

# The Bad Names Club



**ELSEKIN CHRONICLES 2**

**Eibhlín Valdys**



The Bad Names Club  
(Elsekin Chronicles 2)  
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ISBN-13: 9798390477304

Published by Upatree Press via KDP 2023

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Developed with the support of the ACNI and National Lottery via SIAP 2020/21



**LOTTERY FUNDED**

## **DEDICATION**

For Brightwing, without whom there would be no Marmalade, and with thanks to Elizabeth, who beta read.



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**Therial** – this group includes two distinct types of being: fusions and thropes. Fusions have fixed physical forms that combine animal and humanoid traits. Beings such as centaurs, minotaurs, satyrs, fauns, harpies, sphinxes, and merfolk are fusions. Thropes have the inherent magical ability to transform at will between a humanoid and an animal form, and/or some hybrid of the two. Beings such as selkies (pinnothropes) and dratsies (lutrothropes) are thropes, as are the assorted so-called wercreatures. The latter term derived from “wer” which was the Old English word for “man”. It is now outdated, due to modern science having identified such beings as genetically separate to humans. In addition, some elsekin, especially therials, consider it derogatory, albeit not on a par with blinkskin, skifter, and flickerform.

**Fey** – this group includes goblins, fairies, pixies, changelings, kelpies, nymphs, sirens, gremlins, elves, dryads, redcaps, brownies, boggarts, and gnomes, etc. It also includes beings descended from such lineage.

**Chthonic** – this group includes eldritch horrors, daemons, devils, djinn, angelics, elementals, gorgons, spirit creatures such as the Chinese huli jing, Japanese kitsune, the Gaelic banshee, the Asian kuntilanak, and the North American Jersey Devil, muses, hags, and furies (aka erinyes, eumenides), which are female chthonic deities of vengeance.

**Primordial** – this group includes dragons, trolls, sentient animals such as unicorns, winged equines, phoenixes, griffins, sentient plants, manticores, yeti, Cyclopes, and giants, etc.

**Revenant** – this group includes all forms of undead, such as ghosts, ghouls, zombies, vampires, draugyr, and wights, etc.

# CHAPTER ONE

## AN UNKNOWN FAMILY

Fourteen-year-old half-fey Hemlock Oleander Baines sat cross-legged on their best friend's bedroom floor, staring down at the screen of their phone. The selfie they had just taken stared back at them; a thin face, with sharp features, delicately pointed ears, wide lips, and a snub nose. Beneath the carnelian hued pattern of their multitudinous freckles, their skin was brown with warm orange-red undertones. Thick, dark red hair framed their face; cropped short with a long, sweeping fringe. Hemlock couldn't help thinking that their eye colour, which seemed both green and blue at the same time, clashed horribly

with the room's brightly painted yellow walls. It felt like yet another reminder that they didn't belong here; not really, certainly not any more. "I should be dead right now, Topaz."

"Don't talk like that!" Fourteen-year-old human Topaz Moon scrambled up from the beanbag chair she was sitting on and snatched the phone out of Hemlock's hands. The young black girl peered intently at the screen, frantically scrolling back to check that they hadn't been looking up anything to do with self-harming, or worse. "Ugh, seriously, why would you even say that, Hemlock? You're not like, I dunno, like wanting to do something stupid to yourself, right? Because if you *are*, then Mum says...!"

"No!" Hemlock interrupted Topaz's lecture. "No, it's nothing like that, I promise. I just...the fire...my parents...it was so nearly me as well as them. I keep imagining what nearly happened. I can't help it, especially not today."

The fire that had gutted their erstwhile family home in Bedford Park,

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Chiswick, had begun around midnight on Friday 1st February 2019. According to the fire service's official report, it had burned unusually hot, leaving no more than ashes in its wake; some of which were all that remained of the late Mr and Mrs Baines. Usually, if the details of such a tragedy reached the media, people would go on to speculate about it for months afterwards at the very least. No reporters had shown any interest in the Bedford Park fire. One day, Hemlock would look back at this curious lack of press coverage, and finally understand the official *why* behind it, but for now, they were much too busy grieving to think very hard about anything. Today, Friday 15th February 2019, was the day of their parents' joint funeral. It had very nearly been Hemlock's funeral too. Only a surprise invitation for them to stay overnight at Topaz's house as a treat for their birthday had saved them from burning to death. It was horribly ironic.

For as far back as Hemlock could remember, their birthday had always fallen by the wayside next to their

parents' traditional Imbolc celebrations. However, this year, Topaz had dared Hemlock to spend their birthday only doing the things that they actually *enjoyed* for once. Instead of going straight home after the cinema, as they usually did on Friday evenings, the young half-fey had returned to Topaz's house for the night. The two teenagers had sat up until the small hours of Saturday morning, eating junk food and binge watching a hilariously terrible trilogy of films. A nasty text message had arrived at ten pm from Hemlock's mum, telling them not to bother coming home before dinnertime the next day, and not to expect any sympathy when they didn't like the consequences of their absence. Topaz had immediately made Hemlock show the text to her parents, who had frowned and then told them not to worry about it. Mr and Mrs Moon had never approved of the Baines' approach to parenting.

Topaz relaxed and handed back the phone. "Sorry for assuming the worst."

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“It’s fine. I don’t blame you for thinking it.” Hemlock switched their phone off and shoved it into the left side pocket of the hooded cardigan they were wearing. Topaz had donated it to them; handcrafted from soft black wool by her Caribbean born maternal grandmother. “I should probably leave my phone off for the funeral.”

“Yeah, good point.” Topaz glanced at the digital clock on the bedside table. None of the Moon family would be attending the funeral. Topaz had an orthodontist’s appointment for her latest set of braces today that couldn’t be rescheduled, and her parents both had unavoidable work commitments. “Not long now until you have to leave for it. I hate that we can’t go with you. Will you really be okay on your own?”

Hemlock nodded. “Social services are taking me to it, and Mum’s sister is going to be there. I know her a bit.”

They didn’t want to admit just how little they actually knew about their aunt. It would only serve to worry Topaz even more. The late Mrs Baines’ older

sister, who went by Mandragora, and her husband, a black haired male fey who went by Ricinus Harper, were among the very few relatives with whom the Baines had ever had any contact. Even then, it had been little more than cards for Yule and Christmas, and small gifts in the post whenever either Hemlock, or Aunt Mandragora's daughter who went by Ageratina, had a birthday. The Harper family lived in Cardiff. The distance meant that despite the cousins being the same age, they had only ever video chatted. Hemlock wasn't especially looking forward to that changing, but they knew that there wasn't anyone aside from Aunt Mandragora who was likely to be named as their guardian. *Perhaps Ageratina is nicer in person. Even if she isn't, at least Topaz and her parents won't have to worry about looking after me any longer.*

It felt to Hemlock as if the entire Moon family had spent the past two weeks fretting over them. Topaz had stuck to them like glue; openly convinced that something else terrible

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would happen if she didn't. For the most part, her parents had been more subtle in expressing their concern since taking Hemlock in as a temporary fostering arrangement. Mrs Moon had been the one who first informed the police and social services of Hemlock's survival. Thankfully, she had insisted on driving the young half-fey home on Saturday morning, intending to intervene with their parents about any punishment for the sleepover. Instead, she had ended up comforting Hemlock at the sight of what had been their home. Later, she had bought them replacement clothing, including a new pair of smart black trousers and a crisp white cotton shirt to wear to the funeral today. Mr Moon had provided a black silk tie that he explained had belonged to him for funerals at Hemlock's age. He hadn't mentioned who it was that he had lost, and now, looking down at the tie, Hemlock realised guiltily that they hadn't asked him. *He probably thinks that I don't care. Ugh, Dad was right: I always muck everything up!*

Absolutely no part of Hemlock resembled their late father's looks. The teenager was secretly happy about that, despite their sadness at his death. Human Professor of Interspecies Anthropology Frank Baines had been white, with light brown hair, grey eyes, and a bad temper that had all too often slipped into violence behind closed doors. Usually, he had just punched walls or slammed doors, but sometimes things had been worse than that. He had never struck his wife. His child however, had been fair game for the occasional hiding, especially after they had openly identified as being non-binary when they turned thirteen. Frank hadn't ever seemed as if he liked being a parent to begin with. Hemlock daring to defy him about their gender identity had clearly been the last straw.

Frank had been tall and sturdy, with a lot of muscle. Even now, Hemlock was still slightly shorter than average for a human or half-fey of their age. They were of a thin, athletic build, which was a genetic trait of their maternal family line. So was their

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unusual eye colour. Hemlock's mother, a fey woman with pale skin, freckles and waist length golden hair, who had gone by Belladonna, had often spoken proudly about how all of the Thornbacks had the same green and blue eyes. She had been less clear on where Hemlock's skin tone and hair colour came from. Whenever they had dared to ask about it, she had changed the subject almost angrily. Once or twice, she had muttered about them having some distant redcap heritage. Hemlock didn't know much about fey culture, but they had gathered that such ancestry was something to be considered very shameful indeed. Aged ten, they had privately concluded that this was why Belladonna ignored how Frank treated them.

Topaz nudged them gently on the shoulder then. "Hey, snap out of it! Seriously, Hemlock, you looked like you were miles away there. Are you sure that you can manage today okay? Nobody would blame you for not going. At least, nobody nice would, and stuff the rest of them."

Hemlock managed a weak smile. “I get why you’re asking, but yeah, I’m sure. It might even help me a bit. Seeing them laid to rest, I mean. Your mum said that it could give me closure.”

“Here’s hoping she’s right.” Topaz sighed. “I have to go and get ready to go now. Stupid dentist thing, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” Hemlock nodded. “The social worker should be here to pick me up soon anyhow. I’d better head downstairs and wait. I’ll text you later, after the funeral.”



The social worker who went by Carol something or other – Hemlock hadn’t really been paying much attention when the human woman gave her name earlier that morning – dropped the newly orphaned teenager off at the funeral parlour. The woman rambled on for the entire drive there about how she wasn’t staying, since

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everything was already arranged anyhow, whatever *that* meant. The preceding fortnight had included a number of such professionals; interspersed with random police officers. None of them had seemed to do much, aside from talk. Their names and faces had blurred together at some point, but Hemlock was being extra careful not to mention that. *I don't want Topaz and her parents thinking that I've lost the plot or something. They're worried enough about me already.*

The Moons had avoided sending any flowers in lieu of attendance, mindful of fey culture. There was still a veritable wall of freshly butchered plant material displayed behind the two matching coffins. Hemlock cringed inwardly at the sight: knowing that their mum would have hated to see the waste. There never ever had been cut flowers inside the Baines' house. Fey didn't approve of such things. Hemlock thought that people who claimed friendship ought to have respected that fact. The Moons certainly had. *Perhaps everyone else just forgot, or something,*

*because they're too upset to think straight at the moment. I'm sure they didn't mean any harm by it.*

One of the sombre faced funeral parlour staff, a thinly built avothrope woman with neat grey hair and wide yellow eyes, escorted Hemlock to their seat in the all but empty front left row. They already knew that nobody had managed to contact their paternal grandparents yet. Jayne and Oswald Baines, although both born and raised in England, now lived off grid in rural Tuscany, where they had relocated some twenty years ago. They were retired academics turned survivalists, and had last visited England when Hemlock was a baby. Apparently, Jayne had taken one look at her grandchild and declared them as the most adorable little changeling in the world. Oswald had chuckled and suggested that perhaps *brownie* was a more apt description. Somehow, the latter nickname had stuck, even after Hemlock was old enough to realise that actually, no, it really, really *wasn't* okay.

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Hemlock's Aunt Mandragora was the only other person seated in the front left row. She was tall and elegant, with long black hair with a literal will of its own. Some of it even wrapped itself around Hemlock as they sat down. The teenager gulped back a sob, suddenly reminded of their mum's hair and its antics. *She hated the fact that I'd cut mine off this short, even though it's always been inert.*

Aunt Mandragora sniffed quietly, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. "It's a terrible situation, Hemlock. And all of those wasted flowers too – dreadful!" She glowered at the display. "Although what else can you expect, what with poor Belladonna having chosen to dwell amongst *humans*."

Hemlock stared down at the polished tile floor, not daring to correct their aunt by pointing out that many of the people in and around their local community were other elsekin as opposed to humans. They thought about their own mixed heritage, and

about how the Moons, who were all fully human, had taken them in for the past fortnight whilst no one else had even offered. *Dad was human too though, and he wasn't all that nice to be around, especially not when he'd had a drink. Well, not to me, at least. Maybe that's what Aunt Mandragora means. I suppose Mum probably talked to her about it at some point.*

Most of the other mourners were familiar faces: friends and colleagues of Hemlock's parents, and of course all of their neighbours from Bedford Park. There were only a handful of strangers, two of whom sat in the opposite front row. A male and a female fey, they both had pointed ears and large bright eyes mirroring Hemlock and Aunt Mandragora in colour, and they were wearing matching smartly tailored black trouser suits with crisp white shirts and thin black ties. Hemlock spent most of the funeral surreptitiously studying the pair; wondering who they were. *They're obviously from Mum's side of the family, but that hardly narrows things down by much!*

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The male fey was a little over six feet tall, and lean but muscular looking. He sported an elegantly groomed dark red moustache, and a matching goatee. The ends of his moustache twitched steadily; like the whiskers on a rabbit. Just like Hemlock, he had warm brown skin, smattered with ruby coloured freckles. The hair on his head was also dark red, and hung to his shoulders in a curtain of lazily stirring strands. Hemlock felt relieved at the sight. *I guess I really do get my looks from Mum's side of the family after all. It's nice to finally know for certain. With how Dad acted towards me, I used to wonder if maybe she'd cheated on him or something! I shouldn't think about things like that though; especially not at their funeral.*

They focused their attention on the female fey instead. She had a cane, and was closer to Hemlock in height, with a thin build and sharp features. Her shoulder length hair was strangely pale: not blonde or even grey, but rather as if somehow leached of all colour. It didn't move, but the tips of the

strands sparked occasionally. At first, it appeared that she wore far too much foundation, and a jarringly pale shade of one at that. Then Hemlock realised that it wasn't actually make-up at all. Instead, aside from the ghosts of a few faint freckles, the woman's skin lacked any sign of pigmentation. The pallor seemed unnatural; the same as her hair. Heavy scarring ran all the way down the left side of her face. Hemlock wondered what had caused it. *Perhaps she's been in an accident, and that's why she has that cane, too.*

Aunt Mandragora finally introduced them all to each other at the gates of the graveyard. By now, the funeral was finally over, and the rest of the mourners had finished paying their respects and left. "Cousins, this is the one who goes by Hemlock Oleander Baines, named so by the deceased one who went by Belladonna in acknowledgement of the deceased one who was claimed as husband by her. Hemlock, this is your second cousin, the one who goes by Solanum Thornback, and his twin sister, the one

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who goes by Hoyden Thornback. They are both acknowledged children of the one who goes by Oleander Thornback, for whom you were named, and who is uncle to me, and to the deceased one who went by Belladonna.”

Hemlock tried not to look too baffled by their aunt’s speech. They really only had a vague recollection about how they were supposed to position their hand for the subsequent ritual greeting. They shuffled their feet awkwardly as Hoyden and Solanum clasped hands briefly with them. “Um, hello, I suppose. It’s nice to meet you both.”

Solanum nodded. “We’re sorry for your loss, little cousin. Now, please, from this point onwards, just call me Sol; honestly, practically everyone else does! *Solanum* always sounds as if it belongs in a *salad*.”

Aunt Mandragora grimaced at Sol’s lack of decorum, but steamrolled on with the conversation. “Now, as I presume the one who goes by Carol will have told you earlier, we’ve spoken to social services and arranged

everything. Since it would appear that nobody still living knows the address for the two who go by Jayne and Oswald Baines, you're to stay with the Thornbacks. Of course, most of them have refused to get involved at all, but you shan't blame them for that; not given how past events played out with your late mother and her unfortunate choice of husband. If you keep your head down and behave with sufficient decorum, then perhaps the others shall accept you eventually. Anyhow, the one whom I claim as husband and I don't have room for another child, and Solanum works abroad most of the time, so you'll be living with Hoyden from now on, up near Weardale, in County Durham. She'll take you back to the human family who go by Moon's house first to collect whatever belongings you might have left there."

Hemlock frowned. "But...but I don't *know* her, Aunt Mandragora! I mean, I barely know *you* either, but still."

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Sol smirked. "Well, to be fair, biblically speaking, no one *knows* our dear Hoyden...!"

Hoyden elbowed him sharply in the ribs. Her eyes flashed silver for an instant as she spoke. "This isn't the time for that sort of humour, Sol, or the place! Quit joking around and at least *try* to feign some empathy."

Sol opened his mouth as though to retort, but paused when he glanced at Hoyden and Aunt Mandragora. "Hmm, yes; I suppose you're right; young ears present, and so on. Anyhow, don't worry too much about who's who, Hemlock. Living with an unknown family is still better than spending the next four or so years in care!"

Aunt Mandragora appeared satisfied with the introductions, even if nobody else was. "Well, now that that's all sorted, I'll be on my way home. It's a long way back to Cardiff. Take care, Hemlock, dear. Hoyden, Solanum, don't forget to keep in touch."



MI99 Section Chief Jamie Carlisle took another slow sip of his Friday evening whisky. The soft glow from the lamp on his home office desk brought the subtler colours of the expensive liquid to life. Carlisle paused to appreciate them. There were hints of softly glinting amber and gold within the warm rich brown: itself only a shade or two paler than the colour of his eyes. Regrettably, he realised, catching a glimpse of himself reflected in the darkened screen of his computer, the light also emphasised the rest of his features – the multitude of small creases at the corners of his eyes and mouth, the slightly hooded look to his eyelids, and the faint stubble dusting the dark brown skin of his jaw line.

The spymaster sighed. He would be fifty-two in three days' time. People with too much influence had begun making inconvenient noises about him being past his prime for the role. *Ha – as if*

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*any of those stuffed shirts even know what my job really entails!*

Nonetheless, if Carlisle wanted to retain his position as Section Chief, then he needed to prove such criticism well and truly wrong. He needed a win, ideally the successful completion of a significant operation. Rooting out at least some of the leaders of the UK's now rampant human supremacist problem would definitely tick all of the right boxes. To do that, he would naturally have to use none other than MI99's very best asset: Hoyden Thornback. Unfortunately, the latter party had taken early retirement the previous spring, following what had been termed as an impromptu exit from the Grand Inter-European Express train. *Talk about inconveniencing your employer!*

To be fair, Hoyden genuinely *had* injured her left leg in the incident, but Carlisle rather felt that she was milking things just a tad. After all, it wasn't as if any of MI99's other operatives didn't occasionally leap, fall, or get thrown

from moving vehicles! It was more or less an acknowledged hazard of the profession. The rest of the survivors certainly didn't go around demanding to be let go with their pension afterwards. *Hoyden needs to get her priorities back in order, before I end up forced out to pasture right alongside her! Fortunately, I have a plan.*

With that in mind, Carlisle returned his attention to the contents of the A4 sized manila cardboard folder currently lying open on his desk. Amid the dozen or densely typed up pages of notes were a handful of colour stills from video footage, all taken over the past three days. As usual, MI99's carefully trained observation gremlins had succeeded where a more typical sort of spy might not. The subject of the file, Hoyden's fourteen-year-old cousin, hadn't even known that they were being recorded. In one close-up shot in particular, they stared past the perspective of the video camera at something behind the tiny gremlin that had been wearing it. The look in their strange bright eyes was obviously one

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of sheer anguish, but the rest of their face showed no emotion whatsoever.

Carlisle checked the date and time of the image against what was in the notes: this had been the moment when Hemlock revisited the charred shell that was now all that remained of their family home. *Most kids would have been in bits seeing that, but something tells me that you aren't like most kids, are you, Hemlock? No, and so much the better: you're obviously a proper Thornback through and through; even if it did skip a generation with your mum!*

The Section Chief had been counting on that being the case. He smiled down at the photograph as he reached for his mobile phone. By now, the funeral was over, and the young orphan was off on their way to their new home. It was time for him to give the order that would have MI99's technicians put the first stage of what he had called Operation Youngblood into action. *After that, I'll make arrangements for checking up on Hoyden and her ward in person.*



It had gone half past six in the evening by the time that Hemlock clambered wearily out of the front passenger seat of Hoyden's battered old grey Volvo. They peered at their surroundings nervously. Their cousin – she had said not to worry about the difference between that and second cousin – lived in what could genuinely have been termed the middle of nowhere. Hemlock's new home was just over a mile north of the hamlet of Aelfhang, two hundred and seventy four miles away from Bedford Park. It was a squat sort of cottage, with small, leaded windows, whitewashed exterior walls and a lumpy looking thatched roof. A steep half-mile stretch of somewhat overgrown gravel driveway flanked by gnarled thorn hedging provided the only access to and from the road. There didn't appear to be any neighbouring houses within sight or sound.

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Hoyden leaned heavily on her cane as she dragged herself out from behind the wheel. Slamming the driver's door behind her, she gestured off to the right of where she'd parked just next to the front door of the cottage. "The five bar gate over there leads into the orchard. Don't leave it open, or the goats will get out and then we'll have utter havoc to deal with. The chickens are round at the back of the house, along with the vegetable garden. I actually need to go and shut them into their coop for the night. Here, take my keys. You go on indoors and make yourself at home. It's not as if you've got very much to carry, so...I mean...luggage and such...well, anyhow, you can let yourself in,"

She limped off out of sight, the gravel path crunching beneath her shoes. Hemlock drew in a slow, deep breath, and shouldered their trusty black cotton duffel bag. They had managed by now to squash down the bulk of their grief. There didn't seem much point in letting it out again by kicking off about Hoyden's parting comment. She had obviously already

realised her poor choice of words. Besides which, it wasn't as if she was wrong. All Hemlock owned now were the clothes on their back, and the items in their duffel bag. *Really, I hardly have anything to carry at all.*

## CHAPTER TWO

### AN UNWELCOME CHANGE

Life with Hoyden immediately proved different to how things had been back in Bedford Park. For one thing, thanks to modern central heating, there hadn't been an old fashioned open fireplace with a pair of magma salamanders living in it there. Nor had there been a chicken perched on the back of the sofa. Hemlock paused in the entrance to Hoyden's sitting room and stared at the creatures in question. "Um, hello...?"

The salamanders didn't react, but the chicken, which was large and orange feathered, stared back. After a moment, it puffed up its neck and

started making an odd sound – not a cluck, but more of a growling, whooping noise. Hemlock, whose experience of poultry up until now had consisted solely of the ready to eat versions, backed away hurriedly into the hall, closing the door of the sitting room between them and the obviously angry bird. “Ugh, well that’s certainly an unwelcome change – so much for Hoyden claiming that the chickens are kept outside!”

It was dark in the hall with both the front door and the sitting room door closed. After fumbling around and finding the light switch, Hemlock decided to investigate the other three doors. The nearest one turned out to be a cramped but neatly kept downstairs toilet, complete with a small sink, and a lidded plastic bin. The second one was nothing more than a large cupboard, crammed full of coats, boots, bits of what looked like more than one vacuum cleaner, and other such household clutter. The third door led to the kitchen, which in turn opened onto a small dining room.

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After a wary glance around both of these rooms to check for any more chickens, Hemlock sat down at the dining room table and took out their phone to message Topaz on CliqueSpeak. "Oh, *please* don't tell me that there's no signal here!"

They were still trying to log on by the time that Hoyden entered the kitchen via the back door of her cottage, and the pale haired fey shook her head at the sight. "I haven't got internet here, sorry. There's a landline in the front hall, if you need to contact anyone."

Hemlock frowned. "My phone is supposed to be able to connect on its own! I have access to 100GB of data every month with the contract I'm on. Dad took it out for me; he did loads of research first and...oh. I suppose it's been cancelled now, hasn't it?"

Hoyden nodded sympathetically. "There are a couple of shops over in Hyssop Tor which sell mobile phones. We can go there tomorrow and get you a new contract. A new phone too, if

you'd like one. I do owe you a good few birthday presents, after all."

"I suppose so." Hemlock stuffed their currently useless phone back into their pocket. "So why didn't you or Sol ever take anything to do with us until now?"

Their cousin limped back into the kitchen and busied herself making tea. "It was Belladonna's decision. She chose to go non-contact with most of the Thornback family when she eloped with Frank straight out of university. To be honest, the real question is why she stayed in touch with Mandragora."

Hemlock shrugged. "I thought it was just because they were sisters."

Hoyden seemed to consider this. "Perhaps you're right. Blood always has mattered a lot to Mandragora. Yes, I expect she just refused to let Belladonna cut her out. Do you take sugar in your tea?"

"Yeah, three please."

Hoyden chuckled. "Well, *there's* a definite Thornback trait, anyhow!" She

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added the requested amount of sugar to Hemlock's cup, and then the same again to her own. "Sol takes six in his tea, and at least nine in his coffee. It often turns heads with strangers, especially humans. Now, let's see: obviously, you're still much too young for dairy, so do you want almond or coconut milk in this? I'm afraid that I've run out of oat milk."

"Coconut, please, I don't like almond; it tastes like the smell of sweaty socks." The teenager glanced towards the front hall. "Um, so anyway, why's there a chicken sitting on the back of the sofa?"

"Oh, that's the one who goes by Marmalade! You know; like in the song, as opposed to the condiment." Hoyden beamed. "I raised her from an egg, and now she's decided that she's a pet."

Hemlock supposed that it was just as well that Marmalade was only a chicken as opposed to a large breed dog, or a cockatrice, or other similar potentially dangerous animal. "Um, she doesn't seem very friendly for a pet."

“She’s just not used to you yet, that’s all.” Hoyden handed Hemlock their tea. “Come on – follow me, and I’ll introduce you both properly.”

Marmalade proved to be rather affectionate once she wasn’t acting as guard chicken. After a cursory peck at Hemlock’s shoelaces, the hen hopped up onto Hoyden’s lap and settled down to sleep. Much to the surprise of the teenaged half-fey, their cousin dozed off soon afterwards herself; during the opening action sequence for the film that she had suggested they watch together. Hemlock, seated on the opposite one of the two matching armchairs, stared at the sight for a moment, and then glanced worriedly at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was now seven in the evening, and there had still been no mention of dinner. Judging by how Hoyden was now snoring softly, it was well past being too late to raise the subject. The young half-fey got quietly to their feet and tiptoed out into the hall, pulling the sitting room door gently closed behind them. Collecting their duffel bag from where

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they had left it in the dining room, they made their way silently up the thickly carpeted stairs. *I suppose I'd best see about figuring out which bedroom is mine. Perhaps I can make myself some beans and toast or something later.*

There were four more rooms up here under the eaves of the cottage. One was the main bathroom, tiled from floor to ceiling in all the colours of the rainbow. Hemlock blinked for a moment: feeling as if they had stepped into a kaleidoscope. There was a toilet, of course, which was white, and a matching sink. The sink had shelving below it for storing toiletries. Instead of a bath, a large walk-in shower took up an entire corner of the room. The adjoining corner had a fitted cupboard that housed the hot press.

The next room along was Hoyden's bedroom; decorated just as vividly as the bathroom, but with wallpaper and paint instead of tiles. It was a cramped sort of room, really, mostly due to the angles of the eaves. A double bed draped in mismatched throws and

cushions took up most of the floor space; the carved wooden headboard of it positioned directly underneath the window. Aside from that, a cluttered dressing table and a matching pair of shabby pine wardrobes were the only furniture. There was no sign of a chair for the dressing table. Hemlock supposed that their cousin didn't really need one, given that the edge of her bed was close enough to sit on whilst using the mirror.

The third room had a much better height of ceiling, and looked like a cross between a home office and a small library. There was an old-fashioned looking dark wooden desk in front of the window, with an equally out of date style of chair. A tatty looking red leather futon was crammed into the far left corner. Every other inch of space contained books, all of them neatly shelved. Hemlock felt a sudden pang of sorrow for their erstwhile collection of much loved paperbacks, all destroyed in the fire. Thankfully, they still had their e-reader, but it wasn't quite the same.

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Finally, the teenaged half-fey found what would now be their bedroom. It was a small, cream painted room furnished with a single divan bed, a small dressing table and chair, and a large, rather gloomy looking oak wardrobe with two drawers underneath it. The ceiling was a good bit higher than the one in Hoyden's room; albeit still lower than the one in the study. There were crisp white linen curtains on the window; matching the obviously brand new bedding. The floor was bare aside from a thick sheepskin rug next to the bed. Beside the wardrobe, there was a matching bookcase, with six shelves, five of which were empty. To Hemlock's surprised delight, the bottom shelf housed a full set of hard backed encyclopaedias, and a couple of dozen YA category paperback novels of various genres.

One of the polished wooden floorboards next to the bookcase creaked as Hemlock stepped on it. Their new bedroom was right above the sitting room, and the sound must have carried down, because there was

a sudden loud clucking from Marmalade. Moments later, Hoyden called up from the foot of the stairs. "Hemlock, is everything okay up there? Did you find your room?"

The teenager tossed their bag onto the bed and hurried back out of the bedroom and along the landing to the top of the stairs to reply. "Sorry, I was just putting my stuff away, that's all! Um, I like the books."

Hoyden beamed. "That's good! I'm sorry for dozing off like that, by the way. It must have been all the driving. Do you want a takeaway for dinner, or should I just make something?"

Hemlock blinked in surprise. "We're in the middle of nowhere – I didn't think there'd be a takeaway anywhere *near* here!"

"Ah, yes; because the countryside hasn't discovered the joys of such things, eh?" Their cousin scoffed, brandishing a handful of worn looking paper menus. "There are two just down the road in Aelfhang, and one over in

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Hyssop Tor that will deliver out this far.  
Come down and we'll pick something."

"Okay."



Two weeks passed, and Hemlock's day-to-day life with Hoyden proved at times oddly stilted, but nonetheless peaceful in its routine. Sadly, the same couldn't be said of Hyssop Tor Integrated Academy. Their new secondary school's official website boasted a long history of promoting healthy interspecies connections. It also claimed to have excellent exam results all round. By the time that the bell had rang to indicate the start of mid-morning break in their first day of attendance, Monday 4th March 2019, Hemlock had formed all too good an idea of just which of those things the teachers' main priority was. Apparently, pupils here at Hyssop Tor Integrated Academy could get away with rather a lot of intolerant behaviour if their academic record was good enough.

Case in point: sixteen-year-old Deborah Burns and her three equally horrible friends Sandra Walker, Norma Ross, and Cheryl Allen. Star student Deborah *really* didn't like people with anything other than human heritage. She didn't especially like people who identified as being LGBTQA+ either, but at least she'd settle for aiming glares and nasty comments at them if they were human. Her friends backed her up, but rarely started anything without her. The handful of elsekin students attending Hyssop Tor Integrated Academy avoided all four of them whenever possible, and made a habit of never going anywhere alone.

Unfortunately, there was no real safety in numbers sort of option available to Hemlock. As the only student with fey heritage in the entire school, they had discovered that they weren't remotely welcome among the other elsekin. The human students were at best indifferent to them. Hemlock could live with indifference, but active hostility bothered them. To judge from what they had picked up

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today, the latter sort of behaviour was why Deborah and her friends were infamous.

With that in mind, Hemlock had formulated a simple plan for evading notice. Shuffling out amongst the crowd of students towards the school's main gate at the end of their first day of attendance at Hyslop Tor Integrated Academy, the young half-fey attempted to tag along behind some of the rowdier Year 14s. It was a long walk from here to the bus stop, and Hemlock had no wish to draw the attention of the four Year 13 girls. *Although I wouldn't really think that they'd chance picking on anyone outside on the street; especially not in front of such a big group of older students! They might not even spot me to begin with if I keep my head down.*

They didn't even make it as far as the actual main gate. Less than halfway across the front playground, the four identically styled Year 13 girls in question suddenly appeared from the crowd. They stepped in front of

Hemlock, cutting them off from following the Year 14s with what was clearly well practised efficiency. Mobbing up around the startled fourteen-year-old, the four bullies herded them behind the nearest bike shelter before Hemlock could so much as try to react. If anyone even noticed what was happening, there certainly wasn't any sign of it.

Deborah, who stood out from her friends by dint of her superior skill in applying eyeliner, loomed over her newest target. "You're the new half-fey kid in Year 10. I hear you're up from London – orphan, aren't you?"

Hemlock nodded. "My cousin took me in."

