



# Ascendant

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**ASCENDANT**

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**Diana Peterfreund**



 HarperCollins e-books

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*For my father, who taught me about science and strong women*



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*In ancient times, royalty hunted unicorns for sport. They'd sally forth from their castle, gaily dressed, armed with spears, bows, knives, dogs, and their secret weapon: a virginal maiden. Without this girl, the unicorn could never be captured. Noble of birth and pure of body and heart, the virgin would enter the depths of the forest and allow the men to tie her to a tree. There she would wait, chaste and silent and still, until the elusive unicorn, attracted to her as if by magic, would come forward and lay his head in her lap.*

*Once the unicorn was subdued, the virgin would grasp its horn and trap the beast with her. The men would spring forth from their hiding place and stab the dangerous unicorn as it lay in the gentle virgin's arms. And so it was that brave and glorious men would be able to kill a unicorn.*

*Never mind that it was the virgin who had its blood on her hands.*









The unicorn drew its last breath. Within its chest, its heart shuddered and stopped. Twenty yards away, I felt it die, and the world settled into normality. Fire and flood ebbed, the tunnel widened, and my thoughts became my own. I lowered my bow and ran to the corpse—a human run, at a human pace, sluggish compared to the recent rush of hunter-granted speed. I bent over the body and withdrew my arrow. It had pierced both lung and heart, and the alicorn arrowhead was soaked in the almost black arterial blood of the kirin. Steam escaped from the corpse at my feet, twisting around my legs and mingling with the early-morning mist in the field. I wiped the arrow off on the grass and returned it to my quiver. These arrows were not so common that we could afford to lose any. I withdrew my knife and knelt by the unicorn's head. Its yellow eyes were flat now, snuffed of the bloodthirst that had so recently filled us both.

I was carefully carving into its skull by the time Cory arrived. “Didn’t need backup after all, then?” she puffed.

“For a single kirin?” I replied without looking up. Over the past month, carving out an alicorn had become a perfunctory postmortem operation. In through the eyesocket to the orbital, a quick jab up to break the nasal cavity, and then use the alicorn itself as leverage to shatter the top part of the skull and peel back the ligaments and skin protecting the base of the horn. In the early days, we’d simply sawed off as much horn as we could grab, but now we were trying to dig as deeply into their heads as possible to retain the venom reserves.

Cory watched me work. “How many kills does this make for you?”

“On this hunt?” I asked, and cracked the alicorn free.

“*Four?*”

“Four?”

Cory said nothing. I swung my braid back over my shoulder with my less-bloody hand and looked up at her. “You?”

“Zero.”

I stood. “Really?”

She gave me a tight smile. “Someone always marks them before I get a chance.”

If the statement was intended to sting, I could hardly feel it over the burn of alicorn venom. Beneath my sweater, droplets of sweat prickled the tender skin of the scar at the base of my shoulder blade. “It’s not a competition,” I said.

Her smile grew even more strained. “All evidence to the contrary.”

Together we doused the ground around the unicorn with flame-retardant, then took out our vials of gasoline and lit the corpse on fire. It was the only way to deal with the bodies, we’d learned. No vultures, no bugs, would touch unicorn carrion. The bravest among us had even tried the meat, wondering if—as with so many other aspects of the animals—hunters possessed a higher tolerance for unicorns. But apparently the flesh was vile. Even Grace, who ate Roman-style tripe with glee, spat it out. So cremation was our only option.

Cory and I returned to the rendezvous point without further conversation. In all honesty, I couldn’t see the source of her pique. When I took a unicorn, it was more out of reflex than anything else. The magic took over. It was just me, my prey, and my weapon. There was no discussion with the other hunters about whose “turn” it was. Hesitation might result in one of us ending up dead. A unicorn

moved too fast for us to stop and think about how many kills we'd each gotten. If I had a shot, I'd take it. The alternative was a horn in the gut.

I knew that all too well.

Two of the other hunters who met us in the clearing were splattered with dark kirin blood, though only one of them clutched a horn. Grace was twirling hers like a gory baton, and Ilesha looked baffled. "Its horn was broken off," she explained, wrapping a bandage around her leg. "Teeth still worked." The rest of the hunters stood in readiness, their bodies drawn as tight as any bowstring, their chins lifted, their eyes shrewd and darting.

"Give it a rest," Cory grumbled. Alone among the unsuccessful, she slumped, the tip of her boot dragging in the dirt. "There aren't any more."

