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## ONE

OH, NO." MARIEL SPARK STARED AT THE STARTLED CHICKEN that had materialized on her kitchen counter. "That wasn't what I meant to do."

At the kitchen table, Calladia Cunnington nearly choked on her tea. "Well, that's surprising. At least they both have wings."

Mariel gave her friend a *look*. She'd recited a summoning spell for an air sprite, not poultry. "Literally the only thing they have in common."

"Points for creativity?" Despite the joke, Calladia's wince was sympathetic. As a witch and Mariel's longtime friend, she knew how upsetting it was for Mariel to mess up a spell yet again.

"It's a basic summoning spell, not a Jackson Pollock painting." Mariel blew a stray curl out of her face, frowning at the surprise avian guest currently preening its ruffled feathers next to her toaster. Her spells often backfired, but this was a new level of fucked-up-ness.

"Well, I think it's cute," their other friend Themmie—short for Themmaline—Tibayan said from where she sat cross-legged in

midair. The pixie's iridescent wings fluttered as she took pictures of the bird with her smartphone.

"Sure, but what do I do with it?" The chicken was now scratching at the chalked pentagram beneath it. What would soothe an alarmed bird that had been teleported into a witch's kitchen?

"Can you send it back where it came from?" Calladia asked, tightening her blond ponytail. She looked disgustingly peppy for a Friday morning, her blue tank top damp with sweat from a recent gym visit.

Mariel bit her lip, trying not to snap. Calladia was the best person in the world, even if she set unreasonable fitness standards, but she'd never struggled with magic the way Mariel did. "Maybe. If I had any idea where it came from."

She wasn't sure how she'd summoned a chicken to begin with. Granted, her mind had wandered to her grocery list while chalking the spell, but it had been a brief distraction, hardly worth noting. And why a live chicken, rather than chicken cutlets or brussels sprouts or a gallon of milk?

Themmie cooed at the chicken as she took more photos. "Cluck for the camera, cutie. Strike that pose!" As a social media influencer, the Filipino American pixie documented everything, and her look changed constantly. This week, her straight black hair had been bespelled green and pink, and a nose ring winked in the sunlight cascading through the kitchen window.

Calladia rolled her eyes. "What is this, *America's Next Top Chicken?*"

*America's Next Top Witch* was a popular national TV show among both magic and nonmagic humans. The *America's Next Top Model* spinoff focused more on lingerie than spellcraft, but the models still cast illusions or shape-shifted during photo shoots. Mariel had enjoyed the show up until she'd realized as a

teenager that she was way, *way* behind even those reality TV disasters in terms of magical competency.

"On the bright side," Themmie said, "you probably rescued it from the cruel world of cage farming." Environmental activism was never far from Themmie's mind, and her face lit up. "We can build it a coop."

"I'm not keeping it," Mariel said. Even though it did look adorable as it goggled at her air fryer.

"Try reversing the symbols," Calladia suggested. "That should send it back."

Normally her friends didn't sit in on her spellcraft practice sessions, but in this case, Mariel was glad they'd come. They didn't judge her for mucking up magic the way her family did.

Mariel took a deep breath, then marked the counter with chalk again. A pentagram, then the reversed summoning marks in each arm of the inverted star. Her handwriting wobbled with the attempt. Hecate, why was writing backward so hard? At least this was a fairly simple summoning and wouldn't require any of the big witchy guns like salt, sage, or newt sperm. The more complex the spell, the more opportunities to fuck it up.

For the billionth time, Mariel wished magic was as easy as baking or gardening. But while Mariel had perfected a killer cranberry tart and raised beautiful flowers, she couldn't manage even a simple cleaning spell without making a horrible mistake. Embarrassing for any witch, but doubly so for the prophesied Spark heir. Before Mariel's birth, the wind, earth, and stars had all signified that she was going to be the strongest witch in generations of the famed magic family.

*Joke's on them*, Mariel thought as she marked another uneven rune into the pentagram. *I suck.*

The chicken flapped awkwardly, then plummeted to the floor

in a rustle of feathers. It started clucking, pecking perilously close to her ankles.