The lead bully scoffed. "Don't suppose that anybody else would have done; not with the state of you! So are you a girl or a boy then?"

Hemlock blinked. "I identify as non-binary, actually. Um, gender neutral – I use singular they, them, and their as my pronouns."

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“That’s not what I asked you though, was it, prick ears?” Deborah’s gaze flickered calculatingly over Hemlock’s deliberately ambiguous choice in clothes: unisex black hooded duffel coat, chunky black lace up trainers, a pair of loosely cut black cotton jogging bottoms, and a long-sleeved black t-shirt, paired with the obligatory school sweatshirt. Hyssop Tor Integrated Academy didn’t have very much in the way of a set school uniform. There was just an especially ugly royal blue sweatshirt complete with embroidered school crest, and a thinner version of it for warm weather. “You dress right weird, don’t you? What changing room are you in for PE?”

“Oh, I don’t take PE any more. I applied for special dispensation and dropped it at the start of Year 10 for an additional Modern Language – German, actually, because I was already taking French and Spanish anyhow. I still do loads of sports based stuff outside of school though. That is, I used to; back in London. I haven’t had the chance to join any clubs around

here yet. Come to think about that, I really hope there *are* some clubs with space in them for new members – I'd hate to have to give up a language option!"

The older student glowered at their lengthy explanation. "Yeah, right, well shut up and never mind any of that for now! What *toilet* do you use?"

"Um...does it matter?" Hemlock had a nervous sort of flipping sensation in their stomach now. Clearly, attempting to make friendly conversation wasn't going to work. "I mean, I only go in there to use the loo and wash my hands anyhow, the same as everyone else does."

Deborah gave a sharp laugh of derision, and glanced at her friends. "Hear that, girls? This dirty prick ears here reckons that we don't know what the toilets are for!"

"No, that's not what I meant!" Hemlock shook their head in frustration. "It's just...why do you even

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want to know what toilet I use? What's it to you?"

Deborah sneered. "We're *asking* because around here we don't stand for nasty little freaks sneaking about and peeking at people! So – which toilet is it?"

"The gender neutral one; it's next to the library." Hemlock attempted to edge away from the gang of girls. By this point, it was perfectly obvious that the older teenagers weren't challenging them for any reason aside from spite, and as such the young half-fey deeply resented the idea of even attempting to explain anything to them. "I'll just go at home instead from now on though. I expect plenty of other people here take that option already rather than risk having to share a confined space with any of *you*."

The four Year 13s moved into a tighter ring around the young half-fey, blocking any hope of escape. Deborah grabbed a handful of Hemlock's lumpy sweatshirt and yanked them closer. She clearly wasn't happy with them

having dared to criticise her. “You think you’re tough or something? Where’s home then, eh? Where do you live, prick ears?”

“They live with me, and our address is none of your business!” Hoyden’s voice cut into the altercation. “Get your hands off them right now, or I’ll see to it that you wake up tomorrow morning trapped on the wrong side of the nearest mirror.”

The air crackled as she finished speaking. All four of the bullies shrieked and scattered, bolting from the by now empty playground as if pursued by their worst nightmares. Hemlock shook their head worriedly. “I’m not sure that you’re technically allowed to threaten people like that, you know.”

Hoyden snorted incredulously. “Oh, never mind what I’m allowed to do! Are *you* okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m starting to miss my old school even more though. Nobody there ever picked on me for being non-binary.”

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“Nobody here will either, or at least not more than once.” Hoyden’s hair stopped sparking, and her eyes, which had been blazing silver, returned to their usual colour. “Come with me. I’m going to have a word with the head teacher.”

“Can’t we just go home instead?” Hemlock trailed along miserably behind their cousin. “Hoyden, please, complaining to the teachers won’t help! You’re going to make everything a million times worse for me!”

“Not if I have those horrid girls expelled.”

“We can’t *prove* anything happened though, so they won’t get expelled. They probably won’t even be suspended, or at least not for very long.”

Hoyden stopped walking at that and frowned at her cousin. “You can’t honestly expect me to let this go? I *heard* what she called you, Hemlock! It’s against the law to use that sort of

derogatory language. It counts as a hate crime.”

“It’s just a stupid slur. Words can’t hurt you, not really; that’s what Mum and Dad always used to say.” Hemlock stared down at their feet; inwardly recalling just how often they had heard that particular mantra. It still felt hollow. “And besides, I don’t want you to get in trouble for scaring them.”

“Lack of proof works both ways. At the worst, it would be their word against mine, and I have plenty of friends in convenient places who owe me favours.” Hoyden sounded supremely confident about this, but nonetheless she changed direction, and, to Hemlock’s relief, led the way back across the playground and out through the main gate. “I’ll let it go for now, but only because you seem so bothered by the idea of reporting it. Besides which, my parking ticket must be at least halfway up by now.”



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In a small underground car park two streets away from Hyssop Tor Integrated Academy, Carlisle sank back into the pristine leather upholstery of the driver's seat of his car and allowed himself to laugh. The footage from the video camera worn by yet another of MI99's observation gremlins continued playing on the pop-up monitor built into the dashboard. *Ah, now that was classic Hoyden Thornback! It looks as if she cares about her cousin. I'd say that young Hemlock has started bonding with her too, given how they're worried about her getting into trouble for defending them. I can work with that.*

## CHAPTER THREE

### AN UNACCEPTABLE ARRANGEMENT

Eleven days had passed since the incident in the playground, and so far, nobody seemed to have complained about Hoyden's threat. Hemlock was still worried about it, but for now, their main concern was Hoyden herself. Their cousin was acting very strangely today. She hadn't bothered getting out of bed in time for breakfast. In fact, she hadn't even answered when Hemlock knocked on the door of her bedroom. In the end, Hemlock had had to see to the salamanders, the chickens and the goats without her. The teenaged half-fey had managed to shower, and grab

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some toast and fruit juice before leaving for school, but there hadn't been enough time left for them to pack a lunch. Buying something in the canteen wasn't an option either: Hemlock had a prepaid bus pass for getting to and from school, but no actual money. As a result, by the time that the bus dropped them off again at half past four that afternoon, Hemlock was both hungry and annoyed.

Hoyden had at least gotten out of bed by now, but she was still only wearing her pyjamas when Hemlock entered the sitting room. The pale haired fey sat curled up on the sofa staring dazedly at the blue and lilac flames produced by the softly crackling salamander nest. Marmalade, who was nestled in next to her, clucked a greeting, and then went back to contentedly preening her feathers. Hemlock dumped their schoolbag on the nearest of the armchairs, peeled off their coat and their lumpy school sweatshirt, and stomped into the kitchen in search of food.

Halfway through their makeshift dinner of peanut butter on toast, extra sugary tea, and chocolate biscuits, Hoyden finally shuffled into the dining room. She stared at her cousin for a few seconds before speaking. “How was school today?”

Hemlock shrugged and answered in between mouthfuls. “Okay.”

“Did those girls try anything?”

“No.”

Hoyden nodded. “Good. Oh, and that was good work sorting out all of the animals this morning. It was very considerate of you.”

“It’s not like I had a choice!” Hemlock glared at their cousin. “They would have starved if I’d left it up to *you*, and you’re supposed to be the adult around here!”

“Oh, come on now, don’t exaggerate! I got up not that long after you’d left; I would have seen to them if you hadn’t.” Hoyden grimaced, and sat down opposite Hemlock at the table.

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“Look, I have chronic pain because of this leg, and sometimes it knocks me back a little, that’s all...!”

Hemlock interrupted her, scrambling to their feet as they shouted angrily. “No! That’s not all, Hoyden! I didn’t have anything to eat for lunch today, the teachers all think that I’m nothing but trouble because practically everybody at school is terrified of me because of how Deborah and her friends keep avoiding me, and all of it’s *your* fault! I hate living here, and I hate you! I want to go home to London!”

The ends of their cousin’s long pale hair sparked as she replied. “Well, I’m sorry that you find it to be such an unacceptable arrangement, but I’m afraid that we’re stuck with one another until you turn eighteen!”

“That’s only if I don’t run away first!” Hemlock was already sprinting for the front door of the cottage, not caring to hear Hoyden’s response to their parting threat. They grabbed their coat as they ran. Out of pique, they snatched up the car keys too, and flung them off to one

side on their way down the drive. *There! That ought to keep Hoyden from following me any time soon, although I expect that she'll wallop me whenever she does catch up. Mum and Dad certainly would have done, and I can't see why she'd be any different to them.*



Just over twenty minutes on from their abrupt departure from Hoyden's cottage, Hemlock arrived in Aelfhang, along with the tail end of the driving rainstorm that the seams of their coat had let in all too readily. The now rather soggy teenager frowned as they wandered along what passed for the main street. It was approaching five o'clock in the afternoon and the young half-fey was beginning to suspect that there wasn't anything whatsoever to do for fun around here. Unfortunately, boring or not, the isolated hamlet was still the only destination within walking distance of Hoyden's cottage. *Okay, so I definitely need to talk to Hoyden about*

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*getting pocket money. Ugh, she'll probably decide that I'm grounded for tossing her keys away and bogging off!*

An articulated lorry trundled past them on its way out of the hamlet, and presumably back to civilisation. Hemlock stared after the grimy vehicle almost wistfully. Would it really be too dangerous for them to try hitchhiking their way down to London instead of hanging around here aimlessly until Hoyden inevitably turned up to drag them back to her cottage? Common sense and a lifetime of warnings from various adults about perverts and traffickers won out. *I don't want to chance ending up being murdered or something.*

A tall, middle-aged black human man dressed in cosy looking weather appropriate smart casual wear was stapling a brightly coloured flyer to a nearby telephone pole. He nodded at Hemlock. "It's a bit wet to be out wandering the streets, don't you think?"

Hemlock shrugged, still trying not to openly shiver with cold. "Yeah, but it

wasn't raining when I left the house. Besides, I've got a coat on."

"So I can see. It doesn't look to me as if it's an especially waterproof sort of a coat though." The stranger tucked his stapler back into his pocket, and then gestured towards a small café. "That's pretty much the only place in all of Aelfhang that's still open after five. Well, aside from the pub and the takeaways, but you look too young for the pub and the takeaways don't let people sit in."

By now, Hemlock was all but positive that the man was some sort of a youth worker, or perhaps even a social worker. They scowled half-heartedly at his helpful advice. "What makes you think that I even want to sit in anywhere?"

The man raised his eyebrows slightly. "Well, for a start, you look just about dead on your feet. Secondly, it's about to start chucking it down again, and I for one intend to avoid staying out in it."

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Hemlock looked away, scuffing the side of their shoe against the pavement. "I um, I don't have any money. I'm just sort of waiting for my cousin to come pick me up."

"Ah, I see." The man nodded knowingly. "If it helps, this café's policy is that customers sit down to order, and you don't have to pay for your food until you're ready to leave. You could always get your cousin to bring money and meet you inside. I'm assuming that you have a phone."

Hemlock blushed slightly, and nodded. "Yeah, I suppose I can do that. It's better than staying out here in the rain, and I *am* hungry."

"That's the spirit!" The man led the way into the café, and showed Hemlock where the cold drinks cabinet was. He proffered his right hand as they sat down across from one another in one of the smaller booths. "I go by the name of Jamie Carlisle. I'm a fully accredited teacher of dancing and mixed martial arts – I've been providing classes at the leisure centre here in

Aelfhang since the middle of February this year.”

Hemlock shook hands with him across the table as the waitress, a plump human woman with neatly bobbed black hair, shuffled past with someone else’s order, dropping off a couple of menus as she went by. “I go by Hemlock Oleander Baines. I’m actually looking for some sports clubs to join, but dancing and martial arts sound like a strange combination. Are there many people interested in taking your classes so far?”

Carlisle smiled and peeled back the tab on his can of ginger beer. “Unfortunately, I suspect that most of the locals share your misgivings! In fact, the two skill sets combine well. Little known fact: if you can dance, you can fight. I myself once singlehandedly incapacitated six heavily armed opponents whilst posing as a female go-go dancer.”

Hemlock blinked. “How did *that* work?”

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“Well, for a start, it involved a *lot* of sequins.” Carlisle took a sip of his drink and continued. “But you’re asking the wrong question there.”

“Am I?”

“Yeah, just think about it properly for a minute. What does a barely attended leisure centre in a miserable little backwater like Aelfhang need with a judo flipping dance instructor?”

Hemlock shrugged and toyed with the corner flap on their carton of diluted blackcurrant juice. “I don’t know, but there must be some reason, or else they wouldn’t have employed you.”

Carlisle’s smile grew wider, and yet colder. “Standard logic leads back to that, yes, but what part of my explanation mentioned my being employed by the centre?”

“Um, well how else could you teach classes then?”

“Simple: I booked one of the hireable rooms there for use every Saturday

morning from ten until twelve and took out the appropriate forms of insurance.”

Hemlock nodded slowly. “Okay then, so you just set up your own class. Why would you want to do that if you didn’t think that Aelfhang was the right sort of place?”

“It was a means to an end.” Carlisle pulled out a black leather ID holder and flipped it open. “Teaching at the leisure centre is just a cover. I’m actually the Section Chief for MI99.”

“I’ve never heard of whatever that is.”

“Most people haven’t. We’re one of the UK’s most secret branches of Intelligence. To put it simply, we take care of any spy stuff involving elsekin. National, international, you name it.”

Hemlock eyed him somewhat doubtfully. “Um, okay, but if it’s supposed to be such a big secret, then why are you even telling me about it?”

Carlisle leaned across the table towards them conspiratorially. “I’m telling you about it because, as a

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Thornback, it's your heritage, Hemlock Oleander Baines. Your maternal grandparents both work for us, just as their parents and grandparents did before them. Your aunt in Cardiff works for our Forensic Accounting department there. Your cousin Hoyden used to be one of our top field operatives, right up until her fall from that train last year. Her brother Sol still is, but don't tell *him* that. It'll go to his head, and that's the last thing we need."

Hemlock scoffed. "What, so you're saying that my entire family are all *spies*? That hardly seems likely!"

"Well, not quite *all* of them. Your grandparents officially disowned your late mum because she chose to follow a different path in life. It was considered quite the scandal at the time." Carlisle frowned. "Personally, I'll never comprehend how anyone from such an esteemed background could willingly embrace boring academia over espionage!"

The teenager sighed. "Oh, right, so did Hoyden send you to find me this

afternoon because she knew you were working undercover in the village or something?"

"Nope, this was all my idea." Carlisle grinned as he put his ID away. "I keep a close eye on all of MI99's operatives, including the ones who quit, and on their dependents too. Your situation caught my attention. Tell me – how do you feel about getting revenge?"

"Revenge for what?" Hemlock took another sip of their blackcurrant juice. "Oh, wait, are you talking about Deborah and her friends? Only they're leaving me alone now. Hoyden scared them off."

"Ha! That doesn't surprise me; terrifying people into behaving is what she does best! But no, this isn't about a few pathetic little bullies." Carlisle lowered his voice slightly. "I'm talking about getting revenge on the scum who murdered your parents in that fire."

Hemlock jolted back in their seat at his words; their fingers clenching reflexively around the flimsy juice

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carton. Purple liquid spattered from the end of the straw as they stammered their reply. "You...do you mean to say that...that the fire...the one they all died in...you're saying that it *wasn't* an accident...?"

"I'm guessing that nobody else had mentioned that part to you yet." Carlisle looked sympathetic at this. He nodded to the waitress as she returned to take their orders. "Hi, Maureen, we'll have two of your specials, thanks; with chips for them and boiled potatoes for me. Oh, and nothing that has any dairy in it. I'll be paying for both meals."

Hungry or not, under normal circumstances, Hemlock would have objected to the idea of a near total stranger just randomly buying them dinner. However, right now, they were much more concerned with learning the truth about the fire. "Why didn't anyone else tell me? I mean, do the rest of my family even *know*?"

The Section Chief nodded. "Yeah, they know, but for now it's all still being kept hushed up for the public good."

Hemlock gulped. “Is that why there wasn’t anything in the news?”

“I’m afraid so, yeah.” Carlisle sighed. “Look, I’m sure that Hoyden would have told you eventually. She’s probably just been waiting for the right moment.”

“And when exactly was *that* going to be? I’ve been living with her for a month now, and she hasn’t said anything! I didn’t even know about her being an ex-spy until now!” Hemlock fumbled in their pocket and took out their phone. “Stuff this – I’m going to ring the cottage and just flipping well ask her to explain about it right now!”

“It would probably be better if you let me finish giving you the details first. Give me your number and your email address and I’ll send you what you’re cleared to know as a civilian. It’s the least I can do for you.” Carlisle pulled out his own phone. “Incidentally, you *might* not want to tell Hoyden about exactly where you got the information. She has some unfortunate hang-ups about her time with MI99. Between you

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and me, I think it's a form of PTSD; her accident, and so on."

Hemlock scrolled down through their Contacts to their own details and turned their phone around so that Carlisle could see the screen. "I hadn't actually thought about Hoyden having PTSD. So, um, what exactly happened to her, anyhow? Her leg, I mean, and those scars all down the left side of her face – how did she get them?"

Carlisle shook his head sadly. "She had a nasty fall during her last mission. Well, sort of. Someone got the drop on her, you see, and tossed her off a moving train. She was actually lucky in a way, though. Whatever angle she fell at, somehow the side of the train only just clipped her. Her skin and hair lost all colour from the shock. In fact, I understand that her hair hasn't moved since. The doctors at MI99 diagnosed it as something called acute rapid onset trichoinertia. They still reckon it was a miracle that she wasn't killed outright."

Hemlock shuddered. "That's *horrible!* No wonder she uses a cane!"

The Section Chief nodded. “She quit the job as soon as she got out of hospital. Hasn’t knowingly been within a mile of a train since, either, and I can’t say that I blame her. Come to think about it, today would probably be psychologically significant. It’s the first anniversary.”

Hemlock suddenly felt guilty for how they had behaved towards their cousin earlier. “Oh, maybe *that’s* what was going on with her this morning!”

“Ah, so she had a bad day today, huh?” Carlisle looked concerned. “I suppose that I really *should* have kept a closer eye on her, but I’ve been trying to avoid disturbing her retirement. Dropping by uninvited didn’t seem like it would be a good idea. After all, I wouldn’t want to come off like some kind of a weird stalker or anything.”

“You could always give me a lift back to her cottage after dinner!” Hemlock blurted out the invitation; regretting ever having stormed off. “I, um, I sort of chucked Hoyden’s car keys into the hedge on my way out. She

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might not actually be able to come and pick me up.”

Carlisle chuckled. “You’ve inherited the traditional Thornback family temper then, as well as the eye colour! Okay – I’ll drive you back after we’ve eaten. You go ahead and ring Hoyden now; let her know that you went for a walk to Aelfhang to cool off. I’m sure she’ll be glad to hear that you’re safe. Who knows, maybe it’ll even balance out my being here.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### AN UNWANTED VISITOR

Hoyden was waiting at the front door when Carlisle's car pulled up outside her cottage at a quarter to seven that evening. She didn't bother to even acknowledge the Section Chief's existence. Instead, she focused all of her attention on Hemlock. The pale haired fey launched into a calm but stern doorstep lecture on acceptable behaviour the instant that they were within earshot; concluding it by announcing Hemlock's punishment. "You're grounded, outside of going to school. I haven't quite decided yet for how long, but at the very least until you find my car keys."

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Hemlock, who was secretly rather surprised and relieved at the lack of shouting from their guardian, supposed that this was fair enough. They nodded in acceptance of their fate. "Okay. Um, I'm sorry for bogging off and leaving you stranded."

"Apology accepted." Hoyden finally deigned to look at Carlisle, who was standing immediately to Hemlock's right. "I see you've brought home an unwanted visitor."

Carlisle smiled. "It's nice to finally see you again too, Hoyden. I was just saying to Hemlock that...!"

His former operative interrupted him. "Shut up, Carlisle. This is your only warning. I won't tolerate you, or any of your minions back at work, saying *anything* whatsoever to Hemlock, now or ever. They're off limits, and I'm prepared to do literal physical, mental, emotional, and financial harm to anyone who thinks otherwise. Is that clear?"

“Crystal!” The man backed up a step hurriedly, holding up both of his hands as if to emphasise his understanding. “Just as long as you know that, retired or not, MI99 will always be there to help if you need us...!”

“We *don't* need you.” Hoyden cut him off, and gestured sharply towards the upstairs of her cottage. “Especially not given the awful state my poor brother arrived in earlier! If he doesn't decide to retire after this, it shan't be because of common sense, or for the lack of my trying to convince him either.”

Hemlock, surprised to hear of Sol's presence, abandoned their original plan of challenging Hoyden over what Carlisle had told them so far about the fire. “When did Sol get here? Is he okay? What happened to him anyhow?”

Their cousin pointed at a sleek red convertible parked next to the orchard gate, barely visible in the rapidly dwindling twilight. Helga, the smallest one of the four resident goats, had

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poked her head through the bars of the gate to nibble at the tyres. “Don’t worry; he’s still half concussed and utterly wiped out right now, but he’ll live. He turned up just after you finally bothered to phone home about where you were. If he’d been in better shape, I might very well have left him here to rest whilst I borrowed that overpriced death trap that he calls a car to come and pick you up. As things stand, it didn’t seem safe for him to be on his own.”

“Eminently sensible as ever, I see.” Carlisle nodded his approval. “Not trying to interfere, but should that animal over there *really* be eating rubber?”

Hoyden swore softly under her breath. “I’ll have to move Sol’s car. You should move yours too – ideally all the way back to London, but I’ll settle for it and you simply being gone.”

She hobbled out past the two of them, leaning heavily on her walking cane as she went. Hemlock stared worriedly after her for a moment, and then turned and looked up at Carlisle

for reassurance. “So what do you think is wrong with Sol?”

The Section Chief shook his head. “Sorry, Hemlock, I haven’t a clue. The last report that I’d heard, he was on assignment abroad, and everything was fine. I’m afraid that things can change all too rapidly in the field.”

“What if it’s got something to do with what happened to my parents?” Hemlock didn’t even want to imagine what might have happened to their poor cousin if that turned out to be the case. “Those people you talked about earlier; the human supremacists. Do...do you suppose that perhaps they went after him?”

Carlisle sighed. “Trust me; if it were connected to that, then Hoyden would *definitely* have mentioned it by now! No – it’s most likely that Sol suffered an injury or six during the course of his assignment, and just came here to rest up for a while.”

“What sorts of injuries though?” Hemlock frowned. “And besides,

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shouldn't he really be in a hospital anyhow if he's concussed?"

A deep, male sounding voice emanated from the shadows at the side of the cottage. "Alas, I suspect that he knew that that was the first place we'd look for him!"

Hemlock, peering into the darkness, caught a brief glimpse of a trio of lanky figures, before Carlisle lifted them bodily and quite literally tossed them through the open front door of the cottage. The teenager yelped as they landed flat on their back in the brightly lit downstairs hall. "Ow! Why did you do that?"

Carlisle was still outside, standing poised in the light spilling from the hall, with his back to the doorway, and his fists readied in front of him. "Stay indoors until full daylight, Hemlock, and whatever happens, *don't* invite them across the threshold!"

Someone – or something – slammed into him from his right side. The two combatants rolled out of sight,

the gravel crunching beneath them. Hemlock stumbled forwards to try to see what was going on. They froze mid step as Carlisle's warning about staying indoors suddenly clicked into place for them. *Don't invite them across the threshold...they must be vampires!*

A terrible shriek echoed from the direction of the orchard. Hemlock flinched, and then yelled. "Hoyden, I think there might be vampires! Are you okay out there? What should I do?"

There was no reply, and by now, it was much too dark outside to see anything beyond the range of the hall light. Hemlock shivered and backed away from the doorway, wracking their brain for something, *anything*, that they could do to help. *The nearest police station is in Stanhope, but I don't think that it's likely they have a Revenant Control Unit based there! Sol – I'll run upstairs and try to wake him! Perhaps he'll know what to do!*

So determined, they spun around, ready to bolt towards the stairs, only to see Marmalade perched on the edge of

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the bottom step. The fluffy ginger hen tilted her head slightly to the left, and clucked querulously at the strange goings on. A sudden inspiration occurred to Hemlock. "Of course – the sound of a rooster crowing repels vampires! I just need to find the right video on SelfTunnel and play it on my phone!"

Finding an appropriate video took only a few seconds. It was only then that Hemlock realised the flaw in their plan. The vampires were *outside* the cottage; lurking somewhere in the dark, and quite possibly draining their opponents dry even now! Playing the video indoors would have no effect whatsoever, other than to annoy Marmalade even further. No, if they actually wanted to help Hoyden and Carlisle, then Hemlock was going to have to risk stepping outside with their phone.

The teenager gulped as they reset the volume for the video to as high as possible. Phone clasped tightly in both hands, with the video of the rooster

crowing playing on loop, they turned once again to face the darkness outside the front door. A single step...two steps...three steps forwards. The cold night air whispered against Hemlock's face as they edged warily towards the threshold of the cottage. Pausing for one last moment to gather their nerve, the young orphan raised their phone up so that it was level with their chin. "Wish me luck, Marmalade!"

The hen, presumably triggered into action by the video, fluffed up all of her considerable plumage and launched herself through the air at Hemlock's phone, squawking furiously at the unseen intruding bird. Her sharp beak closed briefly on the tender skin between the teenager's right thumb and index finger. Hemlock's arm jolted reflexively from the pain; their phone tumbling from their grip to the floor and bouncing off the thick, dark brown carpet. The video was still playing as the device arced out through the open door into the dark.

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Hemlock groaned. "No, Marmalade, that *wasn't* any part of the plan, you bonkers attack chicken!"

"Hemlock, is that you?" Sol's voice drifted down from the top of the stairs then. Looking up, Hemlock saw that there was a nasty green and purple bruise on his forehead. He looked and sounded somewhat dazed. "Attack chickens...? What exactly have I missed going on around here? Where's my harridan of a sister gotten to, anyhow?"

Hoyden and Carlisle both hurried in through the front door before Hemlock could reply to the question. Hoyden, who was still clutching the splintered off upper half of her walking cane, slumped down next to the teenager with a tired sort of nod as she handed over their phone. "That was a clever bit of thinking, Hemlock; throwing this outside, I mean. The vampires that we hadn't yet managed to stake have all fled from the sound of this video of yours. You helped us without putting yourself in danger. I'm proud of you."

Carlisle was beaming through the grisly layer of dust coating his face and upper torso. “Yeah, the kid’s a true Thornback, there’s no question about that! A good thing too, if your brother plans to keep on bringing his work home with him like this.”

“Oh, come now; that’s not what happened at all, and well you know it too, sir!” Sol grumbled as he staggered down the stairs. “Anyhow, is there by chance some vague hope that you could see about switching the dratted thing *off* now, Hemlock? I can’t help but agree with our dear Marmalade about it being rather annoying to listen to.”

Hoyden waved off his complaint as she clambered back to her feet. “Let’s *not* do that until we have a chance to fully secure the house. Speaking of which, I’ll just grab my spare cane and bring the other chickens and the goats indoors for the night too, in case any of those vampires decide to come back for a snack. Hemlock can help me.”

Hemlock squeaked. “Um, sorry, but what happened to me helping *without*

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putting myself in danger? I mean, what if they haven't really left, and they sneak up on us while we're outside? Shouldn't we just stay put in here where it's safe, and call the police so that they can send out a Revenant Control Unit or something? That's what the safety adverts always say to do."

"Ha!" Sol appeared to find this hilarious. "Little cousin, *we're* the ones that the officers in the RCUs turn to for help! Well, I am, anyhow. Obviously, Hoyden's retired now, and poor old Carlisle here hasn't set foot in the field since who knows when."

Carlisle harrumphed irritably. "Nobody needed or wanted that bit of clarification from you, Sol!"

The fey grinned; the soft curls of his dark red hair still unnaturally immobile thanks to his concussion. "You're welcome, sir! Anyhow, Hemlock, my point is that if anyone knows how to deal with a few pesky vampires, then surely it's we in The Bad Names Club!"

Hemlock blinked. “What do you mean? I thought you all worked for MI99. What’s a club got to do with anything?”

Hoyden tapped them on the shoulder impatiently. “Never mind my ridiculous sibling and his nonsense, Hemlock! Come along now, and help me with the animals. I’m reasonably sure that the vampires are gone, but if any of them do pop back up, then I’d much rather have the video still playing and I don’t fully trust myself to know how that phone of yours works.”

The teenager rather wanted to know what Sol had meant, but guessed that arguing with Hoyden now would likely only get them grounded for even longer. Certainly, that would have been the reaction from their late parents. Why should their cousin be any more lenient? *Besides which, it really would be awful if anything bad happened to the poor chickens and goats.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

### AN UNFRIENDLY FACE

Saturday morning dawned with everyone still alive and well, although Marmalade hadn't been especially happy to have the other chickens invading her territory. Hoyden's solution to that had been to put the rest of the flock into the spare room with Sol, who surprisingly hadn't minded sharing space with poultry. Carlisle had slept downstairs in the living room. Helga and her fellow goats had spent the night in the main bathroom, nibbling on the towels along with their hay, and drinking out of the toilet. Hemlock, tasked with cleaning up after the visiting ruminants whilst Hoyden turned

them back out into the orchard once it was daylight, supposed that nothing that could eat car tyres without harm would suffer much from ingesting a bit of cotton.

The sound of raised voices echoed suddenly from downstairs, interrupting Hemlock's chain of thought. Sol had discovered what the goats had done to his tyres, and he was *furious*. "Those confounded animals of yours have mutilated my car, sister!"

Hoyden didn't seem to be at all open to blaming the goats for the damage. "Perhaps you ought to finally make the effort to learn how to park sensibly then, oh dearest sibling of mine!"

The two older fey were all but screaming at one another by the time that Hemlock reached the top of the stairs. Looking down, they saw that Marmalade, by now once again the only chicken inside the cottage, was standing at full alert in the front hallway; her ginger plumage puffed up and her beady gaze locked on the direction of the kitchen. Hemlock surmised that that

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was where the argument was taking place. *It sounds like they're only getting angrier with one another the longer that it goes on! Maybe Carlisle will step in and help to smooth things over. I hope so, anyhow. It's always horrible listening to grown-ups arguing. I'd thought that maybe I wouldn't have to do that here, but I guess it was stupid of me. I should have known it was only a matter of time until something kicked off here.*

Back in Bedford Park, Hemlock's parents had fallen out all the time. Most of their arguments had stemmed from things to do with Hemlock, and how best to parent them. As such, by the age of twelve, the young half-fey had gotten very good at slipping out without anyone at home noticing. At least back then, they had always been able to go round to Topaz's house instead. If Mr and Mrs Moon ever argued, it certainly hadn't been in front of their daughter and her friends. *That's not an option for me now, though. Even if I wasn't already grounded, there still isn't anyone that I can go to here, except for Carlisle, but I don't see any sign of him*

*yet. Maybe he's still asleep, or else he's just trying not to get involved.*

The argument had gotten louder. There was the noise of something smashing. It sounded like a plate, or perhaps a mug. Hemlock, whose stomach felt as if it was twisting from nerves, crept silently down the stairs and picked up the obviously unhappy chicken. "Come on, Marmalade. You can wait upstairs in my room with me until everything blows over. That's what I used to do back in London, whenever I couldn't sneak out instead."

Marmalade wriggled closer; burying her head underneath Hemlock's left arm. The teenager suddenly felt more annoyed than scared by the shouting. *Hoyden and Sol shouldn't be fighting! It's not fair to poor Marmalade, and...and it's not fair to me either!*

They turned away from the stairs and stomped angrily into the kitchen; already shouting as they shoved the door open. "Stop it! You...you're scaring Marmalade, and you ought to flipping well know better than to do things like

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that! I'm sick and tired of listening to adults fighting and smashing stuff!"

Their cousins stared at them in silence, as the toaster popped in the background. Much to the teenager's confusion, neither adult seemed angry at all. Sol was in the middle of kneeling to pick up the remains of the mug that Hemlock had just heard smashing. He still had the handle of it gripped in his left hand. Judging by how the contents had ended up pooled at his feet along with the fragments of pottery, it had simply accidentally come apart from the rest of the mug.

Hoyden was standing stirring a pot of baked beans on top of the stove. She frowned. "Sol and I weren't *really* fighting, Hemlock. We just tend to get a bit loud at each other sometimes, don't we, brother? It's a terrible habit, sorry."

Sol nodded. "We didn't mean to scare you, little cousin. Are you okay? Do you want to talk about anything?"