She was right, of course. The sun was already rising over the distant hills, burning off the morning mist and sending any unicorns back into hiding until twilight. They were crepuscular creatures, active at dawn and dusk, when shadows and mist would be most likely to shield them from human eyes and memory. It was a rare kirin who would stay out in the full light of day. I stretched my senses to the limit but caught no lingering trace beneath the scent of burning fuel and wet earth.

I looked at the other six girls in the clearing. Only a few short months ago, they would have been an unthinkable sight in their blood-spattered clothes, clutching pieces of the monsters they'd slain. A couple of months ago, few people believed there had ever been unicorns. And even if there were, they hadn't been venomous, man-eating beasts—but gentle, sparkly, magical creatures. That was the story anyway. And it was about as accurate as the one that held that medieval noblemen kept virgin maidens around simply as unicorn bait. Why complicate the issue? We virgin maidens could do more than simply attract and capture the animals. We could shoot them ourselves. The women of my family had been unicorn hunters since time immemorial—except for those hundred and fifty-odd years in which we'd erroneously thought that unicorns were extinct.

Unicorn hunters may know more about the monsters than the average person, but even we make mistakes.

Actually, if I started cataloguing the things we didn't know about unicorns and our own unicorn magic I'd be here all day. And my morning had already been long enough.

I finished my perusal of the circle. Had I really killed more than my fair share? Ilesha had three, Grace five, Melissende and Ursula two apiece, and Zelda one. I frowned and flicked a sliver of skin off the back of my hand. Perhaps I was on the high end of the scale, but it certainly wasn't outlandish. And, as I'd told Cory, it wasn't a competition, either. We hunted as a group, and helped one another with kills if the initial shot didn't bring the animal down.

Of course, as often as not, my "marking" a unicorn meant ending its life. Gone were the days I risked anything but a killing shot. Two weeks ago, I'd hit a unicorn in the leg, and before I could string a new arrow, it had reared up and kicked Valerija in the face. She was still drinking her meals through straw.

Seventeen was large for a kirin pack, though, and I was about to say so when Grace spoke up.

"We cleared out two packs, I wager." She'd stored the alicorn she'd obtained and was inspecting her sword for chips. "Or the remnants of two. I bet Ilesha's broken one was a losing alpha."

"It was a female," Ilesha said. "And I don't think they have alphas like wolf packs."

"We don't know what they have, do we, Cory?" Grace pointed out. Cory slumped farther.

"I don't see *you* doing any research!" I snapped at Grace.

"And I don't see *her* killing any unicorns," Grace snapped back. "And perhaps if you stayed home from a few of these trips, we'd be doing more with that laboratory of yours than just buying beakers."

"Since when do I have a doctorate in pharmacology?" My hands were on my hips now, or more accurately, resting on the hilt of the alicorn knife in my waist scabbard. "Yes, we're rebuilding the

scriptorium, but there's no way we're going to wake up one day and the Cloisters will be the Gordian labs—"

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"Thank heaven for that," Ilesha murmured.

"We don't have the equipment or the know-how to ..." I trailed off because I knew I sounded like a broken record. Grace was as accurate with her verbal barbs as she was with a bow and arrow. She knew exactly where to hit me to make it really sting.

Rebuilding the ruined library-cum-lab in our crumbling monastery had been the joint brainchild of Cory and Phil—not me. They'd decided I needed a project to help me get my mind off what had happened in Cerveteri last month. How they figured putting together the equivalent of a high school chemistry lab would make up for the destruction of a state-of-the-art research facility was beyond me. And a high school dropout with aspirations to a career in medicine could never duplicate the skills of the man she'd allowed to be killed right in front of her.

I shut my eyes for a moment, allowing the memory to fill my mind, drowning any remnants of Marten Jaeger's hunter bloodlust in bitterness and regret. Marten Jaeger, his face twisted in pain as karkadann venom rocketed through his system. Perhaps I could have stopped it, could have saved him.

By the time I tuned back in to the conversation, Cory had achieved full-on rant mode.

"Furthermore," she was practically yelling at Grace, "until you take a more active role in the administrative responsibilities of the Cloisters, you don't have a right to complain about the choices we do make."

Something pricked my awareness and my hand tightened on the hilt of my knife.

Cory shouted on, though I could hardly hear her over the rush of blood in my ears. "Value to the order is not determined by quantity, and I resent—"

Grace drew her sword, whirled, and plunged it into the heart of the kirin colt bearing down upon us. The monster slumped over the blade, dead.

Cory froze, but the rest of us were not surprised. The other four girls and I had all drawn our weapons; all stood crouched in readiness. Cory's hands remained empty, her mouth open in shock.

Hadn't she felt it? To judge by their expressions, the other hunters were just as curious.

