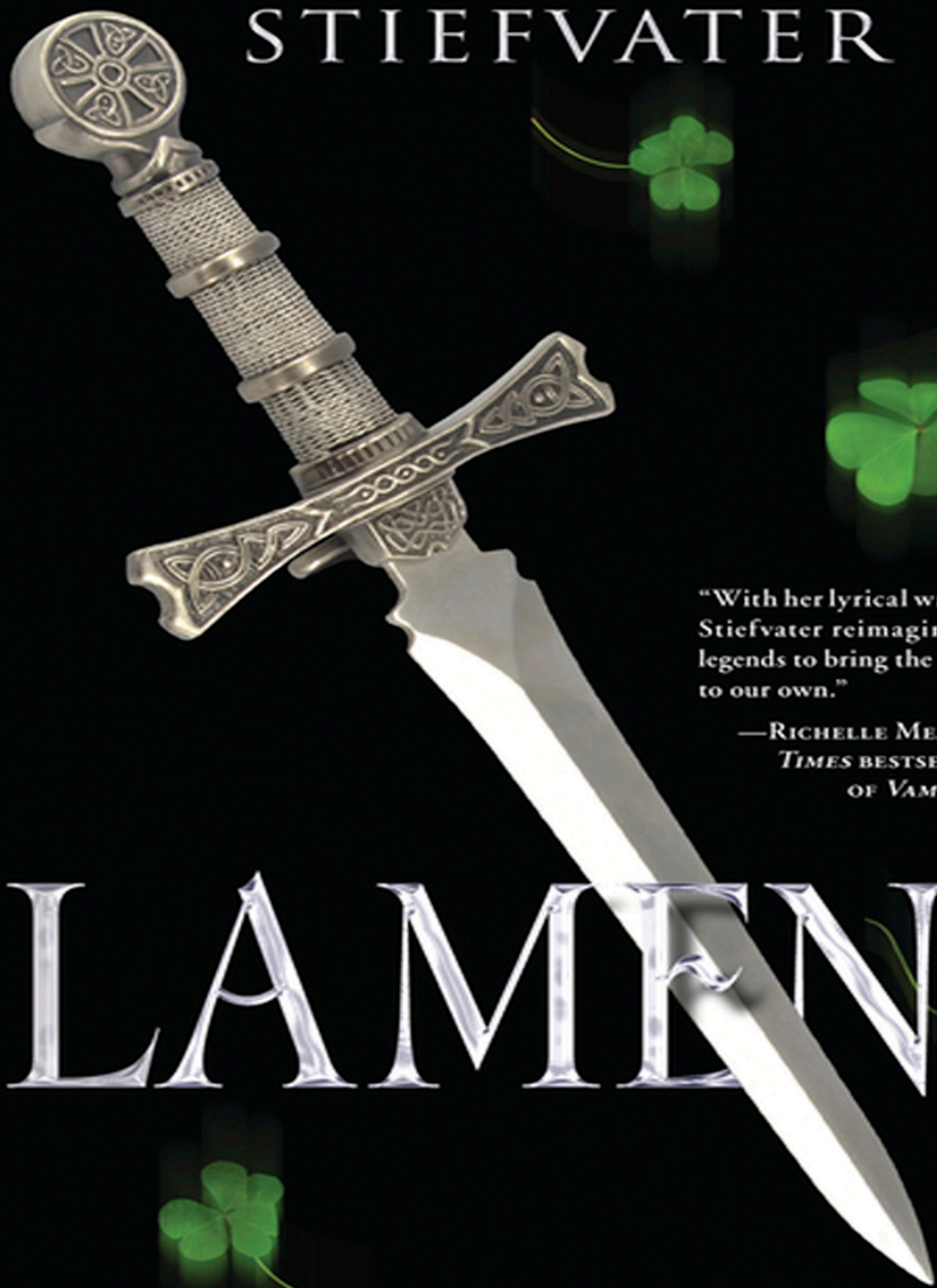


# MAGGIE STIEFVATER



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OF *VAMPIRE ACADEMY*

# LAMENT

*The Faerie Queen's Deception*

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*one*

You'll be fine once you throw up," Mom said from the front seat. "You always are."

Standing behind our dusty station wagon, I blinked out of my daze and tugged my harp case out of the back, feeling nauseated. It struck me that Mom's statement was just about the only reason I needed to avoid a career in public music performance. "Keep that pep talk coming, Mom."

"Don't be sarcastic." Mom tossed me a cardigan that matched my pants. "Take this. It makes you look more professional."

I could've said no, but it was easier just to take the sweater. As Mom had

already pointed out, the sooner I got into the auditorium and threw up, the easier it would be. And once I got this over with, I could return to my ordinary life until the next time she decided to take me out of my cage. I did refuse Mom's offers to help me carry my harp, though plenty of the other students heading inside had parental retinues. Somehow it was easier to be utterly insignificant without anyone you knew watching.

"We'll park the car, then. And find a seat. Call if you need us?" Mom patted her dove-blue purse, which matched her plunging dove-blue top. "And Delia should be here soon, too."

The thought of my diva-aunt pushed me slightly closer to the vomit end of the sick scale. *Oh Deirdre*, she would say loudly, *can I help you run through those scales? You really are a bit flat on the upper range.* And then I would throw up on her. Hey, maybe that wasn't a terrible plan after all. Though, knowing Delia, she'd probably correct my form. *Deirdre, dear, really, you need a better puke arc if you're going to ever blow chunks professionally.*

"Great," I said. My parents waved and left me to find the competitors' area. I shielded my eyes and scanned the broad concrete side of the high school. Shining brightly in the early afternoon glare was a huge canvas sign that said *Competitors' Entrance*. I'd sincerely hoped I wouldn't have to return to the school until my junior year started. Yeah. Farewell, mine dreams.