Hemlock gulped in a breath and set Marmalade down on the floor. The

chicken, who didn't seem even remotely upset now, made a beeline for Sol's spilt tea. Hemlock gestured vaguely. "No, no, I'm fine, honestly. I...um...I'm just going outside to look for Hoyden's car keys!"

They fled the cottage via the back door before either of their cousins could reply.



Sol called Hemlock back indoors once breakfast was ready. The teenager slunk into the cottage and took their seat at the dining room table. They were directly opposite Carlisle, whilst Hoyden sat at one end of the table, and Sol at the other. Things were clearly tense between the three adults. Hemlock hoped that there wouldn't be another argument. *Not that that's the worst thing that could happen, I suppose. I mean, what if Sol and Hoyden start asking me about what I yelled at them earlier. What am I supposed to do then? I don't want to*

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*tell anyone about Mum and Dad having rows. They're dead, so all that stuff should be kept private.*

Hoyden interrupted their chain of thought by passing them a plate and gesturing at the serving dishes laid out along the middle of the table. "I made all of the usual options for a proper fry-up. Just go ahead and help yourself to whatever you want, Hemlock."

It was certainly an improvement on yesterday's paltry meals, but Hemlock wasn't about to chance pointing that out. They added a bit of everything to their plate: piling on bacon, eggs, sausages, baked beans, bubble and squeak, tomatoes, mushrooms, black pudding, and both fried and toasted bread. "Um, could someone pass me the tomato sauce, oh, and the vegetable spread for the toast, please?"

Sol obliged them. "Here you go. Do you want some tea too?"

"Yeah, tea's good."

Carlisle, who wasn't eating or drinking anything, watched as Hemlock and the two adult fey each added copious amounts of sugar to their respective mugs. "I suppose you've already thought of how best to improve your security here, Hoyden? You can't be too careful, not with vampires."

Hoyden nodded curtly. "I've already placed an order for an assortment of repelling plants and trees with one of the local garden centres; McBeedy's. They do same day home delivery. I went for a mix of holly, juniper, and rosemary. Most of the other options are dormant or dead at this time of year."

"How did you pay them though?" Hemlock felt a bit confused. "I mean, without the internet. How did you access their website?"

Hoyden broke off some of the crust from her toast and dropped it onto the floor by her feet for a very pleased Marmalade. "I didn't use their website. In fact, I don't even know if they have one. I just rang them up, and told them what plants I needed. They were

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perfectly happy to take my credit card details over the phone for payment.”

“Oh,” Hemlock thought that sounded very risky. “Um, so then what happens if the person who answered the phone uses your credit card information to run up a massive bill or something?”

Sol chuckled. “Don’t worry, little cousin! That’s called fraud, and banks and credit card companies take it *very* seriously. I doubt if the ones who go by McBeedy will risk trying to spend any of Hoyden’s hard-earned savings. It would be far too easy to trace back to them.”

Hemlock shrugged. “Okay, but I still think using something like CashBuddy would be safer.”

Carlisle and Sol exchanged what Hemlock suspected were called knowing looks with one another. Hoyden cut back into the conversation before either of them could speak. She was scowling again as she replied. “I understand your concern, Hemlock, but it’s fine. I have my own way of doing things. I don’t need lecturing on modern

technology. Now, you and Sol should hurry up and eat your breakfasts before Marmalade starts thinking that you're done with the food. She has form for raiding plates."

The chicken had already polished off every crumb of the toast. She warbled eagerly from somewhere underneath the table, as if she were agreeing with Hoyden's words.

Carlisle frowned. "She steals food from off the table? Shouldn't you see about training her out of doing that?"

Hoyden dropped some more toast down to Marmalade. "No. Anyhow, why are you still here? It's daylight now, so the vampires aren't a factor, and it isn't as if you're even eating anything."

Sol gave an exaggerated sigh. "This is why you have so few guests, sister."

"He says, as if there is some curious problem with that!" Hoyden rolled her eyes and began trimming off the rind from her bacon. "I don't care for having guests. I never have. That's why I

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moved all the way out here. You know that, Sol, and so does *he*."

Hemlock gulped down a mouthful of fried egg and black pudding. They didn't want to think about what Hoyden's statement meant for them. "Um, so why *aren't* you having anything to eat or drink anyhow, Carlisle?"

To their surprise, Carlisle looked a bit embarrassed by the question. "Well, you know, because of the whole ah, problem with the food, Hemlock."

"Huh?" Hemlock blinked. "What problem? What's wrong with it?"

Hoyden smiled kindly at them. "I take it that you've never heard of the fey rules of hospitality before now, child?"

"Um, no, what are they?" Hemlock frowned as they wondered just what exactly it was that they were missing here. "I mean, Mum and Dad never mentioned anything about special rules for food or whatever."

Sol began explaining. "Among the old traditions is the rule that anyone

who eats or drinks anything provided by one of the fey will then be doomed to remain with them forever. Of course, it's not really considered the done thing at all nowadays, and it's never actually been enforced outside of the fey realm to begin with, but there are still some people who won't chance it."

"Oh." Hemlock wrinkled their nose a little. "That's...um...okay, so I won't say that it's *stupid*, but doesn't it make ordering in restaurants difficult? What if there's a fey or a part fey working there, or what if they just grew like the lettuce for a salad and sold it to the restaurant? Would that still count?"

Carlisle nodded. "Yes, it would. That's why it's illegal for anyone with fey ancestry to work in a lot of places. By law, they aren't permitted to have any role whatsoever in the production or provision of food or drink intended for the general public."

Hoyden sniffed. "We aren't permitted to work with babies or children aged less than sixteen years either, unless

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we take an oath not to harm, swap, or steal them first! Honestly, it's ridiculous."

"Yeah, I knew that last part already. Mum explained it a couple of years ago. It was why she and Dad never let me invite Topaz over to our house." Hemlock stared down at their food. "Up until then, I'd thought it was just them being prejudiced because she's black or something stupid like that."

Sol sighed. "Whereas instead it was more of a case of the entire world being prejudiced. Yes, we've all had a moment or two like that in our lives, little cousin. Carlisle included, isn't that right, sir?"

The Section Chief was silent for a moment. Then he drew in a deep breath, and snagged a slice of toast from the plate in the middle of the table. "That's a good point, Sol. Hoyden, it was wrong of me to turn down your offer of breakfast."

Hoyden glared at her brother. "Did you *really* have to pick right now to help him have a moral epiphany, Sol?"

“Couldn't you have waited until he was anywhere other than my home? Now I'm honour bound to make him feel welcome here!”

“Um, so is that what you're doing with me too?” Hemlock half regretted the question even as they asked it. “I mean, making me feel welcome just because you have to, or something.”

All three of the adults stared at them in surprise. Hoyden shook her head firmly as she replied. “Oh, child, no, of course it's not the case with *you*! You're family, you'll always be welcome in my home. I hadn't thought how my grumbling about liking my solitude must have sounded to you, but I swear that I meant no harm by it.”

Sol looked worried. “Hemlock, is there something that you might want to tell us about? Only, between this and what you said earlier to me and Hoyden; about not liking adults shouting, I can't help but wonder.”

To Hemlock's intense relief, Carlisle waved off Sol's question on their behalf.

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“Ah, I'm sure it's nothing serious, Sol! I'm well beyond familiar with what you and Hoyden get like during your tiffs, so I didn't think anything of it this morning, but adults shouting and arguing is scary for most youngsters. It's really no wonder that Hemlock had a few concerns. You two just don't hear yourselves, that's the problem.”

Both Hoyden and Sol winced as they recognised the truth of this statement. They changed the subject swiftly, debating where would be best to plant the various trees, and whether or not the rosemary should be kept in containers. Hemlock, their face burning with embarrassment, kept their gaze fixed on their breakfast, mumbling vague but polite responses to the ensuing conversation, before finally escaping the cottage once again to search for the missing car keys.



In the end, it took Hemlock until early on Saturday evening to locate

Hoyden's keys. By then, the teenager was once again ravenously hungry, and regretting having only grabbed a makeshift sandwich made of two slices of plain white bread, vegetable spread, and extra spicy beef flavour corn puffs, for their lunch. Carlisle had left shortly after breakfast, and they hadn't wanted to be alone at the dining table with their cousins, in case of awkward questions. *I can't avoid going back indoors forever. I'll just have to hope that Hoyden and Sol have forgotten by now about what I said to them this morning. It might slip their minds if I'm lucky. After all, Sol still has that concussion and he and Hoyden were both busy planting stuff for hours. Yeah, I bet they're probably much too tired to bother with interrogating me.*

The keys weren't anywhere near the area where the teenager had expected to find them. Instead, they were high up in the thorn hedge at the very bottom corner of the driveway; poking out from the side of a watermelon sized tangle of twigs, leaves, and random small objects. Peering more closely at the

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structure, Hemlock realised that it was a nest. *Huh. I guess a bird must have picked them up because of the shine from the metal or something. I'll have to be really careful not to damage the nest or disturb the poor bird too much.*

Standing on their tiptoes, the teenager reached carefully into the hedge with their left hand. Thorns snagged in the sleeve of their sweater as they took hold of the keys. "Ugh, great, they're really wedged in here!"

Something moved inside the nest. Hemlock let go of the keys and flinched back instinctively, wary of frightening the occupant. As they watched, a small fuzzy brown creature emerged from within the densely woven twigs. Upon first glance, it looked like a large dormouse, but then it sat up on its haunches, revealing four bright yellow webbed feet. Its eyes too were obviously not those of a common rodent. They were opalescent green and yellow, and slightly bulging. The creature stared back at Hemlock, and

sniffed the air. It uttered a brief, shrill sound. "Nee-eep!"

Hemlock relaxed and smiled. "Aw, look at you! You're just so cute, whatever you are! Sorry, but I really *do* need those keys."

They reached forwards again, and grabbed the keys in their left hand. This time, when they tugged, the keys came loose from the side of the nest. Hemlock grinned triumphantly. "There! I got them, and I haven't damaged your home either, so that's good, isn't it?"

The creature lunged at them, squeaking angrily as it sank its teeth deep into the ball of their left thumb. Blood immediately began to flow from the wound. Hemlock yelled out in pain and shock, and stumbled back away from the hedge, dropping the keys on the ground as they went. To their horror, the creature hung on grimly. It appeared to have locked its jaws shut. "Argh, get off me! Hoyden, Sol, help!"

Both of their cousins emerged from the front door of the cottage, and

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hurried down the driveway. Sol arrived first, with Hoyden limping to catch up. The male fey skidded to a halt next to Hemlock. He winced as he took in the scene. "Oh dear, well that's certainly an unfriendly face if ever I saw one! Okay, try to hold still, Hemlock. Don't agitate it any further. Hoyden, you've always been better than me at identifying random flora and fauna. Have you any inkling of what this thing is?"

Hoyden dropped her cane and grabbed hold of Hemlock's left arm. She peered closely at the creature that was still biting them. "It's a large footed blessenbobble; a common type of fey around here. They're herbivores, and almost always perfectly harmless, unless you're a buttercup, or a nice juicy clump of moss. What in the world did you do to make it attack you, child?"

"I didn't do anything!" Hemlock whimpered. "Your car keys were up in the hedge, just sort of sticking out of the side of its nest. It went for me after I pulled them loose!"

Hoyden nodded calmly. “That makes sense. Blessenbobbles are always very protective of their nests. Not to worry; I have some pliers in the cottage. We’ll soon get it off you.”

The three of them hurried back indoors, with Sol all but carrying Hemlock, who couldn’t stop trembling. The clearly still irate blessenbobble hung on grimly, until Hoyden eventually managed to pry its jaws apart, before casually tossing it out of the kitchen window. Hemlock shivered at the resultant angry squeaking. *So much for them being cute little herbivores!*

Sol offered to drive Hemlock straight to the nearest A&E, in case of infection, or tetanus. “They might even need stitches; it’s bleeding an awful lot.”

Hoyden immediately vetoed the idea. “That isn’t necessary. Everyone knows that blessenbobble bites are harmless. It might sting a bit for a few days whilst it heals, but that’s all. Wait here with Sol, Hemlock. I’ll fetch the first aid kit and patch you up.”

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Hemlock cradled their injured hand against their chest and scowled silently. *Ugh, either Hoyden's never been bitten by a blessebobbler herself, or she has a stupidly high pain threshold!*

## CHAPTER SIX

### AN UNWILLING EXPLANATION

Monday morning classes for the Year 10 students at Hyssop Tor Integrated Academy always involved a great deal of writing things down, and so far, the 18th March 2019 was proving to be no exception. Hemlock, who was currently sitting in Biology, scowled down at the bright red elasticised bandage on their left thumb. The injury from Saturday still hurt, and as a result they were really struggling to keep up with taking notes in class. *Why does the countryside have to have random vicious little monsters scuttling about in it anyhow? I don't care what Hoyden*

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*says, that thing was definitely out for my blood! Ugh, seriously, when will my thumb stop throbbing like this? Is this how blood poisoning feels?*

The bell rang then, signalling the start of mid-morning break. Hemlock packed away their belongings and joined the other students in queuing up to buy something from the school canteen. Today was the first time that they had been able to do so; Sol having quietly slipped them some money on their way out of the cottage to catch the bus. He hadn't been impressed by Hoyden's idea of what constituted a packed lunch. Hemlock, who actually quite liked date and apple sandwiches, certainly wasn't about to turn down the chance of buying some crisps and a drink. *It's a pity that he didn't give me enough to buy a bus ticket back to London. I should have just stowed away in the back of Carlisle's car when he left on Saturday afternoon!*

They shuffled forwards along with the queue. Carlisle still hadn't emailed them with the details that he had

promised to share back in the café. Perhaps he had changed his mind after talking to Hoyden in person. Perhaps he didn't think that Hemlock would cope. Perhaps...oh, but what was the good of *perhaps*, anyhow? Adults never bothered to explain anything. Why should they have expected the Section Chief of MI99 would be any different? *I suppose that at least he has the excuse of being in the habit of keeping everything a secret for work.*

Hemlock was still brooding about all of that by the time that they paid for their crisps and their drink. In fact, so thoroughly caught up in their thoughts was the young half-fey, that they almost walked right into Deborah, who was busy looming over a terrified looking Year 8. The older student spun around and glared at Hemlock. "Watch where you're going, you – oh, it's you. Uh, never mind then."

Clearly, Hoyden's threat was still working as a deterrent. Emboldened, Hemlock glanced towards the unfortunate Year 8, and then back at

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Deborah and her friends. “Um, should you four *really* be picking on younger kids like this?”

The Year 8 sensibly took the opportunity to leg it. Deborah’s friends looked as if they wanted to do the same. Their ringleader scowled and held up a clipboard. “We just wanted him to sign our petition, that’s all. We’re trying to get permission to invite our favourite author to visit the school and give a talk. Our form teacher Miss Beech says that we need at least a hundred people interested before she’ll consider taking it to the head teacher. Here – why don’t you sign it too? Always presuming that you even know *how* to read, that is.”

Hemlock looked at the brightly coloured sheet of paper; recognising the artwork as being a montage of characters from the *Henrietta Thrower* series, by the world famous children’s author Joella Heath. There was a small photograph of the benign looking middle-aged woman in question in the top left hand corner. Hemlock only just

resisted rolling their eyes scornfully. "Aren't you four a bit old to still be interested in those books? I thought they were supposed to be aimed at primary school kids, not teenagers."

Deborah glowered at them. "It's not just about the books, prick ears! We love everything about Joella; she's brilliant!"

Hemlock shrugged. Deep inside, the young half-fey knew that they really ought to walk away and leave it there, but they could also imagine *exactly* what Sol would say in this situation. Maybe it would be worth the fallout. "Oh, so that's why you're so obsessed with who uses the girls' toilets and changing rooms – you're basically projecting stuff! Okay, well, I hope you all feel able to come out properly very soon. Good talk."

They ducked back into the crowd then, and hurried out of the canteen. Despite Hyssop Tor Integrated Academy's vaunted reputation for inclusivity, there was rather a lot of unkind laughter going on behind them.

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Of course, that wasn't *really* much of a change from the usual, but at least for once, Deborah and her mob were the ones on the receiving end. Hemlock gloomily predicted that the four bullies' collective anger over being publicly humiliated would overrule any lingering fear of Hoyden. *There goes my protection! Oh well, it was completely worth it.*



Sol was waiting outside the school's front gates when Hemlock got out that afternoon. He grinned at his young cousin. "The school rang today. They wanted to complain to Hoyden about you terrorising some of the Year 13s! Luckily, for you, she was busy in that vegetable garden of hers, so I answered the phone. From what the teacher said, slug infestation or not, if my sister bothered with owning a mobile, you'd be in serious trouble right now, you know."

Hemlock shrugged. "They were picking on one of the Year 8s. I don't like bullies."

Their cousin hummed his agreement. "Me either, little cousin, but picking fights with older students won't make you popular, you know. If anything, you've probably only made yourself a target. Don't expect that other kid to stand up for you in return."

"I didn't do it to be popular! Besides, Deborah and her friends were always going to start in on me again eventually. I've only sped things up a little."

Sol frowned as they approached his car. "Hoyden mentioned that you'd had a bit of trouble on your first day. She seemed to reckon that it was all well over and done with by now though."

Hemlock scowled. "Yeah, well it isn't. Don't you or Hoyden even remember what it was like being teenagers?"

Sol gestured for them to get into the front passenger seat. "I certainly do,

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anyhow. Back then, one could safely punch a bully.”

“Our teachers don’t allow us to resort to violence, so I’d have been excluded for sure if I’d done that.” Hemlock sighed as they fastened their seatbelt. “I suppose I’m excluded now anyhow, huh?”

“No, but that’s only because there was a lot of very fast talking on my part.” Sol pulled out carefully into the afternoon traffic. “Perhaps we ought to start looking for a different school for you to attend. Just between you and me, I don’t think much of what I’ve seen of Hyssop Tor Integrated Academy. You deserve better.”

Hemlock blinked. “Won’t my changing schools involve telling Hoyden what happened today?”

“Yes, of course it will, you silly creature, but we’re going to have to do that anyway.” Sol switched on the car’s stereo. The snarl of an electric guitar immediately filled the air. “And an unwilling explanation or not, I felt that it

would be best if *you* were the one telling her the story, as opposed to going with the head teacher's retelling of the other students' version of events. She'll be pleased to hear how you stood up for yourself."

The young half-fey nodded thoughtfully. "Well, I suppose she *did* say the last time that I shouldn't just accept people bullying me. Maybe you're right."

Sol grinned at them. "Good choice! Now, let's go back over your story in detail; try and polish it up a little before telling Hoyden."



Sol was very, very wrong on how Hoyden would react to hearing about what had happened at school. The three of them, plus Marmalade of course, had gathered in the sitting room for Hemlock to explain things. Sol and Hoyden were sharing the sofa with Marmalade clucking contentedly in the

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middle, and Hemlock had taken one of the armchairs. The freckle-faced teenager launched cheerfully into the story as soon as everyone sat down. They felt optimistic at first: buoyed up by Sol's assurances on the drive home. The rapidly darkening expression on Hoyden's face as she listened to how Hemlock had dealt with the bullies soon put paid to that confidence, but they soldiered on with their account.

Hoyden's large bright eyes blazed silver with anger as Hemlock finished describing the end of the altercation. Her hair crackled briefly with pent up energy as she spoke. "You can't go around saying things like that, Hemlock! Same sex attraction is *nothing* to be ashamed of, and using other people's prejudices to make a backhanded derogatory comment like that only encourages homophobia!"

Hemlock blinked. "But I didn't even say anything derogatory!"

Hoyden scowled. "Oh? So you're telling us that you *weren't* trying to insinuate that those horrid girls were

closeted lesbians in order to embarrass them?”

The young half-fey blushed and scuffed their feet against the sitting room carpet. “Ugh – fine! I knew other people would laugh, and I knew that they’d hate being laughed at, so flipping what?”

Sol sighed. “Hoyden, I don’t mean to interfere, but aren’t you being just a little oversensitive with this? From what I can gather, those four girls more than deserved to be taken down a few pegs!”

His sister rounded on him instantly, startling Marmalade. “Oh, you’ve gleaned that much already, have you? And since when exactly has framing lesbianism as something to be made fun of counted as being acceptable behaviour to you?”

Hemlock felt a bit guilty now. “I suppose it *was* a bit unfair on any actual lesbians. But I didn’t *mean* it like that!”

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Hoyden glowered. "I should hope not too, but it doesn't matter *how* you meant it. What if there had been a girl there struggling with accepting herself? How do you think that someone like that would have felt about how everyone laughed at your little joke?"

Hemlock's stomach lurched miserably as they realised that in a way, they had been acting all too like Deborah and her cronies. "Um, okay, so I think I understand what you mean now, Hoyden. Sorry. I just got a bit caught up in how everyone else at school seems to do things."

Sol rolled his eyes. The longest of his dark red curls reached forwards to flick the end of Hoyden's nose. "Lighten up, can't you?"

The pale haired fey threw up her hands in annoyance. "No, Sol, I can't, actually; because unlike you, *I'm* the one who's legally responsible for making sure that Hemlock here ultimately grows up to be a functioning member of society!"

Her brother scoffed. "Then perhaps you should start by sending them to a decent school!"

Hoyden laughed bitterly. "And where exactly do you have in mind, hmm? No, let me guess – you think I should send them off to board at Picketon House! Well, I'd like to, but in case it passed you by, I'm not made of money, Sol, and there's slim hope of any of the rest of our family deigning to chip in!"

Sol shrugged. "Dad might. No matter what Mandragora may think, we both know that he would have attended the funeral if he'd been able to get away from work long enough. He's never really agreed with how Belladonna was cut off. Besides, even if he doesn't stump up the cash, there are scholarships available, and I certainly don't mind dipping into my savings to help out. After all, it's only fair that Hemlock should have the same advantages that the rest of us did. Thornbacks have attended Picketon House ever since it opened. Young Ageratina's there at the moment. She

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and Hemlock would be in the same year group. R.J. Townsend's two are there too, come to think about it. They're a bit older, but I'm sure they'd keep an eye out for Hemlock."

Hoyden looked pensive. "I suppose that it couldn't hurt for Hemlock to have family around them at school. Still, I really don't like to borrow money, you know that."

Sol airily waved away his sister's concerns. "Oh come now, it's hardly *borrowing* when it's to help provide for our cousin's education! Anyhow, I want to help."

The conversation was snowballing away from its start, and into a topic that Hemlock didn't like the sound of one bit. The teenager scrambled to their feet. "What makes you both so sure that Ageratina and I will even get along? For all anyone knows, we might completely hate one another! And anyhow, it doesn't matter, because even if we magically turned out to be best friends, I still don't want to go to some stupid boarding school!"

Their cousins turned and stared up at them; clearly surprised at their outburst. Hoyden recovered first, and folded her arms as she replied. “Well, that’s too bad, because after today’s incident you likely can’t stay on at Hyssop Tor Integrated Academy!”

Sol nodded in all too cheerful solidarity. “Don’t worry, Hemlock – Piketon House is a great school! I’m sure that once you’ve been there for a little while, you’ll agree with us about that.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### AN UNAPPROVED EXCURSION

It was cold and overcast in London on the evening of Friday 22nd March 2019. Hemlock, who was trying not to see a negative pattern forming in how Fridays usually went for them, stepped down from the latest bus involved in their journey, and pulled the hood of their coat up around their face before leaving the Southfield Road bus stop. The teenager peered down at the screen of their phone as they walked. There were a dozen missed calls from Hoyden's landline, and at least as many from Sol's mobile. There was even a stern text from Aunt Mandragora,

ordering Hemlock to tell their family where they were immediately. *Ha, as if that's going to happen!*

There was nothing at all from Topaz or her parents, so presumably no one had told them about Hemlock having run away yet. The Moon family lived in Mulberry Street Mews, which was where Hemlock was going right now. The young half-fey had only just afforded the cost of their journey back to London. They had used the money Sol gave them for snacks from the canteen during the rest of their final week at Hyssop Tor Integrated Academy: hiding the cash in their school locker each day. It helped that he had been extra generous yesterday, because of it being Ostara. Today, Hemlock had walked out of school during lunchtime and gotten on the first available bus going south. Once again, they had only the clothes on their back, and the few items that fitted into their trusty duffel bag. *I seem to be making a habit of this.*

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Topaz's house was in darkness when Hemlock arrived. Nobody answered when the young runaway knocked on the front door. Hemlock frowned worriedly as they sent a quick text to Topaz's mobile number to ask where everyone was. They already knew that there wasn't any point in phoning her: their best friend had recently developed an annoying habit of only communicating by text. *Perhaps I should have told her in advance that I was coming back to London today. She'll be at the cinema with her parents, since it's Friday evening. Oh well, at least they'll definitely be home by ten!*

Their phone buzzed softly then as Topaz texted back. Hemlock's stomach sank as they read her reply. Mrs Moon's best friend from university was getting married in Dublin tomorrow morning, and she had invited the whole Moon family along to her wedding! They had left shortly after four this afternoon, and they wouldn't be back until sometime on Sunday night. Topaz, who apparently thought that Hemlock was

just visiting London along with Hoyden, suggested meeting up next weekend instead. A despairing sort of a laugh escaped Hemlock as they finished reading the text. *How exactly do you tell someone politely that you're stranded on their doorstep because you've run away from home?*

They didn't want to do anything to ruin Topaz's weekend, or to upset her parents either. Still, it was getting colder, and the weather forecast had predicted that the temperature would remain in single digits for the next several days. Even if it had been the height of summer as opposed to the middle of March, Hemlock was completely out of money. They might be able to sleep rough, but that still left the problem of finding food and water. *How am I going to manage here by myself until the Moons come home?*

The answer, Hemlock realised as the wind picked up, was horribly simple: they weren't. There was no way that they could stay here. Their coat was warm, but it didn't cover their legs,

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so it wouldn't do in place of a sleeping bag. Besides which, it had already proven less than waterproof during last week's excursion. *Wait a minute – that's an option I'd forgotten about! I can text Carlisle and ask to stay with him until Sunday night. Who knows, maybe he'll even agree not to tell Hoyden and Sol where I am.*

That last part didn't seem especially likely, but it was hardly as if there was anything else to do at this point; well, aside from slink back to their cousins for help. Sighing resignedly, Hemlock wandered back to the Southfield Road bus stop and sat down on the bench to compose their plea. *If I'm really lucky, he'll see it before I freeze to death.*

Quite surprisingly, Carlisle responded almost immediately to their request, and agreed readily to pick them up from the bus stop. He arrived less than twenty minutes later, and grinned as Hemlock clambered into the front passenger seat of his car. "Hello again, Hemlock, it's a bit chilly out there this evening, isn't it? So, do you want to

explain why it is that you've taken what's clearly an unapproved excursion back to London?"

Hemlock scowled as they fastened their seatbelt. "Sol convinced Hoyden that she should pack me off to boarding school!"

The Section Chief chuckled. "I'm guessing that you aren't keen on that idea, eh?" He took his foot off the brake and merged carefully into the Friday evening traffic. "Let me guess – you've heard terrible things about living full time at school!"

"Not really, but there's bound to be at least one person like the one who goes by Deborah Burns there, and I think I'd go mad if I was stuck around her all the time with no escape."

"Uh huh, which is why you've run away from home instead?" Carlisle nodded to himself. "Not going to lie to you, I suspected that things between you and Hoyden might boil over at some point. She's not exactly cut out for looking after a kid. Doesn't have the

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right temperament. I'm surprised that social services didn't flag that."

Hemlock scoffed. "Is that the real reason you gave me your contact details then; just in case I fell out with her, and needed someone to turn to? I mean, it's obvious that it wasn't really about that other thing."

Carlisle frowned. "Other thing – do you mean the information about what really happened to your parents?"

"Yeah; you never sent it to me in the end." Hemlock stared out at the comfortingly familiar lights of the city. "It's been a week now."

"Well, I've been extra busy at work because of the incident with the vampires." Carlisle pressed a button on the dashboard. There was a soft click as the doors of the car locked. "And besides which, I wasn't entirely sure how much of it you were ready for. I've been trying to decide what level of detail would be age appropriate."

“I’m fourteen, if that’s any help to you in deciding.” Hemlock huddled back into the seat. They knew that going off with someone they barely knew was a risky decision, but right now, they were too glad of the car’s warmth to care about that. *Anyhow, it’s not as though Carlisle’s even an actual stranger. He’s basically an old friend of the family, even if Hoyden doesn’t like him much.*



Hoyden was sitting by the phone in the front hallway when Sol arrived back at the cottage on Friday evening. She glanced up tiredly at her sibling. “I just got off the phone with the local police. They’re going to send someone out to us in the next hour or so. Has anyone in Aelfhang seen Hemlock?”

Sol shook his head. “Nothing so far, I’m afraid. People are out checking their sheds and such now. Try not to worry too much. My guess would be that the silly little horror has run off back to London. They’re probably crashing at a

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mate's house without so much as a spare thought for how worried we are!"

"Don't call them names. They've been through a lot this year; it's no wonder they're acting up." His sister sighed. "Anyhow, I already rang the ones who go by Ruby and Derek Moon. I interrupted their weekly trip to the cinema. Hemlock isn't there, and as far as Ruby knows, they didn't have any other friends back there aside from her daughter. It seems that they're a bit of a loner, really."

Sol frowned. "Well, has the daughter heard from our young runaway?"

Hoyden grimaced. "Not since the tail end of last month, and that's where it gets *really* worrying. According to the one who goes by Topaz, since moving in with me, Hemlock never answered any of her phone calls. They didn't pick up video chats either. In fact, they barely even acknowledged it when she texted to let them know that she'd gotten a different mobile number after her old phone broke. She actually

thought that Hemlock was ghosting her because of the move.”

Her brother blinked slowly. “Wait – didn’t Hemlock complain on Sunday afternoon about how Topaz had started using texting to communicate instead of ever answering her phone?”

Hoyden nodded grimly. “Exactly, so who on Earth has Hemlock been texting with so much all this time if it *hasn’t* really been their best friend?”



The drive back from Chiswick to the MI99 Section Chief’s home on the Upper Richmond Road in Putney had gone by quietly. Still, Carlisle hadn’t quite dared to relax until he and Hemlock crossed the threshold of his apartment, which was specially insulated to block inconvenient things like the Find My Tech app. He’d been worried that the jamming device in his car would fail, allowing Hoyden and Sol to trace Hemlock’s phone. *I’m sure*

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*they've already tracked it as far as London; they aren't stupid! I'll have to try to make certain that they concentrate any missing person searches around Chiswick.*

Now safely inside his apartment, Carlisle watched as the door of his spare bedroom closed behind his young guest. He allowed himself to smile. Everything in Hemlock's recruitment process was coming together exactly as he had planned. *It's beyond easy to manipulate people when you know how they think.*

Secretly cutting off communications between the young half-fey and their best friend had been a stroke of genius on his part. The Moon girl and her equally annoyingly compassionate parents were obviously Hemlock's main source of emotional support. Judicious use of well-trained gremlins had let Carlisle put an abrupt end to that connection, without either side realising what had happened. In fact, so far, neither of the teenagers even knew that the other also had a new

phone and number. *I've just about had it up to here with pretending to be one or other of them in texts though! Oh well, with any luck, I can steer Hemlock away from wanting to contact Topaz again. After all, it's not as if anyone from the Moon family was there for them this evening, now is it?*

Carlisle did not intend to let anyone other than Hoyden find Hemlock. Their reunion was a key stage in his plan to get Hoyden back out of retirement. The Section Chief had everything plotted out to the smallest detail. He had already successfully completed the first stage: splitting Hemlock from the rest of their family and other support networks. Next, he would show the young orphan the evidence on the fire, and use that as an opportunity to invite them to become an unofficial spy for MI99. Once Hemlock agreed to that offer, as was surely inevitable, Carlisle would personally train them up a little, just enough that the teenager would believe that their secret recruitment was real. *I'd bet that they'll reckon it's*

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*the best thing ever! Kids of their age all still think that they're immortal.*

The final stage would involve him deliberately placing Hemlock in danger, and then leaving them there for Hoyden to rescue. Carlisle had a scenario in mind for that, but he still needed to hash a few of the finer details out. Making sure that it fell to Hoyden to save the day would likely be the trickiest aspect. Especially given how Sol would undoubtedly volunteer for the task in her stead. *I'll need to get him well and truly out of the way first. Perhaps I can arrange a false lead on where Hemlock is, or else just send him off on an assignment somewhere nice and far away from the action; like Australia.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### AN UNLIKELY CANDIDATE

So far, Hemlock was quite enjoying their Saturday morning. Carlisle had let them sleep in until nine o'clock, something that, thanks primarily to the chickens, never happened in Hoyden's household. Then he had served breakfast for the two of them, which was homemade bacon and mushroom omelette. There had been freshly squeezed orange juice to drink, and then Carlisle had followed his breakfast up with a small glass mug of strong black coffee with next to no sugar in it. He sipped it slowly at the dining table, whilst reading his morning newspaper. Not wanting to be underfoot, Hemlock

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had tidied away their share of the breakfast plates into the dishwasher, and gone through to the living room to watch television.