Mariel closed her eyes and thought about her spell. Magic incantations weren't spoken in Latin, much to her chagrin, since at least Latin had a logical structure. Magic had a language all its own—one that was frustratingly complex. It was full of roots pulled from dozens of languages, as well as some that seemed made up wholesale, and the rules of grammar and conjugation were chaotic at best. Sometimes she was tempted to light the dictionary on fire.

"Uh, Chanticleer just took a dump on your floor," Themmie said.

"Chanticleer was a rooster," Mariel said, eyes still closed.

"Excuse me, Chaucer enthusiast. And, ew, that chicken apparently eats a *lot* of fiber."

Great. Mariel scrunched up her nose and dug for the words that would send the chicken back home before it sullied her kitchen further. "*Adolesen di pullo!*" she proclaimed.

The chicken exploded.



"*AUFRASEN*," CALLADIA SAID GENTLY WHILE MARIEL SCRUBBED the floor. "The correct word was *aufrasen*."

"Too late." Tears pricked Mariel's eyes, and her stomach churned with nausea. She was generally okay with blood, but she'd just exploded a very cute chicken, and it felt different. Not to mention the gristly, bony . . . bits . . . that were sprayed all over her countertops. Her magic was apparently more like a Jackson Pollock painting than she'd thought. Mariel had a batch of muffins to make for Ms. Rostow down the street, but she wasn't sure she'd be able to stomach it.

Themmie, too, looked nauseated. She was hovering near the

ceiling, as far from the carnage as possible. "At least it died quickly."

And at least Themmie had stopped documenting the scene. Her followers probably wouldn't enjoy a chicken snuff film.

Mariel sat back on her heels and wiped her brow. Her skin came back streaked with blood, and she groaned, realizing chicken chunks were probably all over her, too. "I suck."

"You don't suck," Calladia said, coming to Mariel's defense as she always did. "Learning how to summon takes time. And you're amazing at nature magic."

Sure, it took time, but the two witches were the same age, and while Calladia had been successfully summoning for over a decade, Mariel was twenty-eight with the skills of a fifteen-year-old. Except when it came to plants, but—"You know my mom doesn't think much of nature magic," Mariel said morosely. Understatement of the century.

"Your mom's taste is questionable in general. Who cares, so long as it makes you happy?"

"I care. Mom says she'll only pay for grad school once I improve in teleportation and transmutation."

Her mother, Diantha Spark, was one of the best teleporters in the world and couldn't understand why Mariel struggled with that skill, especially considering the prophecy. While Diantha had insisted on paying for college and a house for Mariel (in fact, it had been a battle to convince her that Mariel only needed a small bungalow, rather than a mansion with a bowling alley), she'd balked at the idea of grad school. And not because it was too expensive—a dragon with a hoarding problem and a black Amex couldn't dream of making a dent in the funds the Sparks had been building for centuries. No, Diantha simply hadn't wanted to fund "boring magic." It had taken Mariel a long time to convince her that an SoD—sorcery doctorate—in Magical Herbology was a

good idea, since her mother didn't think plant magic was flashy enough. Eventually, they'd struck a compromise: if Mariel could show improvement in her nonnature-based spellcraft, her mother would release some of the vast Spark funds to pay tuition.

Calladia made a rude noise. "She's swimming in gold. She should support you without strings attached."

"Yeah, well, tell that to Sallie Mae." Mariel sighed. "At any rate, blowing things up isn't going to help my case."

"Maybe the issue is that you're summoning boring things," Themmie suggested from on high. "Who cares about some air sprite? You should conjure up a boyfriend."

Mariel rolled her eyes. "Just because I'm not dating doesn't mean I want to."

Themmie shrugged. "Then conjure a fuck buddy. Seriously, you're way too uptight about this whole Spark family legacy thing." Themmie was still in college, but even with her eyes glued to a phone all day, she'd managed to accumulate far more worldly experience than Mariel or Calladia had, with partners across the gender and species spectrums.

"Getting laid won't make me better at summoning."

"No, but it's a great stress relief."