Man, it was hot. I glared up at the sun, eyes narrowed, and my eyes were drawn to the moon hanging in the sky next to the sun. For some reason, this appearance of the ghost of the moon gave me an odd prickle in my stomach—nerves of a different kind. It had a sort of magic, magic that made me want to stay and stare at it until I could remember why it enchanted me. But staying outside in the heat wasn't helping my nervous stomach, so I left the pale disc behind and I hauled my harp over to the "Competitors' Entrance."

As I pushed through the heavy doors, it occurred to me that, before my mother mentioned it, I hadn't wanted to puke at all. I hadn't even been thinking about the competition. True, I'd had my familiar glassy-eyed, all-attention-devoted-to-not-hurling look on my face on the drive over, but not for the reason my mother assumed. I had still been lost in last night's dream. But now that she'd brought it up, and with the competition in sight, all was right again with the world and my

stomach was a disaster.

A woman with two chins and a clipboard asked for my name.

“Deirdre Monaghan.”

She squinted at me—or maybe that was her normal expression. “Someone was looking for you earlier.”

I hoped she meant James, my best (only) friend. Anyone else, I wasn’t interested in them finding me. I wanted to ask what they looked like, but I was afraid that if I talked much, I’d lose my tenuous control over my gag reflex. Mere proximity to the competition area was definitely antagonizing the whole bile thing.

“Tall, light-haired woman.”

Not James. But not Delia, either. Puzzling, but not really a priority, all things considered.

The woman scribbled something next to my name. “You’ll need to pick up a packet at the end of the hall.”

I held a hand over my mouth and asked carefully, “Where can I practice?”

“If you go down the hall past where you get the packet, the big double doors on the—”

I couldn’t wait much longer. “Right. The classrooms down there?”

She wagged her chins. I took that as a “yes” and walked farther inside. My eyes took a minute to adjust to the light, but my nose operated immediately. The familiar smell of my high school, even without any students nearby, pricked my nerves. God, I was so dysfunctional.

My harp case rang. The phone. I fished it out and stared. A four-leaf clover was stuck to the back of it, damp and fresh. Not one of the ones where the fourth leaf is stunted, either, and you can obviously see it’s just a mutation of a three-leaf clover. Each of these leaves was perfectly formed and spread.

Then I remembered that the phone was ringing. I looked at the number, hoping it wasn’t Mom, and flipped it open. “Hi,” I said tightly, peeling the four-leaf clover off the phone and putting it in my pocket. Couldn’t hurt.

“Oh,” James said sympathetically, picking up on my tone. Though his voice was thin and crackly over the line, it still had its usual calming effect. The bile in my throat momentarily retreated. “I should’ve called earlier, huh? You’re puke-a-rella already.”

“Yeah.” I headed slowly toward the double doors at the end of the hall. “Distract me, *please*.”

“Well, I’m running late,” he said cheerfully. “So I’m probably going to have to tune my pipes in the car and then run in shirtless and half-dressed. I’ve been lifting weights. Maybe they’ll score high for a defined six pack, if they aren’t awed by my mere musical genius.”

“If you manage just your skirt, at least the judges’ll give you *Braveheart* points.”

“Don’t mock the kilt, woman. So, did you have any entertaining dreams last night?”

“Uh . . . ” Even though James and I were just friends, I hesitated to tell him. My intensely detailed dreams were usually a source of great amusement for us—two nights ago, I’d dreamt I was being interviewed by a Harvard college counselor who was up to her neck in cheese (Gouda, I think). The mood of last night’s dream still lingered with me, in a sort of appealing way. “I couldn’t really sleep well enough to dream,” I finally said.

Oh. The moon. It suddenly occurred to me that my dream was where I had seen a moon in a daytime sky—that was where the sense of *déjà vu* came from. I was disappointed that it was something so normal.

“Well, that’s typical,” James was saying.

“Delia’s coming,” I told him.

“Oh, so it’ll be the whole sister-on-sister catfight thing today, huh?”

“No, it’s the whole ‘my kid’s more talented than you are’ thing.”

“Neener neener,” James added helpfully. “Oh, damn. I really am late now. I have to get my pipes into the car, but I’ll see you soon. Try not to spaz out.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I said. The phone went silent, and I stuffed it back in my case as I arrived at the double doors. Behind them I could hear a vaguely muffled cacophony. I waited in line for my competition packet, pulling my harp behind me. Finally, I accepted my crisp manila envelope and turned to go. I was so eager to get out of there that my harp tipped precariously. Next thing I knew, the student behind me was stumbling under the weight of it.

“Uh—*God*.” He carefully set the harp back upright and I realized I knew him: Andrew from the brass section of the school orchestra. Trumpet, maybe. Something loud. He grinned hugely at me—boobs first, then face. “You have to be careful.

Those inanimate objects will get away from you.”

“Yeah.” If he got much funnier, I was going to throw up on him. I pulled my harp a few inches away from him. “Sorry.”

“Hey, you can chuck your harp at me any time.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I just said, “Yeah.” Effortlessly, I became invisible and Andrew turned away. Funny how it was just like any other day in high school.

Except that it wasn’t. Standing next to the double doors, listening to the roar of voices and instruments behind it, I couldn’t forget why we were all here. Tons of students were warming up for their turn on stage. Warming up for their shot at winning a prize at the 26th Annual Eastern Virginia Arts Festival. For their chance to impress the college and conservatory representatives who would be watching from the audience.

My stomach turned again and this time I knew there was no going back. I fled for the girl’s bathroom, the one in the basement below the gym, so that I could puke in private. Leaving my harp by the sinks, I barely made it in time, arms resting on the old gray-yellow toilet seat that reeked of too much cleaner and too many students.

