

Book #3 Fated Fantasies

Holly Oliver

*Elliot  
and  
Thaddeus*

Elliot and Thaddeus

Fated Fantasies #3

A Hedgehog and Honey Badger

Shifter MM Romance

By Holly Oliver

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# Dedication

I want to extend a huge thank you to those readers who have patiently waited for my muse to get on board with Elliot and Thaddeus' story.

For those of you who have read all of my books, I'm sure you can likely see the transformation and evolution of my writing and my storytelling.

Elliot and Thaddeus took me and my writing on quite a journey. Thank you so much for coming along for the ride with me.

This one is dedicated to magic lovers everywhere.

Special thanks to Lisa (Mum), Phil, Sue Ann, Janet, and Jen for helping me craft my ideas, being my endless cheerleading squad, and polishing this story to make it shine.

# Prologue

Elliot Greystone

*Elliot!... Elliot!... Elliot!...*

Elliot was vaguely aware of someone calling his name, and he had a strong urge to crawl toward it. It was a voice he couldn't recognize, yet it was so familiar that it called to a place hidden deep within him. He felt as if he was watching himself from outside of his body, and he was on his hands and knees, crawling in slow motion, one agonizing step at a time. His limbs were moving forward in his mind, yet he felt as if he was getting nowhere. Elliot felt disjointed from reality, almost as if he was drowning in a sea of darkness, but the urgency of the voice kept him afloat as he drifted slowly, ever so slowly to the surface.

It felt like hours had passed, and his resolve was waning, but still, Elliot clung to the voice. The only thing he could be sure of was that it was the voice of a friend, but who?

*Wake up! Elliot, please come back to me!* the voice whispered in the darkness.

*I'm trying,* Elliot cried out into the void that surrounded him, but he soon realized his voice was soundless in the shadows. This was the most bizarre and terrifying experience Elliot had ever endured. Was this a trauma response or something more? All he knew was that when one of the maniacal ghostlike creatures had touched him, that one simple act had sent him into the abyss of his psyche. Of course, there was a lot he didn't know, so many things he could speculate on, but one thing was for damn sure, it was up to him to find his way back to reality again.

*Elliot!* screamed the voice—was it his hedgehog, animal companion, and closest and dearest friend? Elliot noticed that the voice sounded closer than it had been before. It had to be his hedgehog, and if it

was, the poor creature was beside himself. But try as he might, Elliot was unable to respond. He was suspended in time, unable to answer, to comfort his closest friend; he couldn't so much as twitch a muscle in recognition. Elliot willed his limbs to move, but they were heavy, as if they had been encased in concrete while he was lost in the dreamscape filled with darkness.

Was he awake or dreaming? It was hard to be sure as visions assaulted him from the obscurity all around him. Elliot saw shadows sucking the very life force from his broken body and demon dogs feasting on his carcass. And though he watched from a distance—as if knowing none of it was true—the pain in his body certainly reflected the nightmares he could see.

He knew he needed to dig deep, and he prayed to a faceless god that somewhere inside him he would find the strength and resolve to pull himself out of the endless torment in which he found himself. So, bit by bit, inch by inch, whether they were physical miles or mental ones, he fought his way back to reality, battling against the thick fog of darkness that tried to keep him down.

But despite his fierce determination, he was so damned tired, and he warred with his inner self. *Just let me rest!* he silently begged.

*If you rest here, you will die.*

Those seven little words spurred him forward and he quickly ran through his choices, finding he had only one—he needed to fight. He vowed in that moment, by any means necessary, to get back to his friend, his van, and his body—if he had to claw his way back to reality, he would rather return bloodied and bruised than lay down and give up before he'd even tried.

*I'm too young to die!*

With that choice made and resonating within his being, he painstakingly followed the tiny voice that grew incrementally louder until finally, finally, he saw a sliver of light, a beacon, his shining star,

when a fresh wave of exhaustion hit him, and he slumped down again.

That's when he heard it. A new voice whispered to him in the darkness, one he didn't recognize, but the rich velvet baritone was encouraging him forward, too.

"I'll be waiting," it said. "Don't give up. Fight, fight, fight."

Something about the insistence pushed him, encouraged him, and just when the urge to give up came on fierce and strong, he willed himself forward and landed in a fuzzy heap back in his body, in the wrecked van, and was immediately assaulted by the memories of what had just happened to him.

Only the gods know how long Elliot was in his catatonic state. He racked his brain trying to connect the dots, trying to recall the moments leading up to this, whatever this was. A combination of dark magic bindings, loss of blood, and shock? Was that what had left his whole body aching? Intuitively he knew he needed to move, get out of here, and most importantly, find help, and fast.

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Helena de Masque

Helena's eyes were fixated on the man as he strolled in as if he owned the place. His mere presence in her office made her skin crawl. She wanted this "impromptu meeting," as he'd called it, over so she could return to tracking the new energy and magic spikes on the city's outskirts. Her instincts warned her that something big was brewing, and she needed to check on the unmated members of the Array. In fact, with each passing second, the necessity grew.

Prometheus was busy rattling off numbers and statistics, his voice droning in the background of her mind, but Helena knew if he asked a question, she wouldn't be able to respond.

"Stop," she said. The force of her voice ensured Prometheus went silent, even if the respite was brief.

“You have no right—”

“I have every right. Unannounced and uninvited, you came into my office to discuss what? Bullshit that could have waited for another day.”

Prometheus smirked. “My apologies, Helena. I’ll let the Elder know you feel council business is ‘bullshit that could have waited for another day’, as you so eloquently put it.”

Helena scoffed but didn’t bother to reply. The Elder knew exactly where her loyalties lay, and Prometheus was walking on thin ice; they both knew it. But Prometheus always had been a damned smug bastard.