Calladia crouched next to Mariel and reached out a hand as if to pat her shoulder. She hesitated, then pulled the hand back, and yep, there were definitely chicken bits all over Mariel. "I know you're worried about living up to the prophecy. But you'll master the skills on your timeline, not your mother's."

Mariel sighed. "I hope so."



ALTHOUGH CALLADIA HAD OFFERED TO CLEAN THE KITCHEN with a spell, scrubbing it by hand felt like penance. Calladia and Themmie left her to it, promising to meet up soon. The moment

they were out of the house, Mariel let a few tears escape for the dearly departed. "Sorry," she whispered to the gross mess in her garbage can. Being both a chicken and spectacularly dead, it didn't respond, but who knew? Maybe there was a separate spectral plane for dead poultry and the chicken's soul was staring across the veil right now, clucking the bird equivalent of *What the fuck*.

One long, very gross shower later, Mariel felt a bit better. She filled a watering pot and headed into her backyard, where a small greenhouse sat amid beds of herbs. The glass house was her favorite place in the world.

Gardening was one area in which Mariel excelled, both magically and nonmagically. She'd won Best in Class for Dianthus and Astroemeria at the previous year's Pacific Northwest Floral Championships—Supernatural Division, which was one of the tentpole events of the annual Glimmer Falls Autumn Festival. In just a few weeks, Mariel would be gunning for Best in Show with a display of magically enhanced blooms.

Thousands of tourists of all species descended on Glimmer Falls for the Autumn Festival, and it was one of Mariel's favorite times of year. Autumn's fiery shades swept over the majestic Cascade Mountains, and the town nestled into the foothills sparkled with magic shows.

Glimmer Falls would have been like any other twenty-first-century American town—mostly human, with a lively and visible subculture of witches and other supernaturals—except for a rare confluence of ley lines that infused the land with magic. As a result, the town drew a vast array of magical humans and other creatures. There were nonmagical humans, too, of course, since society had been integrated for all of recorded history, but while witches and warlocks comprised fifteen percent of the human population worldwide, in Glimmer Falls it was more like seventy

percent . . . and that was before considering the centaurs, pixies, sirens, werewolves, and other species who called it home. Glimmer Falls was exciting, unpredictable, and wonderfully weird, and Mariel loved her hometown with all her heart.

Her shoulders relaxed as soon as she inhaled the warm, fragrant air inside the greenhouse. "Hi, babies," she told the plants. She started watering them, testing the soil in each bed with her finger to ensure nothing was still damp. As she passed, the blossoms tilted towards her as if she were the sun.

"Good girl," she murmured to her fire lily as it caressed her fingers with its long red petals. She could feel the plant's contentment, a soft happiness at having its needs fulfilled.

Garden magic lacked the drama of transmogrification or teleportation, but it was the one magical skill Mariel had taken to instantly. Even as a child, plants had leaned towards her, and her first pet had been a rosebush. As Mariel walked up and down the rows of plants, she infused each one with a brush of magic, feeding the roots with life. Thanks to her skill, her plants blossomed year-round, unaffected by the outside weather. October was already digging its chill fingers into Glimmer Falls, but inside the greenhouse, time seemed to stand still.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and Mariel groaned. Time for her mother's daily check-in. The plants recoiled in sympathy. Mariel answered the phone, already dreading the interrogation to come. "Hi, Mom."

"How is your spellcraft going?" Diantha Spark's strident voice burst through the speaker, and Mariel pulled the phone away from her ear. "Did you summon an air sprite correctly?"

"I summoned," Mariel said, omitting several key facts.

"Oh, good. Useless things, always flittering about, but they're helpful when you need a stiff breeze to blow up some bitch's skirt. Speaking of bitches, did I tell you I ran into Cynthia Cunnington

the other day?" Cynthia was Calladia's mother, as well as Diantha's frenemy and magical rival. "She wanted me to know all about her daughter's transmogrification practice. Are you still hanging around that girl?"