*I hate this.* My stomach gurgled more. Every time I played in public, this happened. I *knew* it was stupid to be afraid of crowds, and I knew that the throwing up and nerves were all my fault, but I still couldn’t stop it. James had looked up “the fear of public humiliation” for me (katagelophobia), and one afternoon we’d even tried hypnosis, complete with self-actualizing pamphlets and soothing music. We’d just ended up slap-happy new fans of New Age music.

I still wasn’t done. My stupid hair was falling in my face, and my choppy haircut was too short in front to pull back into my ponytail. I imagined going onstage with chunks in my bangs. I cry only when I’m frustrated, and I was getting dangerously close.

And then, I felt a cool hand gently pulling my hair back from my face. I hadn’t even heard anyone come into the bathroom. But somehow I wasn’t surprised—like I’d expected someone to come find me here. I knew without looking that it was definitely a guy’s hand, and definitely not James.

I started to pull my head away, embarrassed, when the owner of the hand said

firmly, “Don’t worry about it. You’re almost done.”

And I was. I finally couldn’t throw up anymore and I was left shaky and utterly empty. And for some reason, I wasn’t totally undone by the idea of a guy standing behind me. I turned around to see who had witnessed the most unsexy thing a girl could do. If it was Andrew, I was going to punch him for touching me.

But it wasn’t Andrew. It was Dillon.

*Dillon.*

The guy from my dream. Here to save me from public humiliation and lead me triumphantly to a standing ovation.

He held out a handful of paper towels and smiled disarmingly. “Hi. I’m Luke Dillon.” He had one of those soft voices that oozed self-control, a voice you couldn’t imagine raised. It was, even in the context of a barf-filled bathroom, amazingly sexy.

“Luke Dillon,” I repeated, trying not to stare. I took the towels with a still-trembling hand and wiped my face. He had been hazy in the dream, like all dream people, but this was definitely him. Lean as a wolf, with pale blond hair and eyes even paler. And sexy. The dream seemed to have left that bit out. “You’re in the girl’s bathroom.”

“I heard you in here.”

I added, in a voice more wavery than I wanted, “You’re blocking me in the stall.”

Luke moved to the side to let me out and turned on one of the taps so I could wash my face. “Do you need to sit down?”

“No—yes—maybe.”

He retrieved a folding chair from the cubby behind the stalls and put it next to me. “You’re white as white. Are you sure you’re okay?”

I sank down onto the chair. “Sometimes after I’m done—uh—doing that, I pass out.” I smiled weakly as my ears started to roar. “One of my—uh—many charms.”

“Put your head between your knees.” Luke knelt beside the chair and watched my upside-down face. “You know, you have very pretty eyes.”

I didn’t answer. I was going to pass out in front of a perfect stranger on a bathroom floor. Luke reached between the tangle of my arms and legs and pressed a



wet paper towel against my forehead. My hearing came back in a rush.

“Thanks,” I muttered, before very slowly sitting up.

Luke crouched before me. “Are you sick?” He didn’t seem particularly concerned about me being contagious, but I shook my head vigorously.

“Nerves. I always throw up before these things. I know I should know better—but I can’t stop it. At least I won’t throw up on stage now. Might still faint, though.”

“How Victorian,” Luke remarked. “Are you done fainting for now, though? I mean, do you want to stay in the bathroom, or shall we go out?”

I stood. I stayed standing, so I must have recovered. “No, I’m better. I—uh—really need to warm up, though. I think I’ve only got forty-five minutes or something until I play. I’m not sure how much time I’ve wasted.” I pointed to the stall he’d found me in.

“Well, let’s get you outside to practice. They’ll let you know when you need to go on, and it’s quieter.”

If he were any other guy in the school, I would have given him the brush-off there. I think this was actually the longest conversation I’d had with someone other than James or my family in the last two years. And that wasn’t even counting the puking as part of the conversation.

Luke shouldered my harp case. “I’ll take this for you, as you’re Victorian and feeble. If you’ll carry this for me?” He held out an exquisitely carved little wooden box, very heavy for its size. I liked it—it promised secrets inside.

“What’s in here?” Right after I asked the question, I realized that it was the first one I’d asked him since he touched my hair. It hadn’t even occurred to me to question anything else about him—as if everything up to now was unquestionable and acceptable, part of an unwritten script we both followed.

“Flute.” Luke pushed open the bathroom door and headed for one of the back exits.

“What are you competing in?”

“Oh, I’m not here to compete.”

“Then why are you here?”

He looked over his shoulder and flashed me a smile so winning that I got the idea he didn’t smile like that very often. “Oh, I came to watch you play.”

It wasn't true, but I liked his answer anyway. He led me out into the sun behind the school and made his way to one of the picnic benches near the soccer field. A student's name blared across the grounds from the speaker near the back door, and Luke looked at me. "See? You'll know when you need to go."

We settled there, him on the picnic table and me on the bench next to my harp. With the sun fully on them, his eyes were pale as glass.

"What are you going to play for me?"

My stomach squeezed. He was going to think I was completely pathetic, too nervous to play even in front of him. "Um ... "

He looked away, opening his flute case and carefully putting the flute together. "So you're telling me you're a great musician and you won't share it with anyone?"

"Well, you make it sound so selfish when you put it that way!"

Luke's mouth quirked on one side as he lifted his flute. He blew a breathy "A" and adjusted the slide. "Well, I held your hair. Doesn't that deserve a tune? Concentrate on the music. Pretend I'm not here."

"But you *are*."

"Pretend I'm a picnic table."

I looked at the muscled arms beneath the sleeves of his T-shirt. "You are *definitely* not a picnic table." Man, he was definitely not a picnic table.

