

Chapter

ONE

Rain pattered down against the roof of the von Althuis house as the family gathered around the kitchen table. Ukrainian songbirds began to sing, signaling the end of the storm. A single droplet of water fell from the tip of a perfectly clear, quartz crystal into a bowl, and Braidy von Althuis watched the surface of the water ripple. The rings traveled to the edge of the bowl, bounced back, and then collided



with each other, a feedback loop of chaos until... the water fell still again. Braidy's fingers scratched against the rough seat cushion on the rickety, old, wooden chair and he looked around at the people seated at the breakfast table.

His aunt Liz sat across from him, her fingers laced underneath her chin and a hot cup of tea billowing steam into her face. Her long sweater covered her hands as she held onto her favorite mug, one with a giraffe on it. Her hair dripped over the back of the chair, long and yellow, and she dragged her pearly teeth across her bottom lip. She looked deeply into her nephew's eyes, brows furrowed, expectations on her tongue.

His mother sat to his right, worry at the corners of her mouth, with her cellphone in hand. She curled up in the chair in her pajamas. Worry had eaten away at her since they had escaped Tsar Koschei, and she hadn't had the energy that morning to put on daytime clothes. Braidy had noticed that since his father had disappeared, little wrinkles had crept their way into the corners of her eyes.

Uncle Rolo tapped his heel on the wooden bar

at the base of the chair, his lips pressed into a thin line, his moustache bristling in agitation. He looked as youthful as ever, but an untold sadness hung on his shoulders. He tapped his finger on the wooden breakfast table in anticipation as he watched the youngest von Althuis. Braidy eyeballed the crystal that hung from a silver chain over the bowl, and then he sneezed.

His sneeze sent the crystal flying, disturbing the surface of the water.

“Ah, c’mon!” Uncle Rolo reached for the crystal, attempting to settle it and get it to fall still.

“I’m sorry!” Braidy frowned and crossed his arms. “I got dust in my nose!”

“Can you *please* try and focus?” Aunt Liz begged as she steadied the bowl with her hands. “You’re the only one who can do this.”

“Can you walk me through it again?”

“Focus your mind. We put this paper under the bowl, see?” Aunt Liz gestured to the paper that sat underneath the clear glass bowl on the table. On the paper she had drawn four arrows, like a compass. The ones pointing north and south were labeled *yes*

in dark marker, and the ones pointing east and west *no*. “I want you to focus and ask this pendulum yes or no questions. We need to find your father.”

“But first!” Uncle Rolo interrupted. “You need to ask it something easy so that we can make sure it’s working. Maybe one or two questions.”

“I would do it, but I don’t have my magick anymore,” Aunt Liz sighed. “Helen doesn’t either, and Rolo’s useless.”

“Hey!”

“I thought I didn’t have any magick either,” Braidy said.

“You’re the only one in this house who’s even touched, if only a little, so I need you to try.” Aunt Liz took his hand from across the table and gave it a good squeeze. “Please, you’re our only hope.”

Braidy hated that. Before, he, his mother, and his cousin were the oddballs in the family: those without magick. His father was a Barghest, after all, his aunt, a swamp witch, his uncle, dead, and his grandmother the most powerful of the fae in North America. Now, Gran was gone, Mr. von Althuis had been kidnapped, and Aunt Liz had given up her fairy

gift for a normal life. For once, Braidy was one of the few in the family that had *any* magick.

If he had any magick.

His grandmother told him repeatedly that he did not have any magickal ability, but still, he could see ghosts. Still, he could see magickal secret doorways and traps. Still, he was worth something at the Market, the place that only valued things magick in nature. Many fae had mistaken him for a Changeling, despite the fact that he had no abilities whatsoever. He smelled of Barghest, they had said. Braidy had always hoped that some letter would come in the mail inviting him to a special school for wizards or that he would meet a god in passing only to learn he must embark on a special quest. All of his waiting proved fruitless, and he could not even perform the most basic of spells, though his grandmother had tried instructing him. In that case, the trace of Barghest in his blood was not enough. As the pendant hung over the dish of water, Braidy held his breath. In this case, maybe, just maybe, that little hint of fairy magick might be what they needed.