Carlisle rejoined them there just as it turned eleven o'clock. He switched off the television and sat down on their left, at the opposite end of the sofa, and handed over an A4 sized manila cardboard folder. "Here – I printed off the basic information about what we believe really happened to your parents. I dare say that you'll want to read through it at your own pace, but if you have any questions, then I'll be here. Don't worry; there aren't any photos, and I redacted most of the grimmer details."

Hemlock stared down at the folder in trepidation. "Um...what does redacted mean?"

Their host explained the process patiently. "Redacting is when we block out sections from documents using a thick line of black ink, in order to avoid people having access to information that they weren't cleared to know.

Sometimes, it'll just be a name, or perhaps a location. Other times, it's a lot more than that. It lets us protect our operatives, and our civilian sources too. Let's say that somebody witnessed a terrorist doing something, and came to us about it. We'd want to make sure that the witness could feel safe in telling us what they saw, and so we'd block out, or in other words, *redact* their name to help keep them anonymous." He gestured at the folder. "Anyhow, I'm sure you can guess for yourself what sorts of details I've redacted from that."

Hemlock nodded as they nervously opened the folder. "Okay."

The truth about the fire unfolded slowly before them as they read. Even redacted, it was a densely typed sort of document, full of phrases like deliberate arson, and domestic terrorism, and attempted *triple* murder. Hemlock quailed as they realised what the latter meant. "Wait...triple...that means three, right? So this report, it basically says that there were probably

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meant to be *three* murders instead of two?"

"Yeah, it does." Carlisle gave them a sympathetic look. "In fact, we have reason to believe that you were the primary intended target."

The young half-fey stared at him in shock. "Then what; whoever was behind the fire only targeted my parents because of *me*, is that it?"

Carlisle nodded grimly. "Human supremacists don't approve of interspecies relationships to begin with. They tend to get extra angry when there are hybrid offspring involved. Some nonsense about how it goes against nature, or religion, or those sorts of things. It's beyond stupid, of course, but a significant number of people still buy into it. MI99 monitors them in order to prevent exactly these kinds of tragedies. We usually do a better job of it."

Hemlock gulped back a sob. "Is anyone in my family investigating? The

other Thornbacks, I mean. You said before that they all work for MI99.”

“I’m afraid it’s not quite as simple as that. Sol, for example, has only ever aimed his skill set towards combating supernatural threats. He wouldn’t even know where to start with something like this.” Carlisle sighed. “To be honest, in an ideal world, Hoyden would have been my first choice for tracking down the people responsible, but she’s apparently developed some sort of mental block after her accident.”

“Okay then, so what about Aunt Mandragora and the rest of them? Are they helping?”

Carlisle looked very uncomfortable with that question. “Ah, well you see, Hemlock, there’s the small problem regarding your late mum having been...well...disowned for one thing, and uh, married to a human, too. I’m sad to say that her untimely death hasn’t changed how the majority of the Thornback family feels about any of that.”

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The teenager clenched their fingers around the pages they were holding. "You're basically saying that none of the rest of them cares about what happened to her and Dad, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid not. Sorry, kid." Carlisle patted them gently on the shoulder. "Families really can just be rubbish to one another sometimes, and that's even without fey politics getting in the way."

Hemlock scrambled up angrily, tossing the folder and its contents onto the coffee table. "Yeah, well then the rest of the Thornbacks and their stupid fey politics can go and get stuffed! Okay, so maybe my parents weren't exactly the *niciest* people ever, but then it's not as if I'm all that nice of a kid, either, is it? They did their best bringing me up. Even if they didn't especially love me, I still loved *them*, and I won't just stand by and do nothing about them being murdered!"

Carlisle shook his head. "That's admirable, Hemlock, but there's nothing that you *can* do, not at your

age. Well, not unless...ah, never mind. I shouldn't mention that to you."

The teenager wiped their eyes with the corner of their sleeve. "Shouldn't mention what to me? Are you saying that there's a way that I can help?"

Their host seemed wary now, but he nodded, albeit only very slightly. "As it happens, MI99 *occasionally* takes on operatives from outside of the standard hiring parameters – only when the circumstances involved make it necessary, mind you. It isn't something that we do lightly, by any means."

Hemlock blinked. "What does outside the standard hiring mean?"

Carlisle inhaled deeply before he replied. "That varies. It *can* on occasion mean operatives who are younger than eighteen, but...!"

"Then I could join up, couldn't I?" Hemlock wasn't about to let the Section Chief try to put them off the idea. "Since none of the other Thornbacks are willing or able to try – you could um,

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like, recruit me, or whatever, and teach me to be a spy!”

Carlisle went very still indeed. He stared Hemlock intently in the eyes as he answered. “Are you sure that you fully understand what it is that you’re offering to do right now, Hemlock? Spying isn’t a game, you know. People get hurt, sometimes even killed, and it’s no less dangerous for kids.”

“Two of the people who were flipping well closest to me have *already* been killed, that’s my whole point!” Hemlock folded their arms and tried to ground their emotions as they continued. “Look, I know I’m still young, but you can’t tell me that I was the primary target and then act like I’m *not* in danger just for existing! Those supremacists...they...well, I mean they’re not going to quit, are they?”

Carlisle smiled ruefully at their line of reasoning. “No, I wouldn’t think so. You’re not wrong about being in danger from them and others like them. Still – this is a big decision that you’re making.

I don't want to push you into something that you don't really want."

"You aren't though." The young half-fey gestured at the folder. "The people behind the murders of my parents are the ones to blame for all of this. They don't care that I'm still a kid, they just want me *dead*. I'll basically never be able to go back to my normal life with them out there. Actually, thinking about that, if anything, training as a spy might help keep me safer. At least I'll know more about defending myself."

"Well, given the circumstances, and since you've argued your point so maturely, I suppose I can take a chance on recruiting you." Carlisle rose to his feet with a determined look on his face. "We'll start your martial arts training later this morning, once we've both had enough time to digest our breakfast. In the meantime, I'll arrange to have the technical types at MI99 jazz up your phone a bit. Give it here."

"Um, okay." Hemlock reluctantly handed him their phone. "Jazz it up how, exactly?"

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Carlisle grinned at them. “Oh, you’d be surprised what MI99 can do to a phone! Let’s start with keeping you safe in the field – how does knockout gas that only affects people aged eighteen and over sound to you?”

The teenager nodded thoughtfully. “It actually sounds pretty cool. What else?”

As it happened, there were quite a lot of other options available. Some of them were a bit gruesome sounding. Hemlock eventually settled on the knockout gas, and an ultrasonic distress signal keyed to a frequency that only MI99 knew existed. The latter, according to Carlisle, would work anywhere on the surface of the Earth, and in most natural subterranean areas down to a depth of fifty feet. Some environmental factors might weaken or even block it, such as being underwater, or somewhere especially rich in ferrous metals. It wouldn’t work at all from inside of a shipping container, so Hemlock made a mental note not to get stuck inside one of

*those. I can't think why I'd be anywhere near one to begin with anyhow, but it's probably best if I try to start planning for the worst from now on.*

## CHAPTER NINE

### AN UNUSUAL INVITATION

Hoyden winced slightly as she bent to refill Marmalade's kitchen water bowl. "I suppose you must miss Hemlock too, eh chicken?"

The bird clucked softly from where she was sunbathing on the windowsill behind the sink. It was midmorning on Friday 12th April 2019, and Hemlock had now been missing for three weeks. The police had seemed to believe that there was no need to be overly concerned. Apparently, teenage runaways were common enough not to rank highly on their list of priorities. *I suspect especially not the ones who*

*aren't white, or who have anything other than purely human heritage.*

Social services had been much more proactive, and yet still somehow equally unhelpful. One caseworker had even threatened to have Hoyden charged with neglect! The utter hypocrites in charge of Hyssop Tor Integrated Academy had been very keen to support that action. In the end, Sol had called in a favour or ten through work, and removed all official records of the matter. He hadn't clarified what *exactly* he had done, and Hoyden hadn't asked. *MI99 has plenty of ways to make people stop being problematic. It hardly matters which one Sol used.*

No, the main thing was that the threat of unjustified legal action was no longer hanging over her. Now all she needed to worry about was Hemlock. Well, Hemlock, and the fact that a coterie of vampires knew where she lived, and were aware of her connection to the MI99 operative responsible for thwarting their scheme

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for world domination. *Hmm, not exactly a safe home environment, is it? To think, all these years later, and the poor child is still likely better off away from me! Although I thought that before, and just look at how that turned out.*

Hoyden scowled angrily to herself. Ever since secretly giving up her then newborn infant to her cousin for private adoption, a part of her had yearned for a second chance. In fact, she had lost count of how many times she had considered reclaiming her child or at the very least reneging on her promise of no contact. Only the belief that the Baines were by default better parents than she could ever even dream of being had stopped her. After hearing about the fire, Hemlock's survival had felt like a sign, and Hoyden had immediately volunteered herself as guardian. *It's just a shame that it turned out to be fourteen years too late for me to prevent harm.*

Over the past three weeks, Hoyden had ended up engaging in several lengthy phone calls with the one who

went by Ruby Moon and her husband. She was still coming to terms with what she had learned of the Baines' approach to child rearing. *Derogatory nicknames, corporal punishment, and borderline neglect – I trusted the one who went by Belladonna with my only child and now it turns out that she and her odious husband failed them on almost every level!*

Hoyden pushed the anger down again, burying it as best as she could at the back of her thoughts. There was no point in her dwelling on the matter now; the fire had seen to that. She needed to focus on finding Hemlock, and bringing them home. *After which, the first thing I'm going to do is get them into counselling for everything that they've been through so far.*



Hemlock stared at their fake passport for the umpteenth time since receiving it. The teenager still couldn't quite believe that the document in

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question had been accepted as genuine at each and every official checkpoint so far. Carlisle had blithely handed it to them three days ago, on the morning of Tuesday 9th April 2019, just before their joint departure for Czechoslovakia. A car journey of almost fourteen hours had followed, with only four stops along the way. The first of those had been for lunch in Calais. Next had been an overnight stay in a hotel in the middle of Duisburg, which had included their evening meal and breakfast. The third and fourth stops had been for quick food and toilet breaks at roadside facilities. Years of being a spy under his belt or not, Hemlock still wasn't altogether sure how Carlisle had managed to drive all the way here without needing to stop and rest a good deal more often. *At least I was able to doze off whenever I felt like it.*

Here, for what it mattered, was a rather grim little room on the second floor of a small hotel in Prague. The room was part of a two-bedroom, two-bathroom suite; all of it painted a

horridly dull shade of yellow, with dark brown carpeting and curtains, and pale laminated wooden furniture and doors. It had been booked under Carlisle's cover identity: a widowed company executive from London, who went by Hector Smith. Officially, Mr Smith was visiting Prague over the Easter school holiday with his sixteen-year-old offspring, who went by Alex. Unofficially, of course, the latter was Hemlock's cover identity. The trip to Prague was a training exercise designed to determine whether the teenager was mission capable or not. *I just hope I don't muck things up.*

Hemlock was looking forwards to proving their recently acquired skills as a spy. The past three weeks had been a crash course in general urban survival and basic espionage. This had included first aid, hand-to-hand combat, free running, situational awareness, blending in, eluding pursuit, bartering and scavenging for resources, covert surveillance, traditional and electronic based lock picking, and even a bit of computer

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hacking. Carlisle had explained that MI99 usually relied on specially trained cybersprites for the latter task, and gremlins for most surveillance, saying that it wasn't likely that Hemlock would ever need to use what they had learnt. *It still can't hurt for me to know how to do stuff like that though.*

The young half-fey tucked the passport into the inside pocket of their jacket and zipped the garment closed. It had just turned twelve noon, which meant that it was time to begin the training exercise: a scavenger hunt through central Prague, in search of a pair of tokens. Carlisle, who had left two hours ago to hide the tokens, would be waiting for Hemlock to join him. Their success or failure would depend on how long it took them to locate and acquire the tokens, which were laminated pieces of card marked with partial GPS coordinates. One of the tokens showed latitude, and the other longitude. Hemlock would need both to find Carlisle, and they had to do it by six o'clock this evening. The Section Chief had warned them that if they weren't

there within time, then he would consider the exercise failed and return to the hotel to wait for them. *This is probably my only chance to prove that I have what it takes to go into the field. I can't afford to muck things up now!*

A soft beep from their phone signalled the arrival of a text. The message was from Carlisle, and comprised the first clue for the scavenger hunt.

**ALL THREE OF US STAND IN  
FRONT OF THE FAMOUS  
AMERICAN DANCERS 24/7, BUT  
THE ONE OF US YOU NEED ONLY  
WORKS NIGHTS**

Hemlock frowned as they studied the riddle. "Well, that's certainly cryptic!"

An online search for famous American dancers in Prague revealed that one of the city's landmark buildings was an architectural homage to two of Hollywood's most iconic performers. Nicknamed the Dancing House, the curious riverside structure was comprised of two towers, one stone

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and the other glass. Still bemused by the clue, Hemlock zoomed in on one of the photographs to take a closer look. Emerging from the pavement outside the foot of the building were three tall metal poles. One of them held traffic control lights, and the second was a pedestrian crossing – both things that were by default in operation night and day. The central pole, however, was a streetlight. Hemlock grinned triumphantly as they realised the answer to the riddle. *Only works nights...Carlisle must have put the next clue somewhere on or near to the streetlight!*

The teenager hurried out of the suite and into the hotel's worryingly noisy lift; feigning calmness in front of the other three passengers as best as they could for the duration of the ride down to the lobby, and nodding politely to the doorman on their way out of the building. The Dancing House was at least forty minutes away on foot. It would be far more practical to take public transport, especially given that tickets purchased for the latter were

transferable between metro, bus, tram, train, funicular, and even ferry routes throughout most of the city. *I don't have a debit card, so I'll need to find the nearest yellow ticket machine, or else a newsagent's shop. That way, I can pay in cash.*

Hemlock soon spotted a ticket machine. As they stood next to it, counting out the correct coins for a reduced rate 24-hour ticket, a dark blue panel van pulled up at the kerb immediately to their right. The young spy in training tensed warily. Then they saw that the blond-haired van driver was frowning at his phone whilst struggling to unfold a large paper map. *He's just lost, that's all. There's nothing for me to worry about there.*

They barely even glimpsed the dark-haired man who grabbed them. It all happened much too fast for that. One moment, Hemlock was still at the ticket machine, and then the next they were sitting on the floor inside the back of the van, with both of their arms held pinned to their sides. Their initial

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assailant was now kneeling behind them. A tall, fair-haired man shoved their legs clear of the door, growling when the teenager kicked out at him. Hemlock recoiled in shock at the sight of his suddenly lengthened teeth and the whiskers that were now bristling from his eyebrows and upper lip. They would have screamed, but the man holding them clamped a leather-gloved hand over their mouth, hissing at them in heavily French accented English to be quiet. "Hurry up and shut that door, Karl! Someone will see if we're not careful! And put your fangs away, for goodness sake; we're not *animals*."

Karl, who was still standing outside the vehicle, glowered and slammed the side door shut, before climbing into the front passenger seat. Hemlock heard him mutter something about fey and dishonesty, but it was in rapid German, and frustratingly they couldn't quite follow the details of it. *Ugh, it's so unfair! I'm sure that I'd understand everything that he was saying if it were in French or Spanish! Although, on second*

*thoughts, perhaps I'm better off not knowing.*

The driver was already pulling back out into the flow of traffic, chuckling softly as he made eye contact with Hemlock through the rear view mirror. He spoke to the teenager in English, with a broad Australian accent. "No need to spit the dummy out there, sook! We're uh, we're just taking you to meet our boss Sasha Cale for a chat, that's all. Dunno if you know him yet or not. I'm guessing this all feels like a bit of an unusual invitation either way, but she'll be right."

Hemlock didn't feel even remotely reassured by that. Taking Carlisle's combat lessons to heart, they jerked their head back sharply, bashing it against the French sounding man's face. Their captor gave a surprised grunt of pain and loosened his hold on them for a moment, swearing angrily. Hemlock made full use of the opportunity, and wriggled free, whipping out their phone as they scrambled to the rear of the load

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compartment. The door proved locked, just as they had feared it might. *I can't risk using the knockout gas on them. If the driver passes out, we'll crash, and then innocent bystanders could get hurt!*

They thumbed the relevant button on the side of their phone; activating the distress signal for MI99. Then the man they had head butted sprang forwards, tackling them to the floor with a snarl. His nose was bleeding, which likely explained why he appeared to have forgotten his earlier opinion on showing fangs. "Come here you little brat, before I forgot that we have strict orders to bring you back alive, and show you firsthand how much damage we lycothropes can do!"

By now, the driver and Karl were laughing aloud at their companion's misfortune, but Hemlock didn't dare join in. Lycothropes, one of the most deadly forms of therial, had teeth and claws capable of rending through solid steel. The teenager stopped struggling; surrendering their phone without a

*murmur. Here's hoping that the distress signal works! I wonder who this Sasha Cale is, and why does the driver think that I might already know him?*

## CHAPTER TEN

### AN UNPAID DEBT

As it turned out, Sasha Cale was a tall, leanly muscled white male lycothrope, with weather-beaten skin, glossy blond hair that hung to his shoulder blades, and tired, bright green eyes. He sat behind a polished foldout table of dark wood, inside a spacious compartment on a train, and this was where the men from the van had left Hemlock moments before. Sasha wore faded black skinny jeans tucked into stout leather boots, a billowing white silk shirt, and a long black leather trench coat. Overall, he reminded the teenager of some of the eighties era rock music videos which they had

stumbled across on SelfTunnel. Aside, of course, from the terrifyingly large knife that he was toying with. *Well, that and the fact that I don't think rock stars of any era tend to live aboard trains.*

The train itself was painted yellow with a bright green trim. It was heavily armoured, the design combining sleekness and practicality, and there were flexible gangway connections between each of its six cars. First was the locomotive: snub nosed and windowless aside from a narrow horizontal panel no more than a foot high stretched right across the front of it for the driver to see through. The next four cars had small, round windows; like the portholes on the sides of some ships. Finally, there was the caboose, which was another windowless car. Hemlock supposed that baggage and so on wasn't likely to need much in the way of a view. Admittedly, the young spy in training was just assuming that storing baggage was the only purpose that the caboose served. They couldn't be sure, because so far, they had only seen the interior of the third car along.

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*Ugh, for all I know, there could even be a bunch of random vampires travelling back there or something!*

Sasha spoke then, interrupting Hemlock's internal musings. He had a soft, gravelly sort of voice, with what sounded like a faint Russian accent. "Welcome aboard my mobile command base, little one! My name is Sasha Cale, and I'm the leader of this, ah, *organisation*. Perhaps you've heard of me?" He paused and peered intently at Hemlock, who shook their head wordlessly. "No? Hmm, well, never mind that for now. My men and I are mercenaries – soldiers of fortune, guns for hire, that sort of thing."

Hemlock tried not to show any fear as they answered him. "Um, pleased to meet you, well, aside from that whole snatching me off the street thing. Why *am* I here, anyhow?"

Their host gestured dismissively with the knife. "Oh, don't worry about that! This is just a matter of settling an all too long unpaid debt between Jamie

Carlisle and me! I don't appreciate being strung out to dry, you see."

Hemlock nodded slowly. For some reason, one of Sol's silly puns popped into their mind. "I suppose that's because you're not a herring!"

Sasha stopped smiling and his voice dropped to a low growl. "Where did you hear that joke, little one?"

"The one who goes by Sol Thornback used it."

Apparently, this was the *wrong* answer. The lycothrope snarled, and slammed his knife into the foldout table in front of him. "When was this, and where? How do you know Sol Thornback? Has one of his innumerable cover identities taken up *teaching* now, or does Carlisle just have him earning overtime as a babysitter?"

The teenager scrambled to think of a believable lie; wary of revealing too much about their identity. "Um...it was Tuesday last, at MI99's headquarters! It was an accident, of course; I wasn't

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deliberately eavesdropping! I just happened to be within earshot.”

“Ah, but what were you even doing there, hmm?” Sasha stepped around the table and prowled closer to Hemlock, thankfully leaving the knife where it was. “For that matter, why have you been travelling with Carlisle? You aren’t kin to him, I can smell that much.”

Hemlock shrugged, hoping fervently that it looked casual. Their heart was pounding at the realisation that Sasha could smell things like that. They could only hope that Sol was a distant enough relation for it not to be readily identifiable. Presumably, their captor would have said something already otherwise; given how he appeared to feel about Sol. “Carlisle’s my handler; I’m training to work for MI99, you see.”

The mercenary leader stared at them. “MI99 hires literal *children* as operatives now?”

“Hey, I turned fourteen back in February!”

“So that’s a yes.” Sasha shook his head, scowling. “I already knew that you were travelling under a false name, of course, but the information I have implied that you were in fact *sixteen*. I’d thought that Carlisle couldn’t actually sink any lower in my estimations, but it appears that I was wrong. Ah well, there goes my plan to ransom you back to *him*. By now, he’s probably started filing the paperwork for a replacement gullible teenager! So, what am I to do with you instead?”

Hemlock decided not to chance complaining about him calling them gullible. “You could always just draw a line under things and let me go?”

Sasha chuckled. “An amusing suggestion, but it wouldn’t be profitable for me. Tell me, Hemlock, how much money would your *family* pay me for your safe return? Answer my questions properly instead of playing at being a spy, and there may be no need for you to suffer.”

“Yeah, well you see, um, the thing is, there’s a small problem with that plan.

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Namely that I'm *not* playing!" Hemlock kicked out as hard as they could; aiming for their opponent's crotch. There was a dull sort of thudding sound as their steel toe capped boot connected. "You...you actually wear some sort of body armour underneath your clothes. Of course you do."

The lycothrope sneered as he grabbed hold of Hemlock and tossed them bodily across the compartment. "Oh, wasn't that in my file? I presume that MI99 still *has* a file about me, yes?"

Hemlock staggered upright. "I wouldn't know either way – Carlisle only told me about the interesting stuff, not about mangy old dogs like you!"

For a long, dreadfully still moment, the only audible sounds were the teenager's now ragged breathing and the faint rattle of the train's suspension. Then Sasha threw back his head and laughed uproariously. "My, my, you really *do* need to work harder on crafting your insults, child! That pathetic little attempt only proves that you've been told *some* things, but nothing

important enough for you to need proper training before hearing it.”

“Well, in that case, why are you even bothering with keeping me prisoner?” The young spy glanced at the scenery blurring past outside the window. “Where exactly are you taking me to anyhow? Do you *really* own this entire train? How do you afford it?”

“I’ll ask the questions, little one.” Sasha pulled his knife out of the tabletop and pointed it at Hemlock. “But first I think you need a lesson in what happens to *real* spies when they’re caught.”

He yanked open the door of the compartment, and spoke with the three mercenaries still waiting outside. “Go fetch the stuff for the water cure! Bring a camera, too – I want proof of life to send along with the ransom letter.”

What the water cure was became all too obvious indeed the moment that Sasha’s men entered the compartment. Hemlock backed hurriedly away from them. “Wait, so what; you’re actually

seriously planning on *water boarding* me? I mean, as in, with real water, and everything...you...no, you can't do that – it's a form of torture!"

"Well, yes, of course it is." Sasha stood squarely in front of the door, still toying with that terrible knife. "Gentlemen, kindly restrain our young guest, and ready the equipment in case they prove recalcitrant."

Quick study or not, Hemlock's martial arts lessons with Carlisle could still only take them so far against four much larger and stronger opponents. First, two of the three lycothropes lifted the struggling teenager and forced them to lie down on top of the table. Karl yanked their arms up above their head and pinned them there one-handed, whilst the French sounding mercenary held their legs. The Australian busied himself setting up the tubing for the funnel; connecting it to a large, clear plastic canister, filled to the brim with water. "I just need a few more minutes to finish calibrating the pump before we can begin, boss."

“Take your time.” Sasha ambled forwards and smiled down at his terrified young prisoner. “So, now you know what we’re going to do to you. I presume that you’ve begun to feel less keen on spying, eh? Then again, perhaps you still don’t quite believe that all of this is really happening. Regardless, I’m sure that your poor family would hate to see you in this position! How much do you suppose that they will pay me to let you go home to them?”

Hemlock hedged their reply. “Um, well, they don’t exactly *know* about my working for MI99. It’s all a bit complicated, really...!”

Sasha growled and flicked the tip of Hemlock’s nose sharply. “That *isn’t* what I asked you!” He gestured for his men to prepare. “I don’t care about Carlisle’s games right now. This is your last chance to tell me what I want to know. What will your family pay as ransom for your safe return?”

“I don’t know! We’ve never talked about those sorts of things! It’s hardly

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as if it's a normal dinner table conversation, after all!"

Their captor sighed. "Oh, for pity's sake, don't tell me that you can't at least *guess* at how much money they have in the bank? What sort of spy do you think you are if you don't even know what your parents earn?"

Hemlock struggled futilely against the hands pinning them down. No longer caring how much they revealed, they began to babble information frantically at Sasha: desperate to avert his threatened course of action. "My parents don't earn *anything* anymore because they're both *dead*, okay? Someone *murdered* them in a fire, and then social services packed me off to live with my mum's cousin. She's disabled, so she can't work, but she owns her house outright, and I think she probably has some savings, so please, *please* don't torture me...!"

Sasha crooned his approval. "There now; that wasn't so difficult, was it? I really am terribly sorry to hear about your loss. Alas, the world is full of evil

people!" He patted Hemlock's face almost kindly. "My men are going to apply the water cure to you now. We wouldn't want this lesson not to sink in properly, after all. Try not to panic, and whatever you do, don't inhale *too* much water. It's bad for the lungs."

The young half-fey gave a shout of frustration. "That's not fair! I *answered* your question – what lesson are you even trying to teach me here?"

No one bothered replying. Instead, Karl grabbed Hemlock firmly by the chin with his free hand, preventing them from moving their head even slightly. The Australian placed the cloth across the teenager's upper face, blacking out any view of what was going on. There was a grating squeak of a valve turning, and then the sound of liquid running. For a horribly long moment, it seemed as if nothing existed in the young spy's world, aside from the crushing grips on their arms and legs, and the terrible, menacing sound of the water. *What if it goes up my nose? Can you drown from that?*

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Suddenly, the water stopped, and the merciless hands let go. A camera flashed as someone whipped away the still dry cloth, but Hemlock, gasping and shivering, barely noticed. They rolled onto their left side and curled up into a ball. The camera flashed again, and then the door of the compartment rattled open and shut again as Sasha's men exited, taking the water boarding equipment with them.

Sasha stayed put; patting Hemlock's back while they tried to calm down. His voice was softer now. "You can't go to sleep on the table, little one. Sit up properly."

Hemlock tried to do so in between bouts of trembling, but found that they couldn't quite convince their body to move. They sobbed. "I can't...!"

The lycothrope grumbled something about baby spies and general stupidity underneath his breath and pulled the teenager up into a sitting position at the edge of the table. "Try to look on the bright side. If you ever see Carlisle again, you'll be able to tell him that

you've lived through a dose of the water cure. It's technically the truth, after all, and it's not as if *we*// ever tell him otherwise! Who knows – perhaps if you decide to keep being a spy, he'll even let you skip that part of your RTI training!"

"I...what's RTI training...?"

Sasha shook his head. "It's short for resistance to interrogation, of course! In my opinion, you're still much too young for most of the techniques involved." He paused to wipe the tears away from Hemlock's face with a soft, dry towel before continuing. "This would be Carlisle's role in the procedure, of course – the kindly handler, putting you back together afterwards; burrowing his way into your psyche as a source of comfort in the process."

Hemlock sniffled. "Is...is that what you're trying to do? Make yourself seem nice, so that I'll trust you?"

"Ha, if that was my plan, then I wouldn't be explaining the concept! No, I'd simply dry your tears, and then give

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you something warm to drink; perhaps some hot chocolate." Sasha tossed the towel aside and pulled out a small notebook and an ornate looking fountain pen from a pocket inside his trench coat. "You will write down your real name, and your actual home address for the ransom letter. Try to make your handwriting legible, please. It makes things so much easier. As I mentioned earlier, I already know that Carlisle has assigned you the cover identity of Alex Smith, so don't try to trick me by using that. And don't even *think* about stabbing me with the pen. I react poorly to violence."

"Okay, okay!" Hemlock took the items with shaking hands and began to write down their name, and the address of Hoyden's cottage. "I actually wouldn't mind a hot chocolate though."

Sasha frowned and then shrugged. "I suspect that something generally seen as essential is either missing from or broken in that little brain of yours, but very well! Do you want some marshmallows with it?"

“Yes, please, but just the white ones, though; not the pink. Oh, and I'd much prefer that it's made with coconut milk. Add a dash of freshly whipped coconut cream on the top. And I like chocolate sprinkles too, if you've got any of those.”

“Ha!” Sasha laughed again, and then opened the door of the compartment to shout for one or other of his men to fetch the requested hot drink. “Fussy – I suppose it's just as well that you're still a few years too young for ordering cocktails, eh?”

“I guess so, yeah.” Hemlock slid gingerly off the table and slumped down onto one of the compartment's elegant bench style seats instead, taking the notebook and pen with them. If Sasha didn't already know, then they certainly weren't about to admit that traditional dairy was as potent an intoxicant as alcohol for fey. “So, what was the lesson supposed to be?”

“That talking shan't save you, of course!”

“Oh. That rather sucks.”

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“Yes, that’s why they provide you with resistance training in the first place.” Sasha nodded curtly towards the notebook. “Have you finished yet? Put your guardian’s name too, by the way. It will make establishing communication with her easier.”

Hemlock nodded, and handed him the notebook. “I already did. She goes by Topaz Moon. Can I keep this pen? It’s very pretty.”

“No, of course you can’t!” The lycothrope stepped closer and snatched it back. “Drafted fey and your inherent hoarding of small objects! These pens are produced specially for members of my organisation!”

“I’m only half-fey, actually; on my mum’s side. My dad was human.”

Sasha peered at the information in front of him. “That explains you having the surname Baines. Wait a minute – do you honestly want me to believe that your late parents named you *Hemlock Oleander*? Did they not grasp how names generally work?”

Hemlock glowered at him. “Hey, there’s nothing wrong with my name!”

“It’s literally two words that *both* mean poison! Honestly, what is it with fey? All of the ones whom I’ve met so far have had equally terrible names.” Sasha tucked the notebook and pen away. “There’s you, for one, and my accountant, and the barman at my favourite club. Then there’s that walking font of bad jokes Solanum Thornback, although at least he shortens his. Oh, and of course I mustn’t forget his dear sister. Her name essentially translated as arch spinster!”

Hemlock didn’t even blink. “Oh, you mean the one who goes by Hoyden Thornback, don’t you? Yeah, I’ve heard of her! Sol complained about her bossing him around whenever they meet. I think he might have said that she used to work for MI99 too.”

“Yes, she *did*.” Sasha looked extremely interested now. “But I’m surprised to hear that she still bosses anyone around, given how she’s

supposedly been well and truly *dead* for over a year now!”

The young would-be spy thought fast; by now supremely glad that they hadn't risked outing Hoyden as being their legal guardian. It was bad enough that they'd given out her address to a dangerous criminal, but it had been that or the Moon family's address. At least Hoyden could defend herself if need be. “Well that's not what Sol says! He says that she lives in Livorno, with hundreds of pet chickens, or something. I suppose that he might be egg-zaggerating about that last part though, get it? It's a joke. Egg-zaggerating instead of exaggerating, you know. See, it's funny because of all of the chickens...!”

“Shut up.” Sasha looked pained. “I don't need another source of awful jokes in my life! Keep it up, and I might just toss you off this train whilst it's still moving.”

“Sorry, I'm sure.”