Luke just looked at me. "Play." His voice was hard, and I glanced away. Not because I was offended, but because I knew he was right.

I turned to my harp—*hello, old friend*—and rocked it back on its six-inch legs to settle it into the crook of my shoulder. A moment's attention to the strings showed me that they still held their tune, and then I began to play. The strings were lovely and buttery under my fingers; the harp loved this warm and humid weather.

I sang, my voice timid at first, and then stronger as I realized I wanted to impress him.

*The sun shines through the window  
And the sun shines through your hair  
It seems like you're beside me  
But I know you're not there.  
You would sit beside this window*

*Run your fingers through my hair  
You were always there beside me  
But I know that you're not there*

*Oh, to be by your side once again  
Oh, to hold your hand in mine again  
Oh, to be by your side once again  
Oh, to hold your hand in mine—*

I broke off as I heard his flute joining in. “You know it, then?”

“Indeed I do. Do you sing the verse where he gets killed?”

I frowned. “I only know the part I sang. I didn’t know he died.”

“Poor lad, of course he dies. It’s an Irish song, right? They always die in Irish songs. I’ll sing it for you. Play along so I don’t wander off tune.”

I plucked along, bracing myself for whatever his voice might sound like.

He turned his face into the sun and sang,

*Fro and to in my dreams to you  
To the haunting tune of the harp  
For the price I paid when you died that day  
I paid that day with my heart  
Fro and to in my dreams to you  
With the breaking of my heart  
Ne’er more again will I sing this song  
  
Ne’er more will I hear the harp ...*

“See, he gets killed—”

“—sad,” I interjected.

“—and it’s a very old song,” continued Luke. “That bit you sang—‘oh to be by your side,’ that bit—must have been added on somewhere along the way. I’ve not heard it before. But what I sang—that’s always been part of it. You didn’t know it?”

“No, I didn’t,” I said, adding truthfully, “You have a wonderful voice. You make it sound like something you’d hear on a CD.”

“So do you,” Luke said. “You have an angel’s voice. Better than I expected. And

it's a girl's song. The lyrics are girly, you know?"

My cheeks flushed. It was stupid, of course, because all my life I'd been told—by highly qualified professionals and people who should know and folks “in the business”—that I was good. I'd heard it so often that it didn't mean anything anymore. But my heart leapt at his words.

“Girly,” I managed to scoff.

Luke nodded. “But you could do so much better. You're not pushing yourself at all. So *safe*.”

My mood immediately shifted from pleased to irritated. I'd practiced “The Faerie Girl's Lament” for months—I had arranged it with so many impossible embellishments and chord changes that even the most cynical of harpists would be awed. I didn't think I could take the designation “safe,” even from the enigmatic Luke Dillon.

“Any less safe and it'd be impossible,” I managed to say evenly. I get my temper from Mom; like her, though, I never show it. I just get frostier and frostier until I freeze the person out entirely. I think Luke's comment sent me to somewhere between “pretty damn cold” and “frostbite warning.”

Luke gave me an odd little smile. “Don't be angry, pretty girl. I just mean that you could really write a nice little interlude in there that was all yours. Improvise a bit—be spontaneous. Make something happen. You've got the talent for that; you just aren't trying.”

It took me a moment to get past his flirting to realize what he was trying to say. “I've written some tunes,” I said. “But it takes me a while to do it. Weeks. Days, anyway. I guess I could see where I could put something in there.”

He slid closer on the table and lifted his flute up. “Not what I meant. Write something *now*.”

“I couldn't. It would be slop.”

Luke looked away. “Everyone says that.”

I sort of had a strange sense then that a lot rode on that moment, on whether I gave up or tried. I just wasn't sure what. I just knew I didn't want to disappoint him. “Then play it with me. Help me think of something. I'll try.”

He didn't look back at me, but he lifted his flute and played the opening notes. I joined in with my harp half a measure later, and together we played. The first time

through, my fingers automatically found the notes, as I had trained them to for months. Just like I'd automatically followed along with Luke and all his strangeness for the last half hour, taking the script as it was written for me.

But the second time through, my fingers plucked out a little variation. Not just a few notes, either. It was something more—a decision to take control and make the tune my own. For once, I was calling the tune and it felt amazing. No regrets. No second-guessing.

By the third time through, Luke dropped out after the first verse and I coaxed eight measures of something brand new from the harp.

Luke smiled.

“Gloating is very rude,” I told him.

“Very,” he agreed.

I bit my lip, thinking. Now I was in completely unfamiliar territory and I didn't know any of the rules. “If—what if—would you play with me this afternoon? If I switch my name over from solo to duet?”

“Yes.”

“I'll go do it now.” I started to rise, but he reached out and caught my arm.

“They already know,” he said softly. “Would you like to practice some more?”

Apparently, I wasn't in control. Frozen by his words, I slowly sank back down, looking at him with a puzzled expression. Something in me prickled with either a warning or a promise. I had a choice—the power to decide which one it was. In a safe world, it would have been a warning.

I nodded firmly. “Yeah. Let's practice.”

“Dee—there you are.”

Distracted, I turned to find James standing behind me. It took me a moment to remember the last time I'd spoken to him. “I threw up.”

Luke said, “Nice kilt.”

James looked hard at him. “Haven't I seen you somewhere before?”

“Parking lot,” Luke said mildly. “Of the music store.”

It was peculiarly difficult to imagine Luke someplace else, someplace ordinary, but James seemed to believe him. “Oh—right. What happened to that fiddler you were playing with?”

“He had to go home.”

I had the curious sensation both were leaving things unsaid. I resolved to ask James about it later.

“Are you playing soon?” I asked.