Braidy closed his eyes and focused his mind on

the pendant. The premise was simple. All he needed to do was move the crystal that hung over the bowl of water. Technically, he was asking the universe to move it for him. He hoped he had enough magick in him to get the pendant to do what he wanted, if not, his father was lost forever.

“Okay, um...” Braidy attempted to hone his mind when an owl hooted in the distance. The forest rustled all around the house and bubbling from the nearby stream pulled his mind outside. The family was still very much stuck in Ukraine, seeing as Mr. von Althuis was not here to move the house back to Maple Hills. Worms writhed in Braidy’s stomach as he thought about never being able to go home. *No. Focus.* He returned his mind to the kitchen. He needed to think of an obvious question to ask. “Is my name Braidy von Althuis?”

Braidy glared down the pendant, hoping something would come from his efforts. After a few moments of waiting, Uncle Rolo sighed and stood, the legs of the wooden chair he pushed back screeching across the floor as he did so. “All right,” he muttered under his breath. “This obviously isn’t working.”

“Wait!” Aunt Liz blurted. “Wait.”

The pendant swayed back and forth, and Uncle Rolo froze to make sure that it hadn't been him who had moved it. After a moment of thinking, the pendant confidently swayed along the *yes* arrows. Aunt Liz hollered out in excitement and clapped her hands together and Mrs. von Althuis let out a deep sigh of relief.

“Great,” Aunt Liz said. “Okay, one or two more.”

“Do I hate *Ghastblasters*?” Braidy asked.

No, the pendulum replied.

“And... um, is Kara my best friend?”

For a moment, the pendant hesitated as it changed direction. Yes, it swung in resolution once it had picked up speed.

“Okay, now we need to think,” Mrs. von Althuis muttered as Uncle Rolo sat back down at the table. “What’s our first question?”

“Is Dad safe?” Braidy asked.

Yes, said the pendulum.

The entire family heaved a collective sigh of relief. It had been weeks since they had last seen

Mr. von Althuis, and they all were exhausted from looking. They knew he was with Azra, Queen of Djinn, they just did not know if he was alive and, if he *was*, where he was being held captive. Aunt Liz had pleaded with the fae to help her find him, but none of them trusted her anymore. She had betrayed her kind by going back to being Human, and for that, they could never forgive her. All of the other ghosts in the area were scared of Uncle Rolo, so his leads went nowhere, and Mrs. von Althuis, being normal and Human, had no clue how to find her husband. Braidy was their last resort, and to have at least a little confirmation that Mr. von Althuis was alive was much needed.

“Is Dad with Azra?”

Yes.

“Is Dad in the Market?”

Yes.

“Has Dad been sold at the Market?”

No.

“Okay, well that’s good,” Aunt Liz sighed. “I was worried she’d auction him off for loads of cash.”

“What good does money do her?” Mrs. von

Althuis mused. “She’s the queen of djinn.”

“Um,” Braidy muttered, “is Dad with Azra at her palace?”

Yes.

The family looked around the table at each other.

“Does she want to use Dad to hurt Gran?”

The pendulum slowly swung along the *yes* arrows.

Everyone’s faces paled, and Braidy swallowed thickly before he asked one final question. “Can we get Dad back with just the five of us?”

No.

Mrs. von Althuis let out a heavy sigh and crossed her arms. “I’m just not sure what we’re supposed to do. We’re running out of money very quickly with Zhanna gone. Rolo, I know you’re doing what you can, and Liz, you picked up some work, but...”

Uncle Rolo crossed his arms and fought a frown at the corner of his mouth. All he did was nod, and Aunt Liz took a sip of tea. Braidy watched his uncle’s eyes, which looked incredibly sad. He

had not said anything to anyone about what had happened. Braidy woke up a week after his father's disappearance only to find that the entire attic had been cleared of Zhanna's things and that she had completely vanished without a word.