“You need to watch the company you’re keeping, Helena; you’re becoming emotional, and you know how much the Elder values our detachment from the matters of the world.”

“Don’t cross me, Prometheus. You and I both know you’re crossing dangerous lines. That business with Jerome—”

“There’s no more than a circumstantial connection between us, and that came from the ramblings of a deranged man. There’s no evidence of my involvement or the Elder would have acted, and you know it,” he sneered.

“Maybe because the key witness went missing within minutes of his hearing.” Helena schooled her voice and her features. It was hard work to keep the emotion from her voice and her face passive. But she wouldn’t show him how rattled he made her—not today.

“I need you to leave,” Helena replied coolly. “I have urgent business that cannot wait.”

“You’re looking a little pale, darling. Not worried about your precious pets, are you?”

“I don’t know what you’re up to, Prometheus, but you can’t hide it from me forever.”



“Au contraire, my sweets. I have everything well in hand.”

Prometheus gave a mock bow and vanished from the room.

“Gah! The nerve of that man,” Helena grumbled. “I need to check on Charlie, Kerry, Jinn, and Elliot. Come to think of it, it wouldn’t hurt to connect with Freddy and Garrick, too. Mated or not, none of them will be truly safe until they’re all partnered up and have mastered their magic. If only we knew what they’d been awakened for...”

She began the slow, arduous task of settling her magic and isolating their threads one at a time. Then, with her sights set firmly on Kerry, who was traveling, nothing out of the ordinary there, a massive spike of energetic interference in the city caught her off guard. It was targeting one particular soul and she needed to move, and fast.

As she grabbed for her keys, purse, and jacket, she muttered curse words under her breath, but as she locked up, she promised, “Elliot, just hold on, I’m on my way.”

# Chapter One

Elliot

“Good gods,” Elliot groaned. His head was pounding. Slowly, ever so gently, he tried to lift his head, but it throbbed and ached. As he gingerly attempted to right his position, his neck cracked and popped with every painstakingly slow movement. Eventually, despite the immense pain, he was sitting upright.

Next, he focused on unfurling one finger at a time, slowly but surely rubbing them now that they had finally agreed to let go of the steering wheel. Then, finally, he could use his hands to trace over his face and forehead, where he found a deep gash, and when he touched it, more pain seared through him.

He gently massaged his neck where he discovered yet another agonizing throb was building on the left side, but at least the only place he seemed to be bleeding was his forehead. Everything else just plain hurt.

*Gods, I feel like I've aged fifty years.*

*Elliot, you came back to me!* His animal companion's relief was palpable.

*Hey, hey. I'm okay now,* he said in a soothing tone inside his head.

*Okay? You are a hundred things right now, but okay is not on the list.*

Elliot tried to chuckle, but the pain was too intense, and the minute movement made him wince. *Well, my sweet hedgehog, how about we find my phone? And get some much-needed help.*

*Where did you last see it?*

Elliot looked toward the cradle on the dash where he usually stowed his phone so he could use the GPS when necessary, but it appeared to have vanished. Everything hurt, and moving around to try and find it—when it may not even be somewhere for him to find—was too much. Elliot timidly unfastened his seat belt and eased his body to a lying position; he'd never been so thankful for a bench seat. All he could do now was to pray to any god who would listen that whatever dark magic had done this to him didn't come back, and that help would come—and soon.

*What happened? Who or, more importantly, what were those creatures, and what did they want?* Elliot's hedgehog was anxiously pacing in his addled mind.

*These are great questions, little buddy. Can we save them for later?* Elliot winced and wished. He needed the pain to be over and for someone to help him. He could still feel the pressure in his chest where one of the shadows had touched him. *I don't even know what those things were!* But despite not knowing what had attacked him, he knew with certainty that whatever had happened to him was terrible. He felt as if he'd been stabbed and injected with a poison so vile, it burned him. All he wanted to do was reach deep down inside himself and rip out whatever it was before it could fester or spread any further than it already had. Shaking off that macabre thought, Elliot focused on the fact that he needed to get as far away from this van as possible, but he just wasn't up to it, not yet.

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Elliot zoned in and out. He'd lost all track of time and had no idea how long he'd been lying in his van. He was sure he could feel his body jostling—someone was trying to move him. The sound of murmuring voices surrounded him, and his fight-or-flight instinct warred with his need for sleep. He vaguely recalled trying to lash out, but his limbs were heavy and fell uselessly back across his body. Then, finally, another voice, this one closer than before, whispered in his ear, penetrating the darkness and confusion. "You're safe now. Help has arrived. Just hold on, Elliot, hold on!"

*Helena? How did she get here?*

*The Array are here, well, some of them. Rest now. You're in good hands,* his hedgehog said, relief palpable in his tone.

That was all Elliot needed to hear and he let himself relax as much as was physically possible with the incessant pain eating away at him from the inside. But if his friends had come, he would be okay—eventually.

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***Three days later***

Elliot could hear low voices chatting and mumbling, not at him but around him; they came from every direction. Then, filled with panic, he sat bolt upright, his fists curled up in front of his body in a fighting stance, ready to attack.

Jinn laughed. “Easy tiger. We’re all friends here.”

“Oh, thank the gods! I thought you’d never wake up.” Elliot turned to see Garrick hovering on the other side of him. Curled in an overstuffed armchair in the corner, Lennox looked up from his book and threw him a wink.

Charlie and Kerry strolled in with grins and steaming cups of something in their hands; Charlie promptly put his cup down to greet Elliot. “Man, you gave us quite a scare. You’ve been out of it for three days.” Kerry inclined his cup in a salute and gave him a warm smile. Freddy and Archie weren’t far behind, and soon the whole Array was crowded in the well-lit and cozy room, which was most definitely not his bedroom.

