

Arden hurried away. She didn't need the bathroom, but went anyway. Plonking her stuff on the sink, she splashed water on her face. Wiping her eyes, she glanced up and nearly jumped out of her skin.

Harshly lit by the fluorescent lights, Georgia loomed behind her in the mirror, fist pulled back. Arden quickly sidestepped, pushing Georgia sideways as she swung forward. Off balance, Georgia fell towards the sink, her fist striking the mirror with her body weight behind it. The mirror cracked and Georgia screamed. Holding onto her fist, she hopped around moaning as blood ran in rivulets down her arm, dripping onto the floor.

The door crashed open, nearly hitting Georgia, as curious students and two female teachers ran in.

"What's going on here?" the first teacher demanded, pushing her way through the girls standing at the front.

"Nothing to do with me!" Arden exclaimed, raising her hands. "Georgia punched the mirror."

"You pushed me!" Georgia snarled at her, tears streaking dark makeup down her face.

Arden's mouth hung open at Georgia's effrontery. "I wasn't doing anything! I was washing my face and Georgia came up behind me and tried to punch me. I just got out of the way."

"Both of you to the headmaster's office," the teacher instructed. Arden's heart sank. She was already on her last probation and they would call her adopted father, David, for sure. And that might cause even more problems. She groaned, knowing it was useless to appeal to the teacher, who was still standing there glaring at her.

Disgustedly, Arden dragged her feet up to the office and assumed her regular seat outside the headmaster's door. With a heavy sigh, she leant her head back against the wall and stared up at the ceiling. *At least Georgia's going this time too. Or will be after getting patched up.* Arden couldn't help a slight smirk at the memory of Georgia hopping around holding onto her hand. She had been so surprised to have been the one injured.

Arden's amusement faded quickly as the wait on the uncomfortable plastic chair lengthened.

Arden was still sitting outside when Georgia arrived, sporting only a few band aids. *Trolls must heal quickly*, she thought. She glared at Georgia who sat as far away

from her as possible and studiously examined the posters tacked up on the noticeboard.

“Why did you try to punch me?” Arden kind of knew the answer, but thought she’d ask anyway.

“You stole my boyfriend,” Georgia snarled.

“Right!” Arden snorted. “So you think you being a psychotic cow had nothing to do with him breaking up with you? Once you weren’t using magic to make him like you, of course.”

Georgia’s eyes narrowed to venomous slits. “You were making eyes at him when he and I were together. You went out of your way to make friends and worm your way into his life. You targeted him, even though he was with me.”

A pang of guilt struck Arden in the stomach. It was sort of true. She had liked him when he was with Georgia, though except for that one mistake, she hadn’t acted on it. “Whatever I did,” she hedged, “you were using magic to influence him. But even with you messing with his mind, he still liked me. The difference is that we are real and you never were.”

“We were real! We were together for six months before you came here. I know you’re using your power to trap him. You’re doing the same thing and it’s the only reason he’s with you. If I had my power back, you would never keep him.”

Arden could feel her body temperature rising, but didn’t want Georgia to see that she has getting to her. She rolled her eyes, hoping to annoy Georgia. “God you’re so deep in your denial that you can’t see that normal people would never do what you did. Not everyone is a psycho like you, Georgia.”

“You act all high and mighty but you’re no different to me. Do you think he’d be with you if you didn’t have any power? He’s attracted to power. That’s the only reason he’d even look at you twice, you creepy bitch.”

Arden’s spine straightened and her hands tightened their grip on the hard plastic seat until they shook as she stared right at Georgia. She fought to keep her emotions from her face, willing her anger back down. Georgia had no idea that the black pearl earrings she wore blocked her power completely. She couldn’t use any magic on him, even if she wanted to. *Nick is with me because he wants to be, not for any other reason*, she thought. She wished she could throw that in Georgia’s face, but it was better if she had no idea that Arden couldn’t do anything to her.

“Arden, you can come in first.” The headmaster opening the door broke their stand-off. Arden rose stiffly and stalked past him into his office. She sat in the flimsy chair opposite his large, cushioned one and waited with poor grace for the bollocking to come.

