

IVY AND ASH

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE UNSEEN

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PROLOGUE

I could not believe I was there. Me, of all people— and accepted, nonetheless. An enrolled student and one with classes starting only days away.

All things considered; I was a relative no one sitting there in Knox University. The premier institute for magic and the unknown, otherwise colloquially referred to as the University of the Unseen—at least when students or scholars weren't around.

My body had been practically thrumming with excitement from the moment I'd first walked through those barred iron gates, unfortunate circumstances be damned, even when I occasionally felt melancholy, I still recovered, blinking and remembering that of all the places in the world, I was there, and that, in itself, was a product of sheer luck. The smile would not drop from my face—at least not at first, nor for a great while, all things considered.

It'd take three hours from the time that I entered for the smile to fade, and even then, it was only for a moment; because tragedy or not, this was a gift.

Of the fourteen magic institutions in the world—four of which were believed to have never existed in the first place—Knox University was unquestionably the best.

And that wasn't just my opinion.

The whole world knew Knox, and they knew it well.

Founded in 1800 by brothers Francis and William Knox, the university had endured 162 years of witch trials, accusations, and scandal; the campus behind its harsh, brick walls being revealed to select outsiders on only a few occasions, with no sign of that fact ever changing.

It hosted an ever-growing list of the world's finest magic scholars, and was one of the only universities in the world to continue to host the taxidermied visages of their familiars long after they were gone—a feat formerly thought impossible—and it was the university I would attend in a matter of days, the daughter of an unremarkable factory worker and a stay-at-home mother, the fifth of twelve children, and the only one to show any amount of magical prowess or possess a familiar amongst the lot; sitting amongst a crowd of people far richer than I'd ever be, with family names I could not even pronounce, much less remember.

Not that they would ever bother to remember me.

Means to say, I was acutely aware of my existence at that moment, sitting amongst the other doctoral candidates in the grand ballroom, my familiar on my lap, a glass of half drunken champagne in my hand, and crisp list of rules for the school year sitting atop a dark purple envelope.

The envelope that would somehow change the course of my life with just a single printed line, if I ever found the courage to open it.

I was an oddity in hand-knitted socks and a hand-me-down dress dyed purple to match the school colors, my lips bare and my neck empty to match as all around me, the

nation's finest sat shimmering and glowing, just feet away from me and yet still too far away to touch, in the way, I suppose, they always had been to people like me. That fact had slowly begun to set in, the smile on my face beginning to flicker, my eyes moving around the room to search for someone, anyone that would actually even bother to think to speak to me.

The simple fact was that people like me were far and few between behind the gates of Knox.

Not unless they were astonishingly smart or remarkably talented, and even then, only a precious few were permitted to reside within the world that existed beyond Knox University's tall brick walls.

I grew quiet as I sat at my table, my seat designated by the number twenty-eight, signifying me to be one of the last to be accepted, making sure that none of my neighbors deigned to talk to me—despite the fact that I really was conversational the moment that you got to know me. But the eyes that flitted in my direction and scanned me up and down did not matter; I was there, after all, I tried to remind myself.

That was an accomplishment in itself. One that had hardly felt real from the moment I'd received my letter. I still struggled to believe it, even as my mind lingered on the envelope before me, the contents within it being the name of my master, the person who would preside over me during my time at Knox University.

I'd long since abandoned the champagne bubbling in a glass in front of me, as I was afraid that even just one drop would somehow reveal the whole thing to be an illusion, and me a fool.

That seemed the only likely explanation for my attending Knox, after all.

The administration knew what I was, even if the students

didn't, and the further the night progressed, the more that the dim flicker of hope within me began to fade.

Perhaps it had all been a joke from the very start.

Perhaps the administration had meant to parade me about in my borrowed, worn-out clothes, and have others whisper with lingering gazes. Perhaps they were teaching some kind of lesson, not only to me, but people like me.

Pietrans. Long since believed to be the enemies of magic, and the detractors of Knox.

All around me, dark purple envelopes sat opened, but mine remained sealed. All around me, people fell in and out of their chairs, diving out onto the dance floor, and yet I did not.

All around me, the world kept living, and yet I did not.

I was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Perhaps now more than ever.

I did not know if it was because the moment that I opened the envelope, I would receive the master I would hold for the next three years and it would all become real, or because I had slowly begun to remember the headlines from the news while everyone else continued to ignore the events that had occurred at that very campus just days prior, the screams that had filled the air and the way that within hours the churches, every single one of them, had denounced the university, proclaiming it to be their fault.

