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DARK MAGIC PART 1

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction
at Western Kentucky University

By
Rachel Quaid
May 2020

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ABSTRACT

Dark Magic is a novel that mixes old folklore with fantasy and a splash of modern day. This first part of the novel readies the readers to enter the world of the old Irish Aos Sì. Ophelia is a witch, living in the land of the fae. She signs up to help with a research study to better her chances at succeeding as a healer. Rhea is a member of the Tuatha de Danann, the fae folk who rule the land from their courts of old. She is sent by her caretaker to observe this study. Everyone knows witches and fae don't get along, but will these two meeting spark more than just uncomfortable rivalry?

This work is based off old Irish folklore, belief, and customs. It takes tales told throughout generations and old histories that far predate Christian settlement of Ireland and creates a brand-new world. The research is used as inspiration, allowing this world to be both realistic and magical all at once.

This section is a draft intended for editors and readers to workshop. It can be improved upon.

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Don and Regina Quaid, who always encouraged my dreams to write. I also dedicate this work to my friend Leah, who helped to reassure me and edit this manuscript along the way.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the FUSE Grant and the Honors Development Grant for providing the funding I needed to travel abroad and complete my research for this thesis. Also, thank you to all my peers who read parts of this work and helped me to create this final piece.

VITA

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INTRODUCTION

As a Creative Writing Major, it should be a given that I enjoy writing. Ever since I was a child, I have created stories. Ever since middle school I have been sending short stories out to contests. Writing is a hobby, but it is also much more than that. Writing is what drives me, is my passion, and what I wish to one day have as a career. That is why I started to have the dream to write a novel. This dream became a full fledged goal in 2018 when the first iteration of Dark Magic was created that summer. I wrote 50k words during a National Novel Writing Month event held that July. There was no plan, no layout. The only inspiration I had was one scene, the scene that takes place in Chapter 15. Obviously, this draft led to only the creation of the characters, a base scene outline, and a general plot on which I built my later drafts. This was the start of the Dark Magic in which I now have invested over 2 years into the creation of.

Writing Process

After this first draft of Dark Magic, a sketch of a story really, I began to create a plan. I planned to turn this mess of a dream into a real work, a real novel that I could submit to publishers and agents in the hopes I would get published. This plan included various steps that I followed in order to create the draft I now present in this thesis. These steps were basic for any writer. They included creating an outline, setting out to research what I needed, and figuring out my characters.

When I wrote my first draft I made specific narrative choices that I kept for a majority of all the iterations of Dark Magic. To start with, I choose to create this story from a third point of view because that is firstly what I find myself comfortable in writing in and what I am most comfortable reading. Second, it would be the best way for me to engage with my readers. This book is also narrated through two revolving points of view from my two main characters: Rhea and Ophelia. I made this choice based on the fact these two characters both come from very different backgrounds, offer very different sets of information, and they both exist in very different aspects of the story. If I chose to select just one character in which to tell the story, I believe the bigger aspect would be missed. One major theme I wished to present was the melding of two worlds, and one way I worked to present this is the melding of the two points of view. By changing from one character to the next my readers see both sides of the story I want to present, both sides of the world I created, and they get to see the worlds as they collide and combine.

My choice for one of my characters to be one of the fae was a specific one. I knew that Ophelia was to be a witch, thus cementing her in a space within but also just on the edge of humanity. Rhea, however, I wanted to have as someone representative of the opposite of humanity. The fae are a large aspect of this story, as it is their world in which I am placing my plot and setting. If I did not utilize Rhea as a fae character, I felt I would have loss the sense of otherness and the knowledge a member of the ‘other’ would carry into the plot. Rhea knows things about the fae because she is one, information that Ophelia would not know. This is also shown in the reverse, as Ophelia knows what it is like to be human and a witch. Ophelia stood as my mediator between magic and humans.

Research

Folklore related to the fae and fairies covers a large amount of the world. The most prolific beliefs about them can be found in the United Kingdom and Ireland. As I started to research, I found a large amount of modern-day utilization of the fae in novels and storytelling comes from Scottish beliefs. Yet, when one thinks of fairies, they most likely imagine Ireland. This is one reason I narrowed my scope of research to Irish fae. Another reason was I wished to be specific with my research. If I was to combine various beliefs it would mean I would have to work with a large amount of folklore. To create a world that was more precise and narrower, I choose to focus on singularly Irish folklore in order to fine tune the scope in which I researched and created.