Elliot looked around, trying to get his bearings. Light streamed in through the huge bay windows that took up two of the four walls, with thick velvet drapes framing them. The bed was bigger than his own and the cotton sheets were soft and felt like silk against his skin. A huge fluffy blanket that looked like faux fur of some kind was draped across him. A large pendant light hung above his bed and the art on

the walls was abstract and colorful. In his thirty-three years on earth, Elliot had never seen anything like it.

Just when Elliot felt one hundred and ten percent overwhelmed, Helena bustled in, followed by a bizarre-looking man in a pea green cloak that hung from his neck to his ankles and made the most unusual swishing sound as he walked. “Thank the gods and goddesses alike that you’re finally awake, Elliot. You gave us quite a scare.” She moved swiftly and with fluid-like movements to his side, knelt and clasped his hands in hers. “Are you okay?”

Well, wasn’t that just the million-dollar question? Elliot seemed loath to speak out loud just yet. Instead he stared at her, as if willing her to speak, explain, and fill in the blanks on which his mind was fixated. When she held his gaze and had nothing to say—which was unusual for her—he slowly moved his limbs little by little. Helena kept hold of his hands and helped him move his arms. He noted with tremendous relief that the immeasurable pain he’d been in seemed to have receded. It wasn’t completely gone, but better.

Elliot tilted his neck from side to side, looking left to right, then tilted his head down and repeated the motion. After some clicking and crunching, even that seemed okay. His fingers tentatively reached for his head; he could feel where he’d been patched up, but the pain was bearable aside from a slight sting when he touched it.

“Better, I think,” Elliot managed to squeak.

Helena turned to the strange man in the pea green cloak. “Malfie? Thoughts?”

Malfie’s eyes flickered between Elliot’s face and Helena’s. “Oh, my goodness, where are my manners,” Helena exclaimed. “Sorry, Elliot. This is Malfie, my most trusted advisor, healer, and dear friend. He’s been working for me and with me for decades now. It’s thanks to him that you’re feeling so much better, but...”

“If I could examine you again,” Malfie said. “I feel as though I am not quite done with you yet.”

Unable to speak, Elliot nodded slowly and then he watched in fascination and fear as Malfie circled the bed, his hands swaying and swishing, his eyes locked with Elliot's. The eye contact made Elliot want to scream. "That," Malfie said. "What was that?"

Elliot gestured to himself, confused. "What did you do to me?" he asked, his voice barely sounding like his own.

"You feel something when I assess you here..." He swished his hand over Elliot's chest and the urge to scream rose in his throat again.

"Stop," Elliot mumbled. "It hurts. I wanna scream at you. It's almost unbearable, almost worse than right after the... accident."

"Hmm," was Malfie's incredibly unhelpful reply.

Elliot was not in the mood for this. He was embarrassed, and he felt vulnerable and chaotic in both his body and his mind. His mouth was dry, and he was hungry, tired, and agitated. Elliot was no lab rat, and did they all have to be in here staring at him like some freak show? Malfie was clearly a friend to Helena, but he didn't need some gobbledygook healer messing with his fragile body. On top of that he knew it was sweet that the Array had all come to sit vigil at his bedside, but this was all beginning to feel like a huge deal over something as stupid, and inconsequential as a vehicle accident.

*You weren't in an accident as such, Elliot, his hedgehog said gently. You were attacked, and it looks like... maybe... possibly...*

*Spit it out already,* Elliot said more harshly than he intended to.

"Elliot, I'm sorry to be the one to have to tell you, but you seem to have been cursed," Malfie said quietly, coming closer and moving his hands in a more rapid flurry of motion.

Elliot heard a few gasps and mutters from around the room. His brain was frantically trying to piece together the limited information that flitted through his mind—the accident, the pain, the jostling, the voices in his head. In some ways, learning he'd been cursed made

things make a little more sense, and at the bare minimum it explained why everyone was hovering at his bedside.

With frantic blinks, Elliot's brain slotted a few extra pieces into the chaotic puzzle in his mind, and one thing resounded crystal clear. Whoever had messed with Freddy and Garrick had moved their sights onto him and had apparently caught up with him before anyone even knew to be on the lookout.

*Well, fuck!*

"Well, fuck!" Elliot said.

"Indeed," Malfie replied. "I took some blood samples while you were in your coma; with your permission, I will try and identify the type and source of the curse." Malfie was looking at Elliot expectantly. His eyes seemed to be waiting for an answer, making Elliot want to laugh because he hadn't actually heard a question. It had definitely been a statement.

"Yeah, sure. Whatever you need." Elliot's voice cracked and broke around his words.

Helena looked at Malfie intently. "Can he eat and drink as normal?"

"For now," was all Malfie said before he swished out of the room.

Elliot wasn't sure when in the conversations that swelled around him that he had fallen back down into the bed, but it wasn't until Freddy landed on one side of him and Archie on the other that he realized he needed help to sit up. He thought he had been sitting up. But things got even more embarrassing than that when he tried to hold the glass of water Archie offered him, and he damn near spilled it all over the bed in which he was lying.

"It's okay," Freddy said gently. "I can help."

"You've seen better days, my friend," Archie's smooth voice added.

*Don't I know it*, he grumbled to himself. Elliot took a few long draws from the straw Freddy held in front of him. He felt like an idiot, and part of him was tempted to push the cup away, but he was too thirsty not to be humble now. He was past holding onto any dignity he thought he might have had within the Array.

*Ahh, the Array.* Elliot wanted to shake his head. *How do they even know for sure I'm one of them?* Thanks to Harvey and Tiberius' mating hundreds of years ago, a line of hedgehog shifters had been imbued with dragon magic on the understanding that at some time in the future, the Fates would call on them to face a great evil that threatened to disturb the balance of light and dark. But so far, Freddy had been kidnapped; they'd rescued Artemis— Archie's sister—from her own mind, and Garrick had been caught up in some mess involving a magical scroll and some lunatic named Jerome.