My mind flashed back to way that my mother had looked at me that morning, her hand around the necklace blessed by Pieters Church decades ago and her lips constantly moving in prayer. The television continued to blare in the background with the news of what had happened at Knox just hours before as my mother watched me, her stare a constant refrain of all the things that she'd already said.

Magic would never have a place next to God. Not in the Pietran Church. Everyone knew that.

Never before had a Pietran confirmed stepped foot within Knox's walls.

Sitting within the hallowed halls of Knox at that moment, I could feel the water that was once smeared across my forehead and hear the priest's ramblings, the Pieters Church believing magic to be a curse birthed from greed alone, and the familiar an embodiment of the sins of envy and pride that would never disappear—to bear one openly meaning that you had to have sinned so greatly in a past life, that not even God himself could save you from the devil.

I had argued with my mother about it before, but now, sitting at a table in the University of Knox with red and blue police lights flashing from just outside the window? The very same lights that the student leaders had ushered me and the rest of the graduate class past? The ones that had barely registered in my mind at the beginning, but now seemed to grow in importance with every passing moment as I processed how well and truly dire my situation could be.

A flash of burgundy pavement rushed to the forefront of my mind, the grim looks on the policemen's faces still lingering even as they averted their eyes from the oncoming Knox doctoral classes, as if refusing to meet our gaze could hide their fear and disguise the reality of what had occurred.

The bridge between magic and the ordinary had crumbled in one night alone.

Perhaps I had been a fool for even applying to Knox university. The thought made me go rigid.

My familiar, Nyx, rubbed against me, her patterns serving as their own Rorschach test as the thick blobs of orange and brown contrasted with her white fur. With that motion, she willed me to look forward, observing him as his hands danced across ivory keys with closed eyes. "Nyx," I tried, but she did not care.

She was enraptured by him as I had been—As really everyone had been, considering the way that the other women watched him as well, staring over the rims of their wine glasses while formulating excuses to come up to him. Even I found myself becoming enamored with him once again as I allowed myself to peek in his direction.

It was funny how a peek could so quickly turn into a stare, the man once again drawing me in.

Such good looks likely would have been a sin within the Pietran religion.

He was a gifted piano player, and a student who had, upon the insistence and almost begging of his classmates, decided to tear himself away from the party and touch the enchanted keys, forcing them into an entirely new melody. A beautiful one, at that.

I had been watching him since the very beginning, as I was sure just about nearly everyone else had, considering the way that his name lived on practically everyone else's lips.

Listening in on others, I took note of it; *Rowan*.

I was bad with names, but I would remember his, I knew.

The pianist for the night. The man with the unruly blond hair paired with long eyelashes and thin, captivating fingers. The one who the girls talked about and the men sought out to befriend— The man with dark irises near constantly hidden from view, and a memory that must have been truly stupendous judging by the way that he played with no sheet music at all, his fingers moving nimbly across the keys with such precision and skill one would have almost thought that it was magic.

“Cassandra says he’s just come back from studying abroad,” a woman with a black bob whispered near me. “France, England, Spain, Germany and the lot,” she elaborated as I feigned drinking champagne, and I believed it.

He seemed the type who could easily charm anyone,

judging by the way he easily kept conversation with those surrounding him, throwing his head back and laughing as he continued to caress the keys. He only seemed to stop entertaining others for a moment, just one, when something caught the corner of his eye and seemed to make his whole being sit up straighter.

I would have paid good money to know what it was that did such a thing to him, *the* Rowan. The one who everyone was talking about.

The one whose fingers slowed on the keys abruptly as he seemed to have concluded that his time performing was done and eyed his only escape.

I knew nothing more of him other than his name, and yet I wanted nothing more than to speak to him, to the point where, when I realized why Nyx was so insistently brushing against me, I immediately stood; rising at the same time as him, forcing Nyx to slide from my lap as I did so, watching as Rowan plucked out the last few notes in his song, withdrawing a wand from his pocket before the piano slowly began to play itself once more.

‘Dance of the Little Swans,’ how fitting.

Nyx hissed in irritation as she fell, bending and twisting in the air, her paws folding in and her head scrunching back to shoot me an accusatory glare. But my gaze stayed on Rowan. Even as the fur on Nyx lengthened and changed, morphing from hair into feathers. A moment later, she was pecking at my side, landing on my shoulder as a rather irate robin instead of a house cat. No harm done.