Irish fairy beliefs are different from Scottish ones, or any other fairy beliefs around the world. Many creatures found in Scottish folklore are not translated over into Irish; though in researching this divide is hardly addressed, creating a space in modern utilization of the fae that does blend the two. There is also long-standing folklore that links Ireland to fae in a way Scotland's and other countries' legends do not. This is the legend that the fae, called the Tuatha de Danann, were one of the original settlers of Ireland. It wasn't until humans arrived and took over the land that these people, also called the Aos Sì, were pushed into the 'other world.' I found this aspect to be the most exciting and provided the main base on which I began to build my world. This revelation that Irish folklore held what could be the backbone for my very plot created even more of a determination to stick to it for research.

Irish folklore can be confusing at times. Much of it predates Christianity, and when Christianity did come to the island, much of it was changed to fit it. This is

specifically related to mythology, and the task of researching mythology and folklore specific to the fae became harder the more I searched. I found one book, the *Lebor Gabala Erenn*, or *The Book of the Talkings of Ireland in English*. This is cited as the core text of the mythological cycle in Irish literature, as well as the earliest known history written by the Irish. It tells of the successive invasions of Ireland by different tribes, from the creation of the world to the coming of the Milesians (Iberian Celts). This book includes accounts of the Tuatha de Danann and about where they came from and where they went. I also found a few online resources that related specifically to the Irish Tuatha de Danann, but many lacked information or repeated the same vague writings. One site I did find useful was Connollycove.com, which is a travel site, but one that did provide a lot of history of Ireland and specific aspects of its history and land. They took folklore, such as the *Lebor Gabala Erenn*, and broke it down to be understandable.

Along with these, I looked for written accounts from more “modern” sources. In Ireland, the bookshops had large selections of Irish folklore and history for me to gather resources from. Two books stand out as inspiration for how I shaped my world and the beliefs my characters hold within it.

The first is by W. B. Yeats. Yeats spent a lot of time researching Irish customs and beliefs, especially when it came to the supernatural or fairies. Not only did he do that, but he is a renowned poet and one of Ireland’s greatest writers. I read his collection *Celtic Twilight* in order to get a glimpse into what the history of Irish fairies was like and how the Irish have treated the stories through the years. This collection is one of many by him, and there are a few I plan to explore for more expansion on this series. Along with this collection by Yeats, I got a collection from an Irish folklorist named Eddie Lenihan. His

book *Meeting the Other Crowd* holds written interviews with Irish people and their experiences with the fairies. These are tales they heard from their grandparents, from neighbors and friends, or even firsthand accounts. This collection was one of the best resources I collected. It was written with the voices of each person Lenihan interviewed and gave the best glimpse into true Irish beliefs about fairies. This is the book I used to base a lot of the behavior my human characters (and witch characters) exhibit around the fae. I also used it to create the anti-fae wards I use in my story, as protection against the fae is a large part of Irish beliefs. It was a great tool to have actual words and experiences from Irish locals to give my novel more authenticity.

One aspect of my research that is not visible to the reader, but was major to me as the author, was my creation of a map. I took a blank map of Ireland, removing all its current existing counties and cities, and transformed it back to what history records as the “original” Ireland. Doing this, I used old Irish Gaelic to name each court of the fae, based off the old counties of Ireland. That is why I have specific names for the courts. They were not made up but based upon folklore and history. This map allowed me to interpret what region and climate of Ireland I was working with in my fiction. The human city is placed in real life Cork, for example. Hopefully, when I publish this novel, I can include a graphic of a map that I used so that my readers will also see this visual.

Ireland Trip

As I found my searching growing ever increasingly difficult, I concluded that I, myself, needed to visit Ireland. This led to me to requesting and receiving an Honors Development Grant along with a FUSE Grant to travel overseas to Ireland to visit the island myself and get a better glimpse at the world I was writing in and to research deeper

aspects of mythology I wished to include. Thanks to these grants and scholarships I was able to conduct my research in a way I never thought I would be able to. I experienced Ireland firsthand and got to speak to Irish natives about folklore and fairy beliefs. One of my focuses was to take pictures and garner a sense of what Ireland looked and felt like. I had to learn what it meant to inhabit its land. This meant that I often took walks around the bigger cities, taking note of how it was laid out and how buildings look. I also went to parks, such as Killarney and the Blarney Castle Gardens, to see what the plants looked like. The plants and forest don't play a major part in this section of my story, but they will later once I move into more of the fae territory. This experience helped me to create a living breathing fiction world based off an actual place. It was a unique experience that I hope allowed me to translate some of the beauty of Ireland into my novel.

