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Tales of the Keyword: An Examination of the Study and Application of Craft Theory for Writers

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
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Getting Inside a Character's Head: A Study of POV and Character

Introduction: How Craft Theory is Useful to Writers

“I don't believe in craft in the abstract—each individual novel is its own rule book, training ground, factory, and independent republic.”

In this quote from Zadie Smith's “A Crafty Feeling,” she puts into words a fundamental truth of writing that is not considered nearly enough: The aspects of literary theory that are concerned with the mechanics and construction of creative works are minimally helpful to writers in the process of writing when not paired with concrete examples. We are practiced in the art of putting words on a page, but each new work teaches us how it wants to be written. In that way, every new project turns a seasoned writer into a novice, following a plotted path into new territory. For these aspects of literary theory that are concerned with the construction of the creative work (referred to henceforth for the purposes of this essay as “craft theory”) to be useful to writers, they must detail how its concepts are applied to a finished piece of fiction. The point, then, is not for craft theory to teach a writer how to write; the point is for craft theory to teach a writer how to read.

It is a commonly accepted notion that writing and reading must go hand-in-hand. As Stephen King says in *On Writing*: “If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot...every book you pick up has its own lesson or lessons” (145). I came to writing through reading fiction works and being inspired by them. Before I opened a book about craft theory, before I even considered studying writing formally, I learned to write through imitation, the same way one learns to play an instrument by ear. Craft theory is to writing as music theory is to music—it is perfectly acceptable to learn to play an instrument by ear, but intuition often hits a hurdle without the theory to guide it. Music theory—craft theory—

gives an artist a vocabulary for the way their art is created and shows them what to look for when studying other works of art to emulate.

Writing, then, becomes a three-step process: read books and essays about craft theory to learn a vocabulary for analysis of the kind of fiction you want to write, read the kind of fiction you want to write, and put that learning into practice by writing. This process was the basis of my first foray into redrafting my novel. I dedicated myself to writing every day and alternated between reading craft theory and reading fiction works, often one of each at the same time. For fiction, I read the *Throne of Glass* series by Sarah J. Maas. I followed Smith's process in terms of what she calls "other people's words" (3). She discusses how the quality of what you read while you write matters, and how other people's words can influence the voice in your own writing. In the essay, the latter is said as a critique by some of her students, but that is precisely what I was hoping for by staying knee-deep in the series while I redrafted. Maas has a way with close third-person narration that both gets close enough to the narrating character to show their personality and inner thoughts, and stays far enough away to allow her style to show through, holding the novel and the series together. This balance of craft in the development of characters and the way that colors the narration was what I was hoping to have translated into my own writing. To fully understand how those things work in Maas's writing, I started with a simple question: What is a character, and how does that lead to close third-person narration?

Character and Narrative Voice

Character and narrative voice are inextricably intermingled. In James Woods's *How Fiction Works*, he describes a narrative voice that is told through a third-person lens where the narration is colored by a particular character's inflection at a short narrative distance. He describes this as, "free indirect style," or "close third person" (8). The narration itself tells the

reader about the traits of the character by the way they react to things and the things they notice or do not notice. For this to be the case, a writer must have a firm grasp on who the character is and how they would think about the events the story portrays.

Once a central character is established, Wood argues that the writing tends toward a short narrative distance as its natural method. He says, “so-called omniscience is almost impossible. As soon as someone tells a story about a character, narrative seems to want to bend itself around that character, wants to merge with that character, to take on his or her way of thinking and speaking” (7). This might have something to do with the rising popularity of close third-person narration in modern novels, or it could be because of the Romantic notion that inspiration and imagination comes from outside the writer, from some distant ether that is not directly accessible to them. Either way, narration tends to take on the viewpoint of a particular character, as hard as a writer might try to make them objective.

Defining “Character”

Character is not as easy to define as close-third perspective, and every author has a different way of describing it. In *On Writing*, King does not define what a character is; instead, he describes how to build one: “The job boils down to two things: paying attention to how real people around you behave and then telling the truth about what you see” (189). A similar sentiment is echoed in *Bird by Bird*, where Anne Lamott prescribes getting to know the character, following the notion that a character is not brought into existence by a writer so much as they are discovered when needed. She advises visualizing them and asking mundane questions about them the same way a person gets to know a stranger (44-45).

Wood himself is unsure of what a “novelistic character” is (106-107), since they are so varied. One cannot say that a novelistic character does one thing or another, or appears a certain way, any more than one can define what a person is. According to Wood, the vitality of a character has to do with “a larger philosophical or metaphysical sense, our awareness that a character’s actions are deeply important, that something profound is at stake” (126). Perhaps he would agree with Michael Noll’s experiences with Plato, that just as one knows a table because of its fundamental “tableness” (1), so too does one recognize a character because of some innate essence.

E.M. Forster’s view brings the most definitive non-answer to the question. In *Aspects of the Novel*, he says that characters are more like people than they are aspects of fiction, that we write characters according to how we see people, similar to King and Lamott. He says, “they are real not because they are like ourselves (though they may be like us) but because they are convincing” (97).