To me at the very least.

“Shh,” I whispered to the harried robin as I lunged forward and grabbed my unopened envelope, intent not to let this moment pass me by. “Don’t draw attention,” I hissed into Nyx’s ear, using my freehand to shield the robin from view as I

hurriedly gathered myself and kept my eyes on Rowan, noting the way that his long, far too thin legs made for the doors to the balcony outside.

No one had made to follow him. Not yet.

This was my one chance.

If I let this moment pass me by, then I would never get the chance to speak to him. Not with the way that people crowded him.

And just from watching him, I could tell, there was a reason why people were clamoring to know him. There was something deeper within him, something that drew me to him.

Something about the way that the lights played across his skin made me feel like Rowan alone could understand me in a way that was far beyond the witches and wizards in the ballroom of Knox— And as I strode to the back door, nearly colliding with a few less than thrilled people along the way, I had to admit to myself, I desperately wanted to be understood. I was lonely, as stupid as it sounded. Just three hours in a ballroom surrounded by my peers, and I had become lonely.

And I convinced myself that knowing him, even if it were just for a second, would make me less so.

Even if it probably wouldn't matter.

People like he and I were different, after all, as was evident by his effortless smiles and grace as well as the way that others grinned at him in return, never daring to complain about the amount he talked or the excitement he exhibited—not like people often did with me.

He was the type to go out and see other countries, to play beautiful melodies, and to make others laugh. I was the type to dream of doing that sort of thing but found myself too shy or awkward to even try. But if I knew him, I could delude myself into thinking it was possible, and that was what I wanted most at that time.

The world, I would soon learn, was a cruel place. But I wanted to believe that it hadn't always been. Perhaps, it once had been kind.

Later on, I would be convinced that had I moved a little faster, had Nyx stayed a little quieter, or had I opened the envelope earlier that night; it would have changed the course of reality.

In a world of magic and mystery, that chance didn't seem far off. But I could never be sure.

I would never know for certain if, in the seconds prior to me stepping out into that cool night air, my envelope had contained a different name. One that was destined to change as someone else's eyes caught me unaware. I could never know if the card inside had initially said Dr. Lisandra Rhodes, my requested professor, or someone else.

All I did know was that inside, people were very slowly coming to the conclusion that not a single card held the name of Dr. Quinn Avarelle or Dr. John Jones—the bitter rivals who sat not only at the top of the academic hierarchy of Knox University, but also at the top of the world's most renown psychotheological researchers' lists.

Trouble, if I'd ever heard any. I minded my business concerning the two and focused on him and him alone, Rowan. The piano player.

The one who seemed to be everyone's golden boy.

Rowan was alone on that night, his arms folded over the edge of the balcony and his eyes trained towards the sky, his breath creeping from between his lips in a trail of fog, and his whole manner seeming determined to fade into the distance as all of the others partied and laughed, well aware of whatever contents had awaited him within the open envelope leisurely held between his fingers. All I could see was the light pink of his lips and the dull look in his eyes, as well as

the way that he seemed to sink into the balcony, his shoulders collapsing in a moment of vulnerability as I stepped beside him.

"I knew you were coming, I saw you watching me," he said with a small smile, though he didn't even know me, and I knew nothing of him. "I was waiting for you," he said, like we'd known each other for decades, perhaps centuries, and when he looked at me, he smiled. A short, halfhearted smile; one that fell immediately as the lights flashed faithfully to the next color.

"I was waiting for you too," I said, though how one could wait for someone they never knew, I was unsure. All I did know was that at that moment, as his eyes met mine, it felt like I had, in fact, been waiting for something—or rather someone—for a long while. Someone who understood me, someone who knew the things I did, and someone who was just as lost in the pomp and circumstances of the world of wizardry as I was...

Perhaps it was the champagne they served; I'd never been much of a drinker, most Pieterans weren't. That would be reason enough to trust him, though why he regarded me in such a reserved and anxious way, I could not be sure.

He was the one who everyone admired the whole night, the one whose name resided on everyone's lips. He had no reason to be afraid of me, an anxious admirer who had come outside solely to have the glory of saying she'd spoken to him once. The fact that he'd noticed me watching him was a feat in itself—and an embarrassment, if I thought about it. I was pretty sure that my voice caught in my throat as I thought of it, the urge to laugh feeling far too strong.

The only thing that had stopped me was the sight of flashing red and blue lights painted across his skin, and the officers that I had passed on my way into Knox had not yet left.