"I think we need to call a family meeting. We need to figure out exactly what we're doing and how we want to go about getting Boris back."

"I'll go get B," Braidy offered and slid his chair back. He made the quick jaunt from the kitchen to Blockhead's bedroom upstairs, where he quietly knocked. Blockhead hadn't wanted to be a part of the magick at all. Magick scared him, and he hated being around any of it. Braidy had been exempt from any kind of magick in the house after his grandmother decided he had no supernatural ability. Only now Aunt Liz taught him, desperate for answers. If Braidy could not tap into his fairy bloodline, Blockhead had wondered if he would be next.

"I don't want to do it," Blockhead signed to Braidy. He grabbed his phone and typed into his text-to-speech translator. "Guaranteed when Mom

runs out of ideas, she'll turn to one of us."

"What do you mean?" Braidy asked as he sat next to his cousin on the floor of his bedroom days before.

"You see how she's been frantic." Blockhead typed with the speed of lightning. "The fae aren't talking to her."

"What?"

"They think that she's a disgrace. That's what she said to me, anyway. They're mad at her for exposing Tsar Koschei and giving up her crown. They won't tell her where Uncle Boris is."

Braidy rubbed his temples and sighed, sinking his head into his hand. "Well, Uncle Rolo will figure things out. There are loads of ghosts hanging around here and they might know what's going on."

"I doubt it, and then they'll come crawling to one of us."

"Why do you think that?"

Blockhead paused for a moment, as if he was sighing. "Well, you've got your dad's blood in you, and I've been cursed. If you can't do anything, it'll be me next."

“You really don’t want to do it?”

“No. I’d rather lose my hearing than do magick.”

“Whoa.”

“Mom told me once that I would probably make a good wizard. Distress fuels magick.”

“That’s... sad.”

Braidy remembered when he was little, before Gran had started assessing him for magick. Gran ran B through drill after drill after drill trying to get him to cast a spell. With his little wooden head, he could not cry, but his shoulders shuddered in fear. All throughout Braidy’s childhood, Gran had attempted to get Blockhead to learn, but to no success. He was so stubborn and resolute that she eventually gave up. This came as a great relief to Blockhead, and he refused to speak on it further. Gran had wanted so badly for Braidy and Blockhead to do at least a *little* magick, and Braidy knew his grandmother was disappointed in them.

Blockhead picked his papers up off of the floor and shrugged his shoulders. He was frantic because the family had taken too long in Ukraine and he was running out of video content to post. He had written

pitches for several videos in the future, but would not be able to upload and film the content while stuck in Ukraine. After a moment, Blockhead typed into his phone. “Gran at some point was so upset that I didn’t want to do magick that she threatened to turn me into a fairy. I’m already cursed. Like... just leave me alone already.”

After Blockhead did not answer the door the first time, Braidy knocked again. “B, it’s me. We found my dad! Don’t worry, your mom isn’t going to make you do any magick.”

Moments of silence passed, and then Blockhead opened the door. His phone said, “You managed to do it?”

“Yeah,” Braidy assured him and held out a welcoming hand for his cousin. “I managed to move the pendulum. They’re not going to make you do anything.”

If B could have heaved a sigh of relief, he would have. His shoulders fell as the tension left them, and he shakily followed Braidy down the stairs. The two of them sat at the dining room table, where all official

family meetings were held. Uncle Rolo and Aunt Liz had also followed from the kitchen, and now they sat grimly around the mahogany meeting place. Braidy and his cousin sat in their usual spots, though the entire thing felt wrong, empty. Zhanna had made the room bright when she had been there, but now, with so many people missing, the dining room felt like a ghost town. Braidy looked to his left at his mother, who sat at the head of the table. With his father gone, Mrs. von Althuis was the head of the family now.

“Thanks, everyone, for coming and sitting today.” Mrs. von Althuis awkwardly scooted her chair in.

“Now... how does Boris usually start these? Ah, yes. We have something to discuss.”