Grace tugged her blade free. "That makes six for this hunt," she said coolly. "Now, what were you saying about how useful you are?"

"I just don't understand it," Cory said for what must have been the fiftieth time.

We were replacing the alicorn weapons on the wall inside the Cloisters's chapter house. No one was sure if it was advantageous to keep them stored down here, but we figured it couldn't hurt. The ancient hunters had displayed them on the wall, so we would as well. There was very little argument that the chapter house was the most magical chamber in the building. So if it could make the hunter magics stronger in us, maybe it could spare a little for the weapons?

"I'm a hunter. I know I am. I can feel it," Cory said. "Bone-grinder still bows before me. So the powers aren't gone. They're just ... *depressed*. Is that possible? I don't understand it."

Rosamund paused over her beloved piano keys and blew a strand of red hair out of her face. "Is it possible for you to not understand it someplace else? Some of us are trying to practice in here."

Cory snarled. "What, am I throwing off your tune? A sour note inside your perfect hunterly echamber?" She hooked another bow onto the weapons wall with a lot more force than it deserved and flounced down the steps, brown curls bouncing indignantly.

Rosamund looked stricken. "You know that's not what I meant, Cory. Perhaps it is something far simpler. Perhaps you are like a piano and need to be tuned."

"Don't pianos need to be tuned only if they aren't in use?" I asked, then immediately regretted

Cory had been *trying* to hunt, after all. It wasn't her fault she was sucking at it. And if anyone should be suffering from lack of practice, it ought to be Rosamund. She'd managed to weasel her way out of participating in the last three hunts, preferring instead to remain in the chapter house and play her precious music.

Lucky. I wished I knew her trick. I wasn't keen on killing animals at dawn, either, but I had not yet found the strength to stay home.

I wasn't sure what that said about me.

Not that I wanted to spend time in the bone-strewn chapter house. Though the room rarely gave me headaches anymore, it still had the power to drive me bonkers. I didn't like being surrounded by so much death. Most of the other hunters were just as happy spending their off time in the dorm or the courtyard, and only Rosamund and Valerija seemed to like it down here.

"No, I like this idea," Cory was saying. "Maybe we just need regular checks, like a car." Her face brightened for the first time in what seemed like ages. "And we know precisely how to do it, too."

Rosamund shuddered. Despite her avowed love for the Cloisters's chapter house, there was one unicorn artifact she went out of her way to avoid: the enormous alicorn throne, composed of dozens of unicorn horns intersecting and weaving around one another in a series of terrible patterns. The throne was a gift from the people of Denmark in honor of a corps of hunters who had once saved a city from unicorn-induced decimation. Each horn in the throne was taken from a unicorn that had killed a hunter. Last month, we'd discovered the throne's purpose. Like every other unicorn artifact in the Cloisters, its presence attuned us to the monsters' thoughts and movements, made us better hunters.

Our inborn hunter abilities lay dormant unless we were in the presence of an actual unicorn. Having the artifacts around, being close to our pet zhi, Bonegrinder—it all functioned like antibodies in the bloodstream, boosting the body's ability to fight. The Cloisters was a giant tuning instrument. However, if the building was like an immune system, the throne was like a shot in the arm.

Of course, the quickest way to improve your hunting abilities was to let a unicorn tear a hole through your body. I was living proof of how well that worked. A mildly less agonizing, though no less violent, manner was to sit on the throne and let the magic of the murdering alicorns seep into your body.

It felt like fire, and your mind would be filled with visions of the bloody battle in which the ancient hunters died, visions that would forge pathways in your brain to make way for the alien communication with the hunters' quarry. I still didn't understand how it worked. All I knew was that it did.

For a hunter, anything made of unicorn was imbued with magic. For everyone else, it was nothing more than horn and bone.

Cory approached the throne and cautiously sat down, bracing her body for the expected onslaught of pain and horror. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Rosamund grimaced. "What's happening?"

"I see the field of battle," Cory replied. I shuddered, remembering the blood-soaked earth, the wormy gray sky, and the moans of the dying beneath the battle cries of those who still fought. Cory went on, her voice toneless. "But I feel nothing."

Last month, fresh from a unicorn stabbing, I'd touched the throne and did not feel the usual flash of fire. It had occurred to me how similar the pain of the throne felt to the agony of alicorn venom, which is when I'd gotten the idea that you could use the throne to force a quick hunter attunement. The experiment worked, and that first time, we'd realized that a subsidence of pain had been a signal that the process was complete.

If Cory felt no pain now, it should mean that she was ready to hunt. But she still wasn't sensing the unicorns as the rest of us did, and I couldn't understand why.