They probably wouldn't for months to come.

"Depressing, isn't it?" Rowan said with a sigh as his eyes

trained on those lights, the harsh glow of police cars filling his irises with their lights. "It didn't always used to be like this."

"I know," I breathed in sympathy, looking down with him upon the police officers that continued to line the pavement, their shadows barely obscuring what had happened. "But it won't always be like this," I told him, shaking my head as I moved beside him and peered past the crime scene. "Things have to get better, eventually."

"You think so?"

"I know so," I reassured, shaking my head. "You just have to believe that it will," I told him, and it must have meant something, those little words, considering the fact that his hand edged to overlap mine, and when I looked up?

Brown. Soft, gentle, brown eyes.

"Rowan," he said, giving his name simply enough and prompting me to give mine as well as he smiled down at me.

"Ana Nilsen," I said, for that was it, really, and because Ana was simple enough that without a surname it might as well have not been mine. Even if the growing grin on his face and the slow way that he said it made me feel as if the name had never belonged to anyone else at all.

"Ana," he said as he turned to look at me, his hand still on mine, his shoulder just barely brushing mine. "Ana Nilsen," he said, tasting the name upon his lips. "It's nice," he stated with a nod. "Very nice."

I laughed. I don't know why I laughed, but I did, allowing my hand to tighten upon his and my body to sink closer into his side, at least for the moment.

Moments were rather short, it turned out, because a mere second later, once my laugh had grown stale on the air and the echo had faded, he asked it.

"And do you believe that things will get better, Ana Nilsen?" He asked, which was a strange question indeed to ask

someone you barely knew, especially the way that he asked me. But I suppose that was part of his charm, really.

“I want them to,” I said as the grin grew wider upon his lips, and then and there, looking him right in the eyes, I declared, “and when I want something, I work hard until I know it will be mine.”

Rowan’s laugh rung through the night.

THROUGH RAIN AND SNOW

It began, as far too many things do, with a book...

Or, at least, many things began with a book—I suppose not all of them. Dr. Jones had told me to stop thinking in generalities if I were to be a proper magician, and since I was...

It began, as some things do, with a book; I supposed with a heavy brow and pointed frown, my morning-addled brain struggling to remember why exactly I just so happened to be in a rush at that moment when I could just as well be walking at a leisurely pace back to my dorm, only to sink into my bed at an also somewhat leisurely pace and fall back asleep at a pace which one would most certainly not call leisurely.

I was tired, immensely, as anyone with an eight am class tended to be.

But of course, if I were to return home and sink into the sweet bliss that was my overly blanketed bed, I'd scarcely get the book, would I? And it was a rather important book, unfortunately—one which Dr. Jones, my master, was in sore need of, therefore resulting in my having to rush out of class at 9:01 on the dot to take off into the street, having long since given up on

the thought of hailing a cab anywhere near Knox University and resigning myself to having to walk any and everywhere I went; even when I needed to get there rather quickly to beat out the competition, lest I get another harsh glare and an even harsher scolding from the sole person I was meant to learn from.

I didn't want that. I'd already been scolded five times that week, mainly for talking too much, and therefore I didn't need to add another flaw to my master's already long list and give him even more reason to turn his nose up at me.

"Especially not with the mood he's been in ever since it was announced that Dr. Rhodes would be taking over his second office," I mumbled with a grimace, hating to think of the events that must have prefaced Dr. Lisandra Rhodes showing up to his storage office with a box of her own belongings and insisting that, being as how Dr. Jones was on probation and all, certain privileges he had once enjoyed would unfortunately have to be revoked.

Those privileges involved two offices—one of which was used solely for storage, as well as a personal assistant, and a role as head of the Psycheology department, which he was promptly informed on the first day of classes had been given to Dr. Rhodes.

An hour after that, he had been given over to me. His apprentice, as proclaimed by my enrollment papers.

He let out a loud, somewhat impressive swear and then stormed to the Dean's office to proclaim me unfit. Ever since then, we'd been getting along well, if well-meant badly and getting along meant that he treated me with all the disdain of a housecat encountering a new family dog.

Dr. Jones didn't believe that women belonged in magic to begin with, and he'd made it clear that nothing I did would ever change that.

Therefore, I sought to prove him wrong.