There had been whispers and rumors of this big bad evil threatening to cause havoc in the world of magic and humans alike, but aside from causing some the Array a few agitating weeks, what damage had been done? And What on earth made this invisible bad guy think that Elliot was a threat? Too many questions, with too few answers.

But shaking off that rabbit hole of chaos, Elliot had to admit that for the most part, the men and women—because Martha hadn't wanted to be left out of the gathering either—kept to themselves. Jinn tapped away on his laptop in the corner. Lennox, who is Garrick's Fated Mate, had set aside his book, and now they were amusing themselves with some sudoku app. They were clearly challenging each other, and it looked like Garrick was winning. Kerry popped in and out and seemed to find it hard to sit still for any length of time, unless he had an Onley James book in his hand, and then he would sit transfixed until he'd reached the end.

Freddy and his Fated Mate, Archie, alternated between hovering, much like Helena and Martha, and bringing in food, which seemed to be Archie's preferred method of making himself feel useful.

Martha, the one who had brought them all together all those months ago, a wise and sweet old hedgehog shifter, had murmured in his



ear not long ago that she, “had some errands to run but would bring him back a special treat.” Elliot asked himself how he could be so agitated by the people bending over backward to support him in the best ways they knew how. What kind of a monster could get mad at Martha? Clearly, whatever he’d been cursed with or by was hellbent on wedging itself between him and the people he loved, so with that in his mind, Elliot did his best to keep his mouth firmly shut.

“If you have nothing nice to say, zip it.” Elliot didn’t know if his mother knew when she told him those words just how helpful they would be in the days to come. But, in truth, the only person Elliot wanted to talk to was Malfie, and preferably only if he had some damned answers.

Along with trying to keep his mouth shut as much as humanly possible, Elliot also spent huge amounts of his day sleeping. From a theoretical standpoint, sleeping was supposed to be good for him. The problem was that his sleep wasn’t exactly restful. In fact, every time he drifted off, he had to endure an endless barrage of nightmares. And now, even when awake, he was beginning to jump at shadows, or spending his time peering nervously at everyone as they came and went. He felt like a caged animal inside his own befuddled mind.

Day and night lost all meaning as the hours dragged on. He hated himself, his brain, and his friends—no matter how hard they tried to help. But what he hated the most was falling asleep, something he seemed to need to do constantly. Whenever he shut his eyes, he was tormented by the vivid details of that fateful morning. It seemed to be on a loop inside his mind, and no matter what part he was up to when he awoke, it picked right up where it had left off when he fell asleep again. So over and over again he was forced to relive the moment when his whole life was turned on its head.

Had Elliot been forced to choose, he couldn’t have said for sure what was worse, being awake or asleep, but one thing he did know with absolute certainty was that he was becoming more and more crazy by the day. He felt as if he was constantly biting his tongue, and he’d

started to get strange aches in his body, mostly in his joints, chest, and head. But he felt as if he should keep that to himself, and despite not quite knowing why he should, he found himself listening to the whispers in his mind.

“Sleep,” it whispered, and so sleep is what he did.

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Elliot fell right back into his dream and watched on replay as the van he was driving came to a crashing halt. He felt the immediate searing pain flow through him as his head flew into the windscreen, as real as if he was there all over again. Nausea riled his stomach, and his thoughts were loud in his head. *What’s going on? Do I need to get out? Is this some elaborate trap? Do I need to be prepared to defend myself?*

He watched from above as if he was hovering outside his body, *always on the outskirts of things*, he scoffed. He felt helpless, unable to change the outcome, but knowing what was coming. He had to live each day in the aftermath of what had started out as an average boring morning. It didn’t matter that on some level he knew this was only a dream, it had become more like torture. Despite having tried and failed, every attempt to change his psyche as he drifted off to sleep, he still found himself right back where he’d left off.

He was going through the motions, because what other choice did he have? Elliot instinctively tried to lift his hand to assess the damage, but his limbs wouldn’t move. He watched in horror as he gasped for air and could sense the moment that desperation fell over him. He could feel his rising panic with the increasing pressure in his chest, the escalation of his heart rate, and the growing dizziness and confusion as he fought for every sip of air.

The oppressive nature of the magic that surrounded him was stifling. He tried and failed to clutch his chest but found that, once again, his hands were fused to the steering wheel. Switching tactics, he tried every trick in the book to get his heart to stop racing and willed his lungs to fill with much-needed oxygen.

Elliot tried in a futile effort to stave off the panic that was rising inside him by the second. He flinched as he laughed at himself; that was the moment he recognized his hysteria wasn't doing him any good, no matter how fitting. He was trapped in the madness of his own mind, lost between the past and the present. Elliot had no choice but to look on as he saw his body pressed back into the driver's seat of his van, and cringe at the sight of his own blood streaming down his face.

His troublesome memory recalled how terrifying it had been when it clouded his vision, and everything took on a tinge of pink at first and then darkened as his blood congealed in his lashes.

Elliot's shoulder muscles tensed against an invisible weight as the pressure around him continued to build. Black spots danced before his eyes, and the sweat on his skin began to cool. Fear rolled through him as he looked at his white-knuckled hands that had taken on a life of their own and remained clamped firmly on the steering wheel. He had chosen a career in driving because it gave him a sense of freedom, but this was the opposite of that; he was unquestionably trapped. His hands and feet were the first to lose circulation, and they sat heavily at the end of their respective limbs.

Five, maybe six looming silhouettes rolled over the car's hood and up the windshield. *I thought I was dying*, Elliot reflected, *that they were the spirits of the dead coming to take me away*. An odd moment of lucidity came to him as he watched the figures glide past him, over him, through him as if he was nothing more than a ghost himself.