“Convincing” in this context is hard to define, but it seems to have its roots in Forster’s notion of “the barrier of art” (97). As much as characters are like people, they are necessarily different from people to fit into fiction. It is not enough for them to be like people to be convincing, but rather to strike a balance between being just enough like a person and just enough like a character in a work of fiction. That balance is what ushers in suspension of disbelief. When a character acts too much like a character, readers will see behind the curtain and into the writer pulling the strings of the narrative. If a character acts too much like a person, the work strays into nonfiction. The character must be balanced between the writer’s real-world experiences and their imagination.

Balancing the Perspective Character and the Writer's Style

To maintain that balance, a writer must also layer their own style over the inflection of the perspective character. Even when the narrative distance is very close, the style of the writer on a sentence level creates cohesion throughout the book. That cohesion is the glue of the novel, and it serves as a promise to the reader that there is some intelligent design behind it. The reader sees the writer's hand in the work and trusts that the writer will bring them somewhere important by the end. Their trust is what brings them through pages, chapters, and series, when otherwise the series of events risks seeming pointless and without an intended destination.

Learning a Character's Voice

Often, knowing a character does not directly lead to knowing their narrative voice. This issue is similar to writers who struggle with dialogue; they know who the character is, what they want, where they went to second grade, but the writer cannot quite grasp how they sound.

The answer is simple, and one echoed by many authors—Lamott (66), King (183), and Natalie Goldberg (58), in particular: listen, and pay attention. In order to write how people sound, you have to listen to how people sound. The world must become a wealth of learning, where a writer notices as much as possible and files it away to be examined later, for setting, for plot ideas, but especially for dialogue and narration.

Close Reading in *Throne of Glass*

In the beginning of *Throne of Glass*, Maas establishes the main character, Celaena Sardothien, by starting at a distance to let the reader ground themselves in the world and the

situation, and then zooming in to let the reader inside Celaena's head and introduce them to her thought process and personality. The first paragraph says:

After a year of slavery in the Salt Mines of Endovier, Celaena Sardothien was accustomed to being escorted everywhere at shackles and at sword-point. Most of the thousands of slaves in Endovier received similar treatment—though an extra half-dozen guards always walked Celaena to and from the mines. That was expected by Adarlan's most notorious assassin. What she did not usually expect, however, was a hooded man in black at her side—as there was now (1).

The first sentence introduces the reader to the setting, the character, and the moment in time. The second establishes Celaena's expected day-to-day. The third gives vital, interesting information about her, and why her day-to-day is already different from every other person's in Endovier. The final sentence tells why the story starts on this day and what is different about it.

The narration here is far from her own thoughts. There is none of her own inflection in "what she did not usually expect" (1); there is only the fact of it. The second paragraph continues in this way to tell how the guards and the hooded figure lead her around the complex to confuse her and make sure she cannot find her way out again (1).

Then the third paragraph shifts closer and closer until the narration is entirely in Celaena's voice:

At least, that was her escort's intention, because she hadn't failed to notice when they went up and down the same staircase within a matter of minutes. Nor had she missed when they zigzagged between levels, even though the building was a

standard grid of hallways and stairwells. As if she'd lose her bearings that easily. She might have been insulted if he wasn't trying so hard (1-2).

This paragraph and the inflection of Celaena's narration tells the reader much about the scene and about her. It undercuts their expectations at the end of the second paragraph, set up by "...until she hadn't the slightest chance of finding her way out again" (1). The tension here exists between a distant narrative voice and a closer narrative voice. Because of the initial distance, the reader trusts that what they are reading is accurate. They have not read an inflection that keys them into a bias that would indicate some cause for doubt. When the distance gets closer, the reader realizes that what they were reading was actually false, which applies both to the narration itself and to the perceptions of the guards. The guards are going through the motions, following a procedure that would work for any other inmate.

Celaena, however, corrects their assumption quickly. The narrative distance closes in, allowing her to tell the reader that the guards were wrong. The paragraph tells us that she is clever—she knows what they are doing and why they are doing it; that they have underestimated her; and that there is some level of insulting pity from her towards an escort she thinks is incompetent. That last notion is confirmed a few pages later: "the only thing all the intended disorientation had accomplished was to familiarize her with the building. Idiots" (3). This is precisely the kind of arrogance and underestimation the reader comes to expect around Celaena. Maas establishes it at the beginning of the novel, so the reader knows to expect it later.

When a reader comes to *Throne of Glass* as a finished work, the close third-person narration tells the reader about the POV character, Celaena. In writing the narration, Maas first had to know who Celaena was and how she thought. Maas had to decide what her speaking voice would sound like and what her inflection would be in thought. That knowledge of character is

what colors the narration first and then gets refined through the revision process. For a reader, narration comes first and teaches them about the character. For the writer, character must come first to accurately write the narration.

While these two aspects of craft may defy definition to certain extents, the usefulness of the craft conversation lies not in making them fit into a box, but rather teaching writers how to recognize them when they show up in existing fiction. Craft theory for writers is the conversation of what makes a certain work tick, and how those techniques can be utilized in one's own work to achieve an effect. It is interested in helping other writers continue to create art, so there is more art to study and thus more art to make. The conversation spurs creativity, so the cycle can continue, and storytellers can continue to do what we do best: discover characters, learn their voices, and show them to the world.