My worn leather soles echoed against the pavement in rapid succession as I tried and failed to outrun the turmoil of a morning crowd, darting past the numerous police officers who still filled the university square and on through the open gates, only to be hit with another tidal wave of people—the unfortunate fact of the matter being that, for many Americans, work began at the dreadful time of nine am and the few people that were left? Desperate stragglers trying to make their way to work so that they could continue to receive a paycheck.

God knew that was important.

Almost as important as procuring a book for a man that many would refer to as abrasive at best. “You can handle Dr. Jones,” I reassured myself as I pressed through the crowds. “You’ve been doing this for a month,” I reminded myself, holding my bag tightly against my chest as I slipped through a crack among the throng of people and finally managed to escape. “Numerous scholarships, dozens of awards, and all straight As—no matter what he says, you know that he is wrong,” I proclaimed, doing my best not to complain, despite the fact that I wanted to. But, in truth, without a master, I would not have been accepted.

It was just that... Well, Dr. Jones was, very obviously, the worst man I’d ever met.

And not was not putting things lightly. I strove not to be a pessimist, especially when it came to my education, which I held in the highest regard. It was simply that, all in all, Dr. Jones was an irrefutably awful person to be around.

He needed little to no prompting to decide to be cruel, and if I failed to get this book? I’d likely hear about it for months to come. Therefore, I picked up the pace to the point that it was almost grueling and did my best not to wince as I splashed through puddle after puddle. Dr. Jones had also said that my

face was too expressive, and my features too unremarkable for such expressions to be memorable—I should smile less, for it made my brain seem quite empty, according to him.

Never mind being a national merit scholar or the fact that I had received no less than 27 scholarships in the past year alone.

“Dr. Jones really does say quite a lot,” I said, shaking my head at the mere thought of him. I was sure that I hated him—I had to, really. But he was better than the alternative. Avarelle was... I grimaced, slowing down at the very thought of him and of being his apprentice of all people, considering what Jones had told me about the man—then I realized that I was slowing down and promptly picked up the pace. “Do not let him get to you,” I said, repeating my often thought mantra.

Jones wasn’t always right about everything, I tried to remind myself. He was wrong about me at the very least.

I would be getting that book, and I would not be letting him down. Not like I had last week.

I held my breath as I ran, trying to restrain myself from talking to anyone, or making eye contact; Dr. Jones, again, always said I talked too much. Therefore, eyes down, knees up, and try not to say much of anything to anyone but my familiar. The normals didn’t like Knox university students very much anyway—

“Of course,” I swore under my breath as I felt the eyes catch on me and my purple sweater, the pin that all Knox students wore catching obnoxiously in the light. My hand slipped down the side of my schoolbag, my eyes closing and my jaw tensing. The very last thing anyone wanted to do those days was to be caught in a Knox University anything—regardless of Knox’s academic reputation. I practically melted with content the moment that my hand met the bell-end of my wand. “Thank god,” I remarked with a laugh to myself as I continued my breakneck pace.

As the staff had ominously informed us on the day of orientation, no one could protect you outside the gates of Knox. Not anymore. Not after what had happened.

It was always better to be inconspicuous than wholly and utterly notable. At least in Dr. Jones's opinion, and as he had told me on the first day of the first week of my apprenticeship, 'my opinions are your opinions now.'

Therefore, "conceal," I uttered, giving my wand the slightest of taps against the side of my bag as I held my breath and closed my eyes, feeling the next part but always hating to watch it as the rich purple of my sweater faded to unfamiliar greys, and the broach at my breast morphed shapes, changing into an unfamiliar fleur-de-lis patch rather than the brilliant, laurel wreath pin that it usually was.

In a mere matter of seconds, I was transformed and I could feel the eyes catch on me and blink as I moved along, undoubtedly wondering if they'd imagined the purple of my sweater mere seconds prior. I had become just another girl—one who was looking every which direction with concern in her eyes as she scanned the crowds for the slightest hint of a dark, almost golden blond head. One with a particularly large cat on her shoulder. A strange girl, but just another girl all the same.

One who shot said cat an amused look the moment she realized that said cat was still there and the aforementioned blond was not—and that the cat kept on sleeping as she tried to rush along with a good twenty pounds weighing her down. But aside from that? A wholly unnoteworthy woman.

Men and women hustled and bustled around me with little thought, wearing their worn, grey suits and carrying their cracked leather handbags and beaten up briefcases as their eyes remained on the ground, constantly averted from each other and more importantly averted from me— people didn't care much to notice others if they weren't beautiful or exceptionally

disarming. Even if they were carrying large cats. I was a dowdy little thing, not worthy of their attention.