“They’ve just finished up the *a cappella* or whatever it’s called and they’re starting the duets now. Jason Byler—you remember him—and I decided to do the pipes with his electric guitar, just to see if we can get a rise out of the crowd. So yeah, soon. I’m going to head inside and find him. I’ll listen for your name, though.” James was still staring at Luke as if he were some sort of rare plant specimen.

“Good luck,” Luke said.

“Yeah. Thanks.” He held out his hand, brushing my fingers with his. “Later, Dee.”

After he had gone, Luke said, “He likes being different.”

I agreed.

“Unlike you,” he added.

I frowned. “That’s not true. I like being different. But somehow everything that makes people outside of high school notice me makes me invisible *inside* the school.” I shrugged. “James is my only real friend.” Immediately I thought I’d said too much, that I’d go invisible to him as well.

But he merely rubbed his flute absently before looking at me. “Their loss.”

*“Deirdre Monaghan. Luke Dellom.”*

I jerked at the sound of my name over the loudspeaker.

“Easy now,” Luke said. “We don’t need you passing out. They’ll wait.” He got up and shouldered my harp, offering me his flute case again. Then he held the door open for me. “After you, my queen.” I closed my eyes briefly as the door shut behind us, waiting for nerves to slam me again.

“Do you know how some people can do anything?”

I opened my eyes. I realized he was waiting for me to lead the way to the auditorium, so I started walking up the stairs. “What do you mean?”

As we got closer to the auditorium, there were more students waiting in the halls, all talking noisily, but I heard Luke’s voice behind me without difficulty. “I mean, you tell them to write a tune, they give you a symphony right there. You tell them to write a book, they write you a novel in a day. You tell them to move a

spoon without touching it, they move it. If they want something, they make it happen. Miracles, almost.”

“Uh, not really,” I said. “Except for on the Sci-Fi Channel. Do you know anyone who can do that?”

Luke’s voice dipped. “I’d ask them to do a few miracles for me if I did.”

We pushed our way backstage; the previous duet, two trumpets, was still playing for the judges. They were revoltingly good.

Luke persisted. “What gets me is you could walk right by someone like that on the street. That you’d never know if *you* were like that unless you tried.”

“This is about the improvising on the tune, isn’t it?” I scanned heads for someone in charge. I was starting to get that light-headed, too-warm feeling that meant I was going to either hurl or fall down soon. “I get it. I wouldn’t have ever known I could improvise like that if you hadn’t made me.”

“Deirdre Monaghan and Luke Dillohm?” It was another lady with a clipboard, horribly mispronouncing Luke’s last name. “Good. You’re up next. Wait until these guys get offstage, and they’ll introduce you. You can say something brief about your piece if you like. *Brief.*” With a harassed expression, she turned to the musicians behind us and began repeating the speech.

“I just think you don’t push yourself enough,” Luke said, continuing exactly where he’d left off. “You settle for ordinary.”

This struck a chord with me, and I turned to look at him. *I will call the tune.* “I don’t want ordinary.”

Luke smiled at me, or at something behind me, his expression unreadable. Then he pulled a small, unmarked bottle of eyedrops from his pocket.

“Dry eyes?”

“I have strange eyes. I’d like to be able to see everything tonight.” He blinked, his eyes shiny with the drops and his lower lashes filled with small tears. A swipe of his arm and his eyes and lashes were dry, though no less bright. Something about them made me want to see the *everything* he was going to see.

“Deirdre? Ah, I thought that was you.” Mr. Hill, the school’s music teacher and band director, touched my elbow. He had acted as my musical mentor since I began high school; I knew he thought I was destined for greatness. “How are you doing?”

I contemplated the question. “Actually, not as bad as I expected.”

Mr. Hill's eyes smiled behind his wire frames. "Great. I wanted to wish you good luck. Not that you need it, of course. Just remember to avoid pinching the high notes when you're singing."

I smiled back. "Thanks. Hey—I'm playing in duets. Did you know?"

Mr. Hill looked at Luke and his smile vanished. Frowning, he asked, "Do I know you?"

Luke said, "Nobody knows me."

I looked at him. *I will.*

"Deirdre? Lucas? You're on." The clipboard-woman took my elbow firmly and pointed me in the direction of the stage. "Good luck."

Together we walked into the too-bright lights of the stage. Luke's hair was lit to white. I looked out, off the stage, trying to see where my family was, but the audience was cast in shadow. It was better that way—I wouldn't see Delia's invariably smug expression. I gave the darkened faces one last glance before sitting on the folding chair; it was unpleasantly warm from the last nervous performer.

Setting down the harp, Luke crossed behind me and whispered, "Don't be ordinary."

I shivered and gathered my harp to me. Something told me "ordinary" wasn't possible when Luke was involved, and that thought was more exciting and terrifying than anything the competition could offer.

"Deirdre Monaghan and Luke DeLong on lever harp and wooden flute."

I leaned to Luke and whispered, "They all say your name wrong."

Luke's teeth made a thin smile. "Everyone does."

"I didn't, did I?"

The stage lights reflected off his eyes like the glow off a lake; I was dazzled in spite of myself. "No, you didn't."

He adjusted the microphone and addressed the crowd, his eyes running over the people's faces as if he expected to see someone he knew. "Excited to be here, folks?"

There was some mild clapping and calling from some of the louder dads.

"You don't sound excited. This is the biggest musical event for students in a six-hundred-mile radius. We're playing for great prizes. These are your children and the peers of your children, playing their hearts out, folks! Now, are you excited, or not?"



The audience clapped and hooted, distinctly louder. Luke gave a wild smile. “Now, Dee and I will be playing an old Irish song called ‘The Faerie Girl’s Lament.’ I hope you like it. Let us know!”