Conclusion: Application in Redrafting

So, if a writer has gone through the first steps and done their due diligence in applying craft theory to reading analysis, how do they go about applying what they have learned to their writing?

On a broad spectrum, anything goes, so long as the “anything” is writing. As King would advise, write, and write a lot. Much of the learning process comes not just from the drafting process many are familiar with in an academic setting, but a variety of techniques that all fall under writing: free writing, brainstorming, outlining. Writing in order, writing out of order, writing in alternate universes and in situations the characters would never find themselves in in the novel. They all serve their purposes in sparking inspiration, learning about the characters, and/or getting out of the rut of writer's block.

In my own practice, I found it helpful to do imitation exercises. I wrote the first hundred pages or so of the novel in first person, so I knew I needed to rethink how I write narration, to undo old habits and start from scratch. I had already been reading the Throne of Glass series, so I picked a few chapters from *Queen of Shadows* and *Tower of Dawn*, and I tried to rewrite some of my own novel scenes according to their construction. On a sentence-by-sentence level, I noted the way Maas weaves in character-based narration alongside descriptions of action from a different narrative distance. She allows the characters' thoughts to guide the exposition in a style similar to stream of consciousness; when a character sees something that reminds them of their past, the scene usually turns to exposition or flashback. In the rare moments it does not, the reader can see Maas's hand in the work and know she is keeping valuable information from them, which builds tension.

This is how I learned to write close third-person narration. My study of character was less an intentional pursuit and more an intuitive observation. My work has always been driven by characters and worldbuilding first and foremost, so plot comes naturally from understanding my characters inside out, as well as the world they live in and the problems it presents. The building blocks of characters come from Lamott's advice: go out into the world, notice, and listen. People will show you the face of humanity, and reading will show you the faces of fiction. Both are needed to write good characters.

What follows is an excerpt from my in-process novel that has been selected to showcase the way close third-person narration and character appear in the work. We find the cast of characters in Chapter 16. Here, the Keyworld serves as a magical sublayer of the modern world as we know it, teeming with vampires, fey, and werewolves. Charged with its protection and secrecy are a group known as the Guardians, gifted by the Earth itself with the power to control

the elements. The Council, figureheads of the Keyworld and overseers of the Guardians, have met with the cast and charged them with a mission. Lena (the main character, a Guardian of fire) is to go with Byron (her mentor, a water Guardian), Constance (a witch of fey blood), Sammy (an adopted werewolf), and Ashton (an air Guardian in training) to obtain a magical artifact, an opal staff known as a Key, and prove Ashton capable at the same time. They have just finished a heist to gain an audience with Holliday, an archfey who leads the largest coven in New York City and who owns the staff. The heist was rocky due to a miscommunication, and tension has been brewing between Lena and Ashton since.

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Excerpts from *Tales from the Keyworld*Chapter 16

With dusk quickly descending on the horizon, the small entourage finished their final touches and convened in the hall. A borrowed jacket sloped down Sammy's shoulders. Lena had helped him tie his tie, and she herself wore a white blouse with a black skirt. Constance had slicked back her blonde hair, and a maroon blazer fell halfway to her knees. Ashton wore the same standard black suit he had worn to greet the Council. Byron had swapped his traditional suit coat for one detailed with gold filigree and had procured a cane.

Ashton glanced over at Lena. "There's not a dagger under that skirt, is there? The invitations said to come unarmed."

"Then I guess you'll never get to find out," she replied coolly. "Are we all ready to go?"

Byron gave her a pointed look, darting his eyes to Ashton before returning to her. She shook her head. *Not now.*

He sighed. "I suppose so."

* * *

Constance cast her gaze around the room as they crossed the threshold, taking in the sheer plethora of magic around her. The room was all dark glossy wood and gold and glass, like some kind of gothic Egyptian dream. A balcony ringed the entire room, which spanned the length of a football field, easily. Below them, people of all kinds and presentations milled about. Heads bobbed along to the music floating out from the other side of the room. Small flares of energy disrupted the open air as magic was performed for entertainment. As they watched, a small dragon made of

sparkling light apparated above their heads and circled its way up to nestle among the spikes of the chandelier.

Constance followed its flight to the chandelier and cocked her head. It was massive, taking up almost the width of the ceiling, and it was dripping with crystals. What wasn't dripping were the candles. The flames were real—she could see them flicker as the air moved—but the candles were perfect, not a wax drip to be seen. “Wow,” she breathed.

Constance turned to Lena, a grin on her face, but it quickly faltered. Lena was wincing away from the lights and the noise. Her ears were probably ringing, Constance realized.

The witch reached out and took Lena's hand in hers. *Hey, it's alright. Just breathe.*

Lena's hand tensed in her grasp, but she didn't pull away. *I think we might have bitten off more than we can chew.* Her eyes were locked on a space across the room.

Constance followed her line of sight to the opposite balcony, where a tall, lithe figure leaned over the railing, watching the room below. He was enveloped in a suit made of black velvet that swallowed the light around him. A gnarled staff with a large opal leaned against the railing beside him, clasped loosely in long fingers.

As if he had felt their attention, his focus lifted from the room below and landed on them.

His eyebrow quirked up and he straightened, extending his arms in open invitation.