Except, of course, my stupid familiar, who had never wanted to go to Knox to begin with and had therefore also decided to be a constant hinderance to my education.

“You could not be of any less help,” I hissed down to Nyx, the cat in question, as she blinked lazily up at me. “A bird, a dog, a nimble little mouse—No, you have to be a twenty-pound cat,” I chided, to which I was only rewarded with a lazy swish of her long, luxurious tail.

Typical. I sighed as we slowed to the stop, stuck at yet another crosswalk. The slow-moving procession of cars seemed to idle on the roadway, their long metal tailpipes leaking out a considerable amount of fumes that my labored lungs breathed an inordinately large amount of. The carrying of heavy, ungrateful things was just an ounce of the pain of having a cat, I supposed.

Never mind being a greater magical creature, one that churches and politicians feared, and academics and artists desired—Nyx was positively useless.

Next to me, a few older businessmen stepped away, but I paid them no mind as I turned down to Nyx, my voice a low, harsh whisper. “I’m begging you, Nyx. A ferret, a parakeet—something lighter. You don’t even have to walk if you do that. You know that Professor Jones will be beyond mad if we do not get the jump on *him* here. We cannot lose this reference book to Professor Avarelle,” I said, but the darn cat only purred, overly pleased with herself. In the background, a soft metallic clink was heard as the metal plate indicating whether pedestrians could walk was turned. “Fine then,” I said, looking down at her. “Have it your way.” My fingers loosened around the cat, and I could see the stark irritation far more than evident behind her gaze as she slipped from my fingers, twisting through the air

to land on her feet and changing from the large, fluffy black Himalayan cat she had been to a tall, thin greyhound.

Her eyes looked up at me in loathing as the pedestrians surrounding us failed to so much as even acknowledge her.

That was the nice thing about the late morning crowd, they were always so self-involved and worried about what was soon to come. It made it easier for one to talk to one's cat – or dog.

"Much better," I informed Nyx, patting her head in satisfaction. "You should be proud to have done such a good job with this one. I can barely tell the difference between you and an ordinary dog." I nodded in delight to myself as I moved towards the crosswalk, knowing that she would soon stop her scowling and move to keep up—it was uncomfortable for a familiar to be too far from her witch, after all. Nyx and I had learned that once before, and it was an experience neither of us wished to repeat.

Sure enough, Nyx came trotting after me as I crossed the street, not moving at anything near a good speed, but for the moment, it was enough. Just having her on four legs was better than nothing, especially considering what we were up against.

"I don't know how he does it every time," I remarked, having finally neared the bookstore just a few blocks down from Knox. "Whether it is a spell or sheer time travel; perhaps a transportation potion or good luck charm—" I murmured, yanking the small glass door to the bookstore open and ringing the bell as a result, "but I am tired of him beating me," I said, throwing my head back in anguish. "This time, though; this time, since I kept my mouth shut and did not brag to anyone," I told Nyx, waving my finger in her direction as I replayed the previous scolding of my master a few dozen times in my head, "this time I will be successful."

Maybe. If I were lucky.

I did not have a great track record with being lucky as of

late, so instead I closed my eyes, held my breath, and took a step forward, letting the bookshop engulf me.

So far, so good.

The Raven, named for Poe's most famous poem, was one of only three bookshops Knox Students frequented—and the only one in which the owner was aware that he was dealing with Knox students and faculty. This was because Robert Hearst, the owner and primary operator of the Raven was a collector; which was concerning in its own right, but far less concerning than the alternatives, which he had so helpfully wallpapered the entryway with.

Articles about Knox University. They plastered the doorway and blocked out the light, making it so that passersby couldn't see into his shop—and they were far from the only thing that Robert Hearst had amongst his wares.

I didn't so much as open my mouth as Nyx shifted at my side, reaching to grab my leather satchel with a paw which soon morphed into a hand, one which she used to pull herself up with as she scaled my strap until she sat at my shoulder, trembling into my neck as small monkey for only a second before shrinking down even smaller in size and diving beneath my collar—a mouse, if I had to guess at that point. Not that I could blame her.

I would be afraid too if I were a familiar. Especially considering her surroundings.

Heck, even just being a normal witch, I was nervous.

Collectors were often people who were fascinated with magic but didn't have the abilities themselves. Most were in denial. Almost all came with similar stories, that of animals that were particularly drawn to them as a child, but that were pulled away from them before they could bond—they didn't quite understand what a familiar really was.