Cory turned to me. "Well, Dr. Llewelyn? What's your diagnosis?"

I said nothing.

“Forget it.” Cory slammed her hands down on the arms of the throne, pushed herself out of her seat, and bounded out of the room.

Rosamund and I stared after her. “Should I go apologize?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Just let her cool off for a while.” After three months of sleeping in the same room, I knew that Cory’s moods were best handled by avoidance, not comfort.

“I am sorry I made her feel worse,” Rosamund said. “She knows she doesn’t make the music good.”

“Does it ever go bad?” I asked, half joking. Before coming to the Cloisters, Rosamund had been headed toward a career as a concert pianist.

The Austrian colored. “When Phil is here. Yes, a little.”

I shut my eyes.

“Please don’t tell Phil,” Rosamund added, clearly sorry that she had even told Phil’s cousin.

I took a deep breath and opened my eyes. “Of course not,” I lied, and Rosamund, because she would never lie, believed me. But of course I was going to tell Phil, if only because my cousin would hate the idea of her presence being a burden on anyone here. I left Rosamund to her instrument and took the stairs to the first floor, feeling the tension ease somewhat as soon as I was away from the pull of those bones.

But the pressure never really dissipated within the walls of the Cloisters. Unicorn remnants were laid into the very masonry. The light fixtures were composed of hocks and hooves, and the empty eye sockets of skulls leered from every archway. I passed into the rotunda and found Cory, hands behind her back, contemplating the giant tableau of my ancestor Clothilde Llewelyn attacking the karkadann that history told us was Bucephalus.

“I’m sorry for snapping down there,” she said without preamble, and also without looking away from the mannequin’s placid face.

“No problem.” I shrugged and took a place by her side, studying the tableau. The real Clothilde had looked nothing like this lush, golden-haired doll in her spotless white gown.

“I know it doesn’t seem this way,” Cory said, “but I really am getting better with that whole temper issue of mine.”

I put my hand on her shoulder.

“I’ve been trying so hard,” she blurted, and I no longer knew if she was talking about her temper or about hunting.

“I know you have,” I said, because it was true on both counts. Cory had been the one to bring back the Order of the Lioness, to reopen the Cloisters, to find us all.

Cory took a deep shuddering breath and gestured helplessly toward the mannequin. “I just wish ...”

What? That Clothilde could step off the dais like a goddess come to life and solve all our problems? Explain to us the true nature of our powers, wreak vengeance upon the unicorns for killing Cory’s mother, do it all without wrinkling her silk dress?

The tableau was a lie, every bit of it. The real Clothilde Llewelyn had been scarred and dirty, with blood-soaked hands and arms that looked like ragged ropes of muscle. The real Clothilde Llewelyn’s hair had been shaved short so you could see the scar that ran the entire length of her scalp. The sword the mannequin wielded wasn’t even real—I owned Clothilde’s claymore. The real Clothilde had not died in battle with the karkadann Bucephalus; she’d cut a deal with the monster that allowed her to leave her life of hunting, a deal that sent unicorns into hiding for more than a hundred and fifty years.

I brushed my fingers against Cory’s bouncy brown curls. This life wasn’t pretty. If we kept it up, would we end up like Clothilde? Bitter, broken, desperate to find a way out?

“I just wish they were gone,” Cory finished. “I wish I could wipe every last one of them out. If the

were no more unicorns, we wouldn't be in danger. Our families wouldn't be in danger—no one would ever have to live like me.” She bowed her head. “I was a beacon that called death to my mother’s door.”

“Been working on that chorus a while, huh?” I asked.

But Cory had stopped listening again. “All I want, all I’ve ever wanted, is to get rid of them. I would kill every last unicorn on earth if I could.” She squeezed her hands open and closed reflexively, a tic I hadn’t seen since we first attuned ourselves as hunters. “And I can’t even do that. I just have to stand by and watch you do it.”

I stiffened. Kill every last unicorn on earth? I stared up at the giant stuffed karkadann that might not even be a karkadann but was certainly not the karkadann Bucephalus, the unicorn warhorse that had marched with Alexander the Great, that had known my great-to-the-fifth grandmother Clothilde . . . who had, last month, saved my life.

Kill all the unicorns? Drive the entire species to a true extinction? Was that what I had really come here to do?









I found Phil in the don's office, stacks of paper piled high on her desk, phone glued to her ear.

