quartet played a lively melody in one corner of the ballroom, and raucous laughter filled the space. Silvery-blue starlight knifed across the polished floor. Summertime

perfumes floated on the air, a heady rush of honeysuckle, sweat, endless moonlit nights, fireflies, and fresh grass.

*It was awful.*

Hyacinth anxiously folded and unfolded a scrap of paper in her pocket. Written on it was the most important clue about her missing father that she'd ever found. Not that she could do anything about it while she was trapped at the ball.

*What absolute misery.*

A pair of High Fae lords twirled past Hyacinth, their lips meeting for a moment as they danced. Hyacinth's mind immediately wrenched away from the scrap of paper and the party, landing firmly on a kiss of her own that she was trying to forget.

It'd been a sloppy kiss. A secret one. All warm lips, summer-wine-scented breath, and the dizzy laughter of the common Fae girl feathering against her throat.

*Chloe.*

Just thinking about the red-haired stablehand made Hyacinth's insides twist.

Did Chloe regret kissing her?

Hyacinth flung the question away like a stone skipped across a deep pool. Absolutely not to be considered. To distract herself from more thoughts of kissing, she moved her hand from the scrap of paper to the six small potion bottles on the leather alchemist's belt around her waist. Mentally she recited their contents and effects, hoping that would help her *not* think about Chloe.

*Juniper heart for illusion. A moon-drenched secret for levitation. Bitterroot berry for healing. Gray tendrils of fog for vanishing. Wraith tears for compulsion. Dragonheart ashes for fire and ruin.*

Chloe always asked what the potions were for, and Hyacinth always deflected.

*Stop thinking about Chloe.*

Impossible.

Hyacinth's fingers flitted from the wax-stoppered potion bottles to the enchanted compass attached to her belt. It was supposed to help her find exactly three locations, according to the tinkerer she'd bought it from. Which might be true. Or not. In the last few months, Hyacinth had bought dozens of ultimately useless magical items. She ran the compass's chain through her fingers, loving its slithery, slippery feel.

Chloe's hair had felt just as smooth when Hyacinth had run her finger through it last night.

Hyacinth sighed, surrendering and letting her thoughts dwell on the stablehand.

They'd been circling each other for months: flirting, chatting, sneaking off into the woods for walks, but when the solstice parties had started at midnight yesterday and the torches burned low in the castle, Hyacinth found Chloe in the garden. She'd brought a bottle of starred-berry wine. They drank, and laughed, and danced—then, all at once, they stumbled against one of the garden walls. Their bodies tangled, their hands caught in each other's hair, their breaths came in ragged gasps. . . .

Hyacinth leaned forward, or perhaps Chloe did, and the distance between them evaporated. There had been only lips and hands and—

“Hyacinth Bramblefen! Stand up straighter,” Queen Mab, the ever-glorious monarch of the Moonshadow Kingdom, snapped. “Unknit your brows, let go of that wretched belt you insist on

wearing, and smile, for bramble's sake. It's a *party*. You don't have to look so gloomy."

Hyacinth rolled her eyes at her mother.

She wasn't gloomy. Not really. She was remembering a kiss that never should've happened. High Fae princesses didn't talk to the common Fae, unless it was to give them orders. They certainly didn't befriend them. And they most definitely didn't spend an evening kissing the taste of starred-berries off their lips.

Hyacinth's fingers moved from her enchanted compass back to the scrap of paper in her pocket. *If* she could ever escape this party, she might be able to learn more about the book it had come from and how it connected to her father.

*Unlikely on both fronts if my mother has anything to say about it.*

Hyacinth looked over at the queen.

Tonight, Mab presided on a carved amethyst throne, appraising her guests. Jewels glittered in her cerulean hair, and her sharp teeth gleamed in the slant of moonlight streaming through the glass dome above them. The queen's most trusted advisor and bodyguard—Maurelle, a High Fae knight with a thatch of white hair, a foxtail, and pointed ears—stood beside the queen, scrutinizing the crowd. She twirled a knife carelessly through her fingers, a habit that made Hyacinth's skin crawl.

How was she ever going to get past her mother and Maurelle?

*First, stand up straighter, so the queen stops fussing.*

Hyacinth shoved her shoulders and the phony wings attached to them backward. Pain spiked down her spine, chasing all memories of last night's kiss and her missing father away.

Bramble and marsh, her fake wings were *heavy*.

It wasn't bad enough that Hyacinth didn't have magic like her half sisters and every other Fae in the kingdom. No. She *also* lacked a beautiful set of jewel-toned wings she could manifest with a whispered word. Her true wings were supposed to have appeared months ago on her seventeenth birthday, along with her High Fae magic. Without the potions and other trinkets on her belt, though, she couldn't even pretend to do common Fae magic like warming a cup of tea (not that she'd ever had cause to warm tea, since the palace kitchens provided all her meals, but she'd heard it was something the common Fae could do). She certainly couldn't do any of the higher Fae magics like shifting a flower into a flying bird, painting a glamour over herself, crafting complex potions, convincing rivers to abandon their beds, or opening doors to other realms.

She was broken.

The secretly unmagical princess of the Moonshadow Kingdom. It was miserable most of the time, but some nights were particularly bad. And the solstice revelry season was the absolute worst.

The queen glanced over and raised an eyebrow at Hyacinth.

Hyacinth forced a pleasant smile and fought not to itch the spot on her shoulder blade where the fake wings irritated her pale purple skin.

Seemingly satisfied, her mother turned her attention from Hyacinth. The queen was the only other person who knew about Hyacinth's lack of magic. *Don't worry, darling*, the queen often said, a frown between her eyebrows betraying her true thoughts. *I'm sure your High Fae gifts will arrive soon. No need to tell your sisters or anyone else about this.*

Hyacinth wasn't so sure, and that's why she kept swiping potions from her mother's alchemists and buying enchanted trinkets from every trader who visited the palace.

The queen had made her favorite jeweler craft Hyacinth's fake wings in secret, and earlier that day, she'd secured them to Hyacinth's back with a spell that would hold for at least a fortnight. It wasn't perfect, and it'd make sleeping awkward, but it'd get Hyacinth through the next few balls. Which was something. At least she'd seem normal for those weeks. After that, who knew.

*Stop thinking about your ridiculous wings and get moving!*

How was she going to leave, though? Hyacinth considered the ballroom.

Hyacinth's half sister Maeve—a green Faerie who had found herself in their mother's ill graces a few months ago after she'd snuck into the human world and then tried to snatch Queen Mab's throne—had taken over planning the solstice celebration in her latest effort to make amends. She'd magicked the ballroom to look like, in her words, *a glittering nightclub in the human world*, complete with stained glass lamps, marble arches, flowing absinthe fountains, and sumptuous flower sculptures. Now Maeve stood beneath an arbor of wisteria, laughing with Clover and Tansy, two of the other Moonshadow princesses. The three princesses' mossy-green, pale gold, and pink-hued skin tones all matched their *real* wings.

How they would laugh if they knew Hyacinth had no magic. That she kissed stablehands and enjoyed it. That she wanted nothing more than to flee the party so she could uncover more about her long-lost father.

"How much longer do I have to stand here, Mother?" Hyacinth asked as evenly as possible.

"As long as I say," Queen Mab shot back. "We want people to see your *quality*, child. So they don't have any . . . suspicions about

you.” Like Hyacinth was a prize-winning racing salamander. Some creature to be warred over among the gentry. No one would want her if they knew how broken she actually was.

Would Chloe still want her if she found out Hyacinth had no magic?

*A silly question.*

*One you certainly don't have time for.*

Hyacinth glanced at the clock above the ballroom door—9:43. She had to go! She was meeting Chloe in the largest dragon paddock at ten. Tonight, party be damned, they were sneaking away to the Solstice Market in Keldale: a magical market with goods from all over the Fae realms that only appeared once a year and disappeared at midnight. It was nearly ten already!

If Hyacinth didn't get moving, she'd be late. Then she'd have to wait a full year to find the bookshop she was searching for tonight.

Making sure her mother wasn't watching, Hyacinth slipped the paper from her pocket and yet again studied its handwritten words.

*Property of Evan Bramblefen.*

Then, in blocky, worn letters below those five words was a bookshop stamp:

PURCHASED AT THE WILTING SPARROW BOOKSHOP, KELDALE.

SHOP HOURS DURING THE SOLSTICE MARKET ONLY.

IF LOST, PLEASE RETURN—

It wasn't much, but it was a clue—no matter how small—about her father. Evan Bramblefen. It was more valuable than any crumb

she'd ever forced from her mother. After Hyacinth had found the scrap of paper tucked into a history book a few weeks ago, she and Chloe had devised their plan to visit the market. To learn anything more about her father tonight, though, Hyacinth had to leave the party. Now.

"Mother," Hyacinth said sweetly. "May I get some refreshments and have a dance? I'm certain my 'quality' will be much better shown among the other revelers, don't you think?"

Maurelle stopped twirling her knife and raised an eyebrow, but Queen Mab sighed. "Perhaps you're right. Very well then. Go on."

"Can I get you or Maurelle anything?"

Queen Mab's stern royal countenance relented just a bit. "No, nothing for me. Please enjoy yourself, Hyacinth. Find someone to dance with, and celebrate the solstice. I'll be giving my speech soon, and then I plan on doing the same."

"As you wish, Mother," Hyacinth said, curtsying as gracefully as she could with her wretched wings.

Queen Mab rested a hand on Hyacinth's shoulder, her silver nails biting into Hyacinth's skin. "You're such a good daughter. It's a relief on my nerves, really."

Hyacinth fought to maintain her own smile. She tried to be a good daughter. She really did. She was polite, pliable, obedient. Always striving to do the right thing, be the right thing, make her mother happy and proud. That version of herself should want nothing to do with Chloe and summer wine and dragons and bookshops in magical markets, but she *had* to sneak away tonight. She couldn't miss the chance to uncover the truth of where her father was and what had happened to him!