“You aren’t really, not yet, but I suspect that that will change soon enough.” Sasha sat down beside Hemlock. “Especially once you begin to understand that being found by me was actually one of the less terrible things that could have become of you.”

Hemlock eyed him warily. “Um, no offence or anything, but given that you pretty much just had me *tortured*, what exactly do you mean by less terrible?”

The lycothrope bent forwards and pulled out a sleek tablet computer from a compartment hidden beneath the seat. He gestured curtly at the screen. “Pay attention, little one. I’m going to show you the official files for some of the worse options. If nothing else, then at least you will have an inkling of who to run away from in the future.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### AN UNSTOPPABLE FORCE

Having ended up stuck as Sasha's hostage for the past four days hadn't been *all* bad, Hemlock supposed. For one thing, whoever was in charge of the food aboard the train was an amazing cook. For another, Sasha had taken the decision to continue their general espionage training. He was a surprisingly good teacher, albeit oddly fixated on making sure that his young guest became fully fluent in Russian. Since learning new languages was one of their favourite things to do, Hemlock hadn't complained, although picking up the Cyrillic alphabet was certainly proving challenging. *I think I finally*

*have it memorised properly now though.*

There hadn't been any further threats of torture so far, despite a complete lack of response to the ransom demand. Sasha had assured Hemlock that it was far more likely that the letter was simply still in transit, as opposed to their guardian choosing to ignore it. Apparently, some people did that with ransoms, usually due to a love of money rather than a lack. Fortunately, he was in no particular hurry to collect either way. *Perhaps he'll even accept payment in instalments. I hope so, anyhow, since otherwise Hoyden's probably going to need to take out a second mortgage or something to ransom me back!*

It was raining heavily outside the train today. The sound of it reminded Hemlock of their interrogation. They shivered, huddling deeper into their seat and staring at the rivulets patterning the tiny window of what by now counted as their roomette. The teenager wondered yet again if they

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should risk trying to escape. The main problem with such efforts was that, for the most part, the train moved at well over 200 miles per hour. It only ever stopped when scheduled to do so. So far, Sasha had always arranged a guard for them at those times. He didn't bother with that whilst the train was moving, because disembarking at those kinds of speeds wasn't possible. *Well, technically it is, but probably not in a way that I'd be able to walk away from afterwards. Just look at what happened to Hoyden.*

The other problem that Hemlock had with trying to escape was what would happen if their attempt *failed*. The train provided limited space to those on board it. Someone could all too easily stumble upon them in the act of escaping. Even if they somehow got clear of the train, Sasha and his minions would most likely chase them down and attempt to recapture them. The teenager shivered as they imagined what the lycthropes would do to them in retaliation. Lukas, whose nose they had broken during the

struggle in the van, and who was in fact Belgian as opposed to French, was bearing a grudge. Karl, who it turned out was Austrian, hadn't forgiven them for kicking him either. The Australian, Joe, had told Hemlock that this was more down to how Karl hadn't liked fey to begin with. *Ugh, not that knowing that helps me at all!*

Hemlock gulped miserably. There was a horrid, sharp sort of feeling in the deep of their throat; like a lump that they couldn't quite swallow. With hindsight, they realised that Sasha was right. Carlisle hadn't ever talked about what happened to spies who got caught. Instead, their handler had focused purely on the positive aspects of a career in espionage, such as travelling the world, and having gadgets, and of course the opportunity to help others. He had made it all sound fun, and exciting. There hadn't been any discussion about distress signals that no one answered, or kidnappers, or any of that! *Then again, he might not have thought that he even needed to mention it. Maybe this stuff*

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*happens to everybody, and most people manage to cope with it.*

They were still feeling thoroughly wretched when Joe opened the door to their roomette. The Australian lycothrope gestured curtly. "Boss wants to see you in his office, sook! He said it's important, so you'd better get a move on."

Hemlock sighed. "Okay, okay, I'm going!"

Sasha's office was right next door, and was the same compartment of the train in which he had originally interrogated them. By now, Hemlock knew that it doubled as the mercenary leader's living quarters. It was four times the size of either of the roomettes in the car, and twice as big as the other three sleeper compartments. The latter were where the other mercenaries bunked; four of them to each compartment, with a shared toilet, wash hand basin, and shower cubicle. Both of the roomettes were reserved for guests. *Although I'm starting to suspect*

*that guest is really just a metaphor for hostage.*

The teenager knocked on the door before entering. “Um, Joe said you want to see me?”

Sasha smiled and beckoned them to take a seat. He held up Hemlock’s phone triumphantly. “I trust that you shan’t object to my having borrowed this. I find that using the hostage’s own phone for communicating with their loved ones saves money on burners. On which note, your guardian has used the prepaid phone that I sent to her along with the ransom demand to text her reply. She agrees to pay in full for your safe return. I just need to schedule a time and place for her to drop off the money.”

Hemlock sighed with relief and sank down onto the seat opposite Sasha. “I’m glad you told me that! To be honest, I wasn’t sure if she could afford to pay it or not.”

The lycothrope chuckled. “I am not so cruel as to set a ransom at a price

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too high to be met, especially not for a child who has simply gotten in over their head.”

Hemlock grimaced at him counting them as a child yet again. “I...you never really took me being a spy seriously at all, did you? Not even while you’ve been training me.”

Sasha shook his head. “No, little one, I did not. Spying isn’t for children, not even brave, clever children. Take my advice and leave it to the adults from now on, lest you end up running afoul of one or other of those worse options I showed to you.”

The young half-fey shrugged haplessly. “I can’t promise that, sorry. I know that I’m not very good at spying, but it’s the only way that I’ll ever get justice for my family. Besides, I still don’t see why spying would increase the risk of someone being snatched up by traffickers.”

The mercenary leader sighed. “Any activity which takes someone away from their home and support network

automatically increases the degree of general risk to their wellbeing! Still, if you're truly determined to seek revenge, then there's likely no use in arguing with you. I can only wish you luck with it, Hemlock Oleander Baines."

Hemlock smiled. "Yeah, you can't have too much luck! Um, that's always presuming that you mean *good* luck, anyhow."

Their captor waved off the question. "Luck is neutral, little one! It's what you make of the assorted chances strewn about in the wake of it that counts. Now – let us see how just much progress you have made so far with your Russian...!"

The door of the compartment rattled open abruptly while Sasha was still speaking. Hemlock gasped as they recognised the new arrival. "Hoyden? Is that really *you*?"

Hoyden limped into Sasha's office with a mix of tiredness and cold determination on her scarred face. Her walking cane hung folded and clipped

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to her belt, and there were dark shadows under her eyes that hadn't been present the last time that Hemlock had seen her. She was dressed in a black vest top, paired with dark blue jeans and black leather motorcycling chaps, and she was carrying the largest rifle that Hemlock had ever seen. She pointed it at Sasha as she replied. "It's over, Hemlock. You're safe now, I promise."

Sasha grinned. He didn't seem remotely perturbed by the gun pointed at him. "Well, well, well, if it isn't one of my dearest, oldest, and most treacherous erstwhile friends! Whatever are you doing here, Hoyden? After all, the last that I'd gathered, you were so deeply retired that you'd officially declared yourself as dead and fled to Livorno! I must say, you *do* look terribly pale compared to how I remember you. Why, I might not even have recognised you at all if not for that ridiculous gun!"

Hoyden's aim didn't waver. "I could ask you the same thing, Sasha, especially given how Sol and I footed

the bill for your *second* supposed funeral six years ago! As for what I'm doing here, well, really, what did you expect me to do when the ransom letter and those *awful* photographs arrived? Was I honestly supposed to just stay home and hope that poor Hemlock's mysterious kidnappers would actually bother honouring their side of the arrangement if I paid up?"

Sasha blinked. "Wait – so *you're* their guardian? Oh, this is just priceless! Hemlock, you wily little scamp, I can't believe that you lied to me about this; *Topaz Moon*, indeed, ha! What an obviously fake name that was. To think, I thought that I could spot when anyone was lying to me. Still, the why of things aside, Hoyden, how did you ever manage to find us, and how did you get on board this train? What, did you take on the shape of a flock of sparrows, and fly all the way here?"

Hoyden grimaced, looking a little nauseous at the question. "This may surprise you to hear, Sasha, but I find that I'm disinclined to share that

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information with you, given the fact that you *kidnapped* one of my family members! On which note, are you okay, Hemlock?"

The teenager nodded. "Yeah, I'm good. Well, aside from having been kidnapped and menaced by a raving lunatic, that is."

The enemy in question sneered. "You are such a rude child! Perhaps I should have my men give you a *real* dose of the water cure to try and teach you some manners whilst your delectable cousin and I catch up."

Hoyden kept the rifle trained on him as she replied. "I still can't believe that you went so far as *torturing* a teenager! In all of the years that we've known one another, I never took you for that degree of evil, Sasha. Oh, you were a bit greedy at times perhaps, and certainly far too ambitious to grant much thought to other people's wellbeing, but not a torturer, no. Sol will be horrified when he hears about it."

Sasha scoffed. “Don’t agonise too much, my dear! The child was in no real danger. The water was never actually applied. Even if it had been, you fey are more than tough enough to withstand something like that! More importantly, weren’t you listening just now? I have other people who torture *for* me nowadays. I’ve gone up in the world since last we met, Hoyden. My organisation is the top name in the freelancing business.”

“It even has a website.” Hemlock nodded towards the laptop on the table. “There’s a sort of miniature server farm in the next car along; the one between here and the locomotive. Sasha gave me a tour of it. He talks a lot, by the way. He keeps trying to teach me random things about world history, and he thinks that I ought to learn how to speak Russian, just in case there’s ever another outbreak of the big Cold War as opposed to the steadily ongoing little one.”

Their cousin gave Sasha an odd look at the latter bit of information. “And

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since when are you such a fan of Russia anyway?”

Sasha waved off the question. “As the child said, my organisation has a website. You can find my official biography on there, including my proud Slavic ancestry.”

Hoyden stared at him for a few seconds before she replied. “Precisely what proud Slavic ancestry would that be? The Cale pack is just about as English as Tower Bridge. You grew up on a council estate in *Sheffield*, Sasha – Sol and I have literally met your entire family! Not surprising, given that they came to both of your supposed funerals so far.”

Hemlock frowned. “Wait, so you mean to say that he’s been faking that Russian accent this entire time?”

Sasha pouted, seemingly offended. “Technically *yes*, but I’m entitled to do so. My paternal grandmother married into the pack during the 1920s; she was originally from one of the Kuban packs. Anyhow, does neither one of the pair of

you understand the importance of *branding*? Having people think of me as Russian brings in more business. None of my clientele would be interested in hiring an *English* mercenary!" He smirked for a moment, before continuing with his explanation in a soft Northumbrian burr: his accent lilting, with flat sounding vowels. "Aa doot as whether mony o the limmers would e'en knaa a word o what Aa wes sayin te thayem anyhoo!"

Hoyden edged carefully into the compartment; sliding the door closed behind her with one foot. "Talk however you please, Sasha, just get down on the dratted floor. Face first, fingers interlaced behind your neck; you know how this goes."

The mercenary didn't move to obey, instead smiling almost fondly at Hoyden from where he sat. "Aye, pet, but thee winnit pull yon trigger in front o thy bairn."

Hemlock scowled as they translated at least part of the latter sentence. "Hey! I'm *not* a child!"

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Their cousin seemed conflicted. She hesitated for a moment, and then sighed. "You're right. I don't want them to see that. Hemlock, close your eyes for a bit."

Sasha growled as he raised his hands. His Russian cover persona snapped back into place. "Very well, Hoyden, but you must know that there's no way for the two of you to escape! This train is an unstoppable force, and my men shan't halt it outside of schedule without my direct command."

"That's for me to manage, and you not to mind." Hoyden waited until the lycothrope had lain down as ordered. Then she drew back her left foot and kicked him hard in the right side of his head, rendering him dazed. Hemlock thought that the strike looked terribly dangerous. "Do me a favour and play dead for a while, Sasha! Grab your phone and follow me, Hemlock. We need to get to the caboose."

Hemlock did as they were told, following Hoyden out into the corridor. "What about the other mercenaries?"

“Any between here and our way off the train are already unconscious. I saw to that whilst I was searching for you.” Hoyden opened the door into the next carriage. “Just between us, this rifle of mine only fires tranquiliser darts, not bullets. I had it custom made for me during my career with MI99. I’ve always felt that we shouldn’t go around murdering those who inconvenience us, even if they *are* career criminals. Besides which, it’s quieter than shooting, and I didn’t want to bring the rest of them running. Sol would have opted for stabbing if he’d been here, since that’s how he almost always does things. Personally, I don’t like getting close enough to risk a grapple, especially with this dratted leg of mine the way it is nowadays. Throwing knives aren’t much use in this kind of environment; the vibrations caused by the train’s momentum affect one’s aim.”

Hemlock tried to picture the different forms of combat described, but swiftly decided that they could live without the imagery involved. “Why didn’t you dart Sasha too, though?”

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“Mostly because I ran out of ammunition just before I found you. I wasn’t anticipating that I’d be up against lycothropes, you see. The darts that I was using aren’t designed for that strong of a metabolism. I ended up needing three per target.” Hoyden sighed. “Knowing Sasha, he would just have plucked it out of the air and used it to pick his teeth anyhow. He’s always been a terrible show-off. Worst case scenario, he might even have flung it back at me.”

Hemlock followed her through the final enclosed gangway and into the caboose. “So what’s the plan now?”

Hoyden crouched and began the process of disconnecting the caboose from the rest of the train. “Well, for a start, I need to disable this car before we leave, so that Sasha’s lot can’t use the train to chase us down when they wake up. Unfortunately, I suspect that even at triple dosage, those darts shan’t keep them down for long.”

The caboose was where the mercenaries stored all of their bulkier

items, such as scuba gear, and welding equipment. There was a large safe built into one corner, presumably used for valuables. A trio of quad bikes stood next to it, with a remote control drone hanging above them. Hemlock spotted a familiar blue van too, and wondered how in the world it had been loaded onto the train. Then they noticed that the floor underneath it was actually a hydraulic platform of some kind. “Um, Hoyden, what should we do about the van, and those quad bikes over there?”

Hoyden handed them a knife as the caboose finally ground to a halt. It had taken a full three minutes due to how fast the train was moving. “That’s a good point – go and slash through all of the tyres. We don’t want Sasha’s lot having an easy time of catching up to us. Be careful with the knife, by the way, it’s very sharp.”

Hemlock frowned. “Can’t we use one or other of them to escape?”

Their cousin shook her head. “They’re likely rigged against theft with trackers and such, or perhaps even a

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remotely detonated self-destruct. Anyhow, we don't need to. I brought my old scooter; it's magnetically locked to the rear of this car. A technomance friend of mine upgraded it years ago to manage extra high speeds. That's mostly how I caught up to the train in the first place."

"Oh, okay then." The teenager set to work sabotaging the vehicles. "How did you know where to find me? Sasha seemed to think that using a hostage's phone worked just as well as a burner, or something."

"I've been checking the Find My Tech app hourly ever since you disappeared. Sol was as well; at least until Mandragora suggested that you might have tried to go to your grandparents. He's off scouring rural Tuscany in search of them at the moment, and the last that I heard from him, there wasn't much in the way of internet access." Hoyden sighed tiredly before continuing. "Anyhow, we'd initially tracked your phone as far as London, but then it disappeared from

the app. It finally popped up again this morning, but it kept changing, so I realised that you must have been in transit somehow. I got a map and marked down the various coordinates until I had enough information to determine speed of travel, by which point the route lined up perfectly with this railway line. From there, it was relatively easy to predict where I could best hope to intercept.”

Hemlock blinked. “That was lucky! I mean the app suddenly starting working again, obviously the rest of it was genius. Um, incidentally, where are we now anyhow?”

“Don’t you know?” Hoyden seemed surprised by the question. She peered worriedly at Hemlock as they rejoined her after slashing the final set of tyres. “There are signs all along railway lines stating locations. Surely you thought to look out of a window?”

The young half-fey cringed inwardly: remembering how much time they had spent over the past four days doing exactly that, without ever thinking of

trying to figure out the train's route. "Ah, well, yes, of course I *looked*, but I um...uh...I must have just missed spotting them, or something."

Hoyden didn't look convinced, but she let the subject drop. "We're in France now, as it happens, not all that far from the easternmost outskirts of Calais. There should be just enough petrol left in my scooter to get us back to the entrance of this side of the Channel Tunnel. As for the Find My Tech app suddenly flagging your phone's location just before the ransom demand arrived in the post, with your phone number as the only contact option, I'm inclined to think of that as being suspiciously *convenient* as opposed to *lucky*. If Carlisle hasn't had something to do with it, then I'll...I'll kiss Sasha!"

Hemlock recalled the still ongoing lack of response from MI99 to their phone's distress signal. Doubt began to bubble up. What if there never was any scavenger hunt at all and Carlisle had *deliberately* let Sasha kidnap them?

What if it had all been part of their training, and now they had mucked everything up by needing rescued instead of escaping? “So...um...so do you think he hacked into the app after I was kidnapped to try and help you find me or something then?”

Their cousin stared at them for a long moment before speaking. She looked tense, and her tone was ever so slightly too calm. “Something along those lines, yes.”

Hemlock felt their heart sink at this confirmation of what they feared. “The kidnapping was really all just a test, wasn’t it? Carlisle needed to see whether I was ready for the field yet or not. I suppose I’ve failed it, since I didn’t get away from Sasha by myself!”

Hoyden growled. “I was right then: Carlisle *was* behind you disappearing in the first place! Where did he keep you? What sort of nonsense was he filling your head with up until when you were snatched?”

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“He didn’t fill my head with anything!” Hemlock was offended on their mentor’s behalf. “We stayed at his flat. He was training me up to work as a spy for MI99, outside of the standard hiring parameters. I volunteered so as to get revenge for the fire!”

Hoyden laughed bitterly. “Training you up to be a spy of your own free will? Oh, I’m sure that’s what you *think* happened, but trust me, Carlisle is an expert at manipulation. He definitely played you. The only question now is *why*, although I can hazard a guess there.”

Hemlock huffed indignantly as their cousin opened the rear door of the caboose. “What makes you so sure about...?”

Their question trailed off unfinished as they followed Hoyden out of the train, feeling fresh air on their face for the first time in days. Thankfully, the rain had finally stopped. However, it wasn’t their freedom, or the improvement in the weather which gave Hemlock pause. Standing less than fifty feet

away, by the side of the railway tracks, was Carlisle. He was smiling, and standing next to him, looking a good deal less cheerful about the situation, was none other than Sasha.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### AN UNHAPPY REUNION

Hemlock saw almost immediately that the rest of the train was far closer than ought to have been the case. It must have reversed backwards along the tracks in the time between the caboose stopping and Hoyden opening the rear door. Otherwise, it would have been almost thirty miles away by now. Instead, the closest end of the other five cars was only two hundred feet away. The young half-fey suddenly wondered: what would happen if another train came along? Could Sasha's mercenaries get their train started in time to prevent a collision? *Even presuming that they can, there's still the*

*caboose. Maybe Hoyden shouldn't have sabotaged it after all.*

They didn't have time to dwell on those concerns. Hoyden, having led the way down onto the rain soaked gravel beside the railway line, was now aiming her rifle straight at Carlisle and Sasha. Her voice was icy when she spoke. "Go on then: give me an excuse to squeeze this trigger. See what happens, I *dare* you."

Neither of the men seemed aware that the rifle wasn't loaded, or that it only fired tranquiliser darts anyhow. Sasha stepped to his left, pointedly moving away from Carlisle, nodding to Hoyden as he went. "It was his plan, not mine, I swear! I only went along with it because I owed him a debt. On which note, we're even now, Carlisle."

Hemlock frowned in confusion at his words. "I don't understand. You told me that *he* owed *you*, not the other way around!"

The mercenary leader shrugged. "I lied to your face, little one. You'll find

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that people like me do that. People like Carlisle too. He's been on the train with us the whole way since Prague, monitoring everything. You just never saw him. Now that you know the truth, I foresee this becoming an unhappy reunion."

Carlisle scowled. "Well, I can't see how it can be anything else if you keep on stirring up bad feeling, Sasha!"

Hemlock stared worriedly at their mentor. "I failed the test, didn't I? You wanted me to escape on my own, not need rescuing like this! I'm sorry that it took me until it was too late to figure out what was really going on. Please, if you'll just give me another chance, then I'm sure I can do better, and...!"

The Section Chief gestured for them to be quiet. He sighed. "Look kid, I'm sure there are at least a hundred different things whirling around in your head right now, but you need to understand one simple fact: this was never really about recruiting *you*. I needed to prove to Hoyden that she still has what it takes to work for MI99. You

were simply the only person that I could be completely sure that she'd come out of retirement for."

Hemlock shook their head, feeling as if reality had turned itself upside down. "Oh, right, so I was just a pawn this whole time, huh? Then why even bother with the deception on the train? Why did you make me go through all of that? Why let Sasha have me almost literally *tortured*?"

Carlisle started to reply, but Sasha interrupted him almost gleefully. "Oh, but he didn't just *let* me do that, Hemlock. No, I was following his instructions the entire time. You see, he told me that it was all an advanced RTI training exercise, and that I should expect you to eventually escape, but not make it easy for you. Of course he never mentioned anything whatsoever about Hoyden, or your familial connection to her."

Hemlock stepped backwards, away from Sasha, but more importantly away from Carlisle. They felt their voice wobble as they spoke, but they couldn't

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think how to stop it. "Um...Hoyden...? Is it okay if we...I mean can we, uh...I'd quite like to just go home now, please."

Their cousin nodded. "That's fine by me, Hemlock. Come on; there's a spare helmet in the box behind the seat of my scooter."

Carlisle looked supremely irritated. "Don't be so petty, Hoyden! There's a perfectly nice luxury train right over there that can take us all safely back to London. I'm sure that Sasha shan't begrudge us a lift."

The mercenary leader snorted. "I've seen the CCTV, and I think that you will find that my train is going *nowhere* at all until we have finished repairing the damage that dear Hoyden has done to the caboose! So yes, I very much *do* begrudge the lot of you transportation. Make your own ways home!"

Carlisle blinked in obvious consternation. "But I already had MI99 collect my car and luggage from Prague! I'd anticipated travelling back to London with you."

Sasha waved him off dismissively. "That isn't any of my concern. Perhaps Hoyden will help you, if you ask her nicely for once, as opposed to playing the puppeteer."

Hoyden slung her rifle over her right shoulder as she led Hemlock over to where her scooter remained magnetically locked to the rear of the caboose. The scooter was the same shade of yellow as the train. It had a narrow, bright green seat just long enough for two people. "I'd sooner salt my own doorsteps and window ledges whilst standing outside the house! As for luring me out of retirement, forget it, Carlisle. I'm *done* with MI99."

The Section Chief shook his head. "Well, I really had hoped that it wouldn't come to this, Hoyden, but you've left me no other choice. You took early retirement on the grounds of being incapable of continuing in the field. The CCTV footage that Sasha mentioned shows you in action today, boarding the train, and rescuing Hemlock. I have every second of it stored to a hard drive

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on the train. If you won't come back willingly, then I'll pass copies on to whoever needs to see it in order to cancel your pension. Good luck with managing to raise a kid on no money."

Hemlock gasped. "You can't do that – she literally fell off a moving train; you told me that yourself! She has PTSD from it, and everything!"

Carlisle scoffed. "Well, yes, but she's managed to get past all of that now, hasn't she? Otherwise, she couldn't have rescued you. All it took was the right sort of motivation, and a chance for her to realise that she *isn't* broken. That's precisely where Operation Youngblood came in. Besides, I'm willing to be reasonable. If she comes back to work right now, then I'll triple her old rate of pay."

In the background, Sasha pointedly cleared his throat. "I'm afraid that there's a significant flaw in your hilariously named scheme, Carlisle. I may not be a nice person, but I still draw a line at enabling you to blackmail one of the fey into returning

to work for you against her will, *especially* this one. Don't worry, Hoyden. I'll see to it personally that all of the train's CCTV footage featuring you or Hemlock is permanently erased."

That statement earned him a glare from Carlisle. "You *really* need to stop altering our agreement, Sasha!"

Sasha smirked. "If you want loyalty, then perhaps you should try *paying* the next mercenary that you employ, instead of trading on old debts!"

Hoyden was by now standing astride her scooter. "Hemlock, put that helmet on, and then climb on behind me. You'll need to hold on tight, by the way. We're going to take a shortcut home through the Underlanden." She raised her voice then. "Grimmick Gallop, grant me guidance hence, for I seek the gateways of old!"

A soft crackling sound began building slowly in the air. Sasha looked suddenly horrified, and bolted back past the caboose towards the rest of his train, shouting urgently to his men

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as he went. "Everybody, drop whatever it is that you're doing and get aboard, now! Hans, start the engine, we're leaving immediately!"

Hans, who was the train's brown-haired and bespectacled German engineer, looked puzzled, but loped off towards the locomotive. Joe however, tugged at Sasha's right arm as soon as the latter came within reach. "Boss, what about the caboose?"

The mercenary leader snarled as he hurled the Australian lycothrope bodily in through the nearest open door. "Forget the caboose! We crossed a fey, and as a result it's about to be lost to the Underlanden! What's in it can be replaced, people can't!"

Hemlock stared at the mercenaries and their bizarre behaviour, and then glanced back towards where Carlisle had been standing only moments before. To their surprise, the Section Chief was also fleeing the area. He had an impressive turn of speed. The young half-fey blinked as they put on the helmet and climbed on behind their

guardian. “I don't get it, Hoyden. What's so scary about us using the Underlanden for a shortcut? I mean, it's just a ley network. I've never seen it for myself, but Mum used it to go shopping and stuff.”

Hoyden clicked her tongue as if choking back her disbelief. “The Underlanden is a mere ley network? Wait, is that all that Belladonna ever bothered teaching you about it? Oh, Hemlock, my darling child, it's so very much *more* than that!”

She started the motor, and detached the magnetic lock. The scooter dropped free from the caboose, and spun smoothly around so that it was now facing away from the sabotaged car. Hemlock blinked in surprise as they realised that it was hovering just clear of the tracks. “Uh, Hoyden, is it me, or is this scooter sort of flying?”

“Well, not *exactly* flying in accordance with the standard laws of physics, but close enough, yes.” Hoyden sounded proud. “It's another one of Albert's upgrades. That's the

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name that the technomance I mentioned to you earlier goes by – Albert Astley.”

Hemlock was about to ask if Albert worked for MI99 too, but then the crackling sound finally reached what appeared to be its crescendo. The air, and for that matter reality itself, split apart in front of the scooter, peeling aside to reveal a strange, glittering tunnel. It was around ten feet high and twice as wide, and almost too bright to look at. From somewhere just out of sight within it echoed a high, piping melody, that Hemlock instinctively recognised as not made by birds. *Wow, Mum never mentioned any of this! She always made using the Underlanden sound utterly boring.*

A small, green-skinned and cleanly shaven male fey, at the very most two feet tall, emerged from the entrance to the Underlanden then. He was dressed in a dark green three-piece suit and matching bowler hat, and carrying a neatly rolled umbrella in his right hand. There were oxeye daisies and

dandelions growing out of his pockets and all around the brim of his hat, which he doffed politely to Hoyden and Hemlock. “Good morrow to you and your companion, Hoyden! Might I have their name?”

Hoyden sighed. “No, you may most certainly *not*, Grimmick! They go by Hemlock Oleander Baines, and I am their guardian. Hemlock, this one goes by Grimmick Gallop. He helps with navigating the Underlanden.”

Hemlock let go of Hoyden long enough to wave to the smaller fey. “Um, pleased to make your acquaintance, Grimmick. I have a sort of spare name that I’m not using that you can have, if you’d like? There’s a passport for it as well.”

Grimmick clapped his hands together in delight at their offer. “What a generous offer to make, young one! May fair luck flow to you.”

The teenager unzipped their jacket and pulled out the passport that Carlisle had given them in Prague. They

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handed it to Grimmick. "Here you go – the name is Alex Smith, and their father goes by Hector Smith."

Hoyden spluttered for a moment and then laughed. "Hector Smith is one of Carlisle's favourite cover identities! Oh, Grimmick, you must be sure and let me know how that goes!"

The cheerful little man beamed. "It shall be so, dear Hoyden, that I promise you. Ah, but young Hemlock – surely I owe you a boon in exchange? Tell me now; what would you have as the balancing?"

Hemlock thought carefully for a while. "Well, actually, I'd quite like to have that caboose moved safely to the side of the railway tracks, and then left there for its owner to collect it. I don't think it's right for him to lose it to the Underlanden, since that will only add credit to all the nasty things people already accuse us fey of doing."

If Grimmick was puzzled, he certainly didn't show it. Instead, he twirled his umbrella in a complicated

pattern, and then stamped his left foot three times. "Be it so!"

A massive kudzu vine sprouted up from beneath the gravel, and wrapped tightly around the abandoned caboose. With a soft rustling of leaves, it lifted the car and placed it neatly beside the tracks. Task complete, the giant plant shrank back down into the earth. The only hint of fey intervention was a faint trace of glitter on the sides of the caboose.

Hoyden sighed resignedly. "That was much kinder to Sasha than you needed to be, Hemlock. I hope you understand that."

The young half-fey shrugged. "I don't like holding grudges if I can avoid it. Besides, it was all Carlisle's fault, really. Sasha was just following orders. And he *did* promise to get rid of the CCTV footage, so we owed him one there."

Grimmick nodded sagely. "It's always best to pay one's dues, and sooner than later! So – which route are you needing opened?"

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Hoyden tossed him a small white silk pouch, tied shut with a braided red and gold cord. The contents clinked. "We're headed home, so any of the Aelfhang gates will do."

Having tucked the pouch into one of his suit's many pockets, Grimmick turned and gestured once again with his umbrella. "Two travelling to Aelfhang by wheeled transport, open up and find me a path for them!"

The glittering tunnel shimmered briefly, and then twin lines of primroses blossomed into life, marking out a pathway into the Underlanden only just wide enough for the wheels of the scooter. Hemlock craned their neck to see past Hoyden, peering in vain at where the primroses disappeared into the otherworldly glow. *I guess you just can't see into it from the outside, or something.*

Grimmick stepped aside, bowing courteously to Hoyden and Hemlock. "Keep to the path and a safe journey home to you both, my friends!"

“See you again, Grimmick.” Hoyden released the brake, and the scooter zipped forwards along the newly sprouted path. “For reference, Hemlock, if you’re ever in a tight spot and need to get home, just call out for Grimmick the exact same way that I did, and he’ll come to you.”

Hemlock glanced at the blurred shapes beyond the edges of the scooter’s path. “Does that work no matter where you are? Aren’t there any limits on it?”

“Well, you need to be outside, for one thing, and it’s generally agreed to be poor form to do it anywhere that’s especially urban.” Hoyden shifted her weight slightly as she steered left. “That last part doesn’t matter in a genuine emergency, though. Oh, and you’ll have to pay him too, obviously, so be sure to always carry something with you that you’re happy to trade as your fare.”

“Does that mean that it doesn’t need to be money in the traditional human sense of it?” Hemlock supposed it best to ask about such details now, rather

than risk mucking things up somehow in the future.

“Yes, that’s right.” Hoyden made another turn, this time to the right. “You’re a fast learner, aren’t you? Still, Belladonna ought to have taught you all of this stuff years ago! I can’t understand why she didn’t. It’s not as if she was exiled from the entirety of fey society.”

Hemlock didn’t understand it either, but knew that it was all too likely their own fault somehow. “Um...let’s just say that I’ve never been an easy sort of kid to raise, and just leave it at that, okay?”