"Well, can you take a message, then? Yes, Philippa. One L, two Ps, and then Llewelyn is two Ls and then one L—well, no, the first P is in there, too—look, it doesn't really matter to me how you spell it, just get him the message. Order of the Lioness. Unicorn hunters, that's right. Yes, I'm completely serious."

She hung up the phone, blew out a breath, then smiled at me. "Hey there, Asteroid. Ever have one of those days where you feel like you walked out of *Ghostbusters*?"

I plopped down on the chair across from her. "In *Ghost-busters*, didn't they just capture the ghosts and keep them in a containment unit that ended up exploding all over the city?"

"Okay, can that metaphor?" Phil shifted some of the folders. "How are you doing?"

I shrugged. "Killed four unicorns this weekend."

Phil grimaced. "I wasn't looking for a score count, Cuz."

Of course she wasn't. Phil had been worried from the beginning about what exactly it meant to protect humanity from the threat of killer unicorns. Where did it end? Meanwhile, I'd been content to rationalize the benefits of killing particular unicorns that were actively endangering people in populated areas. The hunters had taken out a kirin that was terrorizing a farm, a pack of zhi that had been hunting in a suburban schoolyard playground, a re'em that had prowled the streets of Rome. Unicorn hunting had never been meant as a long-term-planning kind of thing, because the people who'd first invented the Order of the Lioness, centuries ago, had no concept of preserving other species—especially not dangerous ones.

And now I realized that the person who'd revived it—Cory Bartoli—didn't either.

Killing unicorns might be what we did, but we had to plan for the endgame as well. Nowadays, people didn't *get* to hunt species to extinction. Or they shouldn't, anyway. And that's what Phil wanted to make sure of.

"Who was on the phone?" I asked.

Phil rolled her eyes. "The intern to the assistant to the assistant secretary to the Deputy Secretary of the Department of the Interior."

"So you're really getting somewhere with this little crusade of yours?"

"It's better than it sounds, honestly."

I just shook my head. "Has it occurred to you that this isn't really on their radar? Right now, they're concerned with keeping the parks safe. They're still trying to figure out why they can't just go out with a rifle and shoot a unicorn that comes into populated areas. They're not going to put a conservation plan in place until they've done studies on the animal they're hoping to conserve. The things take time."

Phil smiled, but it wasn't her usual wide, gorgeous grin. "Well, I've got one semester before my volleyball coach replaces me on the varsity team and cancels my scholarship, so it's pretty much now or never." Her hands flittered around the desk, rearranging files and shifting papers from one pile to another. The don's ring glinted on her thumb, its cabochon stone shining like a droplet of fresh blood. "I've got four months to save the unicorns."

I nodded, mouth shut. Perhaps it would be a good idea for Cory and Phil to coordinate. My roommate would probably be a bit unhappy to learn her extermination plans were being undercut by

my cousin's quest for conservation. A quest with long-distance phone bills coming straight out of Cory's pocket.

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"A tall order," she went on, not quite meeting my eyes. "Even if I were still magic."

I heard a jingle, then Bonegrinder trotted out from the don's private wing, gait still stiff from disuse, eyes still half-closed with sleep. The little unicorn yawned, showing her long pink tongue and her sharp white fangs.

"C'mere, Sweetheart!" Phil called to the zhi.

Bonegrinder looked at her, unimpressed, then pranced to my side of the desk and bowed at my feet. I patted her head behind her screw-shaped horn, and she bleated happily. The don's ring was supposed to keep Bonegrinder docile in the presence of nonhunters like Phil and Neil. But lately, Bonegrinder had been acting more bored with it—and them—than subdued by its allegedly awesome magic unicorn-controlling abilities.

Phil became very busy with her files. "I heard from Neil earlier," she said. "He's bringing in two new hunters in the next month."

"That's great!" I said as Bonegrinder shoved her face into my lap so I'd scratch underneath her little billy-goatlike chin scruff. Perhaps more useful than training hunters to overcome the unicorn threat would be figuring out what made the ring work and getting it into mass production. Chalk it up as another piece of the magic that nobody understood.

"Yeah, we've got to build our numbers back up, right?" Phil shoved a lock of her dirty blond hair behind her ear. "We're dropping like flies, you know."

"Phil," I began.

She caught my eye. "I was *joking*, Asterisk. Please don't treat me like a china doll. Believe me, I do not miss murdering innocent wild animals who are only responding to their own survival instincts."

No, she wouldn't miss that. Bonegrinder put her front hooves up on my thighs, the rough edges digging into my flesh. I pushed her off and she growled, pouted, then lay down beside my chair, picking fluffy white hairs off my jeans.

Phil pretended not to notice. There'd been some talk about getting my animal-loving cousin a kitten or something, but then we realized that Bonegrinder would probably eat it.