“Miss St John, you have left me with no choice. You were on your last probation before this happened. I cannot allow you to remain—“ A sudden loud knock interrupted him. Muttering under his breath, he walked over and opened the door slightly. Arden couldn’t see who was on the other side, but could hear a woman’s voice speaking quietly. She tried as hard as she could, but could only make out the occasional word, which wasn’t enough to get the gist of their conversation.

He shut the door quietly, more contemplative than he had been when he had opened it.

“It seems you have a reprieve, Miss St John.” He sighed heavily. “A member of staff overheard the two of you in the bathroom and has told me that you were not at fault.” Arden watched his face, not believing her luck.

After a tense five minute lecture on staying out of trouble, Arden left with a warning ringing in her ears. She didn’t even make eye contact with Georgia on the way out, grateful that it hadn’t gone worse with the headmaster. Which teacher overheard and what exactly did they say?

Walking down the hallway from the office, she thought back over the entire confrontation.

She stopped dead.

They hadn’t actually said anything.

Their argument, such as it was, happened outside the office and there hadn’t been anyone there. Whoever the teacher was, they had lied to the headmaster. She couldn’t think of any teachers she had a close enough relationship to who would do that for her. Who exactly had come to her defence?

Uneasiness crept over her, until shaking herself, Arden realised she was looking at a gift horse in the mouth. *This is a good thing!*

Sixth period was about to start, so Arden hurried out of the office building. Sophie and Grace were watching from across the quad and ran to catch up to her. They all had a study period now so no one would miss them being late.

“How did it go? Everyone was talking about you punching Georgia in the bathroom,” Sophie asked, concern wrinkling her forehead. “They didn’t suspend you did they?”

*Great*, Arden thought exasperatedly. She didn’t do anything, but still somehow ended up being the one at fault. “It was fine. Just a warning.”

“That’s good. We like having you around,” Grace said, giving Arden a nudge from the side.

Arden gave her a slight smile, before it slid away as she remembered her earlier apprehension. "A teacher told the headmaster that they'd overheard our argument and it wasn't my fault."

"That's great!" Sophie said, bouncing a little as she walked.

"But we didn't say a word to each other." Arden frowned. "She literally just tried to punch me and I moved out of the way. She hit the mirror and started screaming. Everyone burst in and that was the entire thing."

"Really?" Sophie asked, looking confused. "Then why would they say that?"

"I have zero idea. I don't even know who it was." Arden's eyebrows drew together.

"That's really strange." Arden and Sophie exchanged a concerned look.

"Have you noticed that the lorikeets have gone?" Grace asked out of the blue. The other two girls stared at her for a moment, then looked around the school grounds. It was true. Usually there were flocks of the small brightly coloured parrots, hopping around and chatting happily to each other while they scavenged for the discarded remains of school lunches.

"Where are they?" Sophie asked. The only birds in the whole school yard were two crows silently sitting in the centre of the quad. They weren't trying to eat the scraps, they looked like they were standing guard, heads tilting to scan the area.

"Okay, that's weird right? Or am I being paranoid?" Arden asked.

"It's okay, Arden. With everything that happened last year, you're right to be cautious," Grace reassured her. "With the earrings in and your wrists covered, you're effectively invisible. You can't be tracked and you appear to be a regular human. If anyone is after you, unless they know exactly what you look like, you're safe, even if someone has dodgy looking crows at their disposal."

"Who would be looking for you anyway?" Sophie said. "The only one who would care is Benedict, and he already knows where you are. There's no one else to worry about."

"If Sophie's right, why can't I take the earrings off?" Arden asked Grace. Being a literomancer, she could read someone's future from their handwriting.

"From what I saw, there's still danger." Grace shifted her gaze away from her friends, eyes flickering around the expanse of concrete. "The last reading I did for you showed a person, well it looked like a person, but their face was sort of veiled, like they had a dark scarf over their face so you couldn't see their features clearly. They were searching for something and the feeling I got was that it was you." Grace shuddered. "It was creepy as all hell. I don't know what it means exactly, but I saw it

in your future and it didn't look good. If this thing is looking for you, then it's best that it doesn't find you."

"Yeah, that doesn't sound like something I'm rushing to meet." A deep shiver rippled down her spine, startling Arden.

"The earrings will keep you safe. Keep them on!" Sophie instructed, with only a slight joke to it, trying to lighten the sombre mood that had descended.

"Yes, boss." Arden saluted her.

"That's right. Don't you forget it." Sophie smiled.