This was where I would normally either throw up or fall down, but I didn’t feel like doing either. I felt like grinning as big as Luke. I felt like kicking some music-geek ass. It was the best feeling I’d ever had. Where had the real me gone? Because I didn’t want her back.

“Ready, Dee?” Luke asked softly.

His smile was infectious and for the first time in my life, being on stage felt *right*. I smiled hugely at him and began to play. The strings were still buttery-soft from the heat outside, and the acoustics of the stage made the harp sound twenty feet tall. Luke chipped in and began to play, and the flute was low and breathy like his singing voice, full of expression and barely suppressed emotions. Together, we sounded like an orchestra, albeit it an ancient, untamed one, and when I began to sing, the auditorium became as still as a winter night.

Did I really have the voice of an angel? The voice that filled the room didn’t sound like mine—it sounded grown-up, complex, as agonized as the Faerie Girl in the lyrics.

The first verse ended and I *felt* the flute hesitate for the barest of moments, waiting. I began to play a counter-melody, something that had never been heard before. Only this time, I’d done it before and I *knew* I could wander from the melody without getting lost. This time I attacked the counter-melody with sweet savagery. It climbed up the scale, bitter and lovely, and Luke’s flute came back in, low notes that climbed with mine to an almost unbearable intensity.

Then I began to sing the last verse, the one I had just learned from Luke. Any other day, I would’ve forgotten the lyrics, but not today, with the memory of his voice singing them. The words seemed to take on new meaning as I sang them; they were real.

I *was* the Faerie Girl.

*Fro and to in my dreams to you  
To the haunting tune of the harp  
For the price I paid when you died that day*

*I paid that day with my heart  
Fro and to in my dreams to you  
With the breaking of my heart  
Ne'er more again will I sing this song  
Ne'er more will I hear the harp.*

By the time we got to the last refrain, Luke was grinning so widely he almost couldn't play. I let my voice fade softly, vanishing with the flute's last note, returning to wherever that amazing counter-melody had come from.

The room was completely silent.

Luke smiled a small, private smile, and then the audience leapt to its feet, clapping and whistling. Even the judges in the front seats were on their feet. I bit my lip, color flushing into my glowing face, and exchanged a look with Luke.

We let ourselves be directed offstage for the next performers and Luke seized my hand, his face shining as if from within. "Good girl!" He released my hand. "Good girl! I have to go—but I'll be back for the reception tonight."

"You have to what?" I repeated, but he had already disappeared into the throng of people backstage. I felt strangely lost.

Don't wear something trashy," Mom advised, shutting my bedroom door behind her.

*Thanks for the hot tip,* I thought, staring at the pile of clothing she'd put on my bed. I didn't know what I was going to wear to the reception, but I already knew it wasn't going to be any of the items she'd taken out of my closet.

I was still holding her last suggestion, a dress that made me look like a runaway from a nursing home. I chucked it on top of the pile of other too-formal dresses and pantsuits, and looked out my bedroom window. Patchy white clouds slid across the afternoon sky, taking the edge off the heat and obscuring the faint sliver of the

moon—if it was even still out there.

Instead of getting dressed, I stuck a CD into my player, shoved the mound of clothing over to the other side of the bed, and crashed on top of the covers. The wild set of reels on the CD whirled through my brain, bringing back the vivid memory of playing on the stage earlier today.

Holy crap. Luke Dillon was real. I couldn't really wrap my brain around it. People didn't just walk out of dreams.

For a few minutes, I allowed myself the luxury of lying on the bed and remembering Luke. The careful way he spoke, delivering each word as if it were something precious. The breathy voice of his flute, whispering secrets and longing. His super-pale eyes, like glass. I could imagine him holding my hand and making me one of his secrets. I kind of felt guilty for lying around, letting myself crush on him when I should've been getting ready, but I hadn't ever had a crush on a boy before.

Well, that was a lie. Back in seventh grade, I'd been in a class with Rob Martin, a slight, dark-haired guy with a face like a brooding dark angel. Or at least, that's how I imagined it. With my superpower of invisibility, I watched him everyday at school without ever working up the courage to speak to him. I knew he was a saint of some variety, because he spoke out loudly against animal cruelty and picked all of the meat out of the cafeteria's offerings. He once berated our teacher in front of the entire class for wearing a leather jacket. He used words like "anathema" and "pogrom."

He was my hero.

Then, a few days before summer vacation when I was shadowing Rob during recess, invisible, I watched him take out a lunch box and eat a ham sandwich.

I hadn't had a crush on anyone since then.

On the CD, the reels ended and the next track started, a sweet, sad ballad and one of my favorites—"If I Was a Blackbird." As I hummed along, a sudden, familiar phrase stuck out like a sore thumb. Oh. So much for magical improvisation. My counter-melody wasn't exactly like the one the band was playing now, but it was close. I listened hard as they repeated the verse. Okay, not that part. But there—wait—those few notes? And maybe those? Oh yeah. It was painfully obvious to me where my inspiration had come from.

I sighed heavily, but some part of me was a little relieved. If there was a plausible explanation for my sudden ability to improvise, then there was probably one for Luke, too. Because the fact of it was, people *didn't* just walk out of dreams. I was recognizing him from somewhere—heck, the way he'd played the flute, maybe he even had a band that I'd heard before. I didn't know anything about him except that he was cute, played music, and was interested in me.

Did anything else matter?

Well, he did just show up in the bathroom—

“Deirdre!” Mom shouted. “Have you picked something?”

I stood up and looked at the CD player for a long moment before shutting it off. “Yeah!” I shouted back. “I've just decided.”