"Yes, Mom." Mariel pinched the bridge of her nose. She and Calladia—rhymed with Cascadia—had been best friends since elementary school. It was an odd pairing on the surface—rough-and-tumble Calladia had been suspended more than once for fighting, while dreamy Mariel had spent her recesses playing with weeds on the playground—but they fit together. Add the stress of a matching pair of overbearing mothers, and there had been no separating them.

"Well, keep an eye on her," Diantha said. "Keep your enemies close, but not close enough to exchange fluids, that's what I always say."

Mariel made a face. "Calladia isn't my enemy."

"Everyone's your enemy when you're the best. I know you don't know how that feels yet, but there weren't any prophecies delivered at Calladia's birth, so I'm certain you'll show her up soon. You're the daughter of the best teleporter in three hundred years, after all."

"Two hundred and eighty," Mariel said, taking secret glee from repeating her mother's least favorite fact. "Griselda Spark was better."

Diantha made a rude noise. "The historical record is full of inaccuracies."

If her mom started griping about family history, there would be no escaping the call anytime soon. "I'd love to chat," Mariel said, sandwiching the phone between her ear and shoulder as she caressed the leaves of her jade vine, "but I'm in the middle of gardening."

"You and your plants. It's a marvel you have the focus for that,

but not for fulfilling your destiny. The stars didn't say anything about daisies, you know."

Mariel rolled her eyes. "I like gardening. I got two awards for it last year, if you'll recall."

"Ribbons," Diantha said scornfully. "Do you know what they give Best National Spellcaster? A golden trophy studded with precious jewels."

"Yes, I'm aware." There was a display case of trophies in the entry hall of her parents' house, a constant reminder of the family legacy she was failing to live up to. Moving out of that house for college had been a massive relief, not least because she no longer had to look at those stupid trophies every time she came or went.

"You'll get one this year, I'm sure of it. You're just a late bloomer. Your father says sometimes genius works like that. A witch seems like a useless idiot for years, and then something clicks. Have you tried Ritalin? I heard it does wonders for improving focus."

"I don't have ADHD, Mom."

"Yes, I know, but abusing drugs can be surprisingly useful. I once went on the longest cleaning spree after snorting coke with your father in college . . ."

Mariel let her mother yammer on, knowing there was no stopping it unless she outright hung up. Diantha Spark was a force of nature, known for her strident opinions, alarming uses of teleportation, and questionable boundaries. She was both beloved and feared in Glimmer Falls.

Talking to her mother, much like gardening and baking, required patience and precision. Mariel bided her time, waiting for the perfect moment to escape.

"—and you know she lords it over me, the salty bitch. Best pie, never mind that I teleported chocolate from Belgium and wasted two hours of my time trying to show her up."

Mariel rolled her eyes. She'd been hearing about Cynthia Cunnington's levitating rhubarb pie ever since last year's Autumn Festival. Funny how her mom had derided baking until her "friend"—aka magical nemesis—had decided to try her hand at enchanting a pie.

"Baking is beneath me," Diantha said, "but she said that nasty thing and I had to destroy her somehow, and your father wouldn't let me port her into a volcano. Do you think she bribed the festival judge?"

"No."

"You have such a trusting nature. You should work on that. Anyway, this year I'm going all out. A chocolate truffle pie with truffles imported from France, topped with authentic gold leaf and ensorcelled to shoot fireworks." She cackled. "Let her try to beat that!"

Mariel seized the moment. "Speaking of teleporting truffles, I hate to cut this conversation short, but I need to bake some muffins."

"Ugh. I bake out of spite; I would never willingly subject myself to it otherwise." Diantha sighed. "All right, dear. Make sure to teleport the ingredients from abroad."

"Will do."

"Only the best for the Sparks, that's what I always say."

"Yep."

"You'll live up to the family reputation soon, I'm sure of it." Diantha made smacking kiss sounds into the phone. "Goodbye, Mariel dear, make your ancestors proud today."

"Bye, Mom." Mariel hung up, then sagged against the glass wall. "I'm exhausted," she told her tulips. "It's ten a.m., and I'm exhausted just from listening to her."

The tulips nodded in sympathy.

"Make your ancestors proud today," Mariel mimicked. It was