“Oh, child, what did they do to you?” Hoyden sounded saddened now. “I...you...ugh, look, there’s obviously still a lot that we need to talk about, Hemlock, and we *will*, eventually, I promise you that. In the meantime, try not to pick up the blame for things that aren’t your doing. It’s a poor habit to fall into, and it helps nobody.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### AN UNWISE DECISION

Reclaiming an allegedly abandoned train car was a truly eye watering expensive process, Sasha reflected, as he watched the bank transaction go through on his tablet. First, there had been the fine for having left the caboose parked up illegally beside the tracks, never mind that the latter act hadn't been Sasha's decision! Then there were all of the fees to preclude the French authorities from simply hauling the sabotaged car away to the nearest reclamation plant as scrap. Between those, and the cost of moving it back onto the tracks for reattachment to the rest of the train, he knew that it

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would be quite some time until his organisation recouped the money. If there hadn't been so much of value stored in the caboose, the mercenaries might very well have denied all knowledge of it. Thankfully, the repairs needed had all proven simple enough, and so outside help hadn't been required. That was one additional cost avoided. *Aa reckon Hoyden took pity on us there, like.*

She did that sometimes, or at least, she'd used to; back in the day. Doubtless Carlisle had hoped to leverage that connection over her too somehow. The Section Chief was more than coldblooded enough to resort to such petty cruelties in pursuit of his desired outcome. Sasha had no illusions in that regard. *Na, but then it's nut he as hes us tripping' up ower owld ryples, is it?*

The blond mercenary leader sighed and shook his head at the memories. There was no sense in dwelling on what had been, and less yet in yearning after what hadn't. No, he'd had his

chance to win Hoyden's heart years ago, and he'd blown it: end of story, no seekers of happy ever afters need apply. *Thon's nobbut summat for bairns te believe in, anyhoo.*

On which subject, what in the world should he do about Hemlock? Sasha frowned as he mulled over the options. He could hardly just *ignore* what he now knew, but nor did acting on the information feel practical. For a start, he didn't want to risk drawing any further attention to the teenager. The sorts of enemies that Sasha had would all too readily target Hemlock. Carlisle wasn't much nicer, even if he was *technically* one of the good guys. Besides which, Hoyden clearly hadn't wanted anyone to know, including Sasha himself. She would have announced the truth otherwise, at some point in between all of his and her feigned demises. *Thon canny spelk Hemlock i wor bairn, fernietickels and aal!*

Sasha knew that Hoyden was fully aware of his inherent ability as a lycothrope to identify people through

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scent. That meant that she knew that he knew the truth about Hemlock's parentage. Since Hoyden hadn't said anything about it on the train, Sasha had guessed that she didn't want to discuss it, or at least not then. Hemlock had seemed unaware that he was their father, or even that their supposed cousin was in fact their mother, so perhaps that had been the reason for Hoyden's silence. It had hardly been the right time for such revelations, what with Carlisle lurking about in the background. *Thon slee gadgie's far ower clivvor fo hes aan gud.*



To the outside world, Joella Heath was a raging success story. Her books about an orphaned human girl who solved mysteries and defeated terrifying monsters were bestsellers. The income from them, along with that from the films and other such associated merchandising, had long since made the author a billionaire;

despite all of her carefully planned acts of philanthropy. She owned three luxurious homes in the United Kingdom, and a fourth in France, which was where she was currently staying. In short, Joella had every material thing that she had ever dreamed of in the days before her fame began, and a good few more besides. Nonetheless, she wasn't happy, and it was all Hemlock Oleander Baines' fault. *Why couldn't that horrid little brat have had the good grace to die along with his or her wretched parents?*

Joella still didn't know whether Hemlock was a boy or a girl. The mercenaries she had hired had failed to come up with confirmation either way. She was extremely disappointed with them about that. She was even less pleased with them for failing to make sure that the opinionated teenager in question was home ahead of setting the fire. Thanks to the latter bit of ineptitude, Hemlock remained regrettably alive and therefore all too able to post unacceptably negative opinions about the *Henrietta Thrower*

series on social media. Honestly, what was the point of paying people to do a job, if they weren't going to do it properly? *You don't ever see me handing over an unfinished manuscript as a final draft, now do you?*

Rousing herself from her musings, Joella stood up from the chaise longue. It was Wednesday 24th April 2019. The time was almost ten o'clock, and she needed to make a start on today's word count. She was currently writing what was to be the tenth *Henrietta Thrower* novel. The series had struck a chord with human supremacists the world over, but especially those in the UK. Joella supposed that it might have something to do with her use of elsekin as villains. *Well, it was hardly as if I could use aliens or such, now was it? After all, it wouldn't do for me to – ahem – accidentally borrow any ideas from someone else's books.*

She privately felt that her solution had been nothing short of creative genius. Elsekin, with their strange powers, and even stranger cultural

traditions, were always going to make more interesting foes than normal humans did. The fact that certain elements within society regarded the books as a rallying point for their cause was wholly coincidental. Joella had simply recognised the potential marketing opportunity sparked by the controversy, and cultivated it accordingly. *I don't care what anyone thinks the books symbolise, just as long as the royalties keep flowing in! If the human supremacists want to regard me as their official idol, so be it.*

There were two flights of sumptuously carpeted stairs between the downstairs of the chateau and the door to her writing room. It allowed her plenty of time to reflect on just how badly the four so-called professionals responsible for burning down the Baines' house had failed in their task. *Honestly, how hard could it be to eliminate one pathetic little teenager? Perhaps I ought to have hired human supremacists instead of mercenaries. At least they would have been more likely to make sure that their target was*

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*actually inside the house before striking the first match! Why, I might not even have needed to pay them. They'd likely have done it out of their sheer so-called love for humanity.*

Just then, her mobile phone buzzed inside the pocket of her flowing silk housecoat. Joella paused outside the door of her writing room to answer the phone call. She sighed as she glanced at the screen. Only one person was even remotely likely to be contacting her from a withheld number. "Yes, what is it now, Mr Rafferty?"

The mercenary spluttered angrily at her casual use of his name. "I told you *not* to use names! What if it hadn't been me at this end?"

Joella rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't be ridiculous, Malcolm! If that were the case, then whoever it was would have been calling me from your phone, and as such would likely *already* know enough about us to be a threat, wouldn't they?"

He sighed. "I suppose I have to grant you that one. Anyhow, the boys and I were just wondering when the rest of our payment for the Bedford Park job will come through."

Joella snorted. "You mean to say that you expect me to give you yet *more* money?"

Rafferty chuckled nastily. "Well now, that's what we agreed to, Miss Heath: half up front, half afterwards. The job was in February, and now here we are in the last week of April, with still no sign of the final payment. Surely you haven't forgotten?"

She could hardly believe the nerve of the man! "Our exact agreement was that you would get the rest of the money only once the job was done, Mr Rafferty. There's still an ugly little chunk of work wandering around very much *unfinished*, isn't there?"

Rafferty sounded considerably less sure of himself when he replied. "Ah, so you already know about that then, eh?"

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Feeling her temper begin to get the better of her, Joella took a deep breath before she spoke this time. "Of course I do! The media has been almost as uninformative as you have about what happened, Mr Rafferty, but there was a small obituary notice in one of the papers. I took the liberty of attending the funeral incognito, and it was *definitely* short by one coffin. Would you care to try and imagine how I felt when I saw which member of the family had survived?"

Rafferty grunted. "I think I can guess! Look, I'm not being funny now, but you'd maybe be better off just leaving well alone, if you take my meaning. I've heard a few whispers since we talked last that add up to the whole thing having been an unwise decision. That family had connections to people that you don't mess about with."

Joella scoffed. "It sounds to me as if you've lost your nerve, Mr Rafferty! If you and your friends want the rest of your payment, then you'll do what I hired you to do in the first place.

Actually, no – scratch that. Bring Hemlock Oleander Baines to me alive. I want to watch you finish the job; that way I shall know for sure that it's done.”

Rafferty sounded furious. “You’d do well to remember who you’re dealing with here!”

Joella ignored the clearly implied threat behind his words. She knew that he wouldn’t really do more than bluster about it anyhow; not whilst he still wanted the rest of the money from her. He wasn’t quite *that* stupid. “And *you* need to ask yourself whether or not there are many people out there who will want to risk hiring a mercenary team that doesn’t reliably complete their contracts! I understand that a good reputation is rather important in your line of work.”

Rafferty muttered unintelligibly for a moment to someone at his end of the phone call, and then answered her tersely. “Fine – I’ll bring the stupid brat to you! Just you make sure that you have our money ready.”

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That was more like it! Joella smiled almost beatifically as she spoke. "It's good to hear that you're still on board, Mr Rafferty. If it helps at all, a little bird tells me that the remaining part of the job is located somewhere near Hyssop Tor now. Do let me know if you need any help with finding the exact address. Goodbye now, and have a lovely day."

She ended the call and slid her mobile phone back into her pocket triumphantly. Discovering Hemlock's new location after all of this time had been a stroke of luck. A girl named Deborah Burns had emailed to ask if Joella would ever consider visiting her school. Like so many others, the teenager clearly believed that Joella cared about her obsessive readers and their pathetic little lives. She had complained in her message about how she had to put up with a new elsekin student at her school: none other than Hemlock Oleander Baines. *It's just a pity that I didn't get around to reading the email any sooner. I suppose that I should see about sending the tiresome girl a reply to encourage her to keep on*

Eibhlín Valdys

*at the school about inviting me to give a talk there. In person signings are always a good way to drum up more book sales.*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### AN UNEVENTFUL LIFE

Hemlock huffed out a sigh as they took a seat in the oppressively quiet waiting room of the Hyssop Tor Juvenile Mental Health Clinic. It was now Tuesday 30th April 2019, exactly two weeks since their return home with Hoyden. In all honesty, Hemlock was starting to feel a bit bored. Summer term had begun the previous week, but Hoyden had decided not to send them back for it. Instead, she was homeschooling them until September. At that point, Hemlock would go to board at Picketon House. *Ugh, I'm still not keen on that idea.*

The young half-fey wasn't about to argue the subject with their cousin, not after learning the truth about everything that had happened with Carlisle and his schemes. Comparing texting and social media messaging histories with Topaz had been a revelation. The Section Chief had almost destroyed their friendship, just because he wanted to use Hemlock as bait! *Hoyden was right about him all along. Maybe she's right about Picketon House too.*

The needle thin hands of the oddly silent clock on the opposite wall confirmed that it was twelve noon. There were still ten minutes to go until the start of what would be their first counselling session. So far, the only other person present was the receptionist: a cheerful, sharp featured white human in his twenties, with a nasally voice, and spiky brown hair, who went by Dave. Hemlock wasn't sure whether being the only patient there was a relief or even more of an embarrassment. *I suppose at least I don't have to worry about random people asking me why I'm here.*



Hemlock scowled out through the window of the Tuesday afternoon Hyssop Tor to Stanhope bus at the scenery, glad to be almost home. They were feeling frustrated by how their first session had gone. They hadn't been able to talk about Carlisle or MI99, of course, and they hadn't wanted to discuss their late parents. In the end, their counsellor, a middle-aged white human woman with neatly bobbed brown hair who went by Gillian, had focused on how Hemlock being non-binary might have affected their relationships with other people, such as the problem with Deborah and her friends. *Yeah, right, as if that lot weren't already bullies! Even if I weren't non-binary, they'd still have picked on me for being part fey. Just look at how they treat the other elsekin students. Ugh, Topaz and Hoyden might think counselling will help, but they're not me! I hate talking about my feelings, especially to a stranger. Not that I'm*

*even allowed to mention half the stuff I've gone through to begin with.*

They knew Hoyden had gotten counselling through MI99 after her accident, so she wouldn't have had to worry about giving away top secret information. Topaz hadn't actually ever been to a counsellor herself. She had done a lot of research online though, once Hemlock had admitted to her about Hoyden having booked them in. *I suppose I'll have to keep going to my sessions or else they'll both nag me to death about taking better care of myself! I just hope I'm never expected to talk about anything to do with Mum and Dad. That's...that's too personal. I don't even feel ready to tell Sol or Hoyden about any of it yet, never mind the one who goes by Gillian.*

A crowd stood on the village green at the edge of Aelfhang as the bus rattled past. Hemlock flinched inwardly when they glimpsed the twin stacks of kindling being prepared. It was Beltane tomorrow: the first day in May. Hoyden had said that she wasn't going to

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bother with any of the bonfire rites this year. Hemlock was relieved about that. They didn't think that they would ever look at a fire in the same way again; not after how their parents had died. *I'm twitchy enough already about helping Hoyden look after the salamanders without hanging out around a pair of literal bonfires too!*

Aelfhang was only a few minutes' drive from Hoyden's cottage. Seeing their destination come into view, Hemlock clambered to their feet and pressed the button on the nearest handrail that signalled for the driver to stop. As usual, the bus pulled up next to the verge less than thirty feet away from the end of their cousin's driveway. Saying goodbye to the driver quietly, the young half-fey stepped down onto the parched stretch of grass, making sure to stand well clear of the bus as it moved off again. They wrinkled their nose at the diesel fumes left in its wake. For some reason, the smell was always more noticeable on hot, dry days like today. *I hope everyone remembers to*

*be extra careful around the celebration fires tonight.*

They were halfway up the driveway when they spotted Marmalade huddled in next to the hedge. Hemlock frowned and crouched down in front of the chicken, keeping a wary eye out for blessebobbles as they did so. “What are you doing all the way out here, Marmalade? I’ve never seen you go more than a few feet away from the front door before, and even then it was only because you were too busy following Hoyden around to realise that you’d left the cottage!”

The fluffy orange bird clucked, which unfortunately explained nothing whatsoever. Then she sprang up, settling on Hemlock’s right shoulder in a brief flurry of wings and clawed feet. The teenager straightened up carefully. “I suppose this means that you want me to carry you back, huh?”

It was a long enough walk from Marmalade’s hiding spot to the front door of the cottage that Hemlock had time to pull out their phone and try to

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reach Hoyden. They found it odd that their cousin wasn't already outside looking for her pet. Odder yet was the lack of anyone answering the landline. Hemlock frowned as they listened to it ringing. Then it dawned on them that they could hear the sound not only through their phone's speaker, but also via the open front door of the cottage. *Why on Earth has Hoyden left the front door lying open like that? I know it's warm today, but she always says to be careful of anything getting indoors that could hurt Marmalade; foxes, and boot gremlins, and such.*

A scary twisting sort of feeling began in the pit of their stomach. Something wasn't right with this situation. Ending the still unanswered call, Hemlock closed their left hand around their phone, with the ball of their thumb resting lightly on the button that would release the knockout gas. If it turned out that there were burglars or similar lurking in the cottage, the young half-fey meant to give them a nasty surprise. *I just hope that Hoyden shan't be cross*

*with me for not telling her about the upgrades to my phone.*

There was no sign of their cousin as Hemlock entered the front hall. The cottage had that too empty sort of feel to it: the atmosphere eerily still and tense, almost buzzing with ineffable danger. As such, the burly human man who suddenly emerged from the kitchen didn't surprise Hemlock much at all. They still flinched at the sight of the gun in his hand, and couched their words accordingly. "Don't shoot me, please! Take whatever you want!"

The intruder sneered. "I'm to take you with me alive, luckily for you! Don't be getting any big clever ideas though. Not if you ever want to see that other pointy eared freak again."

Hemlock was very careful not to move. "You're talking about Hoyden, aren't you? Where is she? What have you done with her?"

"She's fine – for now, anyhow. She went on ahead with my boss. They're travelling separately to us so as to

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make sure that you behave.” The man, who sounded Irish, gestured with his gun. “Drop that phone there now. You won’t need it where we’re going.”

“Okay.” Hemlock squeezed briefly with their thumb and tossed the phone onto the floor in front of their would-be abductor’s feet. A cloud of bright blue gas engulfed the man almost immediately. There was a meaty sounding thud from amidst the fumes as he collapsed. “Wow – that stuff works *really* fast!”

Recalling what Sasha had taught them about not presuming that an incapacitated enemy was no longer a threat, Hemlock hurried out to the back garden and took down the washing line. Marmalade, still perched on their shoulder, puffed up her plumage and warbled grumpily at the other chickens the entire time. Re-entering the cottage, Hemlock used the kitchen scissors to cut lengths off the washing line, and hogtied the unconscious gunman. “So much for Hoyden and me going back to leading an uneventful life, but at least

that should hold him if he wakes up! I think I'd best ring Sol for help now, Marmalade."

Sol didn't answer, not even after three missed calls and a string of texts. He was still in Tuscany; busy searching for Granny Jayne and Granddad Oswald, Hemlock realised. *He hasn't even heard that Hoyden found me yet! Ugh, for all I know, it could be weeks until he's reachable by phone again!*

The burly intruder was still out cold. Unfortunately, his still unidentified boss most likely *wasn't*, and that was who had taken Hoyden. Hemlock didn't want to think about what might be happening to their cousin right now. They needed help with this horrid mess, and quickly too. *I daren't contact the police, though – not after knocking out a human and tying him up like this! He'd be sure to accuse me of attacking him for no reason at all once he was able to talk again, and we all know who the police are more likely to believe in a situation like that.*

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They paced about the front hall, considering their options for help. Topaz and her parents would believe them, but were unlikely to be able to do much. Nor could they get to the cottage any time soon. Aunt Mandragora could use the Underlanden to arrive in moments, but would probably hand things over to MI99, which would then lead to Carlisle knowing. Hemlock wasn't sure if they trusted the Section Chief not to somehow twist whatever was already going on into something even worse. *He'd do anything to force Hoyden into working for him again, and she'd owe him a favour if he rescued her. He could demand that she go back to MI99. For that matter, what if he's the one who set up this kidnapping in the first place?*

Another option occurred to them. It wasn't a very sensible sort of choice, but then again, this *was* an emergency, so perhaps risky choices could be excused. Besides which, they had run out of other people to ask. That made it a necessary risk. Hemlock's opinion was that it was perfectly acceptable to

take those sorts of chances. *Hoyden's going to be furious with me when she finds out, though.*

They tapped in the website address that they had memorised weeks earlier. It was a complicated string of letters and numbers rather than the standard sort of title, but Sasha had claimed that the sorts of people wanting to contact his organisation were usually accustomed to such things. Hemlock supposed that it also helped to avoid having too many random unsuspecting innocent bystanders accidentally stumble upon the website. *I was one of those, not so long ago.*

The website's main page appeared on the screen of their phone then. It took less than ten seconds more for Hemlock to find the contact phone number. They rang it before they could lose their nerve: stumbling over their words when an unfamiliar sounding male voice at the other end of the call demanded that they state their business. "Um...I...um...need to speak with Sasha Cale, please. It's very

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important. He's uh...he's expecting to hear from me!"

Whichever of the mercenaries that it was who had answered the phone, he clearly wasn't paid to argue with potential clients. Seconds later, Hemlock recognised Sasha's feigned Russian accent instead. "This is Sasha Cale. To whom am I speaking, and why did you claim that I am expecting to hear from you?"

Hemlock blurted out the first thing they could think of that might keep the lycothrope from hanging up on them. "You're not expecting it at all, but Hoyden's been abducted for use as a hostage against me, and I'm scared that they'll hurt her once they find out that I'm not cooperating!"

Sasha sighed. "Why come to me for help with this, little one?"

Hemlock sank down onto the stairs. They couldn't stop trembling. "I'm sorry, but I *had* to! Sol's not answering his phone. I couldn't think of anyone else, aside from Carlisle, and I don't trust him

to not make things worse. You said back on the train that Hoyden was one of your oldest and dearest friends.”

Sasha snorted. “Perhaps you have forgotten, but I also used the words *most treacherous* in that sentence!”

He didn’t sound actively resentful, so Hemlock continued with their current line of reasoning. “Yes, I know, but you didn’t seem as though you really meant that part. And anyway, you owe me a favour.”

The mercenary leader laughed drily at their words. “Oh do I now? And why would that be, hmm?”

Hemlock glanced warily around the corner of the banister at the still unconscious gunman. “I’m the one who made sure that your train car was left where you could safely get it back. According to fey customs, you owe me for that. Hoyden was just going to let the Underlanden have it.”

Sasha scoffed. “Ha! That’s simply yet another reason for me to call her

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treacherous! However, since you deigned to mention the train car, do you have any idea just how expensive reclaiming it was, or how much the repairs came in at?"

By now, Hemlock had begun to feel annoyed. They snapped back at him. "What, so would you rather not have had it back at all?"

The lycothrope growled softly. "Of course I wanted it back! There were many valuable things stored in it."

Hemlock shrugged, accidentally disturbing Marmalade, who jumped down from their shoulder and wandered off towards the kitchen, clucking as she went. "Well then, you *do* owe me, and now I'm collecting. If...if you won't help me, then I'll put up posts all over social media about how you're secretly from Sheffield, and that you lie about it to all of your clients so that they'll hire you. Except I don't think that I'll have to do that, because you don't hate Hoyden, not really. Not given how you smiled at her when she was rescuing me from you."

For some reason, Sasha opted not to acknowledge the latter part of their argument when he replied. “So, to be clear, you intend to blackmail me unless I agree to your demands? As in, me who has all of the heavily armed mercenaries and knowledge of how to get rid of annoying little pests? Do you *really* think that throwing your weight around with me is a good idea?”

The teenager gulped. “Well, no, but it’s not as if I have any other options left right now. Sorry, but I...I’m just desperate, that’s all!”

Now Sasha sounded amused again. “You must be, if you’re willing to risk such measures! Very well – I shall assist you. Are you currently at the address that you gave me for your ransom?”

Hemlock tried not to feel too optimistic yet. “Um, yeah – it’s a cottage up near Aelfhang. One of the people who took Hoyden is still here, by the way. I used the special gas thing in my phone to knock him out, and then I tied him up with the washing line. I’m not

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actually all that sure how much longer he'll be unconscious for, though."

Sasha grunted. "Put some duct tape over his mouth. That way, when he wakes up, he can't try to trick you into freeing him."

"Okay. Sasha." Hemlock sniffled. The adrenaline was wearing off. "Um...when should I expect you?"

"My train is still in France." Sasha paused and said something that Hemlock couldn't quite make out to one of his mercenaries, before continuing. "I am owed a favour from a man here in Calais who just so happens to own a prizewinning racing carpet. I'll be there in a little over two hours. Lock everything up until then, and keep well away from your prisoner in case he gets loose unexpectedly."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### AN UNPLEASANT DUTY

The gunman still hadn't woken up by the time that Sasha and his borrowed flying carpet arrived at the cottage. Hemlock was both relieved and concerned about that. It meant that they hadn't needed to worry about him trying to escape, but on the other hand, the teenager knew that the man needed to be awake to answer questions before they or Sasha could ask him where Hoyden was.

Sasha, having by now rolled the carpet up and leant it against the wall of the cottage, stalked in through the front door as if he owned the place. He took one look at the gunman, and

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immediately dismissed Hemlock to the kitchen. “Go and make us a snack or some such, little one. Close the door behind you. I have an unpleasant duty to perform, and I don’t want you witnessing it. I will let you know when it’s okay for you to come back.”

Hemlock frowned. “Um, you’re not going to *torture* him, are you?”

Sasha shrugged. “Well, I shan’t if he cooperates.”

The young half-fey shook their head disapprovingly. “We both know that Hoyden wouldn’t want us to resort to doing stuff like that! Surely there’s a better option?”

Sasha scoffed. “I suspect that you know her rather less well than you think that you do! One doesn’t become known and feared as one of the Bad Names Club’s finest operatives through repeated acts of *gentleness*, after all.”

“Sol calls MI99 that too.” Hemlock deliberately ignored the scowl that appeared on Sasha’s face when they

mentioned their other cousin. “I asked him why, but he didn’t explain. Is it because everyone who works there is like, secretly evil, or something? Only that’s basically what you’re implying right now. I suppose I could believe it where Carlisle is concerned, and you, but not Sol, not really, and *definitely* not Hoyden! I mean, she doesn’t even use bullets...um...actually, maybe just forget that I mentioned that last bit, okay? It’s supposed to be a secret; her gun only firing tranquiliser rounds.”

Sasha blinked. “Are you done rambling yet, or should I expect a further chorus?”

The gunman stirred then, which put paid to the debate. He mumbled angrily behind the duct tape. Hemlock skittered backwards warily. “Uh – so anyhow, getting back on topic, what are you going to do now that he’s awake, Sasha?”

The lycothrope sighed. “Well, since you’re so determined to hobble our chances of a successful interrogation, I suppose that I must resort to using

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mere verbal persuasion. Take off the tape so that he may answer.”

Hemlock did as instructed, and then backed away to stand behind Sasha again, not wholly sure if the washing line would hold, or if indeed, their knot tying skills were good enough. *After all, it's hardly as if I make a hobby out of randomly tying people up.*

The gunman sneered. “And what makes you think that I'll talk? What – am I supposed to be scared of you; is that it, eh?”

Sasha crouched down next to him, and answered softly, his tone of voice almost conversational. “Have you ever heard of the Bolton Strid? It's a stream; a narrow little bit of a thing to look at, barely two strides across. You'd think that one could jump it easily, and that falling into it wouldn't matter anyhow. After all, it's just a stream. And you would be *wrong*.”

Their prisoner snorted. “Who cares about some daft wee bit of water? What's it got to do with any of this, eh?”

Hemlock, who had read all about the stream in question in Year 8 as part of a project for Geography, had a nasty feeling that they knew where Sasha was going with this conversation. They swallowed nervously. "Well, for one thing, it's counted as being quite possibly the most dangerous body of water in the world, because, um...it basically swallows people."

Sasha nodded his agreement. "My young companion is right about that. Nobody who has fallen into the Strid has ever survived. The lucky ones drown *before* the water horses eat them. Those creatures are among the most truly vicious of fey – oblique carnivores, too. I understand that they start with the liver. You can most likely guess how they get to it."

The gunman had paled. "I can guess, aye."

Sasha drew back his lips in something that was much too predatory looking to qualify as a smile. "Then you can presumably also predict what will happen to you when I throw

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you into the Strid, which is *precisely* what I will do, unless you tell us where Hoyden is, who took her, and why!"

The bound man squirmed helplessly, straining against the washing line. "You wouldn't do that!"

Hemlock tried not to think about their experience on the train. "I think he might. He's not really a very nice person. And he's got a weird thing about using water."

Sasha merely shrugged. "It is at most two hours of travel from here to Bolton Abbey."

His coldly factual reply tipped the gunman from nervousness into near panic. "Okay, okay! I'll tell you everything that I know! You're looking for a man called Malcolm Rafferty – he's the one who planned the whole thing. Me and the other two lads involved were only following his orders. He's had us working for some rich English woman; apparently, she's got a fancy big house over in France where she's living."

Sasha growled impatiently. “And what exactly does this rich English woman want with Hoyden and Hemlock?”

The prisoner gulped. “It’s something to do with them being fey. I don’t really know. We didn’t ask. She told Malcolm to bring the kid to her. That’s who we were after here. Malcolm decided to use the older fey as bait. I was supposed to bring the wee one along with me in the older fey’s car, and torch this place before we left, so as to cover our tracks.”

Hemlock thought suddenly of the MI99 file on the fire back in Bedford Park. “Wait, so have you and these other three men come after me before this? Was it you who...who burned down my family’s house?”

The gunman squirmed again. “Aye, okay, so that was us too, but I swear to you, it was just a *job!* There was nothing personal to it.”

Hemlock choked back the urge to start crying. “That doesn’t make it any

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better, you round eared creep! You *killed* my parents!”

By now obviously bristling with anger, Sasha punched the gunman hard in the side of the ribs. “Drowning someone like you would be a service to the world in general, save that it is not punishment enough for your actions! Where is Hoyden now?”

The man wheezed. “Still with Malcolm and the others! They’re holed up in a campervan parked in among the trees on the north side of what used to be the steelworks over in Hyssop Tor! It’s been standing empty for over ten years now. As far as we could tell nobody ever looks near it, but Malcolm reckoned that we shouldn’t chance hiding out in the remaining building in case of urban explorers.”

Sasha scoffed as he rose to his feet. “Ah, yes, of course – the infamously deadly species that is the average urban explorer! Truly, they are a foe to be reckoned with! Hemlock, tape his pathetic mouth again.”

Hemlock complied hurriedly, and then followed the lycothrope into the living room. "So what do we do now?"

"You do nothing, little one. I, however, am going to Hyssop Tor to speak very sharply to this Malcolm Rafferty." Sasha took out his phone. "I will have someone come and stay here with you until the matter is resolved. With luck, Hoyden shall be home safe and well before your bedtime."

"Before my *bedtime*?" The teenager stared at him in disbelief. "I'm not just going to sit here and wait while you rescue Hoyden! I want to help."

Sasha shook his head sternly. "You can help best by keeping out of the way. Situations like this are no place for children."

Hemlock shrugged. "Fine then, be like that. I'll just make my own way to the steelworks. I expect that the Underlanden can get me there even faster than a racing carpet. You'll just have to hope that nothing goes wrong before you catch up to me."

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The blond mercenary glared at them. "This isn't a game, Hemlock! Hoyden would want you to be safe."

"Yeah, but Hoyden's not here, is she?" Hemlock folded their arms stubbornly. "She's the one who's in danger right now, and it's all because...because she took me in to live with her, when nobody else would. She'd be safe if it wasn't for me."

Sasha sighed. "Hemlock, you are without question an annoyingly brave child at times, but *none* of this is your fault! These men and the woman who hired them to go after your family are the ones to blame."

"You don't understand!" Hemlock scuffed their feet against the carpet. "They still only targeted Hoyden to get to *me*. I was the primary intended target; the same as with what happened back in London. If I'd just gone home after the cinema that night like Mum and Dad told me to, then maybe none of this would even be happening right now!"

“Nonsense; the people responsible are obviously all terrible, so you would simply be dead along with your parents.” Sasha finished texting and tucked his phone away again. “Anyhow, why are you so convinced that you were these men’s primary intended target the entire time and not simply a loose end left over from the murders of your parents? For that matter, how do you even know that phrase?”

Hemlock hunched their shoulders and stared down at their shoes as they replied. “Carlisle showed me a copy of the file that MI99 has on the fire. He said that the people behind it were human supremacists, and that they don’t approve of people like me existing. Whoever this woman is who hired Rafferty and his men, she only ever went after my family to begin with because of *me*.”

Much to the teenager’s surprise, Sasha cupped their chin in his hands, and tilted their face up to look at him: his voice slipping into the soft burr of his real accent. “Now thee giv ower an

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listen te us, fernietickels! Thon dowly sneck-drawn wife's actions are because o' hor, an because o' foerk in general lettin' baccy like thon flourish amain in the first place. Divvin gan fashin yersel fo *any* o' this."

The young half-fey blinked. "Um...sorry, but what did you just say?"

Sasha had already let go of them and was striding out of the room. "Never mind, it wasn't anything important. Now, if you're serious about helping to rescue Hoyden, then hurry up and follow me. Better that I let you help me and know where you are at least, than chance you getting in over your head alone!"

Hemlock followed him out to where the borrowed flying carpet was leaning against the front wall of the cottage. Surprisingly, so did Marmalade. The usually agoraphobic chicken, seeming to have decided that the outside world was bearable after all provided she had company, fluttered up onto Hemlock's right shoulder. The teenager winced inwardly at the expression on Sasha's

face when he saw the bird. “Um, so this is the one who goes by Marmalade; like in the song. I think she’s worried about Hoyden too. They’re very close.”

“Today I learned that Hoyden owns a chicken named after a somewhat risqué song from the seventies.” Sasha shook his head disapprovingly as he unrolled the carpet and laid it out flat on the gravel. “Fine – bring the bird along if you must, but don’t blame me if anything happens to it!”

“I won’t, I promise!” Hemlock sat down hurriedly next to Sasha in the middle of the carpet. It was dull brown material, patterned with an impressively detailed tapestry of birds, rats, and oddly cheeseburgers. “How do these things work, anyhow? Is there like a secret magic word needed to start them or something?”

The mercenary leader grunted. “No, it’s more like riding a horse. One uses these long tassels to steer the carpet, like reins. In addition, you should know that it might decide to throw us off mid-flight and attempt to eat us if either of

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us fidgets too much. It's a carnivorous flying carpet, you see; the kind that is more usually kept to guard property. You can see everything that it has eaten depicted in the tapestry pattern. My associate found it early last summer in London, where it had gone feral. Since it's considerably smaller than is usual for a carnivorous specimen, he felt that it was better suited to racing than guarding, but it still has teeth. Thanks to its relatively small size, it likely couldn't do more than maul the two of us, but that bird would make a tasty snack for it, and I doubt if we would appreciate the fall."

Hemlock gulped, and sat very, very still as the carpet lurched up into the air. Marmalade had already hopped down onto their lap, where there was less risk of her falling off. She seemed perfectly comfortable with this arrangement. "Uh, so when we find Hoyden, we're not going to tell her about this part, right? Only I don't think that she'd approve of us travelling by flying carpet without safety helmets, especially not a *carnivorous* flying carpet."

“Ha!” Sasha chuckled. “She’s really gotten old and boring if those sorts of things trouble her!”