I don't think we can back out of this now, Constance said.

No. No we can't. Lena straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin, leading the rest of them through the crowd.

* * *

Holliday was humming as they approached. He turned, every movement one of slow, feline grace. He draped his arms across the banister, fingers still encircling the staff. His eyes drifted over each of them with the casual interest of one perusing wares. “What interesting company you keep, Miss Grindstaff.” He paused on Sammy, who stilled under his gaze, then turned with much more interest to Constance. “What brings a witch into the company of Guardians?”

Constance shrugged, perfectly reflecting his aloof demeanor. “Good pay, initially. Then good company.”

He hummed again. “I’m sure. Well, tell me a bit about this entourage. I don’t do business with strangers. Your favor for Russo only bought you my presence.”

Alarm bells were ringing in Lena’s head. Russo had told them Holliday never just threw a party, not when there were displays of power to be made and people to torment psychologically. This was a man who cared more about the intellectual than the tangible, and he was asking for information. If they weren’t careful, they were likely to become the lab rats in Holliday’s experiment.

Lena spread her hands, the picture of ease. “What do you want to know?”

He glanced between all of them again. “You’re obvious, the Council wants you here,” he said, looking at Byron. He looked between Constance and Ashton indecisively, finally settling on her. “You. Who are you protecting?”

She crossed her arms and nodded towards Lena without hesitation. “I protect her.”

His lip twitched up in amusement. “And who do you protect?”

“I protect all of them,” Lena said.

His eyes narrowed. “Mm, that’s not quite true, is it?” He looked at Byron and Constance again in turn. “He taught you everything you know, and she protects you…” His gaze turned to Ashton. “You radiate recalcitrance in waves. Why?”

Ashton shifted his shoulders and shoved his hands into his pockets. “What do you mean, why?”

“Nobody gets to be like *that* without prodding, dear boy, I would know. So, why?” He glanced between Lena and Ashton again, smiling again as realization dawned on his face. “It’s her, isn’t it? Yes. It’s *you* she protects. The wolf, too, but in a different way. And you’re absolutely *chaffing* against it.”

Sammy’s eyes widened, questioning.

A fire was building in Lena’s chest, warming her fingertips. She resisted the urge to grind her teeth. She had to seem like he couldn’t get to her. All he wanted was a reaction, and she was *not* about to give him what he wanted.

Ashton’s expression was dark. “Why do you care? What does this have to do with anything?”

“The truth can be just as valuable as things. See, I like to make things *happen*. We can talk about the staff, but this is what I require beforehand. Your favor bought my presence. The truth will buy my attention, and perhaps my cooperation. But,” Holliday looked pointedly between all of them, “only the truth. I want it from all of you.” He gestured over Lena’s shoulder to an open doorway that led to a sitting space. “Come along, let’s talk.”

They all followed, uneasy.

Lena reached out to Byron mentally. *What's he doing? What's his game?*

Her mentor frowned. *I'm not sure. Be very careful what you say to him. I imagine these walls have ears.*

Holliday draped himself over an armchair as they settled. "So, I want the lay of the land. Let's start with the wolf. He seems simple. What's your name?"

Sammy blinked a few times. "I'm Sam."

"And what are you doing with so many vampires, Sam?"

He rubbed his arm with his other hand. "I wanted to learn how to take care of myself."

"And you thought this lot could teach you?" He cocked his head to the side, confused.

"No, just...just her. I met Lena first, and she promised to teach me."

"Ah, so he's your student, and your ward. You took pity on the poor wolf." He turned back to Sam. "Why didn't your pack do that for you?"

He frowned. "I didn't choose my pack. I was never initiated. So I picked my own path."

"Why her? What is it about a young prodigy that would've struck a charity case like yourself?"

Lena saw the flash of hurt in Sammy's eyes, and she wanted to strangle Holliday. Every comment stoked the coals burning behind her ribs, sharpening the ache that always lived there. She grasped onto the pain to ground herself, all the while maintaining the perfect façade on her face.

Sammy hid it well, too. Beyond the half second of reaction, he didn't flinch. "She treated me like a person. She said she gets it, because she hasn't reached maturity, because people resent her help. She said no one takes her seriously."

His eyebrows turned up again, looking at her. "Well, that's not true, is it? You command a room with your presence. The mention of your last name demands respect. Have you been in a room in the past six months where you were not the first addressed?"

Don't talk to me of respect when my last name got Aurora killed—

She bit the inside of her cheek and refused to drop eye contact.

He tutted. "What a thread you've strung. Avelock."

Byron looked up calmly. "Yes?"

"How did she come to you?"

"A friend sent her to me when they noticed her powers."

"And then? What was she like, early on?"

He shrugged. "She wasn't raised by Keyworlders, so there was a lot to catch her up on, but she worked hard. She was dedicated."

Holliday caught a change in inflection. "She *was* dedicated? Something changed. What was it?"

Lena's heart pounded in her throat. *Byron, don't.*

"She had a bad mission, realized the dangers she faced. She lost her naivete."

Holliday narrowed his eyes, unsatisfied, but he shifted his focus again. "Witch."

She lifted her chin. “Constance.”