With transfixed eyes, the still-sleeping Eliot followed the movements of the silhouettes as best he could. Then, as the silhouettes passed him, one of them winked as the sound of tearing metal filled the air, the van shuddered beneath his rigid body, and his life started to flash before his eyes.

He'd been robbed, or so he'd been told. He'd found out later that the entire contents from the back of the van—the contents that had taken him over an hour to load—had been stolen, the whole damned

lot. But while the packages and parcels could be replaced, and apparently none of his bosses blamed him for what had happened, Elliot couldn't help but wonder why anyone would go to such lengths to steal parcels. But a more pressing issue than that, was that whatever had actually happened to Elliot inside the van that day had left him inexplicably changed, and that change was taking root deeper and deeper with each passing day.

Even now, as he watched the rerun, he felt powerless to stop it, unable to scream, act, or do anything to protect himself. It reminded him of his childhood, with parents that thought he was worthless. Nothing he did mattered, so there was no point in trying. But this, this was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. This attack stemmed from the world of magic, magic that hid in plain sight. The same magic his parents were terrified of, and Elliot was beginning to understand better why they felt so strongly.

It had to have been at least six months ago when he'd been called in to help the sweet little old lady Martha with something she'd called 'a retrieval'. That's when his world began to tilt on its axis, and a new reality had been inserted into his mind. But, even then, he'd felt like he was on the outside of it all, not fitting in, like he never truly belonged.

The concept of magic had remained a foreign concept. Despite having seen it with his own eyes when they helped rescue Artemis from her mind, Elliot didn't believe he was anything more than a vessel. Elliot could use logic and reasoning to justify what had happened that day, and there were enough people around that it was easy for him to decide that he'd played no real part in it. *There's no way I have magic of my own.*

Even when he'd seen Garrick and Lennox practice with their magic, too—there was no way that gift was for him. Even if he was able to put all that aside, there was no denying that whatever was happening to him right now was a far cry from the fluffy Freddy magic he'd helped with all those months ago, and one hundred

percent not as cool as the kind of magic Garrick and Lennox could do.

Whoever had assaulted him had been dark and dangerous; they drew upon make-your-toes-curl magic, and Elliot, ever the optimist, had no clue what to do. He'd been pinned in place, as if the world's largest invisible hand was holding him in his seat. And as every second passed, he was pulled further into unconsciousness.

Even now, Elliot couldn't understand how his body and mind had remained alert even though he had been completely numb. It was almost as if he was experiencing the entire thing in slow motion.

Elliot flinched as he heard his hedgehog scream his name, begging him to wake up. The sound of grinding metal from behind him had stopped and now Elliot was acutely aware of a presence by his door. A door that, any second now, would be ripped from its hinges, leaving human police baffled and confused. He forced himself to take one shaky breath at a time when a cold dark silhouette wrapped itself around his still form. A sharp burning pain seared through his neck, and he fell deeper into whatever sleeplike state they had put him into initially.

As his eyes opened in his dream, he was ripped from the depths of sleep and sat bolt upright in his bed. "Shit, shit, shit! I'm so over this. I need a distraction, and a damned good one at that."

# Chapter Two

Thaddeus Wilder

Thaddeus glanced down at his phone; it was ringing again. *Gods, don't these people know I'm busy?* Because he'd been exactly that since Helena rang six days ago. Thaddeus had been and still was a man on a mission. The need to find something, anything to protect the magic brewing within the Array had moved up and taken the top spot in Helena's list of priorities, which meant it moved up in Thaddeus', too.

He'd worked for Helena on and off over the years in various capacities as either a tracker or a seeker—yes, they're different things. A tracker looks for something specific, while a seeker hunted for things that have yet to be found. But six months ago, she'd rung him in a panic. She was determined she had finally met the elusive Array, a group of hedgehogs destined to have their magic awakened in order to fight a faceless enemy. She'd been desperate for Thaddeus to find answers, so he'd committed to working exclusively for her ever since. His other clients had been more than happy to let him go; on the understanding that he was contactable should the need arise, something Thaddeus was happy to oblige.

He wasn't getting any younger, and with almost a dozen decades of life behind him and with nothing else in his life since he'd lost his family, Thaddeus was more than happy to move around and explore. He hoped that maybe if the Fates deemed him lucky enough, one of these days, his travels would lead him to his Fated Mate, but for now, he was dedicated to helping Helena find answers, and this time, his research had led him to the jungles of Guatemala. Over their many years working together, Helena was usually more than happy to let him manage his own time, and let Thaddeus initiate contact as and when he deemed it necessary, but for some reason, whatever was happening in Helena's world now, was making her a little more on edge.

That in itself wasn't an issue. The problem was, that Helena had called him once, if not twice every day, and Lennox had tried to call, too. These distractions and constant checkups made it hard for Thaddeus to concentrate, and have you ever tried being in stealth mode with a phone vibrating in your pocket? Not cool, not cool at all.

Thaddeus had trekked for days through the dense vegetation. The jungle was a curious mixture of thick foliage and towering trees. The canopy overhead allowed sunlight to trickle through and cast amazing patterns on the forest floor. Moving predominantly on foot, meant his clothes were sticking to him like glue, no matter how minimal. The air was warm and humid, and he was frequently caught in sporadic rain that he didn't even see coming. The landscape around him teemed with wildlife. The air had been thick with bird song, and the call of howler monkeys. His nose took in the myriad scents of damp earth, jungle flowers, and the animals that lived all around him.