Then again, to be fair, no one else really knew either.

Familiars could not simply be pulled away from their owners, nor were they ever static in form, especially when they first showed up. If a child were to have a familiar, then they would simply show up one day out of nowhere, and then keep changing forms for the rest of that child's life, determined never to part with them and destined to disappear once the child had died—at least for the most part. If they were lucky.

It was painful if not.

"Stay close and stay quiet," I whispered to Nyx, my eyes dancing across the figures that decorated the tops of the shelves, while thinking of the rumors I'd heard about Robert Hearst as I instinctually moved to cup my hand protectively over Nyx. "You mustn't draw attention to yourself," I said, though whether I was telling Nyx or myself at that moment I did not know.

Legend (or rather gossip acquired from my roommates) said that Hearst had bought a familiar once, paying for it in a seedy back alley with the conviction that it would soon recognize itself as his. It writhed in agony from that moment on, until a barkeep had the sense to put it down one night when it had escaped from its cage, claiming that he didn't know what it was when he damn well did; ever since then, Hearst had kept searching.

It was that failed familiar that drew him to Avarelle and Jones and made him the only clerk that either of them could find service with, and it showed. They were practically part of the décor, and I couldn't stop myself from gawking at their work.

Only nine magicians in the whole world could preserve a familiar after its owner had passed, with so many rotting into nothing right after, and only three places in America had ever managed to acquire even the skeletons—Knox University, the backrooms of the Smithsonian, and the Raven.

A part of me wondered if Robert Hearst knew that full preservation of a familiar was possible as I stood in that musty, run-down shop with hollow eyes peering at me from every direction. Another part of me wondered if I should withdraw my wand. Potentially dying did not seem all that fun, nor impossible at the moment.

“Rowan has been here before,” I reminded myself, because if Rowan had done it, then I should be able to do it as well. “There’s no need to be afraid,” I reassured myself.

I needed to be able to do everything he could, or else I was nothing.

At least if you asked Dr. Jones, who frequently claimed such a thing and not much else about me. To be honest, I sometimes wondered why I accepted his errands with a smile, or put up with him at all. Surely, I could have found some way to transfer in the first month.

If the pedigree of a doctorate from Knox University wasn’t worth so much.

“Brilliant choices, Ana,” I whispered to myself, taking it all in; the tall, dark bookcases and the familiar skeletons that sat atop them, somehow making the walkway to the desk feel somewhat longer. “You could not go to Winsbury’s, could you? Where there was a wonderful bakery and a cheery school song,” I muttered, hating myself more by the minute with every step that I took now that my legs shook and stomach turned. “No, you just had to go to Knox,” I said, allowing my eyes to scan over the shelves and note the fact that contrary to its name, there didn’t seem to be a whole lot of literature actually there.

At least not the entertaining kind like my roommates and I would read on the weekends.

It was mainly magicist books, the kind that you would find tucked into the corner of any other bookstore and pushed out of sight. Shelf after shelf, row after row—just magicism. Hearst

had made a name off of the books, after all, along with his ability to obtain titles that no one else could; thus, why he was in Dr. Jones's favor, I supposed.

Or at least I hoped that was why. I had never met the man before, nor been in his shop. My only interaction with him was a short, simple phone call. One in which I asked if he could get the title in, and he asked me who was calling, only to give a gruff, 'interesting,' when I informed him I was Jones's apprentice.

But then again, everyone said that was interesting, considering what had happened to the last one. The one that everyone should have been all too eager to forget.

I tried not to think about it, keeping my eyes trained forward as I approached the large, mahogany desk that sat to the back of the store, balancing a cash register. But just when I thought that I had pressed the thought from my mind, I looked down and I saw it.

Sitting on the corner of his desk, wrinkled from having obviously been perused many times over; a newspaper clipping bearing the headline from that fateful night sat, waiting for me, and I had barely the time to note it, taking in the smudge of fingerprints upon the ink, before a loud thud resounded beside me.

"The Jones girl?" Hearst.

I pivoted, my eyes going wide and my hand instinctively clutching my bag before I could even process who was speaking, only to find that the Hearst I saw was... Well, I suppose he was what I expected, but not what I should have been trained to have expected. Not in the world of academia.