Hemlock scrunched their eyes shut against the force of the surrounding air as the carpet picked up speed. They wrapped their arms carefully around Marmalade, shielding the chicken from the wind. “I wouldn’t call her that if I were you! That’s how you end up being lectured on *manners*.”

Sasha gave an exaggerated sort of sigh. “Oh, Hoyden, Hoyden, Hoyden! My dearest foe! Whatever has become of the person that I used to know? If not for how you named that bird, I’d think that you lost your sense of fun along with your hair colour!”

“What colour was it originally anyhow?” Hemlock realised that they still didn’t know all that much about their cousin. “Carlisle said she lost the colour from her skin and her hair because of falling from that train, but he didn’t go into any details, and I haven’t seen any old family photos yet.”

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“She was brown skinned before, with dark red hair and freckles, just like you and Sol.” Sasha sounded almost wistful now. “I understand that they both took after their mother’s side there, not that I ever met her. Anyhow, those pointed ears and seawater coloured eyes are the only real hints of their father to either of them. His hair is red, true, and he has freckles, but not the same shade as the three of you. Think chestnut rather than ruby, and pale skin. Oleander is his name. You likely already knew the latter fact already, given that he is your grandfather.”

Hemlock shook their head. “Actually, the one who goes by Oleander is my great uncle, not my grandfather. Hoyden and Sol are his children, which technically makes them my um, first or second cousins or something like that. It’s complicated, sorry.”

Sasha grunted. “Yes, indeed – complicated! Ah, but look, down there. We are almost at the steelworks.”

Sure enough, there was the northernmost side of the derelict site

and the belt of trees where the gunman's companions were holding Hoyden captive. It had taken less than half the time that travelling by car would have. Hemlock supposed that this was one of the conveniences of flying carpets. *I think cars are probably safer though. For a start, there's no risk of them eating you.*

The carpet rippled slightly as it landed, but thankfully didn't try to attack anyone. Sasha had opted to land at the edge of an empty field of grass behind the trees. The lycothrope explained his reasoning for this as he rolled up the carpet. "The men who have Hoyden will be on the lookout for any sign of the police or other such interlopers, but they aren't likely to expect anyone to approach from this direction, since it's all farmland."

Hemlock nodded. They kept their voice low as they replied. "How are we going to find their campervan amongst all those trees?"

Sasha dropped to a crouch. "I will shift form and make the most of my

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heightened senses to detect Hoyden's scent. Now, be quiet, and try your best to keep close behind me. I don't want to have to tell Hoyden that you've gotten lost, or been eaten by a random troll!"

The teenager watched Sasha transform from his human to his much larger wolf hybrid shape. It was, of course, a magical form of shifting, and so Sasha's current clothing and equipment simply went somewhere other, well out of the way, where they would remain until he turned back again. To their surprise, he had dark fur, in stark contrast to the blond hair of his human shape, although his eyes remained the same bright green. Hemlock wondered at the difference for a moment. "Um, so I take it that you dye your hair blond, or something?"

Sasha didn't bother to acknowledge their query. Instead, he loped off into the trees, clearly following his nose. Marmalade, who had reclaimed her perch on Hemlock's right shoulder, gave a soft cluck. It might have been coincidental, but the young half-fey

chose to interpret it as telling them to hurry along. Setting their phone to silent just to be safe, they jogged after the mercenary. *Hang on, Hoyden, we're on our way!*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### AN UNCONVENTIONAL WEAPON

Malcolm Rafferty leaned back against the trunk of a tree and lit his third cigarette of the day. He had a splitting headache. It had started well over an hour ago now, and taking aspirin hadn't helped. He couldn't help but wonder if it had something to do with his prisoner. Everyone knew that the fey were vengeful creatures, even to the point of self-destruction. He for one wouldn't put it past the woman from the cottage to have jinxed him before he'd finally managed to render her unconscious with the electric stun gun. *Aye, thinking about it, she was terrible*

*annoyed over me trying to kick that pet chicken of hers after it went for me.*

He rubbed again at the wound on the back of his right hand, where the bird in question had pecked him during the struggle in the cottage. It still hurt quite a bit, but not as badly as his head, and at least the bleeding had finally stopped. Who would have guessed that poultry could be so vicious? Not Rafferty, that was for sure. He'd been more wary of the weird looking lizards crawling around on the charred log in the fireplace. In the end, they hadn't so much as blinked in his direction, unlike the bird. *Lesson learned there, I suppose. I hope a fox gets that chicken, I really do.*

There still wasn't any word back from Brian Kirkpatrick, who had drawn the short straw and been left behind at the cottage to wait for their real target. Rafferty glanced at his watch. It had just gone half past five in the afternoon. Surely, the kid should have gotten home from school, or wherever else it was that they were by now. Today *was*

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a school day here in England, he was still confident of that much, anyhow. *The official May bank holiday isn't until this Monday.*

He winced as another spike of pain seared through his skull. Blasted fey, and their magic! Why had he ever agreed to take on the Heath woman's job? It had been beyond stupid of him to let himself and the other lads be mixed up in a grudge match with the fey to begin with, and stupider still not to cut their losses after finding out about the Baines' familial connection to MI99. Worse yet, their current hostage shared an even closer connection; being a retired operative herself. Not that Rafferty and his men had known anything about *that* in advance of today. *In hindsight, we'd all have been better off just getting rid of our Miss Heath if she ever tried making good on her threat about badmouthing us!*

His other two men, Adrian Price and Francis Doyle, approached him then. As per usual, Doyle did all the talking for both of them. "Here, Malcolm, lad –

would it be all right for Francis and me to nip into the town and pick up a wee chip supper or something? Only it's been hours now like, and the pair of us are near fading away here."

Rafferty nodded reluctantly. "Aye, okay then. Bring me something back with you. I'll wait here for Brian, and keep an eye on our hostage."

Doyle smirked. "Mind she doesn't get loose and turn you into a toad!"

He and Price walked off through the trees, chuckling. Rafferty scowled after them for a moment, before deciding to make sure that the older fey remained securely tied up and gagged. Crushing out his cigarette under the heel of his right shoe, he climbed back into the campervan. *At this rate, she'll have woken up by the time Brian bothers showing up with that blasted kid!*



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Hemlock ducked under what felt to them like the umpteenth low branch, and stared about them in vain for Sasha. In the scant five minutes since entering the trees, they had somehow completely lost track of the lycothrope. *I suppose that calling out for him would probably be a very bad idea.*

They caught a glimpse of red painted metal then. There was a campervan parked less than thirty feet away, behind a thicket of briars. It didn't seem likely that there would be more than one such vehicle here on the outskirts of the derelict steelworks. The fourteen-acre site was hardly the sort of place where people went to camp. Most of it was nothing but cracked tarmac, aside from this narrow belt of trees. Wary of being spotted by Rafferty and his men, Hemlock ducked back behind the nearest suitable tree. *Ugh, why didn't Sasha just wait for me?*

Marmalade stretched out her neck and pecked an unfortunate beetle off the trunk of the tree, swallowing it whole. Then, apparently tired of waiting

for Hemlock to act, the chicken sprang down onto the soft loam, and bustled off through the trees, heading straight towards the red campervan. Worse yet, she was making the distinctive warbling which usually preceded her laying an egg. The latter sound was anything but quiet.

Hemlock muttered several very rude words, but didn't dare to step out from their hiding place. This decision proved to be sensible. The door of the campervan opened abruptly, and a burly human man with pale skin and short brown hair stepped out into view. He held an electric stun gun in his left hand. Hemlock flinched as they spotted the electricity arcing between the two electrodes. *That must be what they used to subdue Hoyden when they snatched her from the cottage earlier. I hope she's okay.*

There still wasn't any sign of Sasha. Hemlock wondered where the mercenary could have vanished to in such a small stretch of trees. Did it even count as woodland? Was it big

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enough? They supposed that it hardly mattered either way, or at least not now. No, the thing to focus on was the man with the stun gun. *I'm sure Sasha can look out for himself.*

The man with the stun gun was staring at Marmalade. He looked perplexed. Clearly, he hadn't been expecting to see a chicken here. Marmalade, however, didn't hesitate even for a second. Uttering a shrill, ululating sort of cry, she launched herself at the man's face. Wings flapping thunderously, she pecked him hard on the bridge of his nose, before scrambling up and over the top of his head in a wrathful flurry of feathers. The man stumbled forwards, cursing vehemently and clutching at his injured nose with his free hand. "Ah, get off of me, you stupid bird! How in the name of all that's holy are you even here? So help me, this had better not be Brian's idea of a joke!"

Brian, Hemlock knew, was the name of the gunman from earlier; whom they'd left tied up in the cottage. They

had checked his driver's licence whilst waiting for Sasha to arrive. They wondered whether Sasha had told his men to do anything about that or not. *There's still no sign of him! Maybe he's decided to sneak off and leave us to our fate. I should probably just be glad that he helped at all!*

Meanwhile, Marmalade was continuing her assault by pecking viciously at the man's ankles. He let out another angry yell. Then he kicked at her, but thankfully missed. The chicken squawked at him again, before sprinting away from the campervan and straight back to where Hemlock was hiding. To the teenager's horror, the man followed. He spotted Hemlock immediately. Worse yet, it was clear that he knew exactly who they were. "You're the wee pointy eared brat that we've been after! How did you manage to get here? Where's Brian?"

Hemlock backed away from him, careful not to let him get close enough to grab them, or to use the stun gun.

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“Brian can’t make it, I’m afraid. He’s a bit tied up at the moment.”

The man glowered. “So you think you’re funny, do you? We’ll see how long that lasts!” He lunged towards them with the stun gun.

Hemlock whirled around and ran as fast as their legs would carry them. The undergrowth snagged at their feet, and the lower branches of the trees caught in their hair and scratched their face and hands as they bolted back towards the flying carpet. Behind them, the man swore angrily as he gave chase; blood still streaming from the injury to his nose. There was no sign or sound of Marmalade. Hemlock could only hope that the chicken was okay. *At least it’s too early for foxes to be up and about!*

A few desperate minutes of running later, the young half-fey cleared the tree line and sprinted over to the rolled up carpet. They had just managed to unroll it when their pursuer stumbled into view. The stun gun sparked in his hand as he stalked towards them. “Better you give up quietly now, kid. I

can guess what you're planning, and it won't work. There's no way in the world that you're getting onto that carpet and off the ground before I catch you."

Hemlock hadn't actually been intending on fleeing. They straightened up slowly from their crouch, still holding onto the edge of the carpet. It hung in front of them like a matador's cape. The brightly patterned and deceptively harmless looking top layer faced away from them, towards the approaching man. Trying not to look down at the rows of viciously sharp teeth, which were now currently mere inches away from their stomach, the teenager let their shoulders sag as if defeated. "Okay. You win. I give up."

The still unidentified man smirked nastily. "That's more like it. Now – put that carpet back down on the ground, and...!"

Whatever he was about to say was cut off abruptly as Hemlock flapped the carpet out and up over his head. The magical artefact wrapped itself tightly around him. Only the man's legs and

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feet remained visible, kicking frantically as he collapsed under the weight of the carpet. Muffled screaming emanated from beneath the thick cloth, but there was nobody there to hear it. Hemlock was already running back into the trees in search of the campervan.

Thankfully, the vehicle in question remained parked exactly where it had been. There was no sign of anyone outside it apart from Marmalade. Given how loudly the chicken was still clucking, Hemlock guessed that the other two men involved in the kidnapping weren't here. Emboldened by that line of reasoning, they yanked open the door of the campervan and scrambled up into it. "Hoyden, are you in here?"

To Hemlock's relief, their cousin was indeed in the campervan. The pale haired fey lay tied up on the grey nylon-carpeted floor of the vehicle's main living space. She mumbled unintelligibly from behind the tape covering her mouth as Hemlock hurried over to her. She looked dazed,

and there was a burn mark on her back, between the tail edge of her black crop top and the waistband of her dark jeans. Hemlock winced as they realised that it was from the stun gun. "Hang on, Hoyden. I'll get you free."

Hoyden staggered to her feet as soon as Hemlock untied the ropes. Marmalade fussed around her ankles, burbling and picking off bits of lint with her beak. Hoyden stared down at her pet for a moment, and then looked back at Hemlock. "What...how did you get here, Hemlock, and why did you bring Marmalade along? For that matter, where exactly *is* here? Some men turned up at the cottage whilst you were at your counselling session and one of them knocked me out. I've no idea where we are."

"Don't worry, you're safe." Hemlock tried to sound reassuring. "We're in the trees behind the old steelworks on the outskirts of Hyssop Tor. Sasha helped me to find you. I called in the favour he owed me for sparing the caboose. He borrowed a flying carpet and we flew

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here on it with Marmalade, because she wouldn't get off my shoulder. Um, I'm not sure where he went after that, sorry. I sort of lost track of him on our way through the trees."

Hoyden scowled. "He bogged off and left you on your own with only Marmalade as company, you mean! That's just typical blooming Sasha! He really *can* be an inconsiderate lump."

Hemlock shrugged. "Hey, at least he helped us a little bit. He got us here, and he convinced the man back at the cottage to talk."

Their cousin blinked slowly, as if processing this information. "What man at the cottage? Hemlock, are you saying that there was somebody there when you got home?"

The teenaged half-fey nodded. "Yeah, but it was just one man. He was hiding in the kitchen. Marmalade was sitting outside under the hedge in the laneway. That's what tipped me off to something being wrong. Don't get mad,

but I sort of used the knockout gas feature that Carlisle put in my phone.”

“The *knockout gas* feature?” Hoyden sighed. “No, never mind that part for now. I’m not angry. Well, not with you, anyhow. So where are the rest of my abductors?”

Hemlock began explaining about the man who had chased them back to the flying carpet. The sudden hideous screech of rending metal interrupted them. A dark furred figure literally tore his way into the campervan. Sasha had finally reappeared.

Hoyden scowled at him. “Must you *really* be so dramatic? We’re lucky that you didn’t rupture the line for the cooking gas!”

Sasha was already rippling back into his human looking form. He nodded approvingly to Hemlock. “I see you managed to rescue her whilst I was busy, little one. I successfully took down two of the men we thought would be here. Has there been any sign of the other one?”

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Hemlock nodded. "Marmalade and I stumbled onto him. He chased me all the way back to that field we landed in earlier. I threw the flying carpet over him, and then made my way back here to free Hoyden."

Their cousin looked thoroughly confused. "How exactly did throwing a flying carpet over him help?"

Sasha edged a little further away from her before explaining about the carpet in question being a carnivorous one. "I would argue that Hemlock did well to think of using it as an unconventional weapon!"

Hoyden had begun to glower. "They shouldn't have needed to think of it! Why did you even bring them along in the first place?"

Hemlock scuffed their shoes against the floor of the now ruined campervan. "Probably mostly because he knew I would have just used the Underlanden to get here by myself if he hadn't."

The mercenary leader chuckled at the expression on Hoyden's face. "Not to worry, Hoyden. It's finished now. Well, aside from the fact that somewhere out there is the woman who hired these men in the first place."

Hoyden sighed. "I take it that there's more going on than what you've told me so far?"

"Aye, pet." Sasha's accent slipped again. For a moment, Hemlock thought that he was going to hug Hoyden. Instead, he stepped back, making a great show of checking his phone. When he next spoke, it was with his feigned Russian identity firmly back in place. "Would you like me to arrange an unpleasant fate for the man still at your cottage?"

Hoyden declined. "Hmm, that's a tempting offer, but I think it's probably best that we hand him over to MI99 instead. Let Carlisle see to tracking down whoever was behind this horrid business. Hemlock and I have had quite enough trouble."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### AN UNTENABLE POSITION

By the time that Saturday morning rolled around, Hoyden had recovered fully from her ordeal. In fact, she was feeling so well, that she announced that it was long past due for Hemlock and her to take a trip to a bookshop together. "There's a very good one over in Hyssop Tor. I'll drive us there once we've finished breakfast."

Hemlock paused while eating their bacon and toast. "So does that mean that I'm forgiven for the flying carpet thing? Or am I still grounded for wanting to avenge my parents?"

The man they had thrown the carpet over had survived the encounter with only a few bite wounds. He had turned out to be the ringleader, Malcolm Rafferty. Since the undersized carpet had only mauled him as opposed to eating him, he was now in the custody of MI99, along with the other three arsonists. Hemlock felt conflicted about the situation. They were glad not to have accidentally killed Rafferty with the carpet, of course, but they also felt slightly guilty about not wanting him dead. *I'm not sure if just being sent to prison is really enough of a punishment, given everything that he's done to my family. Especially not by fey standards – ugh, I should probably want his soul in a jar or something!*

Nobody would tell them anything further about the investigation. Hoyden had even taken their phone away and replaced it with one with no internet access. It needed a password in order to place calls or send texts to anyone outside of the stored list of contacts. Hoyden had gotten the shop to set it up for her. She hadn't given Hemlock the

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password, as she wanted to keep Carlisle from being able to contact them secretly, or vice versa. Hemlock was extremely annoyed with her about that. *I deserve to know what's going to happen to the arsonists, and who the woman behind it all is, but that still doesn't mean that I'd ask Carlisle about it! I never want to have anything to do with him again. I seriously need to have access to the internet too, especially for school, wherever that eventually ends up being.*

Hoyden calmly poured herself some more tea as she replied to their question. "You know perfectly well that I didn't ground you for that part of things. I grounded you for insisting on tagging along with Sasha in the first place. You put him in an untenable position. As to whether you're still grounded, yes, you are, but now it's for being needlessly cheeky. Keep it up, and I'll go to the bookshop without you."

Marmalade suddenly launched herself up onto the middle of the dining room table, and snatched up a whole

slice of fried bacon from Hemlock's plate. Hoyden and Hemlock both tried to grab her, but to no avail. The fluffy ginger hen leapt back down onto the floor and sprinted from the room, clucking triumphantly around her stolen prize.

Hemlock stared after her in stunned disbelief. "Um...so is it even okay for chickens to eat bacon?"

Hoyden shrugged as she transferred a slice of her own bacon onto Hemlock's plate. "Oh, I'm sure it's fine. It's not as if she's ever going to enter the food chain herself. Still, let's make sure to never mention it to anyone official, just in case."



The bookshop that Hoyden had originally planned on visiting was a quaint little place, with leaded windows and a dark red canopy above the ornately carved wooden front door. Unfortunately, it turned out to have

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closed for the weekend, due to the owner being away on holiday. Since they had already paid for four hours worth of parking for the Volvo, Hemlock and Hoyden made their way to Hyssop Tor's other bookshop instead. The latter was a much more modern building in the main square, and boasted a coffee shop and automatic sliding glass doors.

Hoyden pointed at a brightly coloured poster on the wall behind the tills. "Look – there's a book signing being held here today. It's the author of the *Henrietta Thrower* series."

Hemlock glanced back at the crowd of people currently milling about just inside the front entrance of the bookshop. Most of those present were younger children, accompanied by adults, but there were a few teenagers too. Everyone looked extremely excited. "Um, so we don't have to join in with all of that, do we?"

Their guardian shook her head. "Don't worry. The signing won't be down here on the ground floor. They

always use a designated area upstairs for any visiting authors and poets to do readings and book launches. People are probably just hoping to meet Joella Heath when she arrives. I only mentioned it in case you'd be interested."

Hemlock resisted the urge to grimace. "No, I've never actually liked any of those books to begin with. Anyway, I'm too old for them now."

"Yes, I suppose you would be, at that." Hoyden nodded pensively. "Still, I must say that I'm a bit surprised to hear that you *never* liked the series though. Obviously, I've never read any of them – I was already an adult by the time that the first one was even published. It's just that from what I've heard, they're brilliantly written."

The young half-fey scowled mutinously. "Ugh, it's more like they're brilliantly plagiarised!"

Hoyden stared at them. "What do you mean by that?"

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Hemlock shrugged. "They're pretty much just Elwin Lament's *Star Tripped* series, only with humans versus elsekin, instead of elsekin and humans versus aliens. I don't think very many people have heard of *Star Tripped* though. It's out of print nowadays, and it wasn't ever famous the way that the *Henrietta Thrower* books are. Nobody ever knows what I'm on about when I mention it."

"Well, I've certainly heard of it!" Hoyden's hair sparked indignantly. "*Star Tripped* was my absolute favourite book series growing up. I can't believe that no one involved with the publishing industry has cottoned on to the *Henrietta Thrower* series being plagiarised from it! How on Earth has Joella Heath gotten away with this?"

Hemlock felt a sudden pang of sadness. "I was actually going to blog about it back at the start of this year. I wanted to make people aware of how she ripped off Elwin Lament's writing. Then all of my paperback books were

destroyed in the fire, and there isn't a digital edition of *Star Tripped*."

Hoyden squeezed their arm gently. "We'll see about sourcing replacements second hand. That's where I found them for you originally anyhow. Failing that, you can have mine, even if they are horribly tatty. I still have them at home. I read them so many times that the covers are hanging off them!"

Hemlock frowned in confusion. "Um, I always thought that Mum and Dad bought those books for me. That's what they said anyhow."

Hoyden looked as if she was casting about for the right thing to say. Just as Hemlock was about to risk asking what was wrong, the bookshop's doors slid open again, and Sasha strode in. The lycothrope spotted the two of them immediately, and made his way past the excited crowd at the entrance to join them.

Hoyden stepped slightly in front of Hemlock; her left hand clenched tightly

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around the handle of her walking cane. "What are you doing here, Sasha?"

Sasha put his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "I dropped by your cottage first, but obviously you were out already, so I tracked you here by scent instead. I need to talk to you. Can we get a minute away from all of this?" He nodded at the crowded bookshop in general, and then more directly at Hemlock. "No offence, little one, but it's a sensitive matter."

Hemlock, who by this point had had more than enough of being tangled up in the secret schemes of adults, didn't even think about arguing. They were determined to have a nice, quiet sort of Saturday. "That's okay, Sasha. I'll um, I'll just be in the Fantasy and Science Fiction section. I promise I won't leave the bookshop without you, Hoyden!"

They hurried off before their cousin could object to them leaving her line of sight. *She has my old phone with her anyhow, so it's hardly as if she can't contact me if anything too random happens. Although, thinking about it, I*

*suppose that she might need Sasha to show her how to work it first.*



Sol glared up at the much too hot sun. Having spent weeks searching for Hemlock's paternal grandparents, he had had more than enough of the arid Tuscan climate. He was beyond pleased to be on his way home. *If only I were bringing better news along with me! Nothing that I've uncovered here helps with finding Hemlock.*

Worse yet, if anything, his tracking down the elder Baines had added even more problems to the mix. Now, it wasn't merely a case of finding a runaway teenager. Sol's brief visit to the Baines' isolated off grid home had inadvertently led to his discovering a complex plot to steal and sell British trade secrets. From what he had been able to gather so far, Jayne and Oswald had begun the economic espionage in question almost fifty years ago. Their son Frank had simply joined the family

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business; using his academic career as a cover, just as his parents had done. *What in the world was Belladonna thinking of, getting herself involved in such things? She's a Thornback – she must have known better!*

However, Belladonna and her husband hadn't only stolen secrets. They had also faked their deaths. Poor Hemlock hadn't been orphaned that dreadful night, but *abandoned*. The house in Bedford Park had already been empty when the arsonists struck. Ironically, Belladonna and Frank had rigged up an incendiary device of their own before leaving; which solved the mystery of why the eventual fire had been so abnormally hot. Then they had fled the UK, using false identities, and joined Jayne and Oswald in Tuscany. *Bad enough for the rest of those who cared about them too, of course, but they let Hemlock believe that they were dead! What kind of parent treats their child so callously?*

Sol was very much looking forward to informing MI99 about what he had

found. The four adult members of the Baines family were in for a nasty surprise. None of them knew yet about his furtive investigation of their luxury villa and its secrets. Sol, whose spy training had kicked in the instant that he spotted Belladonna alive and well in the local village market, had followed his not so dead cousin home without her knowledge. *Just as well too, given what I've found out since! Carlisle shall be fuming when he hears the details.*



Having reluctantly agreed to indulge Sasha's request for a private conversation, Hoyden had let him escort her to the coffee shop area, on the condition that he paid for both of their beverages. Now, seated in a squashy leather armchair opposite the mercenary leader at a quiet corner table, she nodded for him to begin. "Well? What is it that you're so set on talking to me about?"

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Sasha frowned as he stirred sugar into his painfully overpriced milky coffee. The far from spotlessly clean metal spoon plinked against the chunky white porcelain cup. “Whey, for one thing Aave been wondering why thee never bothered telling us that we had a bairn together.”

Hoyden sniffed and took a sip of her iced tea. “Well, to be fair, it’s hardly as if I told anyone else either.”

“Aye, but then nobody else is the ruddy *dad* now, are they?” The lycothrope paused for a moment as if to consider this statement more carefully. “Whey, at least Aam assuming that it’s no one o those weird fey things where thee took a twig an then stole a bit o hair from one bloke, an nail clippings from another, or summat?”

Hoyden glared at him. “Our child isn’t a changeling!” She paused then. “Although they *did* help another fey to make one recently – I wonder if Carlisle has encountered it yet.”

Sasha blinked. “Eh?”

“It’s based on the cover identity he gave them for that dreadful scheme of his.” Hoyden gestured vaguely, as if doing so somehow helped with her explanation. “You know; Prague, Alex Smith – all that nonsense. Hemlock traded the passport in exchange for your train car’s safe return.”

Sasha scowled. “I’m still right marked about thon carriage, thee know!”

Hoyden tilted her head to the left and stared at him. She had to pin down her anger before replying. “Oh? Do you mean the way I am about the kidnapping and water boarding incident, or is yours a different kind of coldly simmering rage?”

The mercenary growled. “Hey up now, thon were Carlisle’s fault, an well thee know it tee! He towld us Aad be interrogating a sixteen year old wi a cocky attitude as needed breaking, an a good few months o army cadet training under thor belt. By the time me pack had laid eyes on Hemlock an gotten thor scent, it were too blessed late for them te do any more than warn

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us by text! Aa went as easy on Hemlock as Aa could, but Aad no way out o doing what Aad already contracted te do. Well, unless thee reckon thon it'd been better o us te let the truth slip in front o Carlisle?"

"You have a point there, I'll grant." Hoyden wasn't entirely mollified by his explanation. "But you still traumatised them. I won't forgive you for that, Sasha. Nobody in their right mind would."

Sasha shrugged. "Aah way. Aa gyis thons about it is far is that answers. Theors nee use us argyin wi thee."

Not wanting to drive Sasha away, Hoyden changed the subject. "So your mercenaries all know the truth?"

The lycothrope nodded firmly. "Like Aa said, theor me pack. Theor are nee secrets between pack, Hoyden, an especially nut the sort as can literally be sniffed out. Thaal no go spreading it about, if thon's what's bothering thee."

"Discretion would be appreciated, yes." Hoyden glanced at the till for the

coffee shop. "This conversation is likely to take a while. Why don't you bribe me with cake as well as tea?"

Sasha grinned at her and rose to his feet. "Fo auld times' sake, eh, pet?"

He headed back to the queue before Hoyden could complain about the endearment. In truth, it hardly troubled her. *I suppose that honesty in general is something that can't be avoided between us now. Hemlock deserves to know who their biological father is. After that, it's up to them whether or not they let him be a part of their life. I'll support whatever they decide to do.*

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### AN UNRESOLVED ARGUMENT

Hemlock had been browsing the Fantasy and Science Fiction section of the bookshop for a little over half an hour, when their nice quiet Saturday abruptly took a turn for the worse. By now, the crowd of would-be autograph hunters and other such fans of Joella Heath had relocated upstairs, presumably to secure their places in the queue for today's book signing. Aside from the people in the bustling coffee shop, the ground floor of the bookshop was almost empty of customers. As such, Hemlock was even more startled when someone tapped

them on the shoulder. Turning around, the young half-fey saw none other than Deborah Burns.

The older teenager sneered. "Hey, prick ears; I heard they chucked you out of school for being a problematic element!"

Not wanting to start any further trouble, Hemlock resisted the temptation to wonder aloud as to whether or not their bully could even spell *problematic*. "What do you want now, Deborah?"

"I'm here to meet Joella. She's got a book signing today." Deborah held up a hardback copy of her idol's recently released autobiography. "What are *you* doing here?"

Hemlock shrugged. "It's a bookshop. I like reading. You figure it out."

Deborah glowered at them. "I don't think I like your tone, prick ears!"

"Well if we're talking about our personal likes and dislikes, then you ought to know that I actually go by the

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name of Hemlock Oleander Baines, and *not* prick ears." Hemlock glared at Deborah. "Perhaps you should have one of your minions write it down for you. Where are they today, anyhow? Don't you usually go around as a coven or something?"

That had clearly been a retort too far. Deborah swung her book at Hemlock, clouting them hard on their left bicep. "You need to watch your lip!"

"I'm not the one who's randomly assaulting people in a bookshop." Hemlock glanced around them; wondering if it was at all likely that anyone would intervene. "Anyone would think that you wanted to get yourself thrown out."

Deborah scoffed. "Ha, as if anybody even *cares* about freaks like you!" Nonetheless, she backed off by a couple of steps, and lowered her book. "The rest of the girls are waiting upstairs, actually. They're saving me a place in the queue while I buy this."

“Oh.” Hemlock nodded towards the tills. “Um, shouldn’t you go and pay for it then? You know, before you go back to using it as some sort of an improvised bludgeoning weapon as opposed to reading it?”

“I already did!” Deborah brandished what was presumably the receipt for her purchase. “Then I spotted you lurking about, obviously planning to shoplift something. After all, everybody knows that elsekin can’t be trusted; especially not *fey*.”

Hemlock glared at her. “You can’t say that! It’s not even remotely true!”

Deborah grinned nastily. “Yeah, well if it isn’t, then how come it’s always them that are the villains in literally *everything*?”

Before Hemlock could point out that fictional villains didn’t count as proof of anything aside from the possible prejudices of those who invented them, one of the bookshop staff bustled past with none other than Joella Heath in tow. The young sales assistant was so

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busy trying to ingratiate herself with the world famous author that she accidentally bumped into Deborah. It reminded Hemlock of the incident in the school canteen.

This time, however, Deborah wasn't angry. She was too excited at being so close to her favourite celebrity. "Hello, Joella! I can't believe I'm finally getting to meet you face to face! I'm Deborah Burns – you know; from Hyssop Tor Integrated Academy? I emailed you about how one of the elsekin weirdos at my school was trying to make me and my friends look stupid in front of everybody!" Then she pointed at Hemlock. "And *this* is the nasty little freak that I was talking about!"

The sales assistant, a short, pale faced human woman, with lank fair hair scraped back into a stubby ponytail, attempted to intervene. "Miss Heath is on a schedule. She hasn't time to talk to individual fans right now. Why don't you two head upstairs for the book signing like everyone else has?"

Hemlock scowled and shook their head. “Deborah here will, but I’m not actually one of her fans.”

This seemed to confuse the sales assistant somewhat. She blinked. “But...but you must be! *Everyone* loves the *Henrietta Thrower* books!”

To Hemlock’s irritation, the author herself intervened then, beaming indulgently. “Yes, why don’t we take a moment to hear what it is that this young would-be literary critic claims not to like about my books? Well, always presuming, of course, that the poor child can even put it into coherent words.”

Hemlock blinked for a moment. “Um...well, for one thing, they’re not remotely original. You ripped off the characters and most of the story from Elwin Lament’s *Star Tripped* series. The only differences are the names, and that your main character is a human instead of a half-fey. Oh, and of course all of the villains in your books are shape-shifting elsekin instead of shape-shifting extraterrestrials. That’s not

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much fun for readers who aren't human."

Joella tittered. It was a surprisingly nasty sort of sound, especially coming from such a beloved children's author. "Are you trying to claim that my books are plagiarised?"

The young half-fey nodded. "Yeah, almost word for word in places. I'm not sure how you expected nobody else to ever notice, even if you have gotten away with it so far. Although, I suppose that it's only fair for me to warn you now that I'm going to blog about it. I was originally going to do it back in February, but then some human supremacists targeted my family and burned down our house. My...my parents died in the fire. Obviously, I lost all of my *Star Tripped* books too. Luckily it turns out that my cousin has copies that I can borrow."

The sales assistant looked scandalised. Deborah gave a squawk of outrage. "You're lying, prick ears! Joella wouldn't do anything like that."

This Elwin Lament weirdo must have ripped *her* off, not the other way round!”