By the time we got to the reception, I was pleased that I hadn't given in to any of Mom's suggestions. Nobody was wearing jeans, but nobody was wearing anything worthy of the little-black-dress numbers she'd put in my hands. My light blue sundress and strappy white sandals fit the dress code perfectly, and the halter top on my dress showed off my neck and shoulders in case Luke really did come back for the reception.

“I hate when they hold these things outside,” Delia said loudly as she stepped off the sidewalk and her pointy heels sank two inches into the turf. “Thank God they at least have chamber music. I was afraid they'd have something awful, like that bagpiping earlier.”

I disagreed entirely. Nothing was worse than being shut in a room that smelled like carpet cleaner with one hundred strangers. Instead, I saw students, parents, teachers, and judges roaming between large white tents set up for food and the quartet that provided the music. The food smelled great and reminded me of Saturday nights at home. And the hot summer air had given way to a cool breeze as the sun slipped down toward the treeline.

“What is that *smell*?” Delia demanded. She was just being nasty, of course. She knew darn well that Mom's catering company was here tonight. Dad always called Delia “my least favorite sister-in-law.” He was being funny, of course, since Delia was Mom's only sister. But I agreed. Delia was an overbearing cake with

condescending frosting, and frankly, I was on a diet.

“Dee, you survived!” James sauntered up and paused half a step when he saw Delia. “Oh, I didn’t realize you were busy.”

Delia surveyed his kilt, his unkempt hair, and his hands scrawled with various messages to himself.

“You’re the piper, aren’t you?” she asked coldly.

James smiled firmly. He had already identified her as a piper-hater. “Yes, but I do it against my will. The aliens won’t let me stop.”

Delia’s smile was iron. Not amused.

I said, “This is James, Delia. He’s the number two piper in the state of Virginia this year.”

“Soon to be number one,” James said with a charming smile. “I hired a hit man.”

Delia’s face remained exactly the same.

James exchanged a look with me. “Well, it was nice to meet you. I’d better find out if the food’s lonely.”

I gave a little wave as he retreated, mouthing *later*, and Delia frowned deeply. “What strange people always come to these events. We’d better find your parents.”

“I’ll catch up to you.” I edged away from her. “I think I see some of my friends.” I wasn’t a very good liar, but Delia wasn’t a very good listener, so we parted amicably, her toward the tents and me definitely away from them. I glanced quickly toward the food tent crowds but didn’t see any sign of Luke, so I headed around the side of the chamber group’s tent.

Here, the sun came slantwise through the trees across the road and made long gold stripes of light across the grass. I walked along one of the gold stripes, watching my incredibly tall shadow walking before me. I hadn’t gotten far along the stripes when I smelled herbs.

The scent was so strong and came on so quickly that I checked the ground under my sandals to see if I had crushed something. There was nothing but clover beneath my feet. But the leaves caught my eye, and I crouched. Sure enough, there was a bunch of four-leaf clovers, a few among many three-leaf. I picked one and straightened up, looking at it. For luck.

“I heard you play.”

I blinked and focused beyond the clover. Unnoticed by me, a young man with ginger hair had approached. His face was a riot of freckles, but he was still amazingly handsome—like a magazine ad. He had the beautiful, cared-for look of kids with trust funds.

I wasn't sure how to reply, so I just said, "You did?"

He ducked around me in a circle, as if studying me. "Yes." He circled again; I spun to keep my eyes on him. "Very impressive. Quite better than I expected."

Better than he expected for *what*? For a girl? For a student? For a harpist? For me?

"Thanks," I said, voice guarded. He circled again, a smile on his face. I got another whiff of the herbal scent, and I had an idea that it must be him. Something he was wearing.

"Quite impressive altogether."

I asked politely, "Did you play?"

He grinned. "Do I ever stop?"

He kept circling, ceaselessly moving, and then his smile changed in some subtle way that made my stomach drop to my feet. "You smell good."

A familiar voice made me spin the other direction. "Deirdre."

Luke grabbed my hand abruptly, knocking the clover out of it as he did. Relieved to be rescued, I said, "I'm glad you're here. This guy—" I turned to look at the weirdo, but there was nothing there, only the lingering scent of rosemary or thyme. There were a dozen places he could've hidden as soon as my back was turned. It only meant that he really had been up to no good. Why else would he hide? "There was a guy right here."

Luke looked behind me. "There's nobody there." His eyes narrowed. "*Nobody.*"

Goose bumps prickled on my skin. It would've been easy to just believe Luke, but the freckled boy was impossible to forget. "There was," I said unhappily. "Some freak."

"I don't doubt it," Luke said loudly. "C'mon. Let's get back to civilization. What were you doing way out here, anyway?"

I glanced around. All my spinning had taken me surprisingly far from the tents. The chamber music was only a faint music-box sound from here. "I—I was just trying to get away from my annoying aunt."

“Well, let’s get closer to her and farther from invisible freaks,” Luke suggested. He turned me with the barest touch on the small of my back and we headed toward the noise. “I like your dress, by the way. Suits you.”

I secretly preened, then surprised myself by saying, “I know.”

Luke said, “It’s not polite to gloat,” but he grinned. “So, tell me about your annoying aunt.”

I sighed as we approached the food tent. “That would be her, over there. Aggravating my mom by the food tent.”

He stood with me and quietly observed Delia and Mom. I was beginning to like that about him. He listened. He watched. “She’s quite awful, isn’t she?”

“The sort of aunt that’s in storybooks,” I said. “If they put evil aunts in storybooks. She and my mom have never gotten along.”

Even from here, I could hear Delia’s loud voice as she told someone how Mom had been quite talented in her youth, but had never done anything with it. *Bitch*, I thought uncharitably.

“I just thought a very uncharitable thing about a family member,” I admitted.