Before my trip, I selected four cities to travel to. The first is Dublin, the capital of Ireland, and one that holds a lot of culture for the island. It is the center for a lot of creative work and writers. It also held the Dublin Writers Museum and Trinity University. I visited these two locations in order to learn more about the history of writing in Ireland and get a glimpse at some of its famous authors and history. I could not write about a country or culture without seeing what their own writers wrote about and what motivated them to create their work.

Cork was the second city I visited. This is a port city with ties to mythology as well. It also holds Blarney castle, a castle with gardens with many tales of witches and fairies that I wished to visit to get inspiration for Ireland's native flora and fauna. The castle itself holds a kissing stone, which has ties to fae folklore as well. While I am not taking any direct inspiration from the castle's story, I took inspiration from the way the

tales were told, along with how the nature looked around its vast estate. It gave me a glimpse into Irish history and one of its ancient buildings. Along with the castle's garden, I traveled to Killarney National Park. A beautiful park in the bottom West of Ireland that many travel to to remove themselves from the city. This was also a place I went to for inspiration of the setting of my story. It was a beautiful place and held many opportunities for me to talk about folklore with natives. Many had tales about their own parents' legends of the fae or what they thought of the folklore.

Lastly, I traveled to Galway, a cultural hub for Ireland. Here I explored the Atlantic Coast and took inspiration once more for the human city. I also took a tour out to the Cliffs of Mohr and the Burns. These hold a lot of cultural and natural history for Ireland. I took the time to learn about the history of the farms around the hillsides of Ireland. I also learned a bit about their farming practices along with getting pictures of various cottages and homes out in the countryside. This serves as inspiration for Ophelia's home along with scenes outside of the city.

There is a large part of my research that I feel I have yet to properly place within Dark Magic. I have yet to fully grasp a way to show off the beauty and majesty of Ireland within my work, but I hope that I have managed to convey some of it within this draft.

Irish vocabulary

The choice to include Irish vocabulary within my novel was one that came almost last minute. I do not have experience with the Irish language, but I do speak French. In learning French, I have gained experience in utilizing vocabulary from other languages into English, and I have also used this strategy in short stories in the past. However, with

Irish being a language I have never used or encountered, I am not sure how well my use of it is. I believe that before I really send this novel out for publishing I would request a native Irish speaker to look it over and check my use of the language. Language is an important part of cultures, and while I do not want to misuse it, I do think its very important to include it when creating a story based off of any specific culture or part of the world.

Finalization

Once I created a second draft, then a third draft, and finally a fourth one, I began to workshop certain chapters. These were the first four chapters. These workshops took place in separate classes, so I took the various amount of feedback I received from other writing peers to add to my final draft, presented here. A lot of the ideas presented were along the lines of plot holes, questions I might not have considered regarding my work/characters, and additions in which a general audience might look for when they pick my novel up. These additions including making sure my characters' voices were distinct, as this is a novel split between two narrative voices, and to make sure that the world I have created for my novel feels real. This latter point is one in which I struggle, and I find that even in this latter draft I lack some glimpses into the world with a large scope of view. I naturally find myself focusing on small details and forget to bring the scope out for my readers to view the larger aspects, such as general setting. This is a detail I worked a bit on when creating my final draft, but one I still question whether I included enough of.

Now, the reason I have labeled this thesis as Dark Magic, Part 1, is because right now, as it stands, this is not a finished novel. The scope of finishing this story in its

entirety would not be feasible with the time I have to create this draft nor to be read as a complete thesis. Therefore, this section stands only as either a first novel, or a part 1, to a much larger work. This stands as the setup, an introduction and driving force of a plot that I expect to take at least 200 more pages to complete. This draft is ready for editors, ready for changes that can strengthen it and allow me to continue with this story.

CHAPTER 1

Ophelia pushed the door open with her shoulder, the hood of her jacket falling from her head at the slight gust of hot air. It warmed her pink stained cheeks as she shut the winter wind behind her and headed further into the building. The white painted bricks warded out the cold, light filtering through the windows behind her. Occasionally a shadow fell as people walked past. Besides the sunlight, the only thing to see in the room was the faint glow of crystals inlaid into their holders on the wall. They glistened with faint pulses of magic as she passed.