But as he'd made his way through a collection of ancient ruins and continued to move deeper into the undergrowth and further from civilization, his senses began to draw him in one particular direction. Over the past six days, he'd traveled through jungles so overgrown he could barely see his hands in front of him. When he wasn't trailing through the jungles, he was in rusty buses on dusty narrow roads. During this time, he'd made his way to eight out of ten destinations on his handy dandy map. He'd explored prospective temples and secret hidey holes dotted in remote locations, yet still found nothing. Thaddeus wasn't interested in the tourist traps—though he had discovered over the years that 'hidden in plain sight' was a legitimate concept. But for this particular trip he was keenly interested in the off-the-grid places, and to add to the drama, many of them were guarded.

Paranormals from around the world knew the power of the Mayan structures, and over the years many incredible, rare, and downright dangerous relics had been stashed, stored, and hidden in the depths of cloud and pine forests, jungles, mangrove swamps, and sandy beaches formed from volcanic eruptions in a time long since passed.

Thaddeus had followed his nose, so to speak, and his intuition had guided him to the heart of a particularly interesting stretch of jungle. Though he'd never been there before, his keen senses had unearthed a disturbing presence hidden in the chaos of trees and vines, and those same senses had insisted that he stop to investigate.

He was acutely aware that the air around him had changed, the sounds and scents of the jungle had diminished, and his skin prickled in anticipation. Having learned a long time ago, and with vast experience to trust his heightened sense of perception, he was oddly confused by the push and pull inside him. Part of him longed to get closer, while an equally strong part demanded that he turn and run. This inner tension put Thaddeus on high alert; his survival demanded it of him. But when his damned phone rang for the third time, he cringed in frustration, snapped, and finally answered it.

"Yep," he answered as quietly as he could.

"Is this not a good time, Thaddeus?" Helena asked gently. "You've been avoiding my calls. I expected an update yesterday."

"Apologies. Things are a little strange here at the moment. Something or someone is watching me, and I'm not sure how best to proceed."

"What do you think you've found?"

"At this stage, I can't be sure."

"What do your instincts tell you?" Helena asked.

"My senses tell me to go deeper into the ruins, but my instincts are screaming at me to get the hell out of here," Thaddeus murmured.

"Hmm. Maybe in this instance you should listen to your instincts and come home. Elliot's curse is causing havoc in Malfie's lab, and he could use your expertise."

"Curse?"



“Yes. Hence the reason Lennox and I have been trying to reach you. We’re back on defense instead of offense, at least for now. So pin your map and get home. Quick as you can.”

“Can do. Am I flying or driving?”

“Please fly, it’ll be quicker. The plane is waiting for you at La Aurora International Airport.”

“That’s nearly eighty miles away, and I’m on foot.”

“Well, best you get moving then, Thaddeus. Something is brewing here, and I don’t like it. You’re my best man, and I need you here as soon as possible.”

“I’ll tighten my bootstraps and get there as soon as I can.”

“Thank you, Thaddeus. This curse has me worried.”

“I understand. I’ll see you in a few days.”

“The sooner, the better.”

Thaddeus hung up and turned to see three sets of eyes glowing red through the trees, staring straight at him. “You’re not going anywhere,” a voice hissed.

“My boss has summoned me home, so can we make this quick?”

The eyes all glared in unison at Thaddeus, and he was momentarily shocked by the strange creatures that emerged from the shadows: half smoke/half man, with long, lean limbs and huge claws.

*What flawed creatures are these?*

Thaddeus reached into his pocket and pulled out a talisman and spun in circles with it out in front of him. The closest monster shrieked in terror at the mere sight of it, while the other two seemed to regroup too quickly for comfort.

One of them spat at him. It missed, but the poor tree it hit fizzed and melted in seconds.

*This is not good.*

The fight was hard and long. Thaddeus was equipped to fight men and even paranormals when needed, but whatever strange magic had formed these beasts was something new and terrifying. Thaddeus knew the fear would come later; it always came at night. But in the midst of a fight, it had no place and would only serve to distract him.

He lunged and dived, rolled, and twisted. He used every tool in his bag of tricks, but none seemed to weaken his opponents. Finally, channeling his inner honey badger, he shifted; it made him lower to the ground, quicker, and ten times more deadly than in human form. He skittered between the legs of the beast closest to him and lashed out with his claws. At first, he thought his swipe would pass right through the beast the same way as his attacks in human form had done, but he'd found a weakness—finally.

In his animal form, Thaddeus could not only touch these vile abominations but also strike them. So he honed in on his other senses and moved out of sight to regroup. He needed a plan, and nothing was coming to mind.

*Breathe*, his badger commanded. *We've been in tighter spots than this.*

*We have no backup, no idea what they are, and nothing we've tried has worked.*

*Then we need to find something that does.*

Looking up into the thick trees, Thaddeus had an idea. He was standing in dense undergrowth, a sea of greens and shrubbery. The solid cover of the trees made things darker. If he moved towards the light he could see filtering through the trees in the distance, it might be easier to find a weakness.

*Out of the darkness and into the light,* quipped his honey badger.

*Here's hoping it works!*

Thaddeus could sense a clearing ahead. He knew he was being stalked because he could feel the presence of the monsters lurking in a triangle around him. He had to move fast. It was only a matter of time before they closed in on him.

He took a deep breath, crouched as low as he could, and then bolted. It's a little-known fact that honey badgers can run up to twenty-five miles per hour, but a shifter is even faster than that. Thaddeus pictured himself as a blur of fur as he ran. His mind whirred as he evaded. His animal was impressive, dipping and turning, he moved side to side, changed directions without so much as the blink of an eye. He used his impeccable senses to steer him out of the shadowy jungle and into the clearing his mind's eye told him was somewhere ahead.