Hyacinth knew almost nothing about him. Her half sisters were the children of the old Moonshadow King, who'd passed away before Queen Mab met Evan Bramblefen. Then, Evan had disappeared when Hyacinth was barely two. Her mother always dismissed Hyacinth's questions, maintaining that talking about him would bring more heartbreak than hope.

Still, Hyacinth wondered. What kind of High Fae was he? Who were his parents? How had he met Queen Mab? What parts of him lived on in her? Was he still alive? Where had he disappeared to? What sort of magic did he have?

The questions had been haunting her for years.

The Wilting Sparrow Bookshop could have the answers. As long as she returned before the Solstice Ball ended, which would be hours after midnight, her mother wouldn't catch her. And, *if* Hyacinth did find out more about her father, then perhaps her mother would finally talk about him and help Hyacinth understand herself better.

A vision of Hyacinth and her mother bonding over memories of the missing Evan Bramblefen filled Hyacinth's mind. She'd felt different from her mother and half sisters long before her magic failed to materialize. Perhaps, if she knew more about her father, she'd finally feel like she belonged in her family.

It was enough to lend speed to her steps.

Fleeing the royal dais, she hurried toward an enormous gnarled weeping willow tree growing from the floor in one corner of the ballroom. It'd rooted there long before the castle was built, and it slept most of the time. When it was awake, the tree was known for declaiming melancholic poetry, so most of the High Fae gentry avoided getting too close, which suited Hyacinth's purposes. She ducked under the

branches. Hidden in the wall behind the tree was a door—one of many secret passages in the castle—that led from the ballroom to the garden.

Hyacinth turned the doorknob, but it was locked.

She swore to herself, and her stomach sunk.

Why was it locked? It'd been open this afternoon when she tested it. Who could've locked it? Was she going to have to sneak out through the ballroom entrance under Maurelle's gaze?

Before Hyacinth could figure out what to do, the weeping willow stirred, shaking its green tresses. The branches slithered across Hyacinth's fake wings. A rough whisper, like the wind rattling dried leaves, emerged from a horizontal crack across the tree trunk that might've been its mouth.

*“What a calamity, this merriment.*

*So fleeting, so fickle.*

*Echoes of joy lost in the frenzy of time. . . .”*

Hyacinth waited for more verses, but the willow fell silent. Poor thing had suffered through thousands of parties in its lifetime. Hyacinth would write subpar brooding poetry too if she were stuck eternally in this ballroom.

A boisterous cheer pulled Hyacinth's attention from the tree. The pixies stopped playing, and golden goblets of summer wine were passed around the dance floor. Queen Mab raised her glass.

“All magic begins in stories!” the queen declared.

“All magic begins in stories!” The crowd echoed back one of the most well-worn phrases in the Fae world. Hyacinth wasn't sure if it signified anything or if people simply threw it about.

Queen Mab went on: “Tonight, we celebrate the solstice, the day our world began, and the three sisters who built it! Tonight, we honor them. To Celestine! To Millicent! To Aria!”

She gave this speech every year. Hyacinth could recite the story of the three Celestial Sisters from memory.

*The three Celestial Sisters—Celestine of beginnings, Millicent of middles, and Aria of endings, goddesses of fate and fortune—were weary of the human world, where magic was fading and only a few could practice it. Riding their great dragon, Ora, to the end of the horizon, the Sisters spun a country of their own from magic, erecting a wall between their world and the human realm. Their children—the Fae—were many and varied, all of them gifted with some affinity for magic—be it glamours, or shape-shifting, vanishing, moving things, flying, and many more tricks. The High Fae were the Sisters’ favored children, and they were blessed with the most magic. They could do it with spells, bargains, or potions. But magic was in their bodies and in the land itself. All Fae could enjoy it.*

All Fae except for Hyacinth, of course.

She sighed as Queen Mab droned on. After three more toasts and a final rousing shout of “all magic begins in stories!” Queen Mab called out, “Let us dance through the night!” Then she pushed into the crowd. Maurelle hurried alongside her protectively.

Hyacinth had to go now, while they were distracted!

She crept away from the willow, headed in the direction of a table piled high with fruits and cakes. At the same moment, a pair of nobles—one a frog prince and the other a High Fae elf—twirled to a stop beside the table. The frog prince, Lord Helston from the Swamplands, popped a strawberry into his mouth.

The other gentleman, whose name she couldn't remember, drunkenly crashed into the table, sending a waterfall of food *and* Hyacinth tumbling to the floor. Off-balance from her dreadful wings, she got to her feet, brushing off her skirt and checking that her potion bottles hadn't broken.

"Apologies, apologies, Princess Hyacinth," Lord Helston said. He bowed low.

The elf also bowed, his hand over his heart. "Would you care to dance with us, Princess?"

Absolutely not. But could she really turn down two High Fae lords? What would her mother say to that?

She glanced up at the clock. Five minutes until ten. She had to get to the stables!

Hyacinth peered across the ballroom. Her mother was whispering with a plum-haired duchess. The two of them looked utterly absorbed in each other, and Maurelle stood nearby, her attention on the queen. Hyacinth decided to risk the scandal of refusing a dance.

"I cannot, my lords," Hyacinth said with a dip of her head. "Please, though, continue your revelries. I insist."

The two of them were back in each other's arms and dancing away from her before the sentence was out of her mouth. A few more drinks, and they'd surely forget they saw her.

Hyacinth pushed into the crowd. Hands grabbed her, laughter battered her ears, bodies grazed her wings, and the churning unruliness of the Solstice Ball drew her toward its center like a whirlpool.

She pushed harder, fighting against the dancers.

Someone stepped on her skirt, tearing part of it. Fingers raked down her arm as two women pulled her toward them for a waltz.

A gauzy bit of someone else's dress snagged on the chain of her enchanted compass, but she yanked it away. Step by forced step, Hyacinth struggled through the partygoers like someone shoving out of a dense hedge.

Then, suddenly, the swirl of dancers spit her out. Hyacinth's back ached from her wings being beaten about in the fray, but as she stumbled into the wide palace entry hall, her pounding heart slowed. She'd made it! She was free at last.

But the party was too close for comfort. The queen's guards farther down the hall too near at hand.

*Hurry away now. Before someone misses you.*

Her spider-silk slippers whispered over the marble floor as she ran out a back door of the palace, desperate to reach the stables and meet Chloe.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Chloe*

Chloe Wreckersfind tore through a maze of cobblestone alleys and muddy straw paths, racing toward the dragon barns in the center of Queen Mab's stable complex.

Her watch showed it was 9:48. Already? She should've left to meet Hyacinth twenty minutes ago, but she'd been finishing a letter to her twin sister, Anya, who was quite literally a world away. Anya might never read the words, but still, Chloe wasn't going to leave a letter unfinished.

A ridiculous thought.

Chloe didn't do anything by halves.

Besides, if she sprinted, she'd make it to the dragon barns before ten.

She pushed herself to go faster. Always lean, she'd become strong from months of shoveling shit in the stables. Learning to use a sword in her off hours had made her light on her feet as well. Her

sheathed blade banged against her thigh as she ran, and her mind moved almost as fast as her legs.

Had Hyacinth left the Solstice Ball yet? Would they really have time to make it to the market in Keldale? What would they find there? Why did Hyacinth want to go anyway? Chloe had been to the small river town a few times, but never to the Solstice Market. Would tonight be the night Chloe found a door back to her own world?

Would she return home if she did?

Another ridiculous thought. Of course she would.

There was nothing she'd really miss in the Fae world, right?

That wasn't entirely true, but she didn't dwell on the thought. She was a human marooned in Faerie. She *had* to get home. That was all she'd wanted for months. Nothing had changed—had it?

*Things with Hyacinth changed last night*, whispered the hopeful part of her that wanted impossible things. Chloe ignored it.

One kiss—excellent though it had been—was hardly a reason to never return to her own world.

But a kiss from Hyacinth....

Chloe spared a glance at Queen Mab's castle. The palace was tucked against a mountain that towered over the stables. Velvety blue light poured from the windows, casting long shadows across the lawns and gardens. Drunken snatches of song and lilting laughter floated on the summer breeze around Chloe as she ran. There was a waywardness on the wind that excited her. Supposedly, the veil between the Fae world and the spirit world thinned during the solstice.

Chloe didn't know if that was true, but the night air hummed with wildness, and she loved it.

*Stop thinking about the blasted night air and keep moving!*

Chloe grinned at her own fanciful thoughts and sped up her pace.

She ran past the barns where the queen's guests' coaches and the beasts that drew them—gryphons, fire salamanders, giant boars, and a host of other creatures—were kept. Taking a left at the horse enclosure, she sped onward. The stables were like a small city in themselves, and hundreds of common Fae lived and worked in them. There were grooms, coachmen, messengers, blacksmiths, healers, squires, and many others.

As far as Chloe knew, she was the only human employed there. If there were others, they were hidden like she was, and she had no way of—

“Chloe! There you are!” someone shouted, their voice loud, and tipsy with drink.

Skidding to a stop, Chloe turned to see her fellow stablehands Hester and Fellmi stumbling toward her. Hester was a silver-haired wood nymph. Tall, boxy, and “strong as my grandmother, a fine old oak,” she liked to say. She loved a bottle of summer wine, a dip in the lake behind the castle, and riding horses more than anything else in this world. Well, more than anything except for Fellmi. The bookish dwarf was Hester's opposite, which was probably why they were so smitten. Fellmi's parents were professors at the Crescent Atheneum, a magical college on the western border of the Moonshadow Kingdom, but Fellmi wanted a life full of adventure. How that had landed them cleaning up after Queen Mab's dragons, Chloe didn't know. But Fellmi seemed quite happy with the arrangement, and they were working on a book about dragons in their off time.

“Hester, Fellmi, I didn't expect to see you tonight,” Chloe said. As she spoke, she shifted the leather wristwatch on her arm. Beneath it

was the glamour token that disguised her human appearance. What her friends saw when they looked at her, she wasn't quite sure. But Hester liked to compliment her ears—"Such nice points!"—and Fellmi was always asking her if she was from the mountain elf clans, so it seemed to be working.

"Where are you off to?" Hester asked, raising one mossy eyebrow.

Fellmi peered at her. "Are you . . . running?" Their tone made it clear running was the worst sort of idea. "After the day we had?"

The three of them had spent hours stabling guests' mounts, brushing them down, feeding them, and being yelled at by the overwhelmed stablemaster, Plod, who had let them leave only an hour ago, when the night shift came in. Chloe had barely had time to go home, wash, and change clothing. (There hadn't really been time to write her sister that letter. But when missing her sister snuck up on her, she had to sit down and write to her immediately, or she'd start crying. Never an acceptable option.)

"I'm not running for *fun*," Chloe hastily assured Fellmi, before they could launch into a lecture on the benefits of slow living.

"I should hope not." Fellmi took a long swig from the bottle in their hand. "You're sweating, though."

Chloe swiped at the thin sheen of sweat on her forehead with her sleeve. So much for the clean shirt she'd changed into for her night out with Hyacinth. "It's nothing."

Hester slung an arm over Chloe's shoulder. A boozy smell wafted off her along with something that smelled like burnt kindling, likely from the fire salamander Hester had been wrangling earlier. "Where are you headed?"

"Sword practice . . ."

Hester snorted. “On the solstice? Not even Wendell will be training you tonight.”

Wendell was the retired stablemaster and former captain of the king’s guard who Chloe lived with. Hester was absolutely correct; he wouldn’t be training anyone tonight since he was deep in his cups with old pals.

“I am! Or, well, I was going to practice some sword drills, but first I’m meeting someone—”

“Someone?” Fellmi’s voice quirked with interest.

“A girl?” Hester poked Chloe in the side.

Heat rose in Chloe’s cheeks, and she ran a hand through her short red hair. “I’m not telling you anything.”

“It *is* a girl!” Fellmi crowed. “Who is she? Do we know her? Does she work in the stables?”

“Or in the palace?” Hester clapped a hand over her mouth in mock scandal. “Chloe, you naughty thing, are you kissing one of the palace maids?”

Words abandoned Chloe. If only they knew who she’d been kissing from the palace.

“I have to go,” she said, pulling away from her friends.

“Stay! Bring your girl and let’s join the party in the garden.” Hester pulled an apple from her pocket and took a bite. “Lots of trouble we can get into over there.”

Chloe shook her head. “Much as I’d love to find some trouble with you, I’m promised elsewhere.”

“We’ll miss you!” Fellmi pouted, taking another long swig from the bottle they held.

“Say hello to your girl from us!” Hester added.

“Not my girl,” Chloe said.

“Not yet!” Hester waggled her eyebrows again.

“Not ever. Now, really, I must go.”

“At least eat something—you’re going to need your energy for meeting this mysterious someone!” With a laugh, Hester tossed the apple in Chloe’s direction. Without thinking, Chloe drew her sword and split the apple in half in a well-practiced maneuver.

The halves fell at Hester’s feet.

“Well, you’re certainly still quick,” Hester said. “Even if you are sweaty.” She picked up the apple halves and offered one to Chloe.

Chloe took it with a grin. “See you tomorrow at work.”

“Not if we drink enough tonight and have to stay in bed all day!” Fellmi said cheerfully. They passed their bottle to Hester.

Chloe hurriedly wiped her sword and sheathed it. Then she took a bite of apple, waved to her friends, and hurried onward to the dragon barn.

The apple’s sweetness filled her mouth with the tingling Fae food offered her.

Everything Chloe had read about eating Fae food before she got stuck in this world a year ago, when she’d just been an apprentice realm mapper, had been wrong. She’d thought that no human could eat Fae food without feeling immediately, overwhelmingly disoriented or intoxicated, but that was wrong. As far as she could tell, the rules for humans consuming Fae food centered around hospitality.

According to Wendell, this was how it worked:

She could eat Wendell’s food with no enchanted effects at all because she was a guest in his home. That’s why she had a packet of homemade cookies, some dried meat he’d prepared, and a few apples

from his backyard tree in her bag. If she were to grow or prepare her own food, that would also be fine for eating.

She could also enjoy food or drink that was offered in friendship with some minor effervescent effects—a tingling in her hands and lightness in her head, almost like drinking fizzy alcohol—but it would pass after a few glowing minutes. That's why the apple from her friends was relatively harmless. And why the wine she'd drunk with Hyacinth last night made her feel giddy and reckless, but the effects faded once she'd gotten home.

*Was that the wine or Hyacinth's lips?*

Chloe wasn't entirely sure. Perhaps they'd revisit the question later.

The dragon barns were in view, and she slowed her pace, not wanting to dash up to Hyacinth like she was too eager.

As she caught her breath, Chloe considered whether she could buy some food at the market in Keldale. Hyacinth had mentioned food stalls with delicacies from all over the kingdom. Wendell had assured her purchased food would have minimal effects, since there was a bargain implied, but Chloe hadn't risked this yet because she rarely had enough money or the opportunity to purchase anything. Plus, she didn't want to chance eating Fae food that might make her forget who she was.

One thing Wendell had made very clear was this: Fae food she took without being offered and food or drink forced upon her were always dangerous. Too much of this sort of food could supposedly captivate a human, forcing them to do whatever the Fae they'd taken it from willed.

Chloe shuddered at that thought.

As she approached the dragon barn, more unsettling things she'd learned about humans in the Fae world wormed through her head.

Some humans were stolen into Fae, others found their way through Fae doors by accident, like she'd done, and still others had families who had been here for centuries. For the most part, humans were ignored by the High Fae. They had no social mobility. No real organization. There were loose collections scattered throughout the Moonshadow Kingdom, holding menial jobs and scraping by. Even the common Fae looked down on them.

Chloe also knew that some humans were seduced by Fae magic. Thinking to move up in the world, they'd bargain with the Fae, spending years of their lives, their beauty, or their health for trinkets and small boons. Fae magic was like a drug. They wanted more. They needed more. They craved it until it ruined them.

Sometimes she wondered if she'd end up like them if she stayed here long enough.

No. She was always careful, never got caught off guard, and she had her sword if anyone tried to force food on her.

She touched the pommel of her blade and glanced upward. Above her, a silver coin of a moon sat among the scattered stars. Were those the same stars that shone in Anya's world?

A pang went through Chloe as she thought about her twin sister. Would she wonder why Chloe had been gone so long, or was she so happy in her new life, she didn't miss Chloe at all?

Chloe cleared her throat and buried that thought. She could *not* be worrying about her sister when she was supposed to be meeting Hyacinth.

Where was Hyacinth?

Chloe checked her watch—9:55. If Hyacinth showed up soon and they managed to convince a dragon to fly them to Keldale—at least a half-hour flight!—they still wouldn't have much time to shop.

Perhaps Hyacinth was waiting on the other side of the barn?

Chloe circled the largest dragon barn, a grand structure that looked like a museum in Chloe's world. It had a vast entrance lit by torches, tall carved columns, and arched wooden doors towering above Chloe.

No Hyacinth.

Chloe leaned against a tower of hay bales, waiting. Straw prickled her back, and her mind whirled with the wildness of the night, her encounter with Hester and Fellmi, and all her thoughts of her sister.

Restless, she drew her blade and faced the straw bales. Sword fighting would calm her thoughts.

*Lunge—*

Her thoughts turned to kissing Hyacinth last night anyway.

*Thrust—*

Kissing Hyacinth had been a mistake.

*Stab—*

But what a delicious mistake indeed.

Chloe swore. This was not clearing her thoughts. Chloe redoubled her sword drills. Straw flew through the air, the golden filaments dancing in the torchlight.

*Lunge—*

Chloe *was* quite good at delicious mistakes.

*Stab—*

But she'd known it was a bad idea to drink the Fae summer wine with Hyacinth.

*Reset and lunge again—*

She'd known she should've pulled away instead of leaning forward.

*Thrust—*

She'd known High Fae princesses weren't supposed to kiss girls they thought were common Fae.

*Stab—*

If Hyacinth found out Chloe was a human, and therefore far worse to be kissing . . . well. That would only bring trouble.

Chloe stabbed again and again into the pile of straw.

What was she even doing worrying about kissing princesses? And where was Hyacinth?

Chloe lowered her sword and drew in a heaving breath. Her heart thumped furiously, and her thoughts raged onward.

She was *supposed* to be a realm mapper's apprentice, but she'd gotten trapped in the Fae world. She was *supposed* to be finding a way home so she could see Anya again. She was *not* supposed to be thinking about Princess Hyacinth like they had any future together.

*If that's the case, why are you so excited to see her tonight?*

Chloe scowled at the thought and picked up her sword again.

*Lunge—*

She would go with Hyacinth tonight. Fine.

*Thrust—*

Hyacinth wanted to find a shop, and Chloe would see if she could discover any new information about portals back to the human world. Fine.

*Stab—*

She would *not* make a big deal of their time together.

Chloe repeated the sword-fighting sequence she'd been trying to perfect again and again. Her arms ached, but she needed to drive thoughts of Hyacinth from her head.

*Lunge—*

Still, Princess Hyacinth filled her mind.

*Stab—*

Last night the princess had stepped into the garden, all soft curves and wide eyes, her skin painted with moonlight. How could Chloe have said no to a drink together? A dance? Hyacinth had cupped her cheek gently, whispering her name. They'd said goodbye too soon, hazy and sweet and promising something more.

The stable clocktower chimed ten, pulling Chloe out of her reverie.

"Where are you, Hyacinth?" she muttered.

Maybe she was inside already?

Worth a look.

Nerves tingling with anticipation—Chloe had been in the dragon barn before, but she wasn't supposed to be here at night, since that was a good way to get eaten or at least in trouble with the dragon keepers—she pushed open the doors of the dragon barn and stepped into the cavernous main enclosure. She breathed deeply as she took in the space. It smelled of moss, straw, metal, and smoky heat. Torches flickering with magical blue flame lined the walls, making azure shadows dance. Limned in their glow was a dragon paddock as wide as a city block. The queen's favorite dragon, Runa, curled up in the middle of it, snoring contentedly on a vast bed of moss. Her scales—each larger than Chloe's entire body—glittered blue-black. There was a saddle on Runa's back, as if the queen might go for a ride at any time. Even asleep, the dragon felt unfathomably mysterious and ancient.

Far above Runa, an enormous round window looked down from the barn's roof. The window was open, the night sky visible through it.

Feeling both brave and curious, Chloe tiptoed closer to the enclosure.

*Hello*, whispered a silky voice in her head.

Chloe brandished her sword. "Who's there?"

She spun around, but saw no one.

*You really can't miss me*, the voice said.

Chloe turned to see Runa staring back at her.

"You?" she squeaked. According to Wendell, dragons spoke only to their riders, and only if they felt like it.

Runa inclined her head. Her ancient eyes held Chloe's.

"How are you talking to me? I'm not . . ."

*Oh, I know you're not magical. Nor are you Fae, despite that little trinket in your arm. I know you're a human, Chloe Wreckersfind. What I don't know is why you're here tonight.*

Chloe's hand shook as she held her sword. "I'm meeting Princess Hyacinth."

Runa scoffed, smoke puffing from her nose. *Try again.*

"I'm here—well, we're here, or she's going to be here, to see if we can get a ride to the Solstice Market . . . if you'd be inclined to take us." Chloe hadn't even considered that she'd have to talk to the dragon before she borrowed it.

*Aaab. Very well then. Perhaps I will grant that wish. I'd love to stretch my wings. But first you must tell me a story. Dragons really are quite fond of stories, you know.*

Chloe fought to find the right words. "If I tell you a story, you're going to let us ride you?"

Runa smirked—did dragons smirk? *Yes. Tell me the story of how you met Hyacinth, please. And put that sword away. It's thinner than my smallest claw. Don't insult me by waving it about.*

Chloe put her sword away. Runa's neck snaked over the edge of the paddock. Her eyes glittered in the torchlight. Chloe had a very good view of her teeth.

She swallowed hard. The story of how she'd met Hyacinth was neither all that exciting nor interesting, but it would have to do. "It was the end of my first week in Fae, when I was sitting in a hidden corner of the garden, writing my sister a letter. Hyacinth popped out of a secret passage in the garden wall with a book, and she quite literally ran into me. I think we surprised each other so much, there was nothing to do but start talking. I thought she was the loveliest girl I'd ever seen, though I have no idea what she must've thought of me."

It was the same hidden spot in the garden where they'd met last night. The same place where Chloe had spent so much time over the last year, daydreaming about kissing Hyacinth. The same place they'd finally—

A satisfied rumbling left Runa's lips, along with a puff of smoke. *A romance from the first moments, very enchanting.*

"Not a romance," Chloe insisted, though the words sounded hollow even to her.

*Go on then, tell me more. You may climb into my saddle to wait for the princess. You'll have a better view of her there as she walks in.*

Spinning more of the story of the first day she'd met Hyacinth—the conversation they'd had, the way it had made her feel—Chloe climbed into Runa's saddle.

“What do we do now?” Chloe asked Runa.

*Wait for your girl, I suppose.*

“She’s not my girl,” Chloe said, echoing what she’d told Hester and Fellmi not so long ago.

*As you insist. That was a lovely story. Thank you.*

“Chloe?” Hyacinth called out, interrupting her conversation with the dragon. A loud clanking filled the room, signaling Hyacinth’s approach as the trinkets on her belt clattered with each step. Why she always carried so many things, Chloe didn’t know, but she’d gotten used to the noise.

“I’m up here! On Runa!”

Hyacinth strode toward the paddock, and Chloe’s breath caught in her throat. Tonight Hyacinth’s curly hair was piled in a waterfall of ringlets. She wore a diaphanous dress with an enormous tulip-shaped skirt. Lantern light glinted over her light-purple skin and the tips of her pointed ears. She also had wings on her back. Where had those come from?

Chloe exhaled slowly to calm her ridiculous racing heart as Hyacinth climbed the ladder to Runa’s saddle. They were just friends. Nothing unusual about two friends who’d kissed each other last night borrowing a dragon for an illicit nighttime flight.

Certainly not.

Despite her dress and wings, in a matter of seconds, Hyacinth had settled in behind Chloe. “Hi,” she whispered, her voice warm in Chloe’s ear. “Sorry I’m late.”

A shiver went through Chloe at the words. At Hyacinth’s closeness. At the honeyed scent of her skin. Chloe swallowed hard. “You’re not that late, and I’ve been telling Runa stories.”

“She spoke to you? She speaks only to my mother!”

Before Chloe could say anything else, Runa got to her feet, stretching.

*If you're ready, we'll be flying now. Hang on.*

Chloe had never ridden a dragon—stablehands didn't get that privilege—and she nearly slipped out of the saddle with Runa's first step. It was only her grip on the saddle horn that saved her. How embarrassing to nearly fall off in front of Hyacinth! Chloe gritted her teeth. They hadn't even left the building, and already she was in trouble. She squeezed her thighs against the saddle. Hopefully, this wasn't too different than riding a horse.

In front of her, Runa snorted, almost as if she could hear the thought.

*It's much better than riding a horse,* Chloe amended in her mind.

With one graceful move, Runa jumped to a perch on a ledge a bit higher up. Once there, she opened her wings, which spanned the length of the barn. With three flaps, she soared through the round window and landed on the roof. She chuffed happily as the wind hit her face. Chloe grinned as well.

They were really doing this! Chloe Wreckersfind, former “worst orphan in the entire city” according to the headmistress of the orphanage she'd grown up in, former miserable seamstress, and current lost human in the Fae world, was riding the queen's dragon.

Anya would never believe her. She could barely believe it herself.

“Let's fly, please.” Chloe's heart pounded in her chest so loudly, she was certain Hyacinth could hear it.

*With pleasure.*

Runa strode toward the edge of the stable roof and launched herself into the sky. Chloe whooped as they climbed. All worries were driven from her head, replaced by the feel of the warm air against her skin, the dragon spiriting them toward the Solstice Market, and Hyacinth's arms around her waist.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Hyacinth*

The stables and palace grew smaller below them, soon replaced by a vast expanse of forest.

“Isn’t this marvelous?” Chloe called out, her words nearly whipped away by the wind. The stablehand was all sharp angles, and she smelled like hay, cinnamon, and a rich, woody fragrance. Hyacinth inhaled sharply, savoring their closeness. For the first time all night, she felt the sparkling headiness of intoxication.

“It’s not terrible,” Hyacinth admitted, swallowing a lump of nervousness. She was risking so much leaving the party and riding Runa, but it had to be worth it. She *had* to find the Wilting Sparrow Bookshop. She *would* find out more about her father tonight!

Memories of her father rose in her mind as Runa raced toward Keldale. He had dark hair like hers, kind eyes, and a laugh big as the glittering night sky all around her. He’d read Hyacinth stories, doing voices of the three Celestial Sisters, or giggling with her through

the tale of bold imps who tailored a dress of invisible water lilies for a hag. At least Hyacinth *thought* those were memories. They were foggy with the fifteen years that had passed. Maybe she'd made them up after seeing the portrait of her family hanging in her mother's library. Maybe her father had done none of those things. Maybe he'd been a terrible father.

She really had no idea.

She desperately wanted to find out.

"You alright back there?" Chloe called out.

Hyacinth squeezed Chloe's waist once in affirmation. Even if she didn't remember her father at all, she had to try to discover more.

Runa flew fast, and the miles whipped by. Hyacinth's dreadful fake wings caught the wind, but they stayed affixed to her back. Her enchanted compass rattled against the tiny potion bottles, and some of her curls tumbled loose from her bun, but she wasn't going to release Chloe's waist to brush them out of her eyes. Instead, she looked to the left, where the stars shone like pieces of glass flung across the moonshadow-dark marble floors of the palace. It really was lovely to be out of the palace. Sometimes she forgot how big the world was outside her mother's walls.

In what felt like no time, the lights of Keldale came into view. It was a walled town hugging the Mossley River on two sides. Runa descended in a controlled fall that tore a scream out of Chloe and Hyacinth. She landed on the edge of town. There was a stable there with room for Queen Mab's dragons, because the queen often traveled this way when meeting with official delegates. Still, the groom looked surprised to see them land. He jumped to attention as Hyacinth and Chloe clambered off Runa's back.

“My ladies,” he said, bowing. Chloe snorted at the formal address, and Hyacinth elbowed her. The groom bowed again, nearly falling over. “We weren’t expecting anyone from the court. You are from the court, yes? I just assumed because you’re on the queen’s dragon. She’s not here too, is she? Bramble and fern, I don’t have her usual carriage prepared.” He looked around nervously.

Hyacinth took pity on the groom. “The queen isn’t here. But, please, don’t worry yourself on her account. My friend and I have some shopping to do. We won’t be terribly long, but see that Runa is comfortable, please.”

The groom’s face relaxed. “Of course, of course. We always have Runa’s favorite meals and paddock ready.”

He bowed a half dozen more times as they strode out onto a wide cobblestone street.

“Put this on.” Chloe pulled a simple gray wool cloak out of the bag strapped across her chest. “Your dress is outrageous.”

“It’s not *outrageous*. It’s High Fae fashion.” Even as she said it, Hyacinth felt ridiculous. She ran her hands over her glittering gold honeysuckle bodice and tulip skirt. Some part of her had hoped Chloe liked her in this dress. That she’d thought it was pretty. Her fingers slipped through the silvery compass chain, and she touched the slip of paper in her pocket again to ground herself.

They weren’t here so Hyacinth could preen for Chloe in her Solstice Ball dress. What a revolting thought.

Wasn’t it?

Yes. It absolutely was. Chloe probably didn’t give an enchanted mulberry about what Hyacinth was wearing.

“Also,” Chloe continued, interrupting Hyacinth’s spiraling thoughts, “since when do you have wings? Those weren’t there last night.”

Called out, Hyacinth glared at Chloe. It was a fair question, but Chloe couldn’t learn Hyacinth lacked magic. That wasn’t a secret for sharing. What would Chloe think of her if she knew the truth? Hyacinth didn’t even want to know.

So she raised a shoulder, flicking one of the wings, and lied. “These wings are my magical inheritance. I call them up for special occasions.”

“Can you make them disappear now?”

If only she could.

“Absolutely not.” She searched her mind for any excuse. “That’s a very intimate piece of High Fae magic. Not one I can do on the *street* of all places.”

She spoke haughtily, hoping Chloe had no idea about magic the High Fae might use behind closed doors. Her fingers flitted again over the potion bottles on her belt.

*Juniper heart for illusion. A moon-drenched secret for levitation. Bitterroot berry for healing. Gray tendrils of fog for vanishing. Wraith tears for compulsion. Dragonheart ashes for fire and ruin.*

Chloe rolled her eyes and shoved the cloak into Hyacinth’s chest. “Whatever. Far be it for me to question the High Fae and their many magics. But you’re going to get robbed. Wear the cloak, please. Maybe we can’t hide the wings, but you can *try* to blend in, Princess.”

“Fine,” Hyacinth huffed. She wrapped the cloak around her shoulders and covered her dress. It was itchy and smelled of horses, but it did make her feel less conspicuous.

“Ready now?” Chloe asked, looking around. She glanced at her watch. “It’s ten forty-five. The market closes at midnight, right?”

Hyacinth nodded grimly. They really didn’t have much time to find the bookshop and the truths she hoped it held. “Let’s get moving.”

They walked quickly into Keldale. Although Hyacinth had been in the city before with her mother, she’d never been here at night, let alone secretly. It was exhilarating.

The town always bustled with diplomats, royalty, and merchants. The Solstice Market, however, brought traders eager to bargain their wares and lured tourists from all over the kingdoms.

Hyacinth’s heart thrummed as they turned onto a wide cobbled street. The houses in this part of Keldale were smashed together like crooked teeth, and many had roofs and balconies hanging over their neighbors.

The market bustled with common Fae—pixies, gnomes, wood and mountain elves, dwarfs, horned redcaps, fauns, goblins, and many others. There were also groups of fox-tailed High Fae, and some winged members of the gentry, whom Hyacinth hid from by pulling her cloak over her head. Surprisingly, there were even a few humans carrying packages for the Fae or sweeping the streets. Hyacinth didn’t see them at Queen Mab’s court often, and her eyes lingered on a thin, stoop-shouldered woman with brown hair that hung in a braid down her back. The woman’s hand rested on an emerald-green moss cloak set out on a table a few feet away from where Hyacinth and Chloe stood. Behind the table, a swamp hag with teeth like pebbles bargained with the woman.

Moss cloaks were good for healing broken hearts. Hyacinth knew that from the trader who’d tried to sell her one last month.

*Who broke your heart?* Hyacinth wondered as she overheard the human woman beg the hag for the cloak. The hag shook her head once, and then the woman leaned in and made another suggestion Hyacinth couldn't hear. The hag must've agreed to that offer, because she shook the woman's hand. There was a flash of green light, and the human woman cried out. Her dark hair turned bone white in a breath.

Beside Hyacinth, Chloe sucked in a quick breath. Hyacinth's own blood ran fast in her veins. She'd never seen a human bargain happen before, and she was vaguely sick to her stomach, though she couldn't put her finger on why.

As the woman turned, her hard gaze met Hyacinth's for a moment. What had she traded for that moss cloak? Years? Beauty?

"C'mon," Chloe said beside Hyacinth. Her eyes narrowed on the woman and then she turned away abruptly. "Let's cross the bridge."

Hyacinth pushed the human woman and her moss cloak from her mind as she took in the wide stone bridge in front of them. It spanned the Mossley River, crowded with shops, tents, and vendors. Long barges floated along the waterway, each advertising different wares. Jaunty music, haggling, laughter, and the hum of conversation filled the air alongside the smells of roasting meats, pastries, and ale. Golden torchlight flickered off the water and along the streets. If Hyacinth had more time, she'd love to get lost among the stalls and see what sorts of magical items, spell scrolls, and other helpful trinkets might be on offer. Instead, she studied dozens of wooden signs as they fought their way across the packed bridge, hoping desperately that she'd spot the Wilting Sparrow.

There were so many booksellers! Lost in a Book, the Page Keeper, Tatiana's Tomes, Will-o'-the-Wisps, but not the Wilting Sparrow.

A long, frustrated sigh left her lips.

"Are you alright?" Chloe asked. She pulled Hyacinth out of the crowd's path, toward a narrow ledge along the river.

Hyacinth touched her potion bottles for comfort, her chest tight with worry. "No! It's already getting late—"

"It's not that late." Chloe looked at her watch. "Only eleven; we still have an hour."

"That's not enough time! Soon, the vendors will go home or shut up shop, and then we'll have to wait a full year, and I'll never find—"

Chloe's finger tapped the end of Hyacinth's nose, startling her out of her rant. "Princess?"

"Yes?" Hyacinth didn't know whether to laugh, rage at being bopped on the nose like a puppy, or cry in frustration.

"Breathe, please."

"How am I supposed to do that when I'm *never* going to find it!?"

A smirk pulled at Chloe's lips, which made Hyacinth want to shake her.

"What are you *never* going to find?" Chloe asked.

"A specific shop. One that I've heard about . . ."

"What's it called?"

"The Wilting Sparrow. Oh!" Hyacinth's fingers shot to the compass chain on her belt. "I suppose I can use my compass!"

What good was hauling around all these magical items if she forgot to use them? Hyacinth flipped open the lid of the compass.

Chloe scoffed. "You don't need a compass."

"It's a magical one, I'll have you know."

“You don’t need magic either. We’ll ask someone.” She strode over to a nearby stall to talk to the gnomish woman behind the counter. The woman started nodding and pointing.

Why hadn’t Hyacinth thought to ask someone? She snapped her compass shut, shame at her own foolishness heating her cheeks.

She hadn’t thought to ask because she was a princess and often had other people anticipate her every need. But here, she needed to ask for what she wanted. It was a refreshing, delicious thought. One that whispered of freedom and much more. *If you want something, ask for it.*

She wanted to kiss Chloe again.

“Bramble and marsh, not that again,” she muttered to herself. “Focus, Princess. You are here to learn more about your father, not—”

Hyacinth closed her lips over the rest of her self-chastisement as Chloe walked back toward her. A smile lit her face, and she brandished a piece of paper. “According to Tulip, the shop owner I spoke to, the Wilting Sparrow is one of the oldest shops in the market. It’s on a barge. Extremely magical, and very hard to miss once you’re deep enough in there. She drew me a map!”

Relief and a touch of wonder filled Hyacinth. Chloe really was magnificent. Smart, capable, the best sort—

“Are you coming, Princess?” Chloe took off through the warren of boats, stalls, alleys, and walkways, adeptly stepping around customers and over each small bridge they encountered.

All Hyacinth could do was keep up.

Before long, they reached the center of the market—and there it was: the Wilting Sparrow. It was a long barge painted bright purple.

Lanterns hung outside its arched door, their light bouncing off the water. Hyacinth eagerly clasped the scrap of paper with her father's name on it. Her heart raced.

This was it! If she was going to learn more about where her father had been all these years, maybe it would be here.

"Let's go." She started off.

"Ermmmmm . . ." Chloe was fixating on something farther down the market. She glanced quickly between the bookshop and the rest of the nearby stalls. Hyacinth could see tables of swords, a key shop, some animals under a tent, and much more.

"Go on," Hyacinth said, grateful for the opportunity to enter the bookshop alone. "I'll be fine. Books aren't dangerous."

Chloe bit her lower lip. "Are you sure, Princess?"

Hyacinth pointedly did not look at Chloe's lips. "I am. Now go, see the market."

"Be careful, okay?" Chloe pulled Hyacinth into a hug before she could say anything else.

Hyacinth exhaled sharply. Instead of doing what she wanted—pulling Chloe's lips to hers—Hyacinth patted Chloe on the back twice because she didn't know what else to do with her hands.

Really, was she the most awkward girl to ever live? What was wrong with her? Couldn't she hug a friend to say, *Thanks for coming with me to this wild market?*

She could. It's just that being this close to Chloe was making Hyacinth think about last night. Her gaze returned to Chloe's annoyingly perfect lips.

"I'll be back soon," Chloe promised. "Don't go anywhere else without me."

“I’ll be right here,” Hyacinth murmured as Chloe released her from the hug and hurried down the street.

Chloe’s red hair was soon lost in the crowd. Still reeling from the embrace—or maybe that was the leftover excitement of the dragon ride and the energy of the market?—Hyacinth strode into the bookshop.



The Wilting Sparrow was bigger on the inside than it seemed from the outside. The narrow barge somehow magically expanded into a room that stretched in several directions. Bookshelves rose along every wall, stretching far higher than they should have given the dimensions of the barge’s roof. Books of all shapes, sizes, and descriptions crowded the shelves, and many were stacked on the floor. A painted sign above the door declared, *ALL MAGIC BEGINS IN STORIES!* As far as Hyacinth could see, there was no one else in the shop.

“Hello?” she called out.

No answer. She walked past a yellow velvet sofa piled high with books. The barge rocked on the water with her every step, but Hyacinth paid it no mind. Gently, she ran her fingers along the closest shelf, grazing the books. She moved deeper into the shop. How would she find what she needed in this muddle?

She pulled the slip of paper from her pocket. “Is anyone here?”

A clattering noise from somewhere near the ceiling answered her. “I’ll be right down!” someone cheerfully replied.

A book tumbled off a shelf, but before it could hit the ground, an enormous spider caught it. Hyacinth’s eyes widened as she took the

spider in. He wore four pairs of spectacles over his eight eyes and an embroidered waistcoat covered his round belly. The spider lovingly placed the fallen book back on the shelf and then scrambled down from a nook in the ceiling.

“Hello there!” the spider called out. “Apologies for missing your entrance, but welcome to the Wilting Sparrow! I’m Dalton B. Wordstartle, proprietor, reader, story spinner, and book lover. What can I help you find?” The spider blinked at her from behind the spectacles.

Surprise overwhelmed Hyacinth. She’d never seen a spider as large or as dapper as Dalton B. Wordstartle.

Momentarily speechless, Hyacinth pulled the scrap of paper from her pocket and offered it to him.

The spider’s eyebrows—did spiders have eyebrows?—shot upward. “Where did you get this?”

“I found it in a history book in my mother’s library. Do you know what book it’s from?” Hyacinth didn’t dare to hope. There were so many here, and she wasn’t even sure of the title this torn page came from.

Dalton, however, was undaunted. “Of course! I know every book that’s been here and every one that will find its way back to the Sparrow. Part of how my magic works. All magic begins in stories and so on.”

The familiar words struck Hyacinth as strange, though she’d heard her mother declare them in the ballroom not long ago and they were written on the bookshop’s wall. But here in this floating, enchanted space, they felt imbued with more heft.

She couldn’t linger on the thought, however, because Dalton moved over to the desk in the center of the shop and started tossing

aside books with every one of his eight legs. He flung them over his shoulder with alarming zeal.

“Has to be here somewhere. I recall seeing it earlier this evening, but with the trip to the market, it might’ve gotten shuffled, and then who knows. . . .” He moved away from the desk and scuttled back up a bookshelf.

“Do you need any help?” Hyacinth called out, dodging a pair of books that sailed past her head.

“Absolutely not. I know what I’m looking for, just need to— Ah-ha! Here we go!” Dalton stopped flinging books and held up an emerald-green one with a triumphant flourish. He hurried down the bookshelf and handed it to Hyacinth.

A pattern of diamonds and thick double lines decorated the outside of the tome. There was no title on the spine or the front, and a large piece of malachite sat in the center of the book’s cover. A dark vein split the mossy-green gem, making it look almost like an eye. Although the book wasn’t very large, it had weight. It seemed to grow heavier each second Hyacinth held it. The deckled edges were rough cut, and silver clasps lined them.

Anticipation shivered through Hyacinth as she caressed the clasps. “Are you sure this is the one?”

Dalton returned the scrap of paper. “Undoubtedly. Open it.”

Nerves tingling in anticipation, Hyacinth undid the clasps and opened the book. The first page was torn, and she fit the scrap into the space.

A gasp left her lips as she read:

*Property of Evan Bramblefen.*

PURCHASED AT THE WILTING SPARROW BOOKSHOP, KELDALE.

SHOP HOURS DURING THE SOLSTICE MARKET ONLY.

IF LOST, PLEASE RETURN

TO DALTON B. WORDSTARTLE,

WHO WILL MAKE SURE IT FINDS ITS WAY BACK TO ITS OWNER.

Hyacinth hugged it to her chest, happiness, worry, and delight surging through her. “This belonged to my father! I can’t believe I found it.”

Dalton goggled at her. “Your father is Evan Bramblefen?”

Hyacinth nodded and Dalton stepped closer.

“I suppose that means you—well, no it can’t be! Are you little Hyacinth? Grown so big already?”

“I am Hyacinth.”

Dalton beamed at her.

Hyacinth felt like she should say something to address Dalton’s astonishment that she’d managed to grow up, but her head was full of desperate questions. “What is this book? How do you have it? Where is my father? Can you really make sure this gets back to him like it says here?”

She stabbed a finger at the note on the paper:

IF LOST, PLEASE RETURN

TO DALTON B. WORDSTARTLE,

WHO WILL MAKE SURE IT FINDS ITS WAY BACK TO ITS OWNER.

“A fantastic bunch of questions!” Dalton replied. “But I’m afraid I can’t be too much help. I haven’t seen Evan in fifteen years. Last time

I saw him, we met at the Wild Root Inn, and he was on his way to the Labyrinth. There was no—”

“The Labyrinth?” Hyacinth interrupted, excitement about clues regarding her father overtaking her manners. “What was he doing in a maze?”

“Not a maze, child. *The Labyrinth*. An ancient, dangerous place at the edge of the map.”

Hyacinth had never heard of such a place, and she’d gone through a passionate geography phase when she was ten. At the time, she’d known every map in her mother’s library like she knew the potions at her belt and the names of her many half sisters.

So why wasn’t *the Labyrinth* ringing a bell?

But there was a better question that she put forward first, in order to hide her ignorance of something she’d apparently missed.

“What would my father want with a—I mean *the Labyrinth* on the edge of the map?”

Dalton shrugged two of his shoulders. “He was a bit cagey on the details. There have always been rumors of a magical library there—something your father had such a weakness for—and I’ve heard whispers of a portal to another world. But I’m not sure. Lots of people whisper about the place, but none return.”

Hyacinth held up the green book. “How did you get my father’s book?”

“When we crossed paths at the Wild Root Inn, Evan and I drank the night away, talking of our travels, and then he departed early the next morning. It wasn’t until he was long gone that I realized he’d left this book. He must’ve forgotten it.”

Disappointment knotted in Hyacinth's belly. "Is that really all you know? Can't you tell me anything more? Please?"

All of Dalton's eight eyes flew open in surprise. "Do you know nothing about him at all, child?" he said, in a heartbreakingly gentle voice.

"Very little," Hyacinth ground out, not wanting his pity. "My mother doesn't speak of him."

Dalton sighed. "I suppose she wouldn't. I don't know much of their story, but Evan and I were friends long before he met Queen Mab. He was the finest scholar I've ever known. He spoke so fondly of Mab and of you that night at the Wild Root Inn. Said you were the brightest toddler he'd ever seen. Even showed me a little picture he'd drawn of you."

The idea of her father flashing a hand-drawn picture of her to his drinking buddy melted any resolve Hyacinth had to be mad at Dalton for pitying her.

Hyacinth managed a watery smile. "If that's true, why did he leave me?"

"He said he desperately needed to get into the Labyrinth to help his sister. . . ."

"His sister?"

Who was her father's sister? That would be Hyacinth's aunt. How many other people were on her father's side of the family? Suddenly, the canyon of things she didn't know opened at Hyacinth's feet. She hated it. She wanted clear answers about her father, not more questions!

Dalton shrugged. "I don't know much more. He promised to tell me all about it when he got back, but he was in a hurry. That's

probably why he forgot this book. He was distracted the last time I saw him. Head even more in the clouds than usual.”

Hyacinth ran her fingers along the edge of the green book again. Perhaps there was some clue inside that would help her better understand her father. She turned to the first page, and her stomach plummeted.

“*The Traveler’s Guide to the Moonshadow Kingdom?*” she said flatly. It was so ordinary. Her mother had several similar books about famous places throughout the kingdom.

Dalton nodded. “A very useful book indeed. Your father was curious about everything and working on his own guide—one much more detailed and full of history—to the Moonshadow Kingdom. His notes are scattered throughout the margins.”

Hyacinth gaped at him for a moment, frustration sharpening her words. “Well, what do I do with it?”

She’d waited so long to uncover more about her father, and here was his book—but it was just a travel guide of the Moonshadow Kingdom. That was useless!

“There’s a map too,” Dalton offered, as if sensing her disappointment. He flipped to the front of the book and unfolded it.

It showed the Moonshadow Kingdom, and there were some familiar places on it, including Queen Mab’s castle, Keldale, and the Crescent Athenium to the east. But there, on the far western side of the map, was a labyrinth with a great tree at its center. Why wasn’t that on any of her mother’s maps? Why had none of her tutors mentioned it in their geography lessons? There were also a few other unfamiliar places drawn onto the map including the Wild Root Inn, a mountain marked as *Hall of the Mountain King*, and a cottage near the Swamplands.

She flipped through the pages of the book, noting the scrawl in the margins. “These are my father’s notes?”

Dalton nodded.

“And this is *the* Labyrinth he was going to?” She pointed to the maze on the edge of the map.

Dalton nodded again.

“So, if I wanted, I could follow this map there.”

Dalton blinked, every one of his eyes holding her gaze. “Oh no, child. Don’t go to the Labyrinth. No one returns from there. Your father wouldn’t—”

“But you said my father was going there. Do you think that’s where he is?”

“I think that’s where he was heading, but I don’t know if he made it.”

Hyacinth refused to consider that.

“Suppose he did make it to the Labyrinth,” she pressed. “Why hasn’t he come back? Where is he now? What if—” Before Hyacinth could press further, two water nymphs and a goblin matron walked into the shop.

“Excellent questions, my dear, but ones I cannot answer. Now, please excuse me.” Dalton scurried past her to greet the other customers.

“How much do I owe you for this book?” Hyacinth called out.

“You don’t owe me anything, child. But I wish you—and your father—much luck. If you find Evan again, please let him know I’d love a visit. I’ve got several rare titles he’d be thrilled to study.”

With that, Dalton hurried away.

Clutching the book to her chest, she called out a thank-you to Dalton and left the shop. Chloe wasn’t among the shoppers milling

about outside, so Hyacinth leaned against the canal railing and flipped the book open.

Maybe there was a clue in here that would reveal why her father went to the Labyrinth and how she might get there herself.

“Let’s spend some time together, Father,” she whispered, running her fingers fretfully over first her potion bottles and then along the enchanted compass’s chain at her belt.

In a matter of minutes, Hyacinth was immersed in her father’s world and his guide to the Moonshadow Kingdom. The noise and bustle of the market fell away.

Or it did until Chloe came barreling toward her, shouting at her to run.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Chloe*

As Chloe strode into the market after leaving Hyacinth at the Wilting Sparrow, she could still feel the princess standing rigid in her arms. Clearly not wanting to be hugged. Why had Chloe hugged her? It'd been an instinct. Just a quick, friendly goodbye, like she'd give to Hester and Fellmi, but plainly one Hyacinth had no interest in.

Well. Good.

Neither of them had mentioned last night's flirtation yet, which led Chloe to assume it had probably meant nothing to Hyacinth. Who was a princess, for bramble's sake. Of course, she wasn't still thinking about the taste of Chloe's lips. *Hyacinth* was on a mission to find something at a bookshop. Something that she didn't need Chloe for.

It hurt more than Chloe wanted to admit, and so she had hurried away from the bookshop, desperate to lose herself in the chaos.

She wasn't exactly sure what she was looking for tonight beyond something that would help her get home. But an old, familiar hunger for wanting to see it all, experience it all, explore new places, and see new things overtook her as she walked away from the bookshop. The Solstice Market was full of intoxicating smells, irresistible stalls, and fascinating-looking Fae. Chloe's curiosity got the best of her.

Something in her gut tugged her to the heart of the market.

*Perhaps what you're looking for is out here,* it seemed to whisper.

Of course, that was the problem with Chloe—what she was looking for was always out there somewhere. That's how she'd wound up an apprentice realm mapper.

As Chloe moved deeper into the market, she thought about Marcel, the time-traveling master realm mapper with whom she'd left her world.

Her first trips with Marcel were amazing. They slipped in and out of magical doors, mapping the golden and silver dragon threads that wove through time and space. Chloe didn't understand all the theory behind it, but she knew dragons were ancient powerful beings who connected different realms. Some of them left routes between worlds. Savvy travelers and realm mappers followed these to explore new places. In her time with Marcel, Chloe had gone back in time hundreds of years and seen incredible things—like the building of ancient temples and the founding of her city of Severon. She'd visited countless realms, including the Fae realm that contained the Moonshadow Kingdom.

But every time she'd done so, she had Marcel with her. She'd known where the door was to get back to her time and the city of Severon, where her sister lived.

Her first solo trip into Fae was meant to be a quick one. She didn't even tell Marcel about it. While he was away on business, she crept through the magical door he kept open and wandered into Fae. She wanted to show him she was ready to work alone, following up on a rich vein of golden dragon thread Marcel had been mapping for years. She was going to gather information on Queen Mab's dragons, nothing more, nothing less.

But the door she'd come through slammed closed. The enchantment Marcel had taught her to open a new door didn't work. Eventually, Wendell, the Fae stablemaster, found her after her third day of hiding and trying to figure out a way home. He fed her—thank goodness, since she'd refused to eat or drink anything beyond a bit of water since her arrival—gave her fresh clothes, got her a job, and offered her a place to sleep. She hadn't even known there were other doors between the human world and the Fae one until a few months ago, when two humans had come through one to steal Queen Mab's jewels. Chloe had almost made it back home with them, but she'd missed her chance, and Queen Mab had since closed all the doors between the worlds. For good. Which meant Chloe was stuck unless she found another way home.

Did she really think a clue was waiting here? At the Solstice Market?

Stranger things had happened. Maybe there was a key to a door Queen Mab had forgotten, or maybe—

“Are you looking for a new sword, fair one?”

Chloe shoved her thoughts of Marcel and doors back to her world aside and appraised her surroundings. She'd wandered into a sword-selling stall. A small creature wearing a pointed hat and

a gray cloak peered up at her from behind the blade-buried table. Warts and wrinkles covered his face, and his yellow eyes sparkled. He picked up the largest broadsword on the table with surprising grace given his size. “This one will protect anyone who carries it from flying raptor attacks.”

“That seems wildly specific,” Chloe said. She rested her hands on her own sword.

The creature nodded. “All of these are very specific swords for very purposeful tasks.” He picked up a pinkie-sized dagger with a serrated edge. “This one is enchanted to deliver the killing blow to an enemy after exactly a decade of feuding. And this one”—here he picked up a vicious-looking rapier—“is intended only for piercing through a troublesome knot of worries.”

Chloe nodded gravely as she fought back a laugh. The Fae world was still so strange, but she loved that there was a sword for every purpose. “I think I’ll stick to my sword, but thank you for showing them to me.”

The creature bowed low, still holding the rapier. He nearly impaled himself with the movement, then let loose a stream of curses.

Hurrying away from that stall, Chloe passed cloth sellers and acorn hat makers. Game shops and taverns. Arrow fletchers and barrel smiths. Gem artists and fortune tellers. How could she possibly find what she was looking for when there was so much to see?

Pausing for a moment to get her bearings, she glimpsed a pair of humans in an alley, dancing around a purple-flamed fire with languid grace. Both of them had the hollowed-out look of those who’d been chasing Fae magic for too long, and their clothes hung from them in tatters. Chloe’s stomach twisted. Should she give them

some money or try to help them find a place to sleep? She had a few coppers in her bag, but would food offered in friendship help them, or were they happy as they were?

Chloe didn't know, but the question troubled her mind.

*You don't have long before the market closes. Keep searching for what you need.*

Wrenching her gaze away from the other humans, she strode toward a perfume stall farther down the lane.

But before she could ask about the scents, a stall at the back of a narrow alley lined with trash cans snagged her attention. Flickering torchlight illuminated an assortment of animals in wood and metal cages. A broad redcap with ram horns protruding from his forehead, arms the size of Chloe's torso, and a knit hat on his head hunched over the table. He ate a piece of meat with a gleaming serrated knife. His brows were drawn together, and with every bite, his scowl seemed to deepen.

None of that worried Chloe in the least. It was what sat on the table next to the redcap that consumed Chloe's attention.

"Tiny! Dragon!" she exclaimed, far louder than she'd intended. Ignoring the fetid-smelling puddles and the piles of trash, she hurried over to the stall, taking in the dragon. It was the size of a teacup with silvery-blue skin. One of its wings was bent at an odd angle, and it looked utterly miserable in the too-small birdcage the redcap had shoved it into.

The tiny dragon looked up at Chloe as she approached, as if she'd spoken to it. Enormous purple eyes met her own, and the creature whimpered like a kitten mewling.

Chloe's heart nearly shattered.

“Hush, worthless,” the redcap snarled. He poked his knife through the cage, sending the dragon skittering backward.

“Leave him alone!” Chloe cried. A ferocious protective feeling lit her every nerve. She’d never seen a dragon so small—not even in Marcel’s books—and according to Wendell, only High Fae in the Queen’s employ could breed and raise dragons. This swamp-smelling redcap with the cruel-looking knife and back-alley stall was clearly not that.

“Mind your business unless you’re buying,” the redcap snapped back.

The other caged creatures—moonshadow snakes, diamond-ear foxes, fluffy-faced rabbits, birds with bright feathers, and a host of other magical animals Chloe couldn’t identify—started rattling their cages, preening, and calling out to one another. Bits of fur and feathers rose in a cloud behind the redcap.

The redcap lifted a stick and walloped one of the cages. The tiny dragon hissed at him ferociously. Chloe’s heart soared at the creature’s bravery.

“How much for the tiny dragon?” she called out.

“That one’s not for sale,” the redcap snarled.

Chloe patted her pockets and checked her bag—in it was a book of letters to her sister, the food she’d packed from home, and a handful of copper coins. She pulled these out. “Really, I’ll pay anything. Name your price.”

She couldn’t pay much, but perhaps she could borrow money from Hyacinth. There had to be a way to help this little dragon!

The redcap sized her up, interested. “I’ll take three of your teeth, one of your fingers, and your sword. You can have a magical chicken.

Lays golden eggs every full moon.” He nodded toward a scrawny hen who looked like she’d not laid a regular egg in months, much less a golden one.

Chloe liked her teeth, her fingers, and her sword. She’d be keeping them all *and* getting the dragon. Somehow. “I don’t want a chicken! I want the tiny dragon.”

The redcap leaned forward, and his meaty breath engulfed Chloe. “And I want your pretty teeth and fingers and that sword.”

Chloe put her hand on the sword, drawing it ever so slightly. She couldn’t give the redcap the sword. It belonged to Wendell, and he’d loaned it to her for sparring.

“My sword’s not for sale, nor my teeth and fingers. I can get you more coins, though.”

That might not be true, but the redcap didn’t need to know that. Besides, Hyacinth had to have some coins. Surely she’d give them to save this creature. Or all the creatures in the stall.

“No deal,” snapped the redcap. “Get out of here.”

At this, the tiny dragon let out a small growling noise. The redcap brandished his knife again, smacking it against the dragon’s cage. The dragon retreated to the far side of the cage.

“Don’t do that! You’ll hurt him!” Chloe reached for the cage, but the redcap got there first, slamming a fist on top of it.

“This one’s trouble. Haven’t fed him in days because he’s misbehaving, and even when I do feed him, he won’t grow. How am I supposed to become a dragon dealer if my only dragon won’t grow?”

Chloe suspected Queen Mab would have something to say about illegal dragon dealers in her realm. Maybe that was the path to rescuing this tiny dragon. “How did you get him in the first place?”

“You ask too many questions,” the redcap roared. “Now buy a cursing cat or a magical chicken, or get out of here before I take your fingers for being curious.”

Anger filled Chloe. She never could stand a bully.

“I’m *not* leaving without the tiny dragon.”

The redcap stood, and the thick, corded muscles in his arms bulged as he gripped his knife more tightly. “You’re *not* taking the dragon.”

Chloe’s sword was out before her mind had time to catch up. In one quick, clean motion, she swiped at the redcap, forcing him backward.

This gave her the opening she needed. She darted behind the counter and slashed at the wooden locks of the cages holding a pair of moonshadow snakes, one with a black cat in it, and then two of the bird cages.

“Go on!” Chloe shouted to the animals. “Get out of here!”

“What are you doing?” The redcap grabbed for the locks. “These animals are mine to sell!”

The animals surged forward in a whirlwind of feathers and fur, all screeches and hisses. As one, they attacked the redcap, who swung his knife around wildly.

Chloe urgently undid the locks of the remaining cages, freeing the poor chicken and releasing two very confused-looking rabbits. She hoped they all found a safe place to flee or new homes.

“I’ll kill you, girl!”

“First you have to catch me!” Chloe busted the lock on the tiny dragon’s cage. She reached in, and the little creature settled on her palm. His needle-thin claws dug into her skin, drawing blood, but she didn’t care. She cupped her hand around him.

“Give that dragon back!” the redcap shouted. “Stop, thief!”

Chloe didn't look back as she pushed into the market crowds. The redcap shouted, calling for others to chase after her.

Chloe ran, heart pounding, with the tiny dragon curled in her hand. She twisted through street after street, racing over small canals, and shoving through the crowds. The bookshop barge where Hyacinth was shopping had to be around here somewhere! She ducked behind a wall and then turned down another alley. Her breath stuttered in her chest as she looked around. Gods, it was a dead end. Perhaps they wouldn't find her here. She just needed a quick moment to catch her breath and get her bearings.

Chloe cradled the little dragon to her chest.

“Are you alright, Little One?” she whispered, peering at his perfect face.

*As well as I can be*, he answered in a small voice, sounding old and exhausted.

“Are you speaking to me?” Chloe wheezed. She hadn't really been expecting an answer. First Runa had spoken to her, and now this tiny dragon? What a magical solstice night indeed!

*I'd love to chat more*, the dragon said, *but trouble's already here*. The little dragon nodded toward the redcap shopkeeper at the end of the alley. He had two brutish goblins, mercenaries from the looks of their boiled leather armor and curved blades, beside him.

Bramble and marsh. Despite her months of sword lessons, Chloe was certainly not going to beat all three of them. But she'd try.

Chloe tucked the tiny dragon into her shirt pocket and drew her sword. “Stay hidden. They're not getting you back.”

*You're brave, aren't you?* The tiny dragon sounded pleased.

Chloe grinned, hefting her sword. “Foolish more than brave maybe, but we’ll see.”

Before she could find a place to hide, the redcap spotted Chloe. “There you are!” he raged, storming into the alley. Feathers stuck to his cap, and a long scratch marred his cheek, dripping blood. Cheers to the cursing cat or whichever animal had attacked him.

The redcap glared at Chloe with murderous eyes. “All my animals are gone! Gone! Because of you!”

“Good!” She tightened her grip on her sword.

“I’m going to kill you and soak every drop of your blood into my cap.”

Chloe swiped a shallow cut across his cheek to match the scratch. “Your own blood seems much more likely to soak into your cap at this rate.”

The redcap hissed in outrage and waved his knife. “Kill her!”

One of the goblin mercenaries stepped up, his own sword drawn. Chloe met his blade. He was stronger than her, and he pushed her against the alley wall. The tiny dragon’s head popped up out of her pocket.

“Don’t hurt the dragon!” the shopkeeper shouted. “I can’t sell it if you slice it open!”

The mercenary turned. “Why’d you ask us to help if you’re not going to let us hurt her?”

“You can hurt her! Just not the tiny dragon!”

The goblin muttered a string of swears at the shopkeeper. “It’s going to be more money if you want us to be tidy about it.”

“I don’t want you to be tidy! I just want you to bloody end her!”

“Well, if you’d let me do my job—”

Taking advantage of their bickering, Chloe pushed off the wall, shoving an elbow into the goblin. Air whooshed out of him, and his blade clattered to the ground. Not the best mercenary by a long shot. Wendell would beat him in a fight half-drunk, and he was at least a century old.

The other goblin surged toward Chloe, but in a smooth bit of evasion—hard-won from a lifetime of dodging blows and more recently from nearly being kicked every time she had to clean the gryphons' stable—Chloe ducked away from the redcap and his thugs and took off toward the entrance of the alley.

In seconds she was back in the main marketplace, running and pushing through a group of revelers who marched in a parade. They held lanterns and swayed to a lively song that filled the air. It was disorienting, and Chloe tried to get her bearings. Where was the Wilted Sparrow Bookshop? Where was Hyacinth? Chloe had to find her before the redcap and the goblins caught up. She wasn't so sure she'd be able to escape again without help.

"What's happening?" Chloe asked a mushroom-capped woman as the crowd flowed toward the bridge.

"End-of-the-market celebration!" the woman called out drunkenly. "Best time of the night!"

"Do you know where the—"

Before Chloe could finish, the revelers shoved forward, and Chloe was swept along with them. Behind her there was a loud cry as the redcap spotted her. He started pushing through the crowd. His goblin mercenaries swung their swords, parting the celebrating groups of people. Bramble and marsh, what was Chloe supposed to do now? Where was she supposed to hide?

She fought her way to the edge of the river, taking an elbow to the nose and tripping several times, before she scrambled up a low wall. Desperately, she scanned the mass of boats along the river.

And there! The Wilting Sparrow was only a bit farther down the street. Chloe nearly collapsed in relief.

Hyacinth stood outside the bookshop, clutching a green volume to her chest. Leaping from one boat to the next and then back onto the street, Chloe barreled into Hyacinth.

“Run!” she said, grabbing her hand and pulling her away from the Wilted Sparrow.

“Why?” Hyacinth asked, looking around. “What did you find? What’s wrong?”

“Long story.” The tiny dragon popped his head out of Chloe’s pocket. “But I have a tiny dragon now.”

Hyacinth let out a delighted gasp and bent to look at him. Her nose brushed against his. “Where did you get it?”

It was adorable. If Chloe weren’t certain the goblins and redcap would soon be here, then she’d let herself enjoy how cute Hyacinth and the tiny dragon were together.

“I stole him from a redcap in a back alley. He was hurting him!”

“Well done.” Hyacinth nuzzled the tiny dragon. “Oh, aren’t you the most precious thing to ever exist in the entire world,” she cooed. Chloe was nearly embarrassed for her, but she felt the same way.

“Truly, he is,” Chloe agreed hastily. “But let’s discuss this back at your mother’s garden.”

*Who’s this?* the dragon asked into Chloe’s mind. *A friend of yours? She’s lovely. And she’s worried about you.*

Before Chloe could answer, the redcap and his goons caught up to them.

“We’re going to take you apart for making us chase you, girl.” The shopkeeper’s eyes gleamed with malice.

Blade ringing out as she drew it, Chloe stepped in front of Hyacinth. “Get out of here, Princess. I’ll take care of this.”

“No,” Hyacinth said.

“No?”

Hyacinth shook her head, a fierce look in her eyes. She slipped the book she was holding into her belt pouch, and Chloe saw her fingers reach for the tiny potion bottles strapped there.

“Get out of the way, dainty,” the shopkeeper snarled.

“No,” Hyacinth repeated.

Chloe saw her touch a finger to her lips, and all at once, the air smelled like metal shavings and smoke, like the factories in Chloe’s world.

Where had that come from? Probably something at the market. A blacksmith’s booth nearby. Or a bonfire to celebrate the solstice.

Chloe’s mind was wrenched away from the smell as the redcap scowled. “This one’s stolen something from me. And I’ll have it back.”

*That’s rich, considering he stole me,* the tiny dragon said into Chloe’s mind.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Chloe whispered to the dragon.

Hyacinth glared at the redcap, looking every inch as ferocious as he was. Bramble and marsh, she was going to get herself killed.

Chloe pulled on her arm. “Let me take care of this, please.”

Hyacinth shook off Chloe’s hand and then touched her fingers to her lips again. The factory smell filled the air once more. She glared

at the redcap. “You’re *going* to give my friend the tiny dragon. You’re *going* to leave us alone.”

The redcap’s eyebrows came together, and he opened and closed his mouth, like he was fighting to speak. “That’s not your business,” he said in a strangled tone.

A frown appeared between Hyacinth’s eyebrows, and she touched her lips a third time.

“It is,” she said. Then she pulled her cloak aside. Her party dress glimmered under the lantern lights, as out of place as Chloe had feared. Hyacinth stepped forward so her nose was inches from the redcap’s.

“I’d say it’s my mother’s business as well, and I doubt very much *Queen Mab* would be happy with people selling dragons illegally in the market.”

The redcap swallowed visibly, his eyes fixed on Hyacinth. “You’re Queen Mab’s daughter?”

“I am.”

Chloe bit back a groan. It was a terrible, awful idea for Hyacinth to admit that. So much for the low profile Chloe had suggested when they left the stables.

Chloe glanced around. A crowd of merchants, customers, and Fae of all sorts had stopped to stare. Their expressions ranged from curiosity and surprise to suspicion and downright malice. Hyacinth was going to get killed. Or kidnapped. Or robbed, at the very least. Chloe wasn’t sure how she could protect the princess in this case, but she gripped her sword more tightly.

*Steady on, Brave One. I think your friend has this handled,* the tiny dragon whispered in Chloe’s mind.