"How do you do both at once?" I asked. "Fight to make unicorn hunting illegal while running an organization that hunts unicorns?"

She laughed. "The irony has struck me, too. But it's all part of the same goal, right? We want to keep people safe from unicorns. The Order does it in the old-fashioned way: killing them. But we don't have to go by the old rules anymore. I still think people are more important, and I'm willing to do what it takes to make sure they are safe ... for now. But I also think we can find a way to protect people that lets the unicorns survive. Like your pal Clothilde." She shrugged. "But with the force of law so it sticks this time."

I regarded her skeptically. Phil was way more optimistic than I was.

"Have you talked to Aunt Lilith recently?" Phil asked.

"Last week," I said. "She's been busy." Since leaving the Cloisters and heading back to the U.S., my mother had launched a new career as a unicorn consultant. Phil might not be able to get the government's attention, but local television stations were more than thrilled to showcase my pretty blond, arguably expert mother on their programs. The fact that she tended toward the crazy didn't faze them, especially since she'd been vindicated about the fact that there actually *were* killer unicorns out there all along.

From the safety of air-conditioned television studios and radio stations, my mom expounded on the history and mythology she'd spent half a lifetime reciting only to me. She sounded tough and well-informed and, if "former head instructor of a unicorn hunter training camp" was a bit misleading

well, at least it wasn't hurting our cause. My most recent phone conversations with my mother were mostly about whether she needed a booking agent to land a national program, and Grace and Melissende liked to get together and snicker—loudly and within earshot—at the online video clips where my mother rhapsodized over her supposed glory days as a hard-core unicorn hunter.

“How about Uncle John?” I added.

“Still leaving messages. Mom says he ‘needs time to process all this’ or something.” Phil shrugged. “I can't decide if he's maddest that I lied to him all summer, that I'm training unicorn hunters, or that he wasn't there to protect me.”

I reached across the desk and laid my hand out, palm up, for her to hold. “I'm guessing it's the latter one.”

She glanced down at my hand, at the bowstring calluses along my fingers, at the blister forming near the base of my thumb, at the curlicue marks of alicorn scarring on my palm, and didn't let go of her files. “China doll, Astroturf.”

I withdrew. “Right.”

She stood and stretched. “Okay, how about some target practice? Winner buys the loser a gelato.” She glanced down at Bonegrinder, who was still settled at my feet. “And you can't bring her. That's cheating.”

Bonegrinder bared her teeth at my cousin.

“Astrid!” Dorcas called up the stairs. “Giovanni's here!”

I closed the book I'd been reading, grabbed my bag, and headed down to meet my boyfriend. Giovanni had planned the date today, but he hadn't told me where we were going—just to wear something comfortable. Luckily, I owned sturdy shoes in abundance.

If I knew him, we were probably headed to a museum. He'd already taken me to the Borghese Gallery, the Vatican, and more churches with Michelangelo statues in them than I could count. One of the hazards of dating an art student: there was always more art to be seen, especially in a place like Rome.

Of course, the hazards of dating a unicorn hunter were far more obvious and deadly, so perhaps I shouldn't complain. I found Giovanni in the front courtyard watching Ursula as she sat in the shade sketching. The twelve-year-old had only very recently taken up drawing. Melissende, Ursula's sister, had asked her parents to send pastels and a notebook. Phil thought it was great for her to have an outlet that had nothing to do with hunting.

I wondered what Phil would think of Ursula's subject. She'd leaned her bow and a quiver of arrows up against the side of the fountain. *Still Life with Weaponry*.

“The water is the hardest part,” Ursula said, shoving her dark hair out of her face and squinting at the fountain. “How do you do the water?”

Giovanni pointed to a spot on the sketchbook. “Think about the reflection. Water is going to reflect everything, especially from this angle. The fletching on the arrows, the edge of the bow, the top of the fountain, the sky ...”

“But all squiggly,” Ursula said.

“Yeah,” Giovanni replied. “And if you don't think it's squiggly enough, throw a pebble in and draw it quick.”

Ursula laughed, then promptly stopped as she saw me standing by the door. Giovanni looked up, and his eyes softened the way they always did when he saw me. I smiled.

Ursula scooted. “Thanks for the advice,” she said stiffly.