Thaddeus intuited the incoming attack mere seconds before the creature swiped at him. It was so close that Thaddeus felt the flurry of air as the talon flew past his head, and then again by his hind legs. But this was not his first time in an unfair fight, or even his second, so he remained focused and vigilant as he continued to weave through the thick greenery of the trees. Finally, he kept his head down and ran for his life.

With one last flourish of speed, he burst out of the last line of trees and into a clearing. His quick assessment of the area showed him a row of rocks and rubble that stood off to one side. He clambered and climbed up the rocky face without considering his other options. The creatures were clearly hot on his heels because he could hear the scraping of claws following him up the rock face as he climbed. He kept moving higher and higher until he finally felt like he would be out of reach. The scraping claws receded, and Thaddeus in his honey badger form finally stopped, or more accurately, slumped near the top of the rocky ridge.

He took a moment, caught his breath, and then sat up and turned in a slow circle to assess his surroundings. Any other person in this situation would have been worried, but Thaddeus was just plain pissed off—these creatures were standing between him and his way home. Helena needed him, the Array needed him, and if he was being honest, any mention of Elliot being in trouble sent his heart into a spasm that made him wanna move the mountains to get back to him. Yes, it was irrational, but Thaddeus had long ago learned to trust his instincts.

His hope that the creatures might be averse to light had not panned out. But it was becoming more apparent by the second that he needed to put these creatures on the defensive and the only way to do that was to use all thirty-five pounds of him and attack them head-on. He guessed it would be the last thing they expected him to do.

The creatures stalked the ground below his current perch. Behind him, the jungle lay before him, a sea of green. He instinctively knew he needed to head west to the airport, so the only way was through the monsters. Thaddeus hoped there were only twenty miles or so of jungle between him and a road, but that was all instinct and speculation. All he knew for sure was that standing up there was getting him no closer to anything but death.

He braced his legs against the rock and sprang into action. The creatures watching him with all six of their beady red eyes had not been anticipating the ambush that followed, and for a minute or two, Thaddeus finally had the upper hand. He rounded on the one closest to him, running in circles around its feet, and when it looked set to topple, he bit down hard in the spot where a human's ankle would have been. The taste of ash and crude oil filled his mouth, but he refused to let go.

It took a bit of effort, but honey badgers were feisty and determined, and before long the creature finally doubled over, screamed in frustration, and hit the ground. Thaddeus' honey badger was one step closer, which spurred him forward. He pulled and pulled, using all his strength, and with the leg still firmly lodged in his teeth, he

started to climb back up the rocky face. He tugged, heaved, and used every ounce of strength until he was high enough to wedge the leg between two rocks. The limb made a sickening crunching sound, but Thaddeus ignored the queasiness in his stomach. He had to think fast because the shock of his attack had rattled the two remaining beasts, but it wouldn't take long for them to regroup and retaliate. He jumped a little higher and pushed with all his might, sending a small avalanche of rocks down, securing the creature in place.

*One down, two to go.*

The creature thrashed against the rock face, but all that was achieved was more rocks falling, trapping it further. Then, with the beast blocked in and to the soundtrack of its hissing, swiping, and spitting, Thaddeus lined up his next victim.

It was never much fun going up against unknown creatures, there was always the worry that they might be able to change form or have access to magic or other supernatural powers—of which there were countless varieties. But there was only so far background data could take you, so Thaddeus leaned into his instincts and turned his focus to the second monster, the one currently poised to strike.

Half the battle was about knowing when to attack and when to retreat. Thaddeus' honey badger balked at the thought of retreating, but Thaddeus knew he needed something new. It was never wise to underestimate a creature's intelligence, so Thaddeus assumed they wouldn't be fooled by the same trick twice.

His quick assessment told him this creature was not to be messed with. It seemed to radiate blind rage and pure darkness. Its partner, the one not trapped under rocks, was quickly joining him. Two against one was usually a doable ratio, but not with these creatures, not today. But before he could even think, they both lunged at him moving in unison.

Thaddeus was out of time, and with no more tricks up his sleeve, they went head-to-head. He took a nasty swipe to his back leg, but

this only spurred him forward; he climbed and leaped at one of the creature's heads, latching on, scratching, and biting for all he was worth. Thaddeus could sense the other at his back, so he pulled away and spun the creature until it toppled to the ground. He tried a binding spell, but that seemed to bounce off the beast.

*Great, just fucking great.*

Thaddeus was wounded and outnumbered by unknown and seemingly hard-to-kill enemies. Another battle skill was knowing when to push and when to retreat. So with his honey badger's resistance booming loudly in his head, Thaddeus made the call that the time for doing battle was over.

*We can take them,* his honey badger insisted.

*Next time. Please, let's get out of here.*

*Fine!*

With his heart pounding in his chest, Thaddeus turned and ran. Luckily, he'd made it to the other side of the beasts, so he ran west as hard and fast as his legs could carry him. He reminded his honey badger as they weaved through the jungle that they had no choice but to leave, not because of fear, doubt, or any other petty human emotion, but simply and logically because they were out of time. Three against one was a fool's game, one he'd played more times than he cared to count. But whatever madness lay hidden in that temple would be a treasure Thaddeus would return for—another day, at another time, when he wasn't needed elsewhere. And when he did return, he would be better prepared for whatever abomination of magic and myth those damned things were.

*They must have a master,* he considered as he ran. Thaddeus' animal form scrambled up trees and down them, changing direction frequently and listening intently for noises that might indicate he was still being followed. The fumbling claws close by told him he was. But soon enough, the scrambling sounds of claws and drooling monsters gave way to the noises of the jungle.

Thaddeus felt the change in the atmosphere around him that he assumed meant he had passed through the invisible barrier that signified their territory. And just as the noises had subsided, so too the scent of decay and ash gave way to the soothing rich earthy aromas of the jungle. Thaddeus' chest heaved beneath him, his leg was shuddering under the pressure of his pace and was burning in a manner Thaddeus had never experienced before.