A hint of respect shone in his eyes. “What makes you think you need to protect a Guardian, let alone a Grindstaff?”

She matched his push, unrelenting. “She’s my friend. I protect my friends.”

He looked around. “Are these not also your friends? You didn’t say you protect them. You said you protect *her*.”

“You said you wanted the truth. That’s what I gave you.”

He smiled again. “Interesting. Alright, I’ll stop stalling. You, with the lack of discipline.”

Ashton looked up with hate in his eyes. “Yes?”

Holliday shifted in one swift movement to mirror Ashton’s posture, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “How close did she have to get to push your buttons like that?”

The coals in Lena’s chest went cold.

Ashton’s foot stopped tapping. He shook his head and muttered, “Too close.”

He leaned forward again, turning his head like he hadn’t heard. “What was that?”

“I let her get too close. She knows too much.”

“Well, now I’m hooked. Please, elaborate.”

A muscle twitched in Ashton’s cheek, like he was grinding his teeth. “I told her the one thing I haven’t told anybody, and she threw it back in my face to get me to do what she wanted. She keeps me at arm’s length and she won’t tell me why. She’s lying to herself.”

Holliday's eyes lit up like Christmas. *"That* is truth. So what is it, little Grindstaff, that you keep from him? Why bond to the wolf, accept the help of your mentor, win the affections of the witch, and try to keep this one away? Why did you pick him?"

"I didn't. He picked me."

"Maybe, but you could've kicked him to the curb long ago. Why keep him around, if you didn't want to keep him close? To supervise him?" He leaned forward. "Come on, out with it."

She shook her head. He stood and extended his hand to her. "Okay. If you won't say it to him, you have to say it to me."

She rose, taking his hand, a pit in her stomach.

He led her through a door at the end of the room. Her thoughts raced between heartbeats. What could she tell him? Would he know if she lied? How much did he know about them already?

His hand brushed against her throat, moving her hair out of place. "My friend will be so glad you stopped by, Lena." Then, something pierced her skin. Her breath expelled from her lungs. The room spun and went dark.

Chapter 17

Consciousness returned slowly. She shifted. Clanking accompanied her every movement. She dragged her eyelids open and blinked until the room came into focus. Iron shackles were latched onto her wrists and ankles, connected to the floor in the middle of the room. The burning in her chest had completely dissipated, but the pain and the lightheadedness remained. He had to have injected her with serum...but why? What did he want with her?

And what did he mean by his friend?

She pulled herself into a sitting position, fighting against the darkness as it pushed at the edges of her vision again. She braced her feet against the ground, turned her wrists upward, and yanked with all her strength.

They didn't move a centimeter.

Okay, new tactic. She reached into the back of her mind for her energy reserve and prepared to send all the heat she could summon into the metal—and stopped. A rune was carved into the floor. She couldn't read the rune for its translation, but she knew enough to know it meant the shackles were enchanted. Even if they weren't, she didn't have enough magic left to sustain it. By the time she made any headway, she'd be too unconscious to care.

Fine. She cast her awareness outward. She wasn't in the same building anymore, that was for sure. She couldn't hear any of her friends. Even Ashton was silent. She prayed it was because he was too far away and not because of something worse. Instead, she caught the presence of a few walled off individuals, and footsteps coming her way.

She pulled back immediately, closed her eyes, and slowed her breathing. The door opened a few moments later. "Cut the act, I know you're awake."

She gritted her teeth and opened her eyes again.

His ice blonde hair had fallen out of place over muddy red eyes. He pushed dress shirt sleeves up his arms and came to sit in front of her, where she could see him clearly. He looked rather apathetic about the whole thing.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

“You don’t need to know that.”

“What did you do with my friends?”

“You don’t need to know that either.”

“Where am I?”

“You ask a lot of questions for none of them to be, *What do you want*, or, *Why am I here*, or, *What are you going to do to me.*”

“I figured if I waited long enough, those questions would answer themselves.”

“Oh, right, I forgot you’re smart.”

She glared at him. “Fine. Are you Holliday’s friend, then?”

“Something like that. We had an arrangement. Just like you and I did, but you didn’t know it. Not until you almost screwed it up.”

“What do you mean, we had an arrangement?”

“You ran all kinds of little errands for me. There are things I want, Lena, things other people don’t want me to have. You were being wonderfully helpful in leading me to them. Until you weren’t, and now you’re here.”

Her mind was still fuzzy. She felt like she was two steps behind this conversation. She’d never met this man before in her life, and she certainly wouldn’t have run his errands. “I didn’t help you do anything—”

He rolled his eyes. “That’s the point. You never would have agreed if you had known.”

“Why are you telling me now, then?”

"Because I had to pull you out. You were getting to be more of a problem than a help, getting too far off track. Ryder's not helping with that, either. I might have to do something about him."

She pushed herself to her feet. Her vision swam. "If you touch him, I swear to god—"

"Save your swearing," he said, watching her stumble. "It'd be more impressive if your antidote actually worked."

She paled, leaning back against the wall. "What?"

He gestured into the air like he was explaining basic math to a child. "I'm not stupid. You went to Vance, you're friends with the witch. Aurora had your same little problem. It wasn't much of a leap."

He knows about us. He knows about Vance... "How do you know about my family?"