Luke leaned in, close enough that I could smell his faintly musky odor—nothing like an herb, nothing like any high-school boy—and whispered, “Did it start with a *B*? I thought it, too.”

I laughed, loud enough that Delia looked up at me. She made motions for me to come over, but I pretended to be looking past her into the food tent. “Hurry. Pretend you’re pointing something out so I can pretend to not see her.”

Luke put a hand on my shoulder and pointed with the other toward the sky. “Look, the moon.”

“That was the best you could come up with?” I demanded. But I looked at it anyway—pale, mysterious, hanging in blue instead of black. Once again I felt I could look at it forever, or at least until I could remember why I wanted to look at it. “It’s beautiful, though, isn’t it?”

I didn’t think he was looking at the moon anymore, but he said, “Very.”

I kept gazing up. “This will sound stupid, but—it makes me feel funny.” The same way Luke made me feel funny.

“That’s because it’s from the night. The night keeps secrets.”

Luke kept secrets as well, didn’t he? Secrets we both pretended he didn’t have.



“Very poetic.”

“I can be very literary when I want to be. I’m a very complex person. Like yourself, I have hidden depths.”

I looked down. “Awww, you think I have hidden depths? That’s awfully sweet.” His eyes shifted from me to a point just behind me, and I turned to see what he saw.

A very tall, very blond woman was approaching us with a modelesque stride. She was as fair as an Easter lily, with perfect blue eyes and a perfect snowy neck. My dress suddenly felt shabby.

“Eleanor,” Luke said, face expressionless.

“Luke. How wonderful to see you again.” She placed her hands on his shoulders and kissed him on the cheek, running a finger down to his chin. I looked away. “It seems like forever.”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’re not in a very good mood tonight, are you?” Eleanor said. “I’d have thought you’d be in heaven with all this good music.”

Luke didn’t reply.

“Especially you, Deirdre. You played beautifully. We *all* were amazed by how you played.”

I looked up at the sound of my name and was blinded by her radiant smile. Still, for all her beauty, it was just another compliment. “Thanks. Luke helped a lot.”

Eleanor turned her smile to Luke, who still had that strange, expressionless face. “Oh yes, Luke helps out a lot.” She smiled at him. “Luke, dear, you don’t believe in small talk?”

Luke’s voice was flat. “How’s work.”

She laughed. It was annoyingly beautiful. “Going *very* well.”

He raised an eyebrow. “How’s the boss?”

Eleanor studied her gently sculpted nails. “Oh, more like a co-worker these days, I should say.”

“That must be thrilling.”

“The masses appreciate someone like them.” She gestured to herself. “Someone like me.”

Luke said, "How lucky for both of you."

"Oh, I think so, lamb." She turned to me. "Well, you're certainly a rising star. I'll be watching you."

Beside me, Luke stiffened.

"It was very nice to meet you, Deirdre. Have a lovely evening." She touched Luke's cheek again. "And I'll see you again, Luke."

After she'd gone, I looked at Luke, biting my lip before speaking. "Ex-girlfriend?"

Luke's eyes widened and he laughed. "That," he said, "Would be a terrible thing to wish on a man. No. Remember that storybook that would have Delia in it? Eleanor belongs in it as well. Think of her as an evil godmother."

I relaxed. I shouldn't be thinking of Luke that way at all, considering how long I'd known him. But still, the idea of having Eleanor as competition had momentarily floored me.

"Evil godmother is much better than ex-girlfriend." *What makes you so different, Luke, that I should give a rat's butt either way?*

Luke glanced over at me. "Oh yeah?"

I looked away, losing my bravado, and nodded shyly. "Yeah."

I became aware that the speakers from the awards tent had been blaring for quite some time. "Second place in solo performance to Carmen Macy." There was polite clapping from behind us.

We walked silently over to Mom, and stopped when we realized that she was speaking to someone and that Delia had gone quite still.

"—I heard her play this evening, and I just wanted to say that I am quite blown away by her talent. She and her friend are just the sort of people we're looking for. Please, please, take my card and do give us a call."

I looked at the man who was speaking. His pleasant voice belied his image, which was that of a bare-knuckle fighter. Though he was wearing a button-down shirt, the sleeves couldn't hide his enormous biceps and muscled chest. He wasn't like any school representative I'd ever imagined.

"First prize in ensemble goes to Andrew Manx, Tina Chin—" the speaker blared, but Mom's voice seemed louder. "Well, thanks. We'll definitely take a look."

Mr. Gigantic Muscles gave me a small nod before looking back to Delia and Mom. “Well, I know you’ve had a long day, so I’ll let you go get a well-deserved rest. They should be announcing the grand prize very soon, shouldn’t they? Enjoy the reception.”

Mom exchanged a look with me and then stared at Delia after the man had gone.

There was more clapping behind us as awards were read. I was surprised to find that I didn’t really care if I won anything. The competition seemed so insignificant—so ordinary—in comparison to the here and now, standing next to Luke and looking at the business card the conservatory representative had left.

“Thornking-Ash,” Delia read from the card. She sniffed. “Sounds like a funeral home.”

I sniffed, too, but only because I smelled the same herbal smell as before. Was that freak still here?

Luke was at my elbow, saying, “I think I’m going to have to leave early. I think I might have to go *now*.”

I was about to protest or beg unabashedly for his number when I realized the clapping had gone quiet. The voice crackled on the speaker. “Ladies and gentlemen, it’s six o’clock, and as promised, we’re going to announce the winners of the grand prize. Thank you everyone for competing and sharing your talent with us. The judges would like to congratulate the grand prize winners for this year’s arts festival—Deirdre Monaghan and Luke Dilling.”

Luke whispered into my ear, close enough that his lips brushed my hair. “Tell me you want to see me again.”

I smiled.

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