In the world of academia, collectors and dealers were not often short, burly men in their mid to late fifties with skin like leather handbags that were also unfortunately balding. The type that would have looked far more at home sitting behind a

bar than in a bookstore, and that bore the grease stains on their clothes to prove it, but I supposed that was to be expected.

"You're late. I said nine." His attitude was also to be expected.

"I told you I had class until nine," I cheerfully replied. The clock read 9:09.

"When I tell you a time, you show up at that time," the man spat, making it clear that this wasn't exactly a topic that was to be argued about. I should have known.

No one ever wanted to talk about anything, it seemed. I glumly dug in my bag as the man rounded the counter, only to freeze mere moments later.

"No cash, news," the man said instead, and I stopped, the coins sliding from my fingers. "I don't deal in cash when it comes to the likes of Jones."

Poor business model, I had to note.

Of course, he was a collector. They dealt in far more than just money. But... "Knox students aren't allowed to spread gossip," I informed him, reciting word for word from the student handbook, which was to be followed closely that year. What happened in Knox, stayed in Knox.

And if it didn't, you could kiss your degree goodbye...

Most of the time. Depending on who you were.

"Some do," Mr. Robert Hearst interrupted me the moment I had secured his payment, causing my head to jerk up in his direction. "Now, if you got better news than they do—"

"—Knox students don't bring news," I said with absolute certainty, pressing the money on the desk before he could spout more nonsense. I had practically memorized the handbook weeks ago, and I wasn't about to let the shop keep correct me.

"Not true—" Hearst continued despite that, ignoring me as I counted out my coins. "*He's* told me tons," Hearst said, hardly

needing to elaborate as to who. Especially when he continued, his voice brash and overconfident. “Lots about you.”

“I doubt he has.” I knew he likely had.

“—Regular chatterbox—”

“I doubt he is.” I’d known he often could be.

“—Most loquacious student at Knox—” Hearst said as I clapped the last few coins on the table between us, pushing them his way. “Book’s already sold, anyway; some people know how the game is played—”

“—The game is normally played so that people who request certain materials are the very same ones who receive them—” I tried to explain. “Please,” I added in a way that likely would have earned me Jones’ reprimand. Anyone who knew anything knew that Dr. Jones was unpleasant to begin with, if Hearst had half a heart, he’d spare me some pity.

Turned out he didn’t.

“I already told you that the book is sold, girl; the boy knows how the game is played— He already told me what I wanted to know anyway—”

“—And what did this boy tell you?” I asked, far too curious for my own good. “Well?” I pressed after a moment, catching the cash that Hearst had pushed my direction and pushing it back into his hand with a swallow as I attempted to convince him to find it within his heart to tell me whatever it was he’d heard, as I didn’t know much about the incident to begin with. Keywords: I attempted. “Last I checked, Knox students aren’t meant to say much of anything about the Petrov incident to anyone,” I begged, and yet I had to fight back the urge to wince all the same, hearing how my voice broke at the wrong time and betrayed both my uncertainty and interest. I was never meant to sound that desperate.

Hearst’s ears immediately recognized my tone of voice.

“Maybe they’re not supposed to, but maybe he chose to

anyway, he's probably more in the know than most could hope to be," Hearst replied, "maybe he chose to tell me because he knew I'd understand. Maybe he doesn't think it's worth the time, explaining things to a girl who hardly knows what a soul's tether is, but," Hearst began, but he needn't say more, not before my eyes widened and I frantically grabbed the cash and shoved it into my bag, my face growing red with embarrassment "—Ah, don't go running off, darling, I'm sure I can order another one in, you just gotta..." Hearst said, his voice trailing off into the distance as I moved towards the door with Nyx in tow, my ears glowing red and my throat growing tight. "Hell, I'm sure he's got a soft spot for a cute little thing like you," the bookseller continued as I reached for the door, suddenly yanking it open at the implication as embarrassment gave way to something else.

Anger. Even as I tried to remind myself that this was how it was, how people viewed me and nearly every other woman like me in academia.

"If you put a little make up on, doll yourself up and pull yourself together, I'm sure that he'd be more than glad," Hearst drawled, and I had to pause, my feet planted firmly on the ground and the doorknob clutched so tightly in my hand that I could have practically reshaped it.

I hated it. I hated him. I hated this.

"I will never," I whispered, standing in the doorway as my blood rushed through my eardrums, my face turning red for once for reasons other than embarrassment. "Ask Rowan Avarelle," I gritted, the door shaking in my hand. "For anything," I stated, jerking the door shut behind me and accidentally shattering the glass.