He got up to walk around the room. "I have a bit of history with your family. Aurora and I were part of the same society, a long time ago. She looked at me with the same disdain in her eyes."

She laughed. "I can't imagine why."

He took her face in his hand, his fingernails digging into her cheek. *"Watch your mouth."* He released her and walked away, scoffing. "Unbelievable, that people like you got powers like that."

She watched him carefully. "I didn't ask for this."

He whirled back around, his voice ringing through the room. "No, but *I did!* It was supposed to be mine! The powers, the abilities, the status. It was taken from me, *my birthright*. It

was rightfully mine, and I wasn't worthy." He barked a laugh. "They said there was a *darkness* in me that the Earth wouldn't give power to."

Realization dawned on her. "You were supposed to be a Guardian."

"Damn right I was," he growled. "My whole life I was told it would come and I needed to be prepared. I trained and I learned, and then my awakening came, and nothing. No powers, no nothing. All I got was red eyes and the ability to hear dog whistles." He lifted a hand and pointed. "*Aurora Grindstaff*," he said, drawing out the name in mock reverence. "I knew her. I was involved in that scene since I was old enough to know anything. I looked up to her. I wanted to be *like* her. She knew *exactly* what to do with that power, how to make it work for her.

"She was good at hiding the fact she didn't like me. I guess you learn how to be *polite*, *diplomatic*, but I could see it in her eyes. She knew I'd never make it. I suppose she could see the *darkness* in me." His tone darkened, dripping acid with every word. "She had everything I ever wanted, everything I was denied, and she threw it *away!* Tossed it right in the trash because it wasn't good enough. Because she wasn't willing to do what was necessary. It was too much for her." He stepped closer, smiling. "It won't be too much for me," he whispered, "and I know it won't be too much for you." He stepped back, regarding her. "No, you're stronger than she was. Just a little more vicious, with a little less to lose. That was the key, I think. She gave it all up to retain her humanity, so she could live a nice, quiet, safe life, with that blathering fool on top of a mountain. That's not you, not even close. She was born into it, it was expected of her, but you, you *chose* this, at the expense of a normal life. Of your family. All that's standing in your way is Ryder, and that ridiculous sense of honor they instill in you. Both easily dealt with. Besides, without him you don't have much of a sense of honor anyway.

“Innocent Aurora, she never had the guts that you do. Your flame burns brighter than hers ever did. And now, you’re going to help me, and I’ll help you fan the fire.”

She was quiet for a moment, processing. “What don’t they want you to have?”

“Well, Holliday’s staff for one. That spellbook you found with your little wolf friend, for another. An amulet. A ring. A glaive.”

“Why the staff? It’s not like you can use it, not any more than he can.”

“Because I can, little Grindstaff, once they’re all together.” He waited for a moment. When her expression didn’t change, he sighed. “Alright, I’ll explain. You would have heard of them as ‘artifacts sanctioned to Guardian use.’ At the height of the Guardian’s era, they employed the fey to craft items called Keys at the same time they made the swords. They were imbued with magic that grants them their properties, each in accordance with the element it matched. They enhanced the control of the elements, they contained energy reserves, they guarded against scrying. The works. But, as time went on, they were lost. Or at least, that’s one way the story goes.”

“How else does it go?”

“As far as the hearsay goes, somebody has tried to gather them all once before, but one of the fey found out. She decided one person shouldn’t have that much power. She banished all of the Keys to the ends of the Earth, where not even she could find them.”

“If you just need all the Keys together, why do you need the spellbook?”

He huffed. “*Because* you have to perform a linking charm. I thought I was going to have to find my own witch, but your lightbearer will do nicely.”

She laughed. “Good luck with that.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Oh, I don’t need luck. I just need you. She wouldn’t do anything to endanger you, and you...well, I won’t be having a problem with you.”

“What makes you so sure?”

He stepped forward so he was inches from her. “Because if you don’t cooperate, I’ll kill Maeve.”

Her hand shot out and wrapped around his throat. “*You keep her name out of your mouth or you’ll be ash before your next breath,*” she hissed.

He didn’t move, just looked at her patiently. The room spun again, the needles stabbing into the bottom of her lungs. She dropped to one knee, coughing. A splatter of red hit the floor.

He nudged her with his foot. “What did I tell you about empty threats?”

He leaned down, picked her up by her armpits, and set her back on her feet. Something glinted in his hand as he regarded her. “Now, I’m sorry about this, but I have to make sure you don’t go messing anything up for the next few days. When you wake up, go back to your hotel, and be a good little pet and wait for further instructions. If you tell anyone, I’ll know. If you go to the Council, I’ll know. Don’t be stupid.”

There was a sharp pressure in her side, and then it was gone. She spluttered and clutched at her stomach, blood dripping through her fingers. He just stood there, looking at her, until she was falling. The floor was cold. Then, nothing.

Chapter 18

She stumbled back into the hotel, later. Ashton's door was open. They were all clustered around the bed. Byron was typing furiously on a laptop, and there was lots of cursing.

"H—" Her voice cracked halfway through. She coughed, spat blood on the floor. "Hey."