A man rose behind the desk to meet her. His black uniform made the security officer badge bright under the lights.

“Identification and pass please.”

She was already reaching into her bag, dragging up the papers she received yesterday from the researcher. “I don’t have a pass yet. I’m supposed to meet the Head today. For the comhairie dhaonna project.”

“The new one?” He shuffled through what she gave him, barely glancing at the seals and signatures on the glossy paper.

“Yes.”

He slid the papers back to her and gestured towards the side. “All bags and artifacts on the table. I need to pass you through the scanners before you can go ahead.”

She slipped her bag onto the surface. The guard drug it forward into the scanner, its box shaped like the wooden trunk at the foot of her bed at home. Except this one had a huge square cut out the middle. It glowed faintly as her items passed through, lighting up the charms woven into her bag since childhood. Once past, the guard gestured to her once more. She stepped forward, over the strip of runes etched into the stone floor. It lit up and she winced as a shrill beep echoed into the room.

“I’m sorry!” Stumbling back, she patted her pockets until feeling a lump in the back of her pants. “Shit, here it is.” She pulled out a string, the bottom of which tied to a small amulet, the crude imprint of a rose into the metal. “I forgot about this.” The guard shrugged, eyes tracking her hand as she placed the charm in the basket. His face never changed. After pushing that through, she stepped through the machine, this time greeted by silence.

She gathered her things at the other end, listening to the guard moving back to his seat as the outside door banged open from another visitor. She didn’t look up but paused at the guard’s sudden voice.

“Hey! Wait, you can’t just—”

Ophelia turned just as someone else stepped over the detector, its screeching sounding out the guard. Her bag in hand, she looked at the girl who now stood before her. Her hair, a mess of black tangled curls with little braids woven through, was the first thing she noticed. The second was how her eyes seemed to turn gold under the lights above.

“Hey, you have to have everything scanned before you enter.” The guard slide along the back of his desk to join them, arms crossed. “And I need to see your paperwork.”

The girl’s head tilted, but she seemed less interested in looking at the guard, and more at the charm in Ophelia’s hand. Her hand motioned towards it, “I have none of those.”

“This is a restricted area. I need you to step back—”

“Ophelia?” A call from behind. “Ophelia, there you are.” Her head whipped around, spotting the Research Head as he stepped into the small room. The opened door behind him led into a hallway lit by the same artificial lights. “We’ve been waiting for you to arrive.”

The strange girl hadn’t made a move to go back behind the detector, ignoring the guard. She breezed past Ophelia, headed towards the Head. She caught a scent that reminded her of the lavender within her mother’s herb garden back home as she passed. It left her dizzy with the heady taste of magic under her tongue. It wasn’t the same as another witch. It was stronger; strong enough that it had to be supernatural. As she turned she spotted the fluid grace that moved through the taller girl’s limbs, the way her hair seemed to twitch as if something was hidden under it.

A fae. They were a fae. One of the Aos Sì. Tuatha de Danann.

Her eyes widened as fear encircled her throat.

The Head’s friendly smile dropped as his face met the Fae. “Oh.”

Ophelia pulled her bag closer, sliding her hand into the side pocket where her mother always made her keep a satchel of iron wards. Just in case. They were already hot against the cloth; the magic activated by her presence.

“We weren’t expecting you until next week.” The Head eyed them both, his posture in a tight line as he visibly worked between a flight or fight response. Ophelia felt the same way, her own muscles tightening in case she needed to run.

“There was a problem with my guardian’s schedule. She sent me. Earlier than the agreed time.” Her English was better than what Ophelia had expected yet accented with enough lilt that it made it just shy of not right enough, raising goosebumps on her arms. She’d never heard one properly until now, only able to have listened through a pane of glass as her mother traded with them outside their cottage.

“So, you aren’t—” His eyes drifted from the fae’s hands, hung loose at her side, then back to her face. He kept glancing at Ophelia, but she remained mute and frozen.

“The court didn’t warn us of this.”

“I am Rhea. Ioana’s charge.”

“Go ahead to the meeting room Ophelia. Tell them I’ll be there in a few moments. With our... guest.”

Ophelia made her way around the two of them, leaving a wide circle of space. She could feel the fae’s eyes on her as she moved, but she pointedly looked at the floor. Already her skin prickled with the faint aura of magic they gave off to the air around. Her mom had never let her this close, kept her hidden from their sight. She felt unbalanced, caught in a battle with no armor.