Word around the Cloisters was that she'd developed a little bit of a crush on Giovanni after he

carried her out of Cerveteri last month. She'd been injured during the battle with the kirin, and he ~~been the only one with enough energy to pick her up after she'd hurt her leg.~~

Obviously, I couldn't blame her for her preference, but I didn't begrudge her it, either. If Giovanni noticed the way Ursula blushed in his presence, or how she'd mysteriously taken up drawing because she knew he liked art—he didn't say anything about it. Like Ursula's sketchbook, her crush on Giovanni was probably good for her. I know he was good for me.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, coming to meet him. "A picnic," he announced proudly. Ursula bent her head over her drawing.

"Wow, so no art?" I asked.

"Did I say that? I don't think I said that."

I put my hands on my hips.

"Astrid," he began. "Where was the last place you took me?"

"A battle with a pack of killer unicorns."

"And what time of day was it when you took me there?"

I sighed. "Dawn."

"And what happened?"

"The kirin tried to kill you and succeeded in destroying the van you'd borrowed from your school."

"Without their permission or knowledge," he added.

"Right."

"So by comparison ... ?" he prompted.

I laughed. "Art is an amusing and relaxing alternative."

He slipped his arm around my waist. "And safe. No one was ever killed by art."

"I'm sure there is some record of a statue falling over on someone sometime," I argued.

He pretended to consider this. "Was it a poisonous statue hell-bent on devouring my flesh?"

"No," I admitted.

"Then I still win. Now let's go or we'll be late for the train."

"So Cory's determined to exterminate them and Phil's every bit as determined to set up some sort of endangered species protection, and neither of them really knows what the other is up to!"

"Hmmm," said Giovanni, beside me. He tore a silvery leaf off an olive tree as we passed and began dissecting it. "So are you going to sit them both down and make them hash it out as peacefully as possible?"

"Peacefully?" I scoffed. "You've met them, right?"

Giovanni chuckled. "Okay, well, hide your weapons first. Maybe get them outside the Cloister altogether."

I tilted my face into the sun. "You're right. Something like this would be a far more peaceful venue for the coming Armageddon."

Giovanni dropped the leaf and grabbed my hand. "Next time. Now it's just us."

We were wandering around the Villa Hadrian, a green oasis of ruins and olive groves beyond the city. In ancient times, it had been the summer palace of a Roman emperor. Now it was far less posh, but the qualities of quiet, warm, sunny, and secluded remained intact. We'd packed a picnic lunch, and I split my time between keeping my mind open for the presence of unicorns and enjoying the feel of Giovanni's hand in my own as we wandered the walkways between the crumbling marble courtyards and algae-covered pools.

"How about here?" he asked as we crested a hill and looked down over the villa. High above us, an Italian pine spread its branches and protected us from the late summer sun.

I sniffed the air. No scent of fire or flood. No unicorns at all. "It's safe."

"I meant, 'Do you like the view; do you want the shade?'"

“Oh.” I blushed. “That, too.” We spread out the blanket and sat down. Giovanni unpacked cheese, bread, fruit, and mineral water.

“I miss Manhattan water,” he said as the bubbles fizzed in the plastic glasses he’d brought. He handed me one and went back to rummaging in his bag for silverware. “Huh. I can’t find my knife.” He looked at me. “You didn’t happen to ...”

My eyes went wide. “You want to cut *cheese* with my alicorn knife?”

“Well, it’s clean, isn’t it? We’re not going to poison ourselves with unicorn blood or anything like that, right?”

“The blood’s not poisonous. At least, I don’t think it is.” I sighed, reached into my purse, and handed it over. “Be careful, it’s an antique.”

Carved from a single piece of alicorn, the knife had been the relic of my ancestor Clothilde Llewelyn’s first kill. Though the hunters tended to share our small store of ancient weapons, I’d laid an early claim to the knife, and no one—not even Melissende—had challenged me for it. I kept it close to me at all times. I’d brought down my first unicorn with it.

Giovanni began sawing into the bread and I looked away, a little sick to my stomach. The knife was a killing tool, not an eating utensil. He handed it back to me, and I ran my hand along the flat surface, brushing bread crumbs from the creamy exterior.

“Astrid,” Giovanni said, and I tore my eyes off my weapon. He gazed at me, his expression a mix of care and concern, and held out a piece of bread with cheese smeared on top. “Stay with me.”

I pursed my lips. “I’m sorry. I just find the whole concept of using this for food a little morbid, that’s all.”

“Any port in a storm,” Giovanni replied, and stuffed a piece of bread in his mouth. “So, let’s spend the next five minutes not talking about Cloisters politics, or unicorns, or how this knife we’re using on this cheese is usually covered in blood and guts. It’s a gorgeous day and there are no monsters in sight.”