Every head looked up at the same time. She took a step forward and swayed, boot scuffing the ground. Ashton was beside her in an instant, supporting her around her waist. "Whoa whoa whoa. God, where have you been, what happened?"

She closed her eyes. "Sh, calm—calm down. There's so much going on in your head, it's making me dizzy."

Byron approached as Ashton began half-carrying her to the bathroom, taking in the blood down the front of her shirt. She could feel it in her boots, and it squeaked on the linoleum.

"I think that might be other reasons, Lena," Byron said. "What happened?"

"We have a big problem," she said. "One of Holliday's friends, he kidnapped me. He—he said he knew Aurora, that he was supposed to be a Guardian, that he's been using me to find Keys—"

Byron's hands paused in the first aid kit. He blanched. "This is bad. This is very, very bad—"

Ashton's eyes were wild, panicky. "Byron!"

He snapped to, pulling out gauze and sutures.

Lena's voice turned to a whisper. "He said I was better than Aurora because she threw away her gifts, her job, for her family, but I threw everything away for this. I chose this over them."

"He's projecting, Lena, he has to believe you're like him—"

"Ashton what if he's right?"

"No, of course he's not. Not even close."

Her breath hitched. "But he is, I chose this over my family, and Aurora didn't. I—I always choose this until I can't, there's always a choice. The job or my family, the job or my home, the job or my relationships, the job or my life, and I always pick the job. For what? Where am I?"

A searing pain cut across her midsection, just under her ribcage. Ashton cried out, doubling over, as Lena gasped for air. "Constance!" Byron yelled. "Help her!" He dashed from the room.

She looked frantically between the two of them. She set her jaw, grasped Ashton's hand in hers, and set to work, speaking low and fast.

Ashton used the feeling to ground himself, forcing himself through whatever walls Lena had left up, until the pain was shared between them.

She turned to him with wide eyes. *What are you doing?*

I'm not letting you do this alone.

Byron returned with a metal water bottle and a syringe of dully glowing green liquid. Lena felt a pinch in her forearm and tasted iron on her tongue. Slowly, the pain subsided. The

stars around her vision cleared. Ashton retreated a bit from her mind and landed in a heap on the floor. Constance sighed, exhausted. Sammy wrapped his arms around her neck, clutching like she would disappear if he let go.

“Ah—careful,” she said breathlessly, wrapping one arm around him.

“You’ve got to stop doing that to us!” he cried into her shoulder. “I can’t—I can’t lose you too!”

“Hey, hey.” She pulled back from him and held him firmly by the back of his neck.

“Look at me. I’m not going anywhere.”

Constance came up behind him and rubbed his back. “Come on, Sam. Let’s give them some room so Byron can fix her up.”

He nodded, wiping his eyes. Ashton got up and followed them out without a word.

Byron sighed as he threaded the needle. “Okay. Tell me about this guy.”

Lena explained everything she’d heard. Her hands shook as she reached the end of it.

He gave her a long look when she was done. “You know we have to take this to the Council.”

She shook her head, not meeting his eyes. “I can’t—I don’t know how to protect her, Byron. I couldn’t do it then and I can’t do it now.”

“I’ve got friends over there. They could get her, take her somewhere.”

“No, if we move her, they’ll know I talked. And if they know about Maeve, they know about Jamie.” She squeezed her eyes shut and put her head in her hands. “Jesus, if anything happens to her, she won’t even know why.”

“Hey, nothing is going to happen to her,” he said fiercely. “So we wait. She’ll be fine as long as you cooperate, right? We wait a few days, then we go straight to the Council.”

She shook her head. “He’ll know if we leave New York.”

He smiled mischievously. “I never mentioned that I have connections with access to teleportation, did I?”

When she awoke next, Ashton was sitting in the chair across from the bed, elbows on his knees, leg bouncing. She waited for him to speak.

He didn’t look at her. “Lena, what was that?”

She wasn’t conscious enough for her response to be anything but reflex. “What do you mean?”

“What was that? What have you been keeping from me?”

She forced herself upright. He winced as her muscles creaked, sending sharp pains through her already throbbing midsection. “You know what it was. You saw it. You felt it.”

He shook his head. “No, no I don’t. I know that it felt like my—your—insides were coming apart and my head was pounding and it felt like I was on fire. I know exactly what it felt like—God, I’ll never forget—but I don’t know *what it was*.”

She sighed. She could feel her heartbeat in her throat, but there was no going back now. “They used to call it *xeresanguis*. It’s a blood curse. Here, it’s easier if I just show you.”

She went into the back of her mind and began unravelling the block Vance had helped her put in place. Memories, images, sensations, began trickling through, until he was flooded with puzzle pieces of memory he didn’t know he’d been missing. He pressed his palms into his eyes as it all came through.

Eventually it stopped. He dropped his hands, eyes darting around as he tried to process. “So, you have a magical disease that Vance made you a potion for, but it kind of stopped working, and because you have this magic disease, the Council wants to kill you, or they would if they knew, and that’s why you acted like you hated me, because you thought you could keep me from finding out if I couldn’t get close, and they’ll kill me if they find out I knew and didn’t say anything, and Byron and Constance, because she found out when you almost choked to death the other night, and Sammy still doesn’t know, and you’ve been keeping this from me since—”

“Since before I knew you. Yeah.”