Hemlock ignored the urge to sneer back at Deborah, and answered her calmly. “That would have involved literal time travel. Elwin Lament published *Star Tripped* back in the 1970s. The books are out of print nowadays, which probably has something to do with why most people haven’t realised. The ones like my cousin who originally grew up reading *Star Tripped* were all too old to be interested in *Henrietta Thrower*. Which reminds me, so am I. Excuse me please, but I don’t feel like wasting any more of my time on this conversation.”

Deborah seized hold of their right wrist. “Don’t you dare try and walk off after what you just said! Apologise to Joella right now!”

Hemlock glared at her. “Let go!”

The older teenager tightened her grip. “Not until you take back all of the lies you were spouting just now about

poor Joella having ripped off that other author!"

"They weren't lies! Besides, she's not even here now! Look – she's legging it out the door!" Hemlock gestured towards where Joella Heath was hurrying out of the bookshop, still followed by the hapless sales assistant. "Let go of my wrist, Deborah! In case you've forgotten, this isn't school – you can't just go around grabbing people and trying to intimidate them into doing what you want."

To Hemlock's relief, Sasha's voice came from behind them then. "Is there something wrong here, Hemlock?"

For a second or so, Hemlock thought that Deborah would be stupid enough to try kicking off in front of Sasha. A small, mean part of them deeply wanted to see that happen. Then the older teenager seemed to come to her senses. She let go of Hemlock's wrist and stomped off, albeit still scowling and muttering to herself about stupid freaks who didn't appreciate good writing.

Sasha looked at Hemlock. "What made her so angry?"

Hemlock shrugged. "We used to go to the same school. I suppose you might say we have an unresolved argument going on."

"Oh well, as long as it's nothing serious." Sasha gestured with his thumb; pointing in the direction of the coffee shop. "Hoyden is most likely still on the phone to her accursed brother. He rang unexpectedly during our conversation. It's typical of him – always interrupting the business of others! Anyhow, Hoyden asked me to come and fetch you. We needed to talk to you together about something already, but Sol has news that concerns you too, apparently."

Hemlock followed along. "He's finally back in signal range, then?"

"Regrettably, yes." Sasha seemed irked by that. Then he smirked. "From what I could overhear, he had only just read the texts you sent him about

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Hoyden's abduction. I believe that he may have been panicking somewhat!"

It suddenly occurred to Hemlock that they had completely forgotten to text Sol about Hoyden's subsequent rescue. "Huh. I wonder whether he's more surprised about her already being safe, or about her knowing how to use a mobile phone."

Sasha chuckled. "Hoyden isn't nearly as technophobic as she pretends to be, you know. A good deal of it is simply the front that she puts on for the world. She did something similar whilst she was active as a spy too. In fact, I sometimes wonder if anyone knows the real her."

Hemlock frowned. "Does she really like books, or is that all fake too?"

The lycothrope nodded. "Oh no, her obsession with books is definitely real. I have begun to suspect that the chicken thing is too. Still, I suppose that at least it's a step up from her keeping a robotic vacuum cleaner as a pet."

Hemlock blinked. “Did she *do* that?”

Sasha pulled out his wallet and opened it. Unzipping one of the compartments, he produced a rather crumpled colour Polaroid photograph. It showed a younger looking Hoyden sitting cross-legged on a brightly coloured rug, and painting what looked like eyes onto the front of a robotic vacuum cleaner. “We were all still in our early twenties back then. She called it Buster.”

Hemlock stared at the photograph; wondering if Albert Astley had had anything to do with the vacuum cleaner. “Wow – Hoyden really did look a lot like me then.”

“She still does. You have the same shape of mouth, for one thing, and a similar way of smiling.” Sasha tucked the photograph away again as he led the way into the coffee shop. “Different noses though.”

Hemlock shrugged. “Well, we’re only second cousins, after all. There are

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bound to be at least *some* differences to how we look.”

They couldn't help noticing how uncomfortable Sasha looked with that statement. “Ah, yes, second cousins. About that...eh...perhaps it's best if Hoyden does the explaining.”

Hoyden, having finished her phone call, waved as Hemlock and Sasha approached the corner table. “We need to talk, Hemlock.”

The young half-fey shrugged as they sat down opposite her. “Um, okay, so what about?”

Sasha seated himself at the end of the table, with his back to the room. He nodded to Hoyden. “Reckon as it's best if they hear it from thee, pet.” His speech had shifted into its natural Northumbrian burr. “Like as nut it'll all come out soon enough now.”

Hoyden sighed. “Okay, look. Hemlock, the truth is that Belladonna and Frank adopted you as a baby. They ought to have told you as soon as you

were old enough to understand, but they obviously didn't bother. Moreover, Sol's now discovered that they aren't dead. From what he's been able to piece together so far, they'd already left the house well before the fire was started. They've been hiding out in Tuscany with Jayne and Oswald ever since. It seems that all four of them are neck deep in economic espionage, and have been for years. In fact, they've made a great deal of money from it."

Hemlock sagged back in their armchair, struggling to process what Hoyden had just revealed. "Did they...so does Sol know if they left me behind on purpose or not? Since...since I wasn't really their kid, I mean."

Much to their surprise, Sasha gave a low, angry sounding growl. "Wouldn't mind knowing the answer te thon mesel, Hoyden!"

Hoyden shook her head firmly. "Their original travel plans were for all three of you. Sol even found a fake passport that had been made using your photograph."

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Hemlock supposed that that made things slightly less horrible. "Then they would have taken me with them if I'd just gone home that night instead of going for a sleepover at Topaz's house. We would have gone off to Tuscany together, and then everybody would have thought that we were all dead. Rafferty wouldn't have gone after you, and...!"

Hoyden grabbed hold of Hemlock's hands as if she feared the teenager might bolt. "Yes, fine, that's true, but then he and his men more than likely wouldn't have been *caught*, either! They'd still be out there, hiring on to help whoever paid them, and doing goodness only knows what harm. Besides, Sol still would have led those vampires to my door. You were the one who ultimately thought of a way to drive them off with that video of the rooster. You were why Carlisle was there that evening too. As much as I hate him, he tipped the balance for us in that fight."

Sasha grunted. "Right, so Aal say this now, and then Aa want the pair of yees te abide by it. Aa dinnae know whatever it was that went on involving any ruddy vampires, but Aa *can* tell thee right now that Aa dinnae want there te be a repeat o it!"

Hemlock frowned at him. "Um, no offence, but what's it to you anyway?"

The lycothrope smiled bitterly, and looked at Hoyden. "Well, pet? Are thee going te tell the poor bairn about thor parentage or not?"

Hemlock had a sudden flash of insight. "Wait a minute – so if I'm adopted, but I look like a Thornback, then does that mean that Sol's like, secretly my dad or something?"

Sasha looked as if he were about to choke with indignation. Hoyden however, let out a brief snort of laughter, and squeezed Hemlock's hands reassuringly. "No, Hemlock. Sol is still one of your blood relatives, but he isn't your father. He's your *uncle*."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### AN UNDENIABLE CRIME

It took Hemlock a terribly long moment to wrap their head around what Hoyden had just said. They stared across the table at her in stunned disbelief. "But...but if he's my uncle, then you're basically saying that you're my *mum*, aren't you?"

Hoyden nodded. "Yes, I am. I gave you to Belladonna when you were born because she talked me into doing so. She played on how afraid I was that I couldn't provide a good enough home for you. I thought that my work with MI99 would put you at too much risk."

Once again, Hemlock thought about just how easily the recently mentioned vampires had managed to track Sol down. “I suppose that makes sense.”

“I’m glad that you understand my reasoning.” Some of the tension left Hoyden’s face. “And I swear to you Hemlock, if I’d known what things were really like for you living with Belladonna and Frank, I would have taken you back from them *immediately*.”

The teenager frowned. “Why didn’t you tell me the truth any sooner?”

Hoyden looked ashamed. “I wanted to tell you everything from the moment I saw you at the funeral. I just couldn’t find the words at first, and then somehow it never seemed like the right time. The longer I left it, the harder it was to start the conversation.”

Hemlock wasn’t impressed with this explanation. “Um, no offence, but that’s a rubbish excuse. I mean, I’ve literally been living with you for *months* now!”

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Their birth mother raised her eyebrows at the criticism. "Are we counting the amount of time that you spent in hiding with Carlisle as part of those months?"

Hemlock tugged their hands away and folded their arms. "No, but maybe I wouldn't have run away at all if you'd told me the truth!"

Hoyden looked unconvinced. "You ran away because I let Sol talk me into the idea of sending you to boarding school after all of the bother back at Hyssop Tor Integrated Academy! Tell me honestly, do you *really* think that knowing I was your mum would have changed anything for you at school?"

Hemlock shrugged. "I suppose we'll never know either way now. Anyhow, who's my dad? Wait – is he the technomance you mentioned before; the one who goes by Albert Astley?"

Sasha pointedly cleared his throat. "Okay, Hemlock, just think for a second. Ask yourself why *I'm* here for this conversation."

Hemlock turned their head and stared at him for a long moment. Then they looked back across the table at Hoyden. “Um, okay, so am I taking Sasha up wrong right now, or is he more or less hinting that *he’s* my dad? Oh, and more importantly, if so, then is it *actually* true? I mean, it’s not going to turn out later that there’s another random twist that you just haven’t gotten around to revealing yet? You know; because it hasn’t been the right time, or something.”

Sasha gave them a stern glare. “Thon’s enough o thon snarky attitude! Dinnae cheek tha mam!”

That was the final straw for Hemlock. They stood up angrily. “Or what, you’ll have your mercenaries give me a *real* dose of the water cure? After all, I know lycothropes can recognise people by smell, so it’s hardly as if you didn’t already know who I was to you back on the train! Oh yeah, a flipping great dad *you* are. At least the one who goes by Frank Baines only ever used to hit me as punishment, and even then, it

was usually only whenever he'd been drinking! He never stood by and had anyone *torture* me!"

With that, Hemlock vaulted lightly over the back of their armchair before either of their newly confessed parents could react. Sprinting from the coffee shop, the teenager bolted across the ground floor of the bookshop, and out through the main entrance, still reeling inwardly at what Hoyden and Sasha had revealed. *What is it with the adults in my life and their stupid need for keeping secrets? Ugh, stuff all of this! I'll go back to that bit of woodland behind the old steelworks, and summon up the Underlanden to get home!*

To Hemlock's annoyance, a crowd of people standing immediately outside the automatic doors interrupted their flight. Presuming that it was just more of Joella Heath's fans, the young half-fey began edging their way past, keeping next to the front windows of the bookshop. The crowd parted slightly then, revealing the curious sight of Joella Heath standing between a

pair of stern faced police officers. A vaguely familiar looking black woman in a smartly tailored dove grey trouser suit was speaking to her. The author looked furious, but also a little nervous. Hemlock paused in surprise. *Why does it look like she's being arrested? Wait – is that other woman Carlisle?*

Sure enough, the two police officers bundled the still protesting author into the back of their car. Dismissing the situation as none of their business anyhow, the young half-fey started walking again. *Whatever is going on, I'm sure it'll all be on the news later, given how famous Joella Heath is. Well, unless MI99 covers it up or something. Either way, I'd still rather get out of here before Hoyden and Sasha catch up with me and insist on us talking about stuff again.*

Unfortunately, the woman who was very definitely Carlisle had spotted them now. She strode through the crowd, calling loudly for Hemlock's attention. As if this wouldn't have been embarrassing enough already, there

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were several reporters present, including what looked like a television news crew. Hemlock wanted nothing to do with any of it, but the Section Chief caught up to them before they could slip away. She grinned at the young half-fey. “Good to see you again, Hemlock! You’ll be glad to hear that that scumbag Malcolm Rafferty finally cracked under interrogation and told us who hired him. That’s her over there in the back of that police car. Now, I trust that you wouldn’t mind doing just *one* last thing for MI99?”

With that, Carlisle draped her right arm around Hemlock’s shoulders. She pulled the startled teenager in to stand next to her whilst she addressed the reporters. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m MI99 Section Chief Jamie Carlisle. As you have just seen, Miss Heath is under arrest for inciting and financing organised hate crime. The investigation that led MI99 to her began in early February of this year, following an arson attack in London in which two people died. This is the innocent fourteen-year-old elsekin left orphaned

by those evil actions! They've bravely agreed to answer a few of your questions."

As the Section Chief had clearly anticipated, her announcement left Hemlock too stunned to argue. Cameras flashed as the reporters crowded closer. One of them, a thin faced black human woman with vivid pink and purple hair ribbons woven through her chin length box braids, managed to be the first to shove her microphone in front of Hemlock. "How do you feel about MI99 keeping this investigation out of the public eye for so long? Are you pleased to see the woman behind your parents' murders finally caught?"

Hemlock nodded slowly. An idea had occurred to them: an idea that they suspected that Carlisle wasn't going to like. Taking a deep breath, the young half-fey began to speak. "Um...it's good that MI99 traced who was behind the fire, yeah, because arson is really dangerous, and other houses might have gone up that night too. I don't

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really think you should call it *murder*, though. I, um...well the thing is I found out today that *nobody* actually died in that fire. You see it turns out that my parents – my adoptive parents, actually – well, they had already left the house before the arsonists got there. They're living somewhere in Tuscany now. They left me behind and let me think that they were dead. Um...my adoptive parents, that is, not the arsonists. I don't know where the arsonists are, but they've probably all been arrested by now. At least, I hope they have been."

Another reporter, a paunchy looking white human man with sallow skin and short grey hair, bellowed his question at Hemlock. "So are you claiming that Joella Heath is *innocent* of the crimes that MI99 are accusing her of?"

Hemlock shook their head firmly. "No. I mean, she still hired people to burn down our house, and everyone thought my adoptive parents were home at the time, so that's an undeniable crime on her part. Oh, and her *Henrietta Thrower* books are all but

completely ripped off from Elwin Lament's *Star Tripped* series. Do you suppose that she can be charged with plagiarism too?"

That set off a completely new round of questions, but to judge by how Carlisle's grip on Hemlock's shoulders had tightened, the Section Chief now wanted to put a swift halt to the interview. She gestured sharply to a pair of thoroughly nondescript looking figures in grey suits and dark glasses. The two, who Hemlock presumed were MI99 operatives of some sort, began silently attempting to disperse the crowd of onlookers. Then, suddenly, there were four of them, and then eight, and then double that again. Hemlock gasped at the sight. *Wow, I always thought that blinkamores were just an urban legend!*

Apparently satisfied with how the blinkamores were performing their task, Carlisle returned her attention to the reporters. "Okay, well that's enough questions for now, thank you! I'm sure you can all appreciate how distressing

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this has been for young Hemlock to go through and...!"

Suddenly, Sasha, in his dark furred hybrid shape, sprang over the heads of the crowd and landed in front of Carlisle and Hemlock. His bright green eyes blazed as he shifted back into his human form and snarled. "Get tha' sleeked hands off thon bairn!"

Carlisle backed away immediately, raising her elegantly manicured hands in appeasement as she went. "Okay, now calm down, Sasha; there's no need for anyone to overreact here...!"

"Dinnae tell us te calm doon!" Sasha quite literally roared at the Section Chief. "Keep away from Hemlock, Carlisle. Aa'll no warn thee again."

Hoyden limped up to the three of them then. She glared at Carlisle. "What do you think you're doing? Why did it look as if these reporters were interviewing Hemlock?"

Another female reporter, this one a blonde lepothrope with aviator style

sunglasses, elbowed one of the blinkamores aside, and shoved her microphone in front of Hoyden. “How are you connected to the victim? Do you have anything to say on what Joella Heath has done?”

Not to be outdone, the paunchy looking man with grey hair yelled another question. “Is it true that their adoptive parents faked their deaths?”

Hoyden stared at the reporters for a moment, and then looked at Hemlock. “What’s going on here, Hemlock?”

The teenager scuffed their shoe against the pavement. “MI99 arrested Joella Heath for setting up the fire. I saw her taken into custody just now. Then Carlisle spotted me, and he – um, I mean *she* made me give an interview because of my being the only survivor. I decided to tell everyone the truth about the fire, and the fake deaths and stuff.”

Sasha raised an eyebrow at Hoyden. “How dee thee want te manage this, pet?”

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Hoyden put her right arm around Hemlock. "I'm taking them home, before this situation gets any further out of hand. Can you see to it that no one tries following us?"

The lycothrope nodded confidently, flexing his claws menacingly for the benefit of the still clamouring reporters. "Reckon thon winnit be much bother."

Hoyden returned her attention to Carlisle. Her hair had begun to spark, and her eyes blazed silver. "Carlisle, you had absolutely no right to involve Hemlock in this! I demand that you issue a GACS order immediately."

To Hemlock's surprise, the Section Chief grinned as she nodded her assent. "I'm sure that MI99's gremlins and cybersprites will enjoy the exercise. I've already gotten what I needed out of this operation anyhow."

Hemlock frowned. "Um, so what exactly does a GACS order do anyhow? And why is Carlisle a woman now?"

Carlisle was already texting someone, presumably whoever was involved in organising a GACS order. She answered almost absently. "I'm a hergynandro. All my species can switch our sex at will. It's a useful ability for this line of work. As for GACS, it stands for Gremlin Aided Cybersprite Strike. It's one of MI99's means of eliminating sensitive or problematic data. Do you remember the way none of the papers talked about the fire in Bedford Park? That was due to a GACS order."

Hoyden glowered at her. "I'd hazard that you used one to manipulate Hemlock and Topaz into both needing new phones too!"

The Section Chief shrugged. "It wasn't malicious. I just do whatever I have to do to complete the mission, Hoyden. You know that."

Hemlock shook their head angrily. "You know, I think I get it now, Carlisle; why Hoyden quit, and why people call MI99 the Bad Names Club, I mean. It's because most of you do whatever you think needs done, and never mind who

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might get hurt! Well, I'm not like that, and I never will be. I'm never going to work for MI99 ever again! Can we go home now please, Hoyden?"

Their birth mother nodded. Parts of her long pale hair twitched sluggishly, as if trying and failing to move. "Yes, let's do that, Hemlock. Marmalade's probably missing us by now anyhow."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### AN UNBEATABLE TEAM

By the following morning, the whole world knew the truth about Joella Heath. The now incarcerated author had gone from fame to infamy over the course of the weekend. So far, she was still denying ever having deliberately supported human supremacy, but very few people seemed to believe that.

Strangely enough, Hoyden did believe it, and said so as she and Hemlock were finishing eating breakfast together. “That horrible woman was being honest there, you know.” She tapped at the photograph of Joella Heath on the front page of her Sunday morning newspaper. “You can

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tell by the way that she looks at the interviewer.”

Hemlock shrugged and reached grumpily for the last slice of toast. “Maybe *you* can, but that’s because you’re an expert on lying, the same as all of the other adults in my life.”

“You’re still angry then.” Hoyden set her by now mostly empty plate down on the dining room floor next to her feet where Marmalade was waiting impatiently for share. The chicken clucked excitedly as she devoured the remnants of Hoyden’s fried tomato.

Hemlock tried not to worry about the multitude of food hygiene rules that Hoyden had just ignored. “I’m allowed to be angry about what I’ve been put through. You even said so yourself. It was in that big book on parenting and child psychology that you’ve practically been annotating lately.”

Hoyden gave a snort of amusement. “I’m not annotating it! I’ve just underlined a few of the more relevant passages, that’s all.”

The teenaged half-fey gulped down the dregs of their orange juice. “Um, no offence, but I think that counts as denial. You’ve underlined nearly half of the book so far, *and* written stuff in most of the margins!”

Their birth mother sniffed daintily. “Well, it’s not as if it’s a library copy. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with writing in the margins if you own the book in question. Anyhow, on the subject of child psychology, let’s talk about your feelings.”

Hemlock rolled their eyes. “Okay, *fine*. I’m mostly angry with what Sasha did on the train. He knew he was my dad by then, so why did he go along with Carlisle’s stupid orders about interrogating me? Why didn’t he protect me, and why didn’t he bother saying anything about how he’s my dad for literally *weeks*? I mean, why did he leave it until yesterday? He could just as easily have told me the truth when I rang and asked him to help me rescue you from Rafferty! Any time since then too, for that matter.”

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Hoyden sighed. “Pretending that he hadn’t any connection to you was his way of protecting you. I don’t agree with how he went about it, but I understand his reasoning. Sasha has some very dangerous enemies, Hemlock; people who wouldn’t hesitate to harm you to get to him. That’s why he was so angry with Carlisle yesterday too; the news coverage might well have put you at risk. Any reporters who went digging for more information about you could have stumbled onto someone who’d seen the three of us talking together in the coffee shop.” She paused and sipped at her tea. “As for him not telling you the truth for so long, knowing Sasha, he’d been brooding about it. That’s usually how he manages important decisions – he calls it percolating.”

“That’s...um, that’s *embarrassingly* pretentious.” Hemlock thought back over everything else that they knew about their birth father so far. “Although I suppose I shouldn’t really be surprised, given that we’re talking about someone who lives on his very own private train and dresses as if he’s

escaped from an old music video. The swirling leather trench coat should probably have been a warning.”

Hoyden didn't bother to disagree. “He's still your biological father, regardless of how embarrassing he might be. He cares about you, Hemlock. We both do. But it's up to you whether or not you decide to have anything to do with him from here on in. I'll support you either way.”

There was the sound of a car pulling up on the gravel outside the cottage. Moments later, Sol appeared in the doorway between the dining room and the kitchen, having let himself in. “Good morning all! Hoyden, my darling sister, is there any chance that I'm in time for breakfast, or did the chicken already eat my share?”

Hoyden shook her head. “I didn't make enough for three people to begin with. Sorry, Sol, but such are the risks with turning up unexpectedly.”

Sol pouted. “You're a terrible host! Anyway, Hemlock – what's all this that I

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hear about you having run off to be a spy? And why, for the love of the Underlanden, did you decide to go public yesterday about your parents only having faked their deaths?"

Hemlock scowled. "Hey, if they wanted me to keep their secrets, then maybe they shouldn't have basically treated me like crap for my whole life and then abandoned me! And they're actually my *adoptive* parents, in case no one's told you that part yet."

Sol nodded as he helped himself to a cup of tea with lots of sugar. "Hoyden explained it over the phone yesterday. Congratulations on finally dragging her into the modern era of communications technology. Sorry your birth dad's so utterly...!"

Hoyden rose to her feet and glared at her brother. "Sol, that's enough! I don't want my child dragged into the ridiculous feud you and Sasha have going on. It's gone on far too long already, and I'm done with enabling it. Either kiss and make up, or schedule a nice, private fight to the death."

Sol pulled an exaggerated frown. "Oh, now that's simply not fair! I can hardly choose the kiss option given how there's living proof that you called dibs years ago." He gestured towards Hemlock with the teaspoon. "And private fights to the death are *so* out of fashion nowadays! No, I fear that ridiculous feuding over long since forgotten reasons is really our only option going forwards."

At this point, Hemlock decided to try to change the subject. "Um, so weren't you still in Tuscany just yesterday, Uncle Sol?"

The bearded fey nodded. "It seems that Belladonna and the rest of that lot got wind of the interview you gave. By the time I'd led the local authorities to the Baines' house, everyone had already cleared out. I decided that the most responsible course of action was to take the Underlanden straight back here and lecture you sternly on the perils of honesty."

Hemlock shrugged. "Well, in that case, I'd best not tell you about my

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having been training to become a spy. You know; because of all the perils of admitting stuff.”

Sol grinned. “Ah, so you’re a fast learner then! Clearly, my task is complete. Anyhow, seriously: no more running away, eh?”

The teenager picked at a loose thread on the hemline of their top. “Okay. Um, I’m sorry for mucking up the arrest. I didn’t think about what could happen if the interview went viral.”

Hoyden began clearing the breakfast dishes off the table. “It’s fine, Hemlock. You aren’t the one who’s really to blame. Carlisle should never have put you on the spot like that to begin with.”

Sol took a sip of his tea. “Hoyden’s quite right. Besides, I rather think that having so many reporters worldwide interested in talking to them will make life very awkward indeed for your erstwhile adoptive family. Their criminal contacts won’t like the attention.”

Hemlock found that they didn't feel at all sorry about that. They were about to say so, when there was a loud knock on the front door. Marmalade took the sound as her signal to go and investigate. Hemlock stood up. "I'll go see who's there."

It was Sasha, and he didn't look happy. In fact, he glared at Hemlock as they opened the door. "You have some explaining to do, Hemlock!"

Hemlock blinked in consternation. "Um, sorry, but what exactly is that I need to explain?"

Sasha stepped across the threshold and closed the front door behind him; being careful not to tread on Marmalade as he entered the cottage. "Tell me, does Hoyden know about that book reviewing blog of yours yet?"

Hoyden had followed Hemlock and Marmalade into the front hall. She frowned at Sasha's question. "What book reviewing blog would that be?"

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The blond lycothrope handed her his phone. "I took screenshots of the relevant parts. It seems our bairn has been making enemies online."

Hemlock frowned. "How does my book blog have anything to do with making enemies? I just use it to review stuff that I've read! I haven't even updated it since before the fire!"

Their birth father scoffed. "What, so have you forgotten about the debate you got into in the comments section for your deservedly disparaging review of the *Henrietta Thrower* series back in January of this year?"

The teenager thought back for a moment. "Um, are you talking about the anonymous troll account that kept on accusing me of making *Star Tripped* up? How does that matter? It was obviously just some random kid trying to start a fight online for fun!"

Hoyden handed the phone back to Sasha. There was a grim set to her face. "Except that it *wasn't* a random kid at all though, was it?"

“No, it wasn’t. The technical sorts at MI99 have confirmed that it was Joella Heath all along. It appears she wasn’t very good at covering her online tracks.” Sasha slid his phone back into his pocket. He sniffed the air. “Do I smell *Sol*?”

Hoyden nodded. “He’s in the dining room. I’ve already decided that the two of you aren’t going to keep feuding.”

The lycothrope snorted drily. “Nice of you to bother letting us know!”

Hemlock was still busy processing the realisation that they had unwittingly communicated with Joella Heath. “Ugh, seriously, how did she even find my blog in the first place? Did she just go around online, constantly searching for any mention of her books or something? And why did she bother with trolling me?”

Hoyden sighed. “She must have been *baiting* you, Hemlock. She probably wanted to find out what proof you had about the *Star Tripped* books even existing!”

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Hemlock shuddered as the truth sank in. "So...so when I posted a reply in the comments about how I was planning to blog about how many ways the *Henrietta Thrower* series rips off *Star Tripped*...that was why she tried to murder me, wasn't it? She had Rafferty set the fire because she wanted to destroy all of my books. Everything that happened was because of my blog!"

Sasha ruffled their hair. "Maybe Hoyden should ban you from going online, eh? We could see about finding you a nice outdoor hobby instead. You know, for safety, like."

Much to Hemlock's chagrin, Hoyden shook her head as she led the way back through the kitchen and into the dining room. "Oh no; I'm not making *that* mistake, not after the blessenbobble incident!"

Hemlock scowled as they sat down. "I'm just lucky to still have my thumb!"

They could tell that the three adults were only halfway listening to them now. Sol and Sasha were sitting at

opposite sides of the dining table, emanating an air of barely checked raw menace at each other. Hoyden, meanwhile, was watching the two of them warily as she finished clearing away the breakfast dishes. "Sasha, would you like a cup of tea?"

Sasha nodded, but continued his role in the impromptu staring match. "Aye, pet, I would."

Sol took a sip of his own tea. "So, the two of you are parents, eh? I must say, you kept *that* quiet."

A little of the tension seemed to leave the room. Sasha shrugged off his trench coat and draped it over the seat of the empty chair to his right. He rested his forearms on the table. "Try and imagine how / felt when I first found out about it! Mind you, she's always been right good at keeping things hidden, that lass."

Sol laughed. "No argument there! Oh, did she tell you about the plan for Hemlock yet? They're to attend Picketon

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House, like us. I'm sure you'll pitch in and help with the costs."

Sasha nodded. "Of course I will."

Hemlock folded their arms crossly. "Ugh, why do *none* of you seem even remotely bothered about the fact that I don't actually *want* to go away to boarding school?"

Hoyden handed Sasha his tea, and then sat down across from Hemlock. "I've actually been thinking about that, and I might have come up with a solution. How would you feel about attending Picketon House as a day pupil instead of boarding? That way, you could still come home after your classes finished each day and for the weekends too, of course."

The young half-fey blinked. "Um...I guess that could be okay, yeah."

Sasha sighed resignedly. "This will involve the ruddy Underlanden again, won't it? What with how far away Picketon House is from here."

Hoyden lifted Marmalade up onto her lap for a fuss. “Well, yes, of course it will, but I honestly don’t see why you’re worried. It’s a perfectly safe means of transportation.”

Hemlock nodded. “Yeah, just don’t leave bits of your train lying around unattended whenever you come to visit Hoyden and me!” They hesitated then. “Uh, I mean, you *are* going to do that sometimes, aren’t you?”

Neither of their birth parents looked as if they knew how best to respond to that question. Thankfully, Sol was more than happy to voice his opinion on the matter. “Well, for what it’s worth, I’ve always felt that the two of you make for an unbeatable team. I’m sure that you’ll be great parents. Perhaps try not to have a repeat of the Lisbon mermaid incident, though. That was...messy.”

Hemlock raised their eyebrows speculatively. “Um, so what happened in Lisbon? Was it MI99 related?”

Hoyden shook her head. “It’s classified, and yes, in that order. I still

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say that the Venice incident was far worse, mind you.”

All three adults grimaced at the memory of whatever strange and terrible events had occurred in Venice. Sasha muttered something beneath his breath about murderous cantaloupes. Then he nodded. “Reckon as Sol might have a point for once, pet. We did do a fair enough job of saving the world, back in the day, like. Parenting can’t be any great hardship after thon.”

Hoyden sighed. “Are you actively *trying* to jinx us now?”

Hemlock looked at Sasha. “So is that basically a yes on you visiting us and stuff? Only I’d sort of like to know for sure in advance whether or not you’re going to bother with being my dad.”

The lycothrope frowned. “Hemlock, I wouldn’t be here at all if I didn’t plan on stepping up as your dad. Speaking of which, if you’re planning to keep thon book blog of yours going, then I reckon that Hoyden and I had best have full access to it so as we can keep an eye

on things. We dinnae want to risk thee ending up running afoul of another murderous author or summat like.”

The teenager nodded reluctantly. “Okay. I suppose you have a point there. But since we’re talking about murderous authors, what’s happening with Joella Heath anyway?”

Sasha shrugged. “I shouldn’t think she’ll walk free; not given all of the evidence so far. Carlisle was still preening over thon by the time I left MI99 headquarters.”

Sol snickered. “I’m surprised that they let you back in the building to begin with, what with you having gone freelance since your second funeral.”

Hoyden glanced at Hemlock. “Hmm, well I expect that it’s rather difficult to ban someone from entry who’s still occasionally hired by the Section Chief, even if only to help with off the books sorts of missions.”

Sasha looked guilty at that. Then he cleared his throat. “So anyhow, I’ve

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been thinking about it. I reckon that it might do the three of us good to get away for a bit. You know; spend some quality time together as a family, and get to know one another proper like. Give me a chance to try and make up for what I let happen to Hemlock on my train, too. I mucked up there.”

Hemlock frowned. “That’s a nice gesture, I guess, but who’ll take care of the chickens and the goats?”

Their uncle gave an exaggerated sigh and raised his right hand. “I, the one who goes by Solanum Thornback, do hereby promise to care for my sister’s menagerie in her absence, in order to enable her to go on holiday!”

Hoyden raised her by now empty mug in a mock salute. “That’s very kind of you, Sol. And before anyone asks, we’re taking Marmalade along with us, so bear that in mind when you book things, Sasha.”

The lycothrope chuckled. “Find a chicken friendly holiday option, got it!”

Hemlock hadn't ever been on holiday abroad before; unless the fake training mission to Prague counted. They wondered what it would be like. *I suppose it might be boring compared to everything else that's happened so far this year. At least, I hope it is. I've had more than enough of adventure! All I want from here on in is a nice, quiet life, with lots of books.*





## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Eibhlín Valdys is the pseudonym of one of Northern Ireland's most prolific non-binary indie authors. A graduate of Queen's University Belfast, Eibhlín has been actively involved within the Arts Community in Northern Ireland since 2001. They have received funding as an individual artist via the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's SIAP 2013/14, 2016/17, 2018/19, and 2020/21, and also via the University of Atypical's DDASF 2021/22. When not busy writing, their other interests include gardening, dog walking, and equestrianism.