“Fine.” But I sat, silent and dumb, and munched my bread. What was there to talk about? I hadn’t seen any movies. I hadn’t read any books. I didn’t even know what was going on in the news right now, outside of my mom’s television appearances and the semiregular reports of unicorn attacks, or worse, the failed attempts by nonhunters to stop the unicorns themselves.

I will give credit to my mother for this—and only this—she was doing her best to spread the word that the only people capable of handling unicorns were trained unicorn hunters. If we could just convince people to keep out of areas infested with unicorns, and above all to not try to hunt the unicorns themselves, we’d probably be halfway to reaching Phil’s goal of noninterference.

Only, who decided which places were going to be reserved for monsters?

Giovanni stared out over the rest of the villa and volunteered no topics of conversation, either. Great, now I was the boring girlfriend. What did I have to offer other than ruminations about bloodthirsty, magical beasts? I leaned over and kissed his neck.

“Thank you for doing this,” I whispered against his skin, filling my senses with Giovanni until even the memories of unicorns were obliterated. “It’s so beautiful here.”

We forgot about bread and cheese and knives for a bit.

When Giovanni lifted his head at last, we were both a little breathless and warm, even in the shade of the tree. My lips felt swollen and flushed from his kisses, and I could see beads of sweat had formed on his temples.

Since Giovanni had learned the truth about the unicorn hunters, he’d become rather militant about keeping strict parameters when it came to getting physical. We kissed—a *lot*. But nothing more. I wasn’t sure how much longer he’d be satisfied with that arrangement. I wasn’t sure how much longer I would.

He lay above me, breathing hard, and traced his finger over my lips.

“Do you ever wish—” I asked.

“No.” He fixed me with a look. “Never. I’ll take you on whatever terms I can have you, Astrid. You’re a hunter, which means you’ve made a commitment. A meaningful one. An important one.” He sat up and resumed staring out over the greenery and brick ruins. “Summer’s ending.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. I sat up and smoothed my hair back down.

“Have you thought at all about what you’re going to do for school?”

Phil had brought up enrolling me in an international program once or twice, even petitioning Neil and Cory for the funds, but we’d never followed up on it. Now, after losing the money Gordian was providing us, I worried that the Bartolis had enough trouble keeping the Cloisters open on their own dime. I knew Cory was wealthy in her own right, but I had no idea what she could afford. The ancient monastery was in constant need of repair. Neil was in talks with representatives of the Catholic Church to see if they would contribute anything to its upkeep, but he and Phil worried that church involvement in the Order of the Lioness would bring with it restrictions that we weren’t ready to accept.

Things like forbidding make-out sessions in Roman ruins with my boyfriend.

“It’s still a little up in the air,” I said at last. “There’s so much work at the Cloisters.” How would I fit in classes and homework with my grueling training schedule and my hunting trips? Could I squeeze in calculus problems between life-and-death moments on the battlefield?

“You need to finish high school,” Giovanni said. “If you were in college or something, I could understand taking a year off, or even a few—people in the military do it. Phil is doing it. But you need to think about your future as well.”

“For all I know, this is the only future I have.”

“Don’t say that!” he said, turning back to me. “Astrid, someday this is going to be—over. Somehow. And you’re going to go to med school, just like you wanted.”

I folded my hands in my lap and studied them. They were strong hands now. Killing hands.

“That’s still what you want, right?” Giovanni asked.

I shrugged. “Yeah, but I could also die on a hunt tomorrow.”

He said nothing for a long time.

“Tell me again what you saw that day?” I asked him. “In the tombs? What could you see?” Giovanni was one of the few non-hunters who’d witnessed us in action. I wondered what it would be like to stand outside of us, outside of the magic. What was a unicorn to one who couldn’t read its mind or see its speed?

“Blurs, mostly,” he said. “You move so fast. Like streaks of color, like streaks of light. And behind you, corpses. And screams. And these creatures—animals I’ve never seen, could never imagine.”

“Some art student you are.”

He snorted. “Okay. It looks like a nightmare. Like Hieronymus Bosch at his very scariest.” He lifted his eyebrows as if to tease me. “Better?”

“Much.”

“And the smell—” He made a face. “But then you stop, Astrid, you snap out of it, and you stand there, covered in wounds and weapons, and you look like a goddess. Like a hero in a comic book. Like a statue in a temple. Athena.”

“Diana.”

“Whoever.” When he turned to me, his expression was somber, but his eyes practically shone. “Your look breathtaking. Beautiful and terrible all at once.”

I gave him a skeptical glare. “And you’re attracted to that?”

“I’m terrified not to be.” He thought for a moment. “I never really saw the little black ones until they were dead.”



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