He blew air through his teeth and clasped his hands behind his head. “That’s...a lot.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

He bit his lip, then reached over and screwed the lid off of her bottle. He stuck his finger in and pulled it out, tipped in red. He sniffed it. He licked it. He wrinkled his nose.

Lena let out a laugh and immediately regretted it.

He looked at her curiously. “And this helps? This is why you don’t eat?”

She nodded.

“So... the coffee addiction?”

She smiled in spite of herself; this was not how she ever imagined this conversation was going to go. “I like coffee,” she shrugged, “and it doesn’t make me sick.”

His lips thinned out thoughtfully. “The antidote stopped working.”

She sighed. “I’m not sure. I think it did, long-term. We need to make another version, but it seemed to help. This time.”

“Will you have to go to Europe?”

“I can’t. There’s too much to do here. We have to deal with this new guy who wants the Keys, we have to talk to the Council.” The last list item went unspoken. *We have to protect my sister.*

“Be honest with me. If you needed to go, and you thought you were needed here, would you go or would you stay?”

“I’d stay,” she said without hesitation.

He frowned.

Her voice was soft. “That’s not the answer you wanted, is it?”

He shook his head. “I think I’m going to have to get used to not getting the answers I want from you.” He paused for a moment. Then, “Are you going to tell Sam?”

She sighed. “I don’t know—”

He gave her a look. “Yes, you do. You have to, he can’t be the only one who doesn’t know. In for a penny, in for a pound.”

“What?”

“You heard what he said. He cares about you, Lena, enough to stick around. He deserves the truth, and he deserves to be able to make his own decisions.”

“What’s your decision, then?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“If you’re smart, you’ll leave.”

He locked his eyes on hers. “I’d rather be stupid than miserable,” he said, and got up to walk out.

Byron and Constance only succeeded in keeping her in bed for a day. On the second day, she sat down with Sammy and explained everything. He listened patiently, processing as she spoke. She paused when she finished. “Are you mad?”

He looked quizzical. “Do you want me to be mad?”

“No, not really. I just know how much it bugs you when other people make those kinds of decisions for you.”

He shrugged. “You weren’t going to tell anyone, at first?”

She almost laughed. “No, I wasn’t.”

“Then I don’t see a difference between you not telling me and not telling Ashton.”

She looked down. “I think he might be a little mad.”

“Well, he has his own stuff to work through, but. It's not because you were babying me, it's because you were looking out for me, up until the point it didn't work anymore. I trust you, you know that. You told me when I signed on that my job was to jump first, ask questions later. You don't owe me an explanation for everything.” He grinned and tapped her shoulder with a fist. “Besides, it's different with you two.”

That wasn't what she wanted to hear. “Care to expand on that, Sam?”

“Not even close.”

He kept looking at her with that, *We both know what's going on here*, look.

“Any other day I'd tackle you if you kept that up,” she said.

He laughed and jogged from the room. “I know!”

“He's right you know.”

Byron was leaning on the door, watching Sammy's retreating form.

She suppressed a sigh. This conversation wasn't long in coming, she knew. She was hoping Byron might take a little longer, though. “About which part?”

“It is different with you two. I don't know if you can afford to act otherwise.”

“What do you mean, act otherwise?”

“You and I both know full well that a conversation isn't going to be enough for him. Have you apologized yet?”

She shrugged noncommittally. “I haven’t exactly had time, and I don’t know if he even wants to talk to me. He’s been shielding. He only keeps enough of the connection up so we don’t lose it completely.”

He gave her a look, cocking one eyebrow and crossing his arms.

“I need all of you to stop looking at me like everything that comes out of my mouth is horse shit.”

He shrugged. “Maybe if the opposite were true, we’d stop looking at you like this.”

“You’re not helping.”

“Helping wasn’t my intention.” He came to sit on the bed in front of her. “He’s not going to come to you first, Lena. Why does this scare you?”

She ran both hands through her hair before letting them drop back into her lap. “It seems like a lose-lose situation. It goes well and he sticks around to have everyone trying to kill him, or he leaves and he’s safe but he hates me, or he stays and he’s in danger *and* he hates me.”

“You’ve once again neglected to consider the possibility that everything could go well.”

“You’ve been doing this for a lot longer than I have. How often, realistically, does that happen?”

He raised his hands placatingly. “That’s a fair point. That notwithstanding, you don’t run from a fight. You should stop running from things that are actually good for you.” He paused.

“You said you always choose the job.”

“I was half delirious, but yes.”

“Maybe it’s time to make a different choice.”

She turned to him, head cocked in curiosity. “When did you trade training me for giving me life advice?”

He cracked a smile. “I was running out of topics. Thought I’d broaden my horizons.” The smile softened with memory. “I know what it’s like to lose something because of good intentions, Lena, and I’ve probably passed you some of my bad habits by accident. We can’t have everything in this life, but you can have this, if you’ll take the steps there.”

She scooted forward and hugged him. “Thank you. For everything.”

He patted her back with a chuckle. “Don’t go too sappy on me, now.”

She pulled back. “Right, we still have to talk to the Council in the morning. How do you think that’ll go?”

His gaze went distant. “I honestly can’t say.”