But one foot in front of the other was all he could think about. It was survival, and that was essential. He pushed himself to continue running another mile or two before finally letting himself stop. It was in this moment that he realized he'd lost everything when he shifted. Mercy dash or not, now he had no bag, phone, or clothes.

*It looks like the main road is out of the question,* his badger teased.

*For me, maybe, but not for you,* Thaddeus huffed. *New plan. Find clothes,* Thaddeus grumbled. *This is just fuckin' brilliant.*

*I think there's poison in my leg,* his badger huffed. *It feels like it's gonna fall off.*

Thaddeus didn't know why this was funny, but he stifled an internal chuckle and resisted the urge to shift back into human form to check. As a rule, honey badgers were resistant to venoms of any form, state, or origin. Sadly magical shadow beast venom didn't seem to make the list. This was quickly beginning to feel like one of those out-of-the-frying-pan and into-the-fire scenarios. If he stayed in his honey badger form, he would likely attract unwanted attention if any locals spotted him. He doubted he was a typical creature found scuttling in the undergrowth of the surrounding jungles. But then again, a naked white man would also attract attention he would rather avoid, along with questions he'd rather not have to answer.

Being adept at making seemingly impossible decisions at the toss of a coin, he decided to stick in his animal form, basically because it was smaller and easier to conceal if need be. He did, however, slow his pace, still making sure he was constantly moving forward, scenting the air around him for any signs of life. Even if he found an

alternative entrance to the airport, he couldn't very well board the plane as a honey badger, or naked. And even though sneaking on board was always an option, he could hardly tell the pilot it was time to go.

*But Helena will have the plane stocked as always.*

*True, my brain is a mess. Okay, so we have a worst-case scenario plan, then?*

A wisp of breeze carried the scent of jasmine, well, almost like jasmine—but sweeter and more fragrant somehow—across Thaddeus' keen nose. He instantly veered toward the smell. The fragrance meant coffee plants, which meant people, and people had clothes. The scent was faint, likely because it was just the beginning of the flowering season for this district. *Is it almost November?*

Summer seemed like a distant memory. For the first time in a decade, he'd actually taken some much-needed time out and spent a beautiful month hiking, camping, and fishing. In truth, he longed for a simple life, a place where he could put down some roots, grow a vegetable garden and read lots of good books.

Thaddeus chuckled to himself. *Maybe once the Array all have their mates, perhaps when this is all over, maybe...*

*Never give up hope, Thaddeus. Our mate is out there just waiting for us. I can feel it. He's closer than we think.*

*All we need to worry about right now is the coffee plantation being closer than we think, because I genuinely don't know how long our legs will keep us moving forward.*

*We're close, can you smell it? I can also pick up some people, mostly men, a few kids, and a dog. So let's tread easy and quiet.*

*Is there any other way to tread?*

Half an hour later, Thaddeus was dressed, sort of, and was finally able to assess the damage to his leg. It wasn't good. A deep wound



ran down the length of his calf. What he'd imagined in his mind as a scratch was in fact a gash, and whatever grotesque manner of magic, spell, potion, or poison was on those talons was eating away at his flesh.

A purulent ooze leached from the tattered muscle, looking more ravaged than ripped. Almost as if gnashing teeth had torn the flesh away, as opposed to the swipe of a claw which is how he remembered things. *If it didn't hurt so much, I'd call it fascinating. I really wanna know what those things are,* Thaddeus pondered, ripping up an old shirt they'd found in their clothes stealing spree and wrapping it as tightly as he could without cutting circulation.

*Well, getting to Helena just got more important. A one-legged tracker isn't of any use to anyone.*

*It's Malfie we need. If anyone can fix this up, it'll be him.*

*Well, then, onward and upward,* his honey badger grunted. *Oh, and we have company.*

Thaddeus looked up to see curious big brown eyes looking down at him. He thought he'd gone far enough away from the small encampment, but apparently the young boy was a decent tracker in his own right and had followed Thaddeus' clumsy footsteps right to where he sat. Thankfully, he'd finished wrapping his leg when he was spotted, which meant he should be able to make a quick getaway, if necessary. But the eagle-eyed boy saw the ooze-covered rags by his side.

"You're hurt," the boy said, pointing to his leg. "What bit ya?"

"You speak English?" Thaddeus replied. There was no sense in being rude to a child.

"Course. Madre makes us... For a better life," he said proudly.

Thaddeus nodded. "I hope you find that better life one day, boy."

"You're hurt," he repeated.

“Yes, yes, I am. But I’m about to head back into the city for help. Can you point out the fastest way to La Aurora Airport?”

The boy looked left and then right, almost as if making sure no one could hear him. “Did you get bit by one of the monsters?”

“What monsters?” Thaddeus asked, his curiosity piqued more than his intention to be deceptive.

“The ghost men in the jungle. They live by the old ruins.” The boy pointed in the direction Thaddeus assumed he’d come if he’d walked a straight line.

“What are they?” Thaddeus asked.

The boy shrugged, “But if they bite, you die.”

Thaddeus tried to laugh it off, “I don’t have time to die. I need to get home.”

“Then you need Curandera. Now. Come.”

“Who is Curandera?” Thaddeus asked, scrambling to his feet. But when the boy took his hand, he followed and trusted he was making the right call. None of his instincts were urging him away. In fact, his honey badger seemed quite taken with the young boy.

“She’ll help. She’ll keep you from death.”

“Hard to argue with that logic.” Thaddeus followed the boy away from the plantation site and back into the jungle. He was beginning to feel slightly wary, and the pain in his leg was worse than before, but still his feet traipsed on, one in front of the other.

*Trust*, he reminded himself, *was earned until proven otherwise.*

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