As soon as she was through the door, she scurried down the hall, ignoring the echo of her shoes on the marble floor in favor of reaching the lab's door in record time. It was the only one open, and the only one with signs of life inside.

Inside, a group of humans lounged around on the various surfaces, some on chairs and others just leaning on tables. A few looked up as she entered, but many continued their work on the tablets in front of them.

“Are you Ophelia?” A redheaded girl approached from one of the windows, a smile already growing on her face. She was holding a tablet but shifted it easily under her arm to greet her.

Ophelia didn't move, staring blankly at the hand now extended towards her. Her fingers twisted in the bands of her bracelets, so tight she could feel them cutting red lines into her skin. “The Aos Si.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from the girl. The comfortable sounds of typing dropped, and a metallic screech sounded out from one of the desks.

“They're here? Already?”

“Shit.”

“You saw them? What did they look like?”

“Sean, don't just ask her that.”

Bodies were crowding hers.

Ophelia flinched at a hand on her arm. The redhead was leaning closer, pulled her gently out from the doorway.

Some of the people went past her, curiously peeking out into the hall before retreating.

“Crap, is he coming back?”

“With it?”

The redhead shushed them. “Get back to work guys. We talked about this! All of you know your manners by now. I should hope.”

This calmed most of them, at least getting them to travel back to their seats. The concerned glances at Ophelia, still rooted in the rooms middle, didn't stop.

“Ophelia. Right? Are you okay?”

She gave a short nod, managing to unwind her fingers from the charms. “I'm sorry... I just didn't...”

“I guess you weren't warned about our little partner, were you?”

“Partner?”

“Since this project is run by the Comhairie Dhaonna—”

“And the Good Folk are nosy little shits,” a boy butted in from their side. The formal title of the fae with the insult made her heart jolt.

The girl sighed, “And because the Head had to sign contracts with the Court to have this research allowed.” A quick glance towards the door. “Sometimes that means they get invited to come observe.”

The boy from before snorted, eyes glued to the hallway. His hair was red too, a deeper shade that curled over his forehead.

Ophelia sucked in a breath, “Observe?”

The girl nodded, “Don’t worry about them. I’ve been on projects before that have them. They don’t do anything. They can’t really. Not with the rules.”

“We follow theirs; they’ll follow ours.” The boy’s mouth twisted into a frown.

Ophelia still felt like throwing up. “So, it’s one of the court’s people? The Gentry?” That was the worst type. A nightmare.

The girl ignored the question, gesturing at her own chest. “Anyway, I’m Emma. I’m the assistant. The guy is Sean.”

Sean waved. Ophelia barely managed one back.

“You can come sit down.” A hand guided her towards a chair, one she sank down in without a fight.

The heat on her skin was starting to make her sweat. The jacket slid off her shoulders onto the back of the chair. “Isn’t this just a basic research project?”

“Well, it is, and it isn’t.” Emma settled beside her, looking at the others as they went back to work. “You were signed up as an extra hand, right?”

“The Head is friends with one of my potions professors. It was a recommendation.” One she desperately needed. No other project was letting a witch on, and she needed the experience. It was just her luck that this project also meant that a fae was supposed to show up.

“Did you ask anything about the project before hand?”

Ophelia shook her head, “He said it was for something with medicine. I thought you were just wanted to run trials on a new potion.”

She sucked in a breath, “That is the goal. But we have to make the potion first.”

“Oh. Is that... is that why you wanted a witch?”

Emma smiled, “Sort of. But don’t worry. We just need your expertise on plants. This isn’t serious enough to warrant any magical field.”

“Then why do... why do the Aos Sì need to show up?”

“Any potions need to be cleared for use by the Court before they can be allowed on the market. Sometimes it’s easier to allow them in during the process than after the fact.”

A faint screech sounded as a chair moved over the floor, and Sean appeared on Emma’s right. “If you join this field you’ll get used to it. I mean, in person visits are rare still, but they do happen.”

“You don’t have to be nervous around us.” Emma placed a hand on her shoulder, gentle pressure. The faint calming energy that flowed from it into her skin, no doubt accidental on her part, helped Ophelia breath just a bit easier. “I promise no one bites.”

“No one that’s human that is.”

“Sean.” Emma hissed, just as a shadow filled the doorway.

“Sorry for taking