

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE GRASSMARKET

It's almost noon on Saturday and Marley and I are in the middle of the Grassmarket waiting for Erica. It's sunny and we're sharing a pizza from one of the nearby restaurants. This place is called the Grassmarket but there is no grass in sight, really. Nor a market. Just quaint shops, a hotel, a cat café and a few restaurants.

I glance at Marley's watch. "No sign of her."

"I hope she's all right," he says. Then he shivers. "That creature... I'm still having nightmares about it. I thought I was envious of you but boy. After that, no way. I don't want to see through Glamour. It was creepy."

"I don't know," I say glumly. "They just seemed sort of... sad. Under all of the anger."

"If you say so," Marley says around a mouthful of

pizza. "We should have got Hawaiian."

"If you had any sense," I say slowly, "you would know I'm of the educated belief that pineapple has no right being on a pizza."

"Well, you're a snob. Who is wrong."

I squint ahead at the west end of the area. It's an old water fountain that's part of a huge stone block, isolated in the middle of the street. There's a small wooden door on the side of the stone monument. Small enough that adults would have to crouch over to go inside.

"What's through that door?" I ask, pointing towards the water fountain.

Marley follows my finger. "What door?"

"The one on the side of the giant water fountain?"

He exhales and puts the pizza box down. "I don't know what you mean."

"I'll show you," I get up and he follows, ditching the box in the nearest bin as we move. As we get closer, I point to the little door. "That one. Where does it go?"

"Ramya," Marley says my name with a great deal of tiredness and something else I can't identify. "I don't see a door."

I recoil. "It's Glamour?"

"I guess. If you can see it."

"What do you see?"

“A plain, stone wall, Ramya.”

He sounds almost... irritated.

I graze my knuckles against the door, feeling its solidness. Then I knock. Nothing happens so I push... and inhale sharply as it opens to reveal complete darkness.

“Right,” I say to Marley, matter-of-factly. “I’m going in. If I’m not back in twenty minutes, come in after me.”

“I can’t see the door!”

“Well, Erica can. She’ll help.”

“Ramya, we have no idea what’s in there. I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“I’ll phone you. Okay? Just wait here, don’t move.”

I step inside and close the door behind me, drowning out Marley’s objections. I have to use the torch on my phone to see in the complete darkness. I grimace as the artificial light shows I’m at the top of a very steep, narrow and winding staircase. So steep, in fact, that a fall might break my neck.

“Great,” I mutter, gripping the wall as I tentatively start to descend. “Fantastic. A dyspraxic’s worst nightmare.”

I don’t care if it takes my entire lifetime on this planet, I’m finding out what is at the bottom of these stairs. A hidden door in the Grassmarket is another irresistible layer to this bizarre city.

As I continue down, light and noise starts to form. I finally feel my feet touch a flat surface, no further steps. Another door.

I open it. To a whole feast for the senses.

A space as large and as open as the world directly above. Instead of sunlight, sconces with flames. There are snug little booths lining the perimeter of the large hall. The centre is full of stalls, brightly coloured and all selling strange looking wares.

Something pink and fragile flits by my face. I jolt to avoid it, then get a closer look. It’s a little paper dragon, as alive and active as the enchanted statue of Greyfriars Bobby.

It zips up into my face, getting a closer look and then flies away again.

The large hall is abuzz with noise and commotion. No one is taking any notice of me. I step towards the first stall and glance at what’s on display.

It appears to be lots of long, brilliantly coloured clusters of straw. Pink straw, blue straw, yellow straw, and all of it vibrant, almost neon.

“Welcome to the Grassmarket,” the vendor says. “What are we for today?”

I take them in. A Hulder, like Erica. Smiling expectantly at me.

“Um,” I feel a little flustered. “What does this do?” I’m pointing to the pink straw.

“Pink grass,” the Hulder says proudly. “Wear it inside your coat, you’ll make a great first impression.”

I let out a delighted laugh. “So... this really is a grass market?”

“Oh, this is the only Grassmarket,” the Hulder replies. “The one above isn’t for us Hidden Folk. You want the blue? Put it in hot water, use it as a tea, and it will ward off bad dreams.”

That might be good for Marley. The Kelpies are haunting me still but they’re not my first magical creatures. They were for him. “How much?”

The Hulder looks at me contemplatively. “That hat.”

I touch the emerald green fabric on my head. “It’s a beret.”

“I like it. I’ll barter this for that.”

“You don’t want money?”

“They don’t take money down here.”

I spin around at the arrival of someone else’s voice in the conversation. A boy who can’t be much older than me is standing with his hands in his pockets. He nods towards the stall. “They only do exchanges. Something they want for something you want.”

“Well,” I say, a little uselessly. “I like this beret so I

guess I’ll go without.”

He smiles and then jerks his thumb in the direction of the dark booths. “You’re meeting Erica today?”

He’s tall, forcing me to look up at him. “Maybe.”

He laughs. “It’s fine, I’m not trying to abduct anyone. She’s over in the back. Follow me.”

He sets off down the long bustling room. I follow, a little hesitantly. I take in more of the market stalls with their colourful grass. I almost laugh. All of this time, hidden under a touristy part of Edinburgh, is a real grass market. Magical straw that can be worn as a charm or brewed into an enchanted tea.

“Marley will love this,” I mutter as I follow the boy.

I’m relieved when we reach one of the booths. Erica is sitting there, waiting for me. She smiles when our eyes meet.

“Sorry I’m late,” I say dryly. “Took a minute to find the door.”

She chuckles. “Doors can have Glamour, too.”

I sit down across from her, frowning as the boy slides in next to me. “I’m still not used to any of this.”

“Well,” Erica says, somewhat bitterly. “To be magical is to be hidden. Remember that and things usually slip into some kind of sense.”

I quickly fire off a text to Marley, letting him know

that I didn't fall down a steep flight of stairs and die. He replies that this is exactly what an evil fairy would say.

"This is Freddy Melville," Erica tells me, gesturing to the boy next to me. "He's got great intel on sirens. For your notes."

I eye Freddy. "Oh, yes?"

He shrugs. "Had a few run-ins."

I look to Erica. "Are you okay? Last time we saw you, those creepy Fae pair were almost breaking down your door."

She smiles, tiredly. "I'm fine."

"I saw some Kelpies."

The atmosphere at the table changes and the two of them glance at one another, Erica looking fearful.

"They were intense," I add, a little unnecessarily.

"They must have been in a good mood," the Hulder says, her voice a shocked whisper. "Or you wouldn't be here."

"Some of their own are going missing," I try to ignore the fear I felt when facing the strange creatures of the water. Instead, I recall the pain and the sadness that radiated from them. My feelings aren't as important. My reaction seems small in comparison to what they were battling. "They're afraid."

Erica looks out at the market. I follow her gaze. Trolls

sell their wares, while little paper dragons soar over their heads. The odd Fae moves through the crowd, examining stalls. Their pointed ears and quick eyes give them away at once. Other creatures I can't identify commune with one another.

"Who is the heartbroken witch?"

Erica frowns at the question. "I thought she was a myth."

"The Kelpie said the city needs her."

"Typical," Erica shifts in her seat. "Expecting one woman to come out and save everything. There are plenty of witches in Edinburgh, I don't know which one they mean."

The Stranger mentioned a powerful witch. She enchanted the statue.

"I feel like I'm chasing too many leads," I say grumpily. "Sirens, a witch, missing Kelpies. My grandfather just wanted me to make a record."

"Freddy," Erica slaps her palms on the wooden table. "Tell us what you know."

"Wait." I dump my satchel onto the table and slide out the book, flipping right to the middle. I write SIRENS at the top of the page and poise my pen, ready to write. "Go."

"Well," Freddy takes a moment, looking pensive. "The

first thing I think is important to know is that people who have been influenced by Sirens often have no idea.”

I think of our old London house and that Christmas party. I was the only one who truly knew something sinister was happening, even if I couldn’t fully explain it.

“Sirens will leave people thinking that whatever they were compelled to do was their idea.”

“Are other magical creatures immune to them?”

“Depends,” Freddy says, shrugging. “No hard and fast rules. Just know humans are extremely susceptible. Very swayable.”

“Big words,” I mutter. “Why am I immune?”

Freddy regards me, coolly. “How do you know if you are?”

“One came to my house when I was younger. Tried to get me to do something. Couldn’t.”

“Thank your lucky stars.”

“This witch the Kelpie mentioned,” I pester. “Could she be immune, too?”

“Witches don’t see through Glamour as a rule. I’ve never heard of one being free from a Siren’s influence”

“Erica,” I lean forwards. “You said things were getting bad out there. What are they doing?”

She exhales. “Division. Don’t you feel it? No, you’re probably too young. People are more distrustful. More

afraid. More apart from one another. It’s not a mistake. It’s not a coincidence. Something’s causing it.”

“So, what? They’re secretly influencing everyone to be miserable?”

“No,” Freddy speaks, calmly. “Secret societies are the stuff of conspiracy theories. Sirens don’t work together. But their nature leans towards a common aim. Other people, to Sirens, are like boxers in a ring. They pick one and they enjoy the fight. Once it’s over, they don’t care about broken bones and bloody noses. They move on to another fight they’ve orchestrated.”

Her face appears in my mind, that smile. The cruel eyes. The pleasure she was getting from seeing our pain, our conflict.

It was a game to her.

“Chaos. They want to cause chaos.”

“Usually,” Freddy acknowledges. “Now, it’s gone up a gear. There seems to be a deeper plan. If creatures like Kelpies are going missing...”

“Could be a power grab,” Erica finishes, faintly.

“Excellent,” I snap. “So, manipulative creatures that look like normal people are attempting to divide humans and dispose of Hidden Folk AND I might be the only person in this city who is immune to them.”

“Your grandpa probably had no idea of the true

danger," Erica says gently. "This is all so much bigger than you."

"Wait," I turn to Freddy. "My grandpa knew he was being manipulated by the Siren at our Christmas party. He couldn't fully resist but he managed to snap out of it. If someone knows they're with a Siren, could they be harder to fool?"

"Maybe," Freddy says, nodding. "Some people are completely immune."

Like me.

"Others can be very difficult to sway on matters that are very personal to them."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Erica says, re-joining the conversation. "A Siren could maybe get someone to perform tasks for them as ordered, but if they asked them to do something that goes against everything that they are... it might be harder."

"Portia knew my parents through work," I say. "What jobs would Sirens like?"

I think of the Stranger, his face a blur in my mind. "A lawyer?"

"Maybe," Freddy shrugs.

"A teacher?"

"Too much work, not enough pay," Erica says, shaking

her head. "Sirens like being very close to powerful people. Just close enough to influence their decisions."

I suddenly think of the Baroness. Her wheedling tone and her close proximity to the school. As well as the way the teachers followed her lead, despite their obvious reluctance.

"Interesting. And that's why everything is getting weirder? What about politicians?"

"Definitely," Freddy and Erica speak in unison.

"I keep seeing people fighting," I say quietly. "In the street, at school. It's not just the odd conflict here and there, people are getting meaner."

"Those are the warning signs," Erica says softly. "If humans start turning on each other? Historically, a Siren is at work. Turning neighbour against neighbour. Cosying up to evil regimes. Or creating them."

I take all this in. "So, what should we do?"

Erica looks at me solemnly. "Someone needs to stand up to them. That's all we can do. They thrive on division and all of us being isolated. We need them to know they can't do this to us."

"Hidden Folk won't even talk to me," I murmur, glancing around at the market. "You're the only one. And what about the Fae? They don't strike me as friendly."

“They’re not. And they enjoy blood sport. Stay away from them at all costs,” Erica warns me, sharply.

“Duh,” I whisper, remembering how eerie and violent they seemed. “But how can I help Hidden Folk if they won’t talk to me?”

Erica smiles wanly at me. “Maybe just try a different approach?”

I regard Freddy Melville. “Are you like me? Do you see through Glamour, too?”

He watches me for a moment and then shakes his head. “I’m not like you.”

I sigh and flex my hands. They feel stiff.

As I sit in a secret, underground market full of Hidden Folk, I’m starting to feel very alone.

I don’t think I’m going to find anyone who is like me. Which makes this mission all the more difficult.