

1-3 EMAIL

MALLORY WANLESS

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CHAPTER ONE

ELENA

“Come on. Just work, dammit,” Elena muttered to herself, trying for the millionth time to cast her spell.

Agon had stretched his lithe, weasel-like body across a long, skinny patch of sunlight on the floor of the testing room. He’d spent the morning basking in the warmth of the sun-drenched stone and flicking his fluffy blue-black tail back and forth. As her closest, and arguably only, friend, Agon knew nothing he could say would make her feel better. She was in a mood, and the best thing he could do was to leave her be.

Sparks flared and quickly sputtered out from Elena’s fingertips.

“Dammit. Why can’t I get this stupid spell right?” It was a rhetorical question, but Elena was so frustrated by her own ineptitude that she would have traded everything she owned to successfully complete a spell on the first try.

Elena was easily the worst enchantress in her class, probably the whole school. The other students mocked her mercilessly. It didn’t help that her mother, Madame LaBelle, was the most famous enchantress in the whole country, possibly the world, and the headmistress of their school. She could turn a seed into a centuries-old tree with the flick of her wrist. Elena could grow a seed into a sapling with twenty minutes of chanting, flicking, waving, and praying. Maybe. On a good day.

Madame LaBelle was notorious for her skills with magic as much as her beauty. Unfortunately for Elena, she inherited her looks from her father. At least, she assumed that’s where

she got her flat hair and dull brown eyes. She'd never actually met him. In Waverly, as far as enchantresses were concerned, men served one purpose: impregnating women. The men were used and released of all parental rights, whether they liked it or not. Most men didn't even know the woman they had lain with was an enchantress, much less that they had fathered a child as a result. The women opted to disguise themselves—bar wenches, visitors lost in the big city, damsels in need of aid on the side of the road, etc.—just to get what they needed and be gone before the man even knew her name.

It was crass and cowardly, but Elena had been raised to believe it was for the best. Men weren't capable of raising children, especially magical ones, and an enchantress always gave birth to another enchantress. Never in the history of the world, had an enchantress given birth to a non-magical child. Or a boy, for that matter. Enchantress beget enchantress. End of story.

Elena dreamed of love and happy endings when she was younger. All the girls did, but their time at Harbor Ridge taught them that magic was their top priority, followed closely by their loyalty to the school and Madame LaBelle. Elena always felt that it was a tad hypocritical how often her mother preached about loyalty to their family—the school and their classmates—when she never paid any attention to her own flesh and blood. What sort of mother neglects her own child to favor those who are more adept at magic? *Not a good one*, Elena mused glumly.

Agon had been with her since before she was born, like all familiars. They were born together and stayed attached for an "unusually long time," according to her mother. Typically, familiars disconnected from the baby's umbilical cord within a few days before settling into their permanent animal form. Agon and Elena stayed connected for two weeks, all the while Agon remained a blob encased in the placenta. Her mother had many specialists, including a Therionology Enchantress,

or an animal enchantress, come and inspect Agon and try to coax him into taking any form at all. Nothing worked. Baby Elena just spent her days cuddling “this disgusting blob of goo” and sleeping. Madame LaBelle often liked to remind Elena of how unusual that was, and how that should have been a sign that her daughter was going to be different, and not in a good way.

Agon did eventually develop into an animal; however, he didn't change into anything anyone had ever seen before. When she was young, Elena overheard one of the scholars reminiscing with another about how they'd managed to identify Agon as a *Raju*. Madame LaBelle had tasked all of the scholars in the Therionology department to scour all the history books and tomes to identify him. Agon was the only known *Raju* in ages, and Madame LaBelle hated it. *Rajus* were blue-furred, weasel-like creatures that had lightning abilities. Another frustrating hiccup, as far as Madame LaBelle was concerned. Familiars weren't supposed to have magic of their own; they were just meant to be guides to help the enchantress learn to control her powers. Elena knew they were unique, and she knew that her mother despised her for it. Not only did she look nothing like her gorgeous and flawless mother, but she was as inept at magic as she was clumsy. Not to mention her familiar was a troublesome weasel with issues controlling magic he shouldn't have even had. Elena tried very hard in her lessons to improve her control and help Agon to control himself, but it never seemed good enough.

Harbor Ridge was set back in the heart of the aptly named Dark Woods. According to legend, the school was originally built as a safe harbor for magical beings who were being hunted and persecuted throughout the country. The king of Waverly took pity on the enchantresses and gave them the land along the mountain ridge to build a sanctuary. Thus, Harbor Ridge was created. A shelter for all enchantresses on the ridge of a mountain to train, educate, and live without fear. The school itself was an ominous castle made of black

obsidian; the stone so dark you could almost feel it sucking the light from the sky. Four immense towers stood at the cardinal points and served as the dormitories for the girls. Four girls to a room, four rooms to a floor, four floors to a tower. There was magic in the number and the balance it created. Without that balance things would come to a grinding halt, according to school rumor. The legend said that one year, a girl in the north tower couldn't handle the pressure and jumped from her window. The instant her heart stopped beating, the whole northern tower started to tilt and pull away from the castle. According to the stories, the headmistress at the time had to admit some less desirable girl from the nearest village just to keep the school from literally falling apart.

Elena never fully believed the legend, simply because she could never see her mother admitting any student unless they had impeccable credentials and at least ten relatives who were once prolific students at Harbor Ridge, on top of passing the incredibly strenuous entrance exam. She truly believed that her mother wouldn't have admitted her if that had been an option. However, it would have been disastrous for the daughter of the headmistress to not go to Harbor Ridge, too much of a scandal for her mother to bear.

This was a day unlike any other. It marked Elena's sixteenth birthday, a very special birthday. At Harbor Ridge, an enchantress' sixteenth birthday was the day she took her specialty test to determine which division of magic she would be best suited for. The test was always different, based on the enchantress, the season, the time of day, even her lunar cycle. There would be no way to prepare because there would be no way to know what your test would be.

When Elena had walked into her testing hall earlier that morning, she was surprised to see that the room was utterly empty. No alchemy supplies. No seeds meant for her to grow into beautiful trees. No fire or water to highlight her elemental skills. Nothing. Not even a table or chairs. Agon had been nestled around her neck, his preferred spot, and he, too, was

awkwardly quiet. There should have been someone in the room; the tests were always different, but there was always someone there to administer them.

“Maybe we’re just early, Agon,” she had whispered as she’d crept into the middle of the room, further into the empty expanse. The room was eerily still. It felt like a violation to be there, much less making any noise above a hushed tone.

“Maybe they forgot,” Agon replied, in an equally quiet, albeit more condescending, voice. She could feel the nervousness coursing through his veins, both as his heart pounded around her neck and through the magic that bound them.

Standing in the middle of the empty room, she had decided to wait. It was supposed to be her big day, and it was impossible to think her mother simply forgot. Elena convinced herself that waiting was merely a part of the test. Assessing her patience and perseverance. She would stay put until someone showed up to evaluate her skills and place her in a specialty. This was her day, dammit. She’d spent the day watching the sun pass through the windows, from one side of the room, up and over to the other side, repeatedly trying and failing to accomplish even the simplest of spells. Maybe she’d finally get that damned spell right before someone arrived to test her.



“It’s been hours,” Agon whined, “can we please just go find someone? Your mother. I’m sure she’ll have a good reason for all this. I’m bored, and I want a snack.”

“Familiars don’t need food or sleep to survive, Agon. You know that.” Elena was bored too, but she was far too stubborn to give up now. She estimated that they were about an hour from sunset, meaning everyone was sitting down to supper in the Great Hall. They’d forgotten about her. She had waited all day, and her own mother had forgotten about her birthday, the biggest birthday that an enchantress ever had at Harbor

Ridge. The only one that muxing mattered, and her damned mother had forgotten her. Elena realized that this shouldn't be so surprising; her mother never paid much attention to her before, so why would this change anything?

"I didn't say I need to eat, only that I want a snack. I'm feeling peckish." Agon was lounging in the last rays of sunlight on the floor a few feet from where she sat. He was, of course, not really peckish at all, but he could feel how hungry she was, and he was hoping to motivate her to feed herself. Agon was a very attentive familiar, always making sure she took care of herself even when she didn't want to. She was certain that he would go and fetch her food himself if he could venture more than twenty paces from her. That was the thing about being magically tethered: there was an unseeable force that physically kept them together. There were rumors that the wizards and enchantresses of old could travel miles apart from their familiars, but they were just rumors. No enchantress could really do that. They'd die. You cannot be separated from your soul.

"I know what you're doing," Elena muttered, shifting in her seated position on the floor. "Fine, we'll wait five more minutes. Then we'll go find her and see what sort of excuse she musters."

"Let's swing by the kitchens first and grab a quick snack. I can feel your stomach rumbling through the stone in the floors. This is what you get for skipping breakfast." Agon played the part of the fretful parent with practiced ease. Elena truly believed he had happily jumped into the maternal role hours after her birth when it had been clear her own mother wouldn't. She suspected that was about thirty seconds after Madame LaBelle realized just how "different" her daughter and Agon were. Madame LaBelle hated when things were out of sorts, and everything about the two of them was subpar in her eyes.

"Will that make you happy? If we stop and grab a roll, will you please shut up about food for a while?"

“Absolutely!” He was already on his feet and getting a running start so he could jump onto her shoulders and settle back onto his perch.

“You are a very frustrating creature, you know that?” she mumbled as he landed perfectly, the result of years of practice, and snuggled her ear. His way of saying *yes, but you love me anyway*, and she did. He was the only one who ever bothered to make sure she was ok, and he went to great lengths to help her find happiness in this dreadful place.

The trip to the headmistress’ office was an uneventful one, with only a quick pit stop for a couple of dinner rolls in the kitchen before rushing up the four flights of stairs to reach her mother’s tower. Much to her surprise, the door was wide open and her mother was waiting for her. Sitting behind her imposing ebony desk, her mother looked almost regal, especially with her familiar, a snowy lion named Zeid, lazing to her right.

“Elena, please come in. Shut the door.” It wasn’t a request; nothing ever was with Madame LaBelle. She was cold and distant, but that was her way with Elena.

“Today was meant to be your testing day. You failed. Unfortunately, you have been expelled from Harbor Ridge and must leave immediately.”

Elena didn’t move. She just stood there as if someone had cast a spell and frozen her in place.

“Wha—how? What are you saying?” she stammered, and she stumbled to the closest chair.

“You never showed for your evaluation. That is unacceptable. You have until the morning to pack your things and leave. If you are still here at first light, you will be forcibly removed.” No sooner had she finished the words did she go back to the paperwork on her desk. Madame LaBelle, her *mother*, had evicted her from the only home she’d ever known and she hadn’t even batted an eye.

“How can you do this to me? I’m your *muxing* daughter! I waited all day in that room. No one ever showed up to test

me. I waited!” Rage flowing through her veins like molten lava, lighting a fire within her. Agon jumped down from her neck and onto her mother’s desk, small blue sparks flicking off the end of his tail as he swished it back and forth.

“You will not use that sort of foul language in my presence. Get control of your familiar, child. You are my daughter. That is the only reason you have lasted this long. You don’t belong here. We both know it. It’s time for you to go.” While her mother never moved, Zeid rose slowly and powerfully to his feet, sending the message, *Go now or there will be painful consequences.*

“I can’t believe you’re doing this. I mean, I knew you were disappointed in me, but I never thought you hated me. How can you be so heartless?” Elena knew if they remained in this room, it was very likely that there would be blood, she just wasn’t sure whose. But she needed answers. She *deserved* answers. “What did I do that justifies expelling me from my home? Don’t give me that nonsense about how I didn’t show up. I was there at dawn.”

“I am under no obligation to explain myself to you, child. You’ve only survived this long because you carry my blood. We both know you don’t belong here.” Her mother’s tone was cool. Distant. Bored, even.

Bored? She’s imploding my entire life, and she’s muxing bored?!

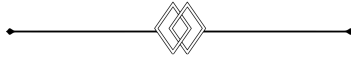
Sparks flashed off the tip of Agon’s tail, and he stood on her mother’s stack of papers, forcing her attention to them rather than the work she clearly felt was more important than her flesh and blood.

“What did I ever do to make you hate me this much?” Elena’s voice was a hushed, heartbroken whisper. All of her rage had instantly drained from her body.

For a split second, she thought she saw a flash of guilt on her mother’s face, but it disappeared in a blink of an eye replaced by her practiced enchantress mask, cool detachment.

Madame LaBelle gestured to Agon. "You must learn to control your familiar." She rose from her throne-like chair and turned her back on her daughter. "You will be gone by first light. If you cause a scene, the guards will remove you by force."

Elena snatched Agon off the headmistress' desk and stormed out, leaving the only family she'd known in her wake.



Elena threw herself onto her bed, curled up around her down feather pillow, and cried. Agon wiggled under her arms and tried his best to comfort her, rubbing his velvety blue nose against her cheek and licking her tears away.

"How could she...? Why? I just don't understand." She choked out the words once her eyes had run out of tears. "How can she be so callous? And what about the girls? The tower will be out of balance and surely start to crumble as soon as I leave, won't it? That's what the legend and rumors all say."

"I don't know, El, but I imagine her Holier-Than-Thou-Ness will have found a way to maintain the balance. She's too calculating to do something like this without a fool-proof plan." Agon wiped the last of her tears away with his fluffy tail.

"I must be missing something. I was told to report to the exam room this morning, at first light. We were there! We waited all day and no one came to test me! We were there." Elena sighed, devastation weighing on her like a thick blanket, making it nearly impossible for her to take a deep breath.

It just didn't make sense. It was unlike her mother to be so unreasonable. She had always had exceedingly high expectations for Elena, and Elena had never felt like she could truly reach her mother's goals for her, but expulsion? Why would Madame LaBelle make up an excuse to expel her only child, then promptly evict her like it was nothing? Like Elena was

nothing, just some failed enchantress who couldn't be taught and must therefore be amputated like a gangrenous limb, for fear that she might infect the others.

"How serious do you think she was about having us 'forcibly removed' at first light?" Agon questioned gently.

"Knowing her? Very. Madame LaBelle never makes empty threats," Elena grumbled. Slowly, she sat up in her bed. "I don't know how to pack our stuff. It's not like we've traveled a lot before. Maybe we can stuff it all into the pillowcase?"

As she went through her wardrobe, Elena tried to ignore the reality of her situation. She packed her few belongings into her pillowcase, a few dresses, a spare pair of boots, and a woolen coat, made her bed one last time, and walked out of her room.



Elena was grateful that the other girls were still at dinner. No one had ever been expelled before. No one even knew that was possible. She didn't know how to explain what had happened.

They passed through the kitchens and filled the pillowcase with as much as they could, said a quick goodbye to the cooks, and left.

With Agon perched atop her left shoulder, Elena hiked the pillowcase on her right and started down the path, away from the school, into the Dark Woods and the unknown.

CHAPTER TWO

QUINN

When you grow up in an orphanage, you learn to read people pretty quickly. When you grow up in an orphanage run by an abusive drunk and his neglectful wife, you learn that everyone is full of shyt and you have to fend for yourself if you want to survive. The former enabled Quinn to do the latter. Reading people helped him find good marks, then he and Lyra would rob them blind. Lyra was quick and clever, like most foxes, but she was special. She could start fires with the flick of her tail, which came in very handy when you needed to distract a mark to pickpocket them, or on cold nights when you didn't have an actual roof or walls to protect you from the harsh frost seasons. He'd learned long ago that they had to take care of themselves. That meant doing whatever it took to survive.

Q didn't like looting corpses, but he wasn't above it either; sometimes they had the best shyt. When he saw her lying there half-curved against the cold, on the side of the road just outside the Dark Woods, he couldn't pass up the golden opportunity. She had a whole bag of who-knows-what lying next to her. It could just be food, but it could be decent enough stuff to sell or use themselves. Even if it was food, he and Lyra weren't exactly feasting these days. Besides, she was dead. What did a dead girl need with whatever was in that bag?

"Lyra, you know the drill," he whispered. As a fox, she was innately adept at sneaking, which was why she always made the initial approach. They'd tried other ways when they first started out on their own, but this was by far the most

effective. Q sat back, partially hidden behind an old oak tree, and waited.

As Lyra crept closer, he could feel her heart rate slow and her senses heighten. She was inches from the corpse when he felt a violent shock, as though he'd been struck by lightning. He cried out, as did Lyra, before nearly blacking out. Q pulled himself from behind the tree, barely able to crawl to his knees before a second, more powerful blast struck them and he keeled over completely.



Quinn awoke to find himself bound to the oak he'd been using as shelter by some sort of invisible force. Lyra appeared to be unconscious still and was being kept under a small cage that looked like it was made entirely of branches. Almost like the trees themselves had turned on him and Lyra and were holding them prisoner.

"Lyra," he hissed as he tried to wriggle free from his invisible binds. "Lyra, wake up! What the hells happened? We need to get out of here."

"She can't hear you, and the more you struggle, the tighter the binds will get." It was a girl. A GIRL!?! How the hells had that girl gotten the drop on him and Lyra like that? What was that shock? She was hiding close, by the sound of it, but it was too dark to see anything.

"Who the mux are you? Why are you holding us? What the hells did you do?!" He was scared, but more importantly, he was livid. This should never have happened to him. He was better than this, dammit.

"Why were you sneaking up on us? What do you want?" Her voice was shaky and coming from behind him now, to the left, but there was something else, an animal by the sound of its light steps, closer to Lyra. He could almost make out the shape of it. Whatever it was, it was small and nimble.

“We thought you might be dead. We were checking to see if you needed help. Can you let us go now?” He kept fidgeting with his binds but she was telling the truth, the more he moved, the tighter they became. When he started losing feeling in his fingers, he finally gave up on freeing himself.

“Liar! You wanted to hurt me, rape me, kill us, and steal what little we have!”

Q heard the charge before he saw the flash of blue light or felt the shock.

“*Muuuuuuuuux!* Stop doing that! Fine, we were going to rob you, but only because we thought you were already dead. We’re not killers.” He must’ve been seeing things, or maybe he hurt his head with all the electrocution, but it looked like the shocks were actually lightning bolts coming off that small creature over by Lyra. But that was impossible, right? There was no such thing as an electric animal. Everyone knew that magical animals died out eons ago. Although, Lyra’s fire-starting would probably be considered magic...

“You were going to rob my corpse?” Her question interrupted his thoughts. “And you think that’s somehow supposed to make me comfortable enough to let you go?” She had moved again. Closer still, but now she was more to the right, like she was trying to get a better look at him without letting him do the same.

“Listen, lady, we aren’t going to hurt you. We’re just trying to make a living here. What are you doing sleeping on the side of the road like that anyway? You could get hurt or killed.” He left the *idiot* implied since she clearly already knew she’d screwed up. Only a complete moron slept on the side of the road. If you must camp out while traveling, you do it further into the woods for protection from the elements and shady people looking for trouble.

“Trust me,” she replied, “this wasn’t my first choice. This wasn’t my choice at all.” The sadness and despair in her voice were palpable. He was starting to feel sorry for her until he remembered that she was currently holding them prisoner.

“If you let us go, I promise we won’t hurt you. Maybe we can even help you. Our place is close by. It’s nothing special, but it’s warm and safe, and we can feed you for the night. This is a one-night-only kinda offer though. You can’t get comfortable with us.” While he wasn’t thrilled about the idea of anyone seeing where he and Lyra took shelter every night—security risk, and all that—he needed to do something to get her to release them, and he was starting to feel bad for her. She seemed genuinely scared and alone. That was a feeling he’d known all too well.

For an agonizing few seconds there were no sounds, like she was weighing her options and trying to decide if he was being serious or trying to trick her. Then he heard the rustle of leaves to his left, and she stepped out of the shadows and onto the road before him. She wasn’t what he expected, although he didn’t really know what he thought she would look like. She spoke with the presence and authority of someone who had experienced a great deal, but she had the face of an innocent little girl.

“Gods, you’re just a kid,” he muttered, more to himself than anything.

Indignant and offended, she puffed up her chest, straightened her back, and said, “I’m not a child. I’m old enough to know how things work, and at sixteen, I’m considered an adult enchantress.”

Enchantress? Holy mux. That explained the invisible binds and tree-root cage, but it opened up so many new questions. He’d never met an enchantress before, although he’d heard they were beautiful beyond measure and brilliant.

“Beyond measure” was an exaggeration. Sure, she’s pretty, but physically, she’s nothing special, he thought to himself. Even as he thought it, he knew it was a lie. Her hair was the color of fallen pine needles that blanketed the forest floor. In contrast to her pale pink skin, her eyes were the color of fresh, wild honey. She was pretty enough, but there was something about her, he couldn’t quite place it, that drew him in. He

had to force himself to look away. She was mesmerizing. Enchanting.

“She was trying to be patient with them, but it was very apparent that she was eager to get this done. Now you’re tied to a tree, and I’m supposed to believe you’ve had a change of heart and want to feed and shelter us for the night?” She was, understandably, doubtful of his motives, but how could he explain that he wanted to help because she reminded him of himself many years ago when he and Lyra were first thrust into the world to fend for themselves? He didn’t want to show any weakness, and he was pretty sure she wouldn’t believe him anyway.

“Look, it’s your choice, but if you don’t and leave us trapped like this? None of us will survive the night.” It was an exaggeration. They’d probably be fine out in the open for one night, but he wasn’t interested in risking it when his home was so close by. “I’ve already told you I have no desire to hurt you. I’d also like to point out that you and your friend have been the only ones inflicting pain here tonight.” That got her attention. She’d been pacing between Q and Lyra, but she stopped dead in her tracks at his words.

“Holy Mother, you’re right. Agon, how could we have been so cruel? Protecting ourselves is one thing, but we crossed a line.” She was speaking to the electric weasel creature that was standing guard over Lyra. Based on what Q knew about enchantresses, he decided that the weasel must be her familiar. “I’m so sorry,” she said waving her hand back and forth several times. It seemed to take her a few tries, but eventually, he felt his hands release from the invisible binds, and the cage over Lyra melted back into the forest floor. He took his time rising to his feet, rubbing his wrists to try and get the blood circulating properly again. Slowly, with his eyes locked on her, he made his way to Lyra. Her heart was racing, and he wanted to position himself between Lyra and the girl, just in case. Lyra didn’t take too kindly to being imprisoned.

“We’re ok, girl, just stay calm,” Quinn spoke to Lyra as he held eye contact with the girl. “Everything is fine. It turns out that the body wasn’t dead, just tired and homeless. They’re going to stay the night with us now.”

Have you lost what little sense you had?! They locked us up and electrified us. A lot. And you want to take them home like a couple of lost puppies? Did you bump your head in between all those lightning bolts? Her voice practically reverberated through his mind. Their connection enabled them to share thoughts, as well as their feelings. At that moment, Q could feel the rage and confusion coursing through her veins, but he desperately needed her to calm down. That girl had already proven she and her familiar, Agon, were a force to be reckoned with; and he could tell they desperately needed help. The best way to prove that he wasn’t a threat to her was to open himself up to another attack. He turned his back on the girl and knelt down to look Lyra in the eye.

“I know what happened, and you don’t get to be snippy with me. I felt those shocks just as much as you. They are on edge because this isn’t their home, and they don’t know who to trust.” He knelt closer, held Lyra’s stare, and added mentally, *We know what that feels like.*

As he sat back, he spoke louder to ensure that the enchantress would hear him, “We snuck up on them, remember? They were just defending themselves. I’ve offered to let them stay the night, one night, and we can take them into town in the morning.”

Lyra shifted uneasily, glancing over his shoulder at the girl, then over her shoulder at the electric weasel still positioned behind her on the edge of the road. He could feel her weighing their options, but he knew she’d see he was right and concede.

I don’t like it, and I don’t trust them, she grumbled.

“Trust me.” Q had seen the fear in the girl’s eyes. The desperation. The need for some sense of safety or security. He recognized it because he’d had that same look for moons. He

wished someone had offered them even a modicum of help in those first few moons, but no one had. Not until they'd snuck into that inn's kitchen to steal some food and found Amelia. He refused to make this girl go through all of that, especially when he and Lyra were fully capable of helping. Amelia taught them better than that. Lyra could feel his determination as intensely as he could feel her doubt, but she trusted him and gave him a slight nod before relaxing her stance. Q had a feeling she wouldn't get any sleep tonight, that she'd opt to keep watch instead, but that was fine.

When he turned back to the girl, he noticed that her weasel had moved and was now wrapped around her neck. She was looking at him oddly, studying him and Lyra as though she were trying to make sense of them. Q realized a little too late that she only heard his part of the conversation. Lyra hadn't spoken a word aloud. This girl probably thought he was insane. Would she follow an apparent crazy guy into a makeshift house in the woods?

Q stood unmoving from his spot on the road between Lyra and the enchantress. He studied her and realized she seemed to be having a similar discussion with her familiar, attempting to get the weasel to trust her as well. It was clear that he was no more thrilled about the plan than Lyra was, but both had grudgingly conceded. For the time being, at least.

"We live just over that rise, by a small creek. You can follow me." Q pointed north-east of their location and started walking in the direction of their home. Lyra ran a few paces ahead. She was distancing herself because she was pouting, but she stayed close enough that she could jump to his aid if she felt it was necessary.

"Thank you for helping us," the girl said as she followed him into the woods. "I'm Elena, by the way."

"Quinn."

CHAPTER THREE

ELENA

Elena knew it wasn't smart or rational to trust a boy she just met. Agon certainly didn't trust him, but Quinn seemed sincere, and she didn't really have a lot of other options. She'd proven that she was capable of defending herself if attacked, so she was pretty sure he wouldn't try anything. Elena could hear the voices of the guards from Harbor Ridge telling her that she was making a bad decision in trusting any male, but where else would they sleep tonight? Her intuition told her that she could trust him, and she'd never been wrong when she followed her intuition.

Elena had studied him while he'd been unconscious. The boy looked to be about her age, maybe a cycle older. He was a bit grungy, dirt smeared on his forehead and both of his hands, but his skin was a soft olive color. Elena knew that following a stranger back to his home in the woods was risky at best but she didn't have a lot of other options. Plus, he seemed like he was also a formidable opponent. She felt confident in the belief that they wouldn't be attacked by any outside forces. Although she wondered a little at his sanity considering he'd just had a very vocal and one-sided conversation with his fox-dog, in which he had seemed to be waiting and responding as though the animal was talking to him. One night and they'd be headed into town and off on the next step in finding a new life. A life outside the school, the only home she'd ever known.

No, she thought, stop that right now. Self-pity won't accomplish anything. Elena walked a few paces behind Quinn with

Agon curled protectively around her neck, head up and fully alert. He wasn't happy with her, but he saw the logic in her choice and begrudgingly agreed. Quinn had said his home was close by, but it felt like they'd been walking for a while.

"I thought you said it was close. Close would've been a five to ten-minute walk. We have been going for nearly an hour." She was anxious. In reality, she had no idea how long they'd actually been walking but it was definitely more than five minutes.

"See that creek over there?" He stopped walking and pointed ahead of them and to the east a bit.

"No, not really. I think I can hear it though." It was much too dark to see, especially through all the trees but if she listened closely, Elena was pretty sure she could hear the babble of water slowly flowing over rocks and brushing against low hanging limbs.

"We live right next to that creek. We're close, I promise. Just a bit further, and we'll be home." Quinn began walking in the direction he'd been pointing, veering slightly more to the east.

"Why do you live out here, so far from town? Don't you need people? For food? Supplies? Companionship?" Elena didn't understand his isolationist lifestyle. At Harbor Ridge, you were never alone. She'd always shared a bedroom with at least three other girls, and there were people everywhere she went. All meals were served in the great hall, and everyone ate together. Time was spent in class, the library, or your room, all of which were always filled with people. The thought of being alone terrified her, and here he was, clearly intent on having a great deal of space between him and anyone else. "Don't you get lonely?"

"No. People annoy me. I prefer the companionship of Lyra and the quiet peace of the woods." He didn't say any more until they got to the creek. "Here we are."

It was dark, and all Elena could see were dense woods and the small creek. "What do you mean? You just live on the

creekside? I thought you said you had shelter. An actual home. This isn't any safer than where we were."

Quinn just chuckled and started rustling around in some bushes beside the water. He pulled back a branch and revealed a decent-sized hut hidden behind—or maybe within—the thicket. His fox, Lyra, ran in first and seconds later there was a fire burning in the stone circle at the center of the space. The hut was surprisingly roomy and cozy, with plenty of room for a large cooking fire. An opening in the center of the roof allowed the smoke from the fire to escape, and a pallet made of furs near the back served as his bed.

"This is...really nice." She tried not to sound as shocked as she felt but failed miserably. "How did you find this place? It's the perfect hideout!" As she said it, she realized that was exactly what it was. A hideout. *Who was he hiding from?* she wondered. Elena thought better of voicing that one. She was curious to know more about this strange boy, but she feared what she might learn. Harbor Ridge always looked down on magept, those who were magically inept, and made them seem ignorant, selfish, and ultimately, conniving cheats. She knew that was probably an inaccurate representation of non-magical humanity as a whole, but weren't all stereotypes rooted in some level of truth?

"It's a nice little place. Safe from the weather and prying eyes. We've been here for nearly a full solar cycle now, and it suits our purposes. Freshwater right outside, plenty of game to hunt, and food to gather. We can live very happily here for some time. To answer your questions from before, I don't need the town or its people because we're perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves out here. We do go into town, rarely, to trade and stock up on the few things we can't find or make on our own, but I don't like the crowds, and they aren't overly fond of us either."

He walked over to the fire and started unloading things from pockets she hadn't noticed he had. A hunting knife as big as her forearm, some rope, a rabbit carcass, berries, something

green that she couldn't see clearly enough to identify, a large waterskin, and two dented metal flasks. He took his cloak off and hung it on a small branch from one of the trees he used to make the walls of his hut and reached out his hand to take hers.

Elena, not comfortable enough to disrobe in the slightest, gently shook her head and wandered over to the fire instead. She analyzed their new temporary travel companions. Quinn picked up his hunting knife along with a large, flat stone, rubbed some sort of oily bar onto the face of the stone, and began slowly slide the blade across the whetstone. The steady, repetitive motion, and the sound of the blade on the stone seemed like an almost meditative habit for him. He kept his focus on the knife, giving Elena a chance to study his face further, drawing her attention to the long, thick, blond eyelashes that curtained his forest green eyes. She tried to be subtle in her observations of him, but he caught her staring when he pushed his blond hair from his brow as he finished working with the knife. Quinn tried—and failed—to hide a chuckle as he turned to the fire, placing a dented tin pail on a hook near the fire.

Elena's focus shifted to the flames. *How had Lyra started that fire?* There were so many things she didn't know about this boy and his rust-colored fox. What was she thinking coming back here with them?

Agon, still perched around her shoulders, nuzzled her ear and sent his thoughts into her mind. *There's something amiss with that fox. She's not what she appears.* His words carried a suspicion that she shared. Elena just nodded. There wasn't enough room in this hut for her to voice her response without being overheard, and she wasn't sure how to respond. She was equally intrigued about Lyra.

Elena decided that conversation was the best way to learn anything about anyone, and sitting here in silence would just make everyone more tense and solve nothing.

“How long have you been living on your own? You said you’ve only been here for a cycle, right? Where were you before this? Do you have any family nearby?”

“You sure do ask a lot of questions,” he replied as he began to skin the rabbit.

“I suppose. Questions are a great way to get to know someone.” The sounds of the skin being removed from the rabbit’s flesh made her nauseated, but she knew that showing weakness wouldn’t do her any good. Instead, she decided to talk about herself and try to get him to open up some. “My mother always told me I ask too many questions and I’m too nosey, but how else will we learn if we don’t have the courage to ask?”

“Your mom sounds sweet.” The sarcasm in his statement was clear, as well as the hint of jealousy and possibly sadness.

“She is a very busy woman. Having a child wasn’t really a priority for her. Raising a child was simply too much work for her, on top of running the school and advising the King. She didn’t have the patience or tolerance for children. It always amused me that she was the one running the school. You’d think it would be someone who actually liked children, wouldn’t you?” Elena knew she was telling too much about herself, but she couldn’t help it. She was a nervous talker.

Quinn dropped the knife and the half-skinned rabbit carcass, turning toward her abruptly, and blurted, “Wait, your mother is *the* enchantress? The one who basically runs this whole damn country? What the hells are you doing sleeping on the side of the road? You’re practically royalty. If people knew who you were, you could be in a lot of danger. You shouldn’t be all by yourself.”

“Don’t yell at me. I didn’t choose to be out there. If it were up to me, I’d still be at Harbor Ridge with my friends, well, classmates, and the people I cared about. My mother kicked me out. She sent me away. I didn’t *have* any other options.” Elena’s eyes filled with tears, but she refused to let herself cry in front of this boy. He didn’t know her. He didn’t understand how she was feeling or what she’d been through. “I appreciate

your willingness to help us, but if it's going to be a night of you chastising me, Agon and I will find somewhere else to sleep."

"I'm sorry." Quinn looked her in the eyes when he spoke, most likely to make sure she knew he meant every word. "I shouldn't have yelled at you. It's very risky to be out on your own regardless of who you are, especially if you're someone important. I didn't mean to snap at you. I was just shocked that they would let you out of the safety and security of that fortress of a school so carelessly. Please, stay. Stay as long as you'd like."

Elena nodded in acknowledgment of his words. She didn't trust her voice enough to respond without crying, and she *really* didn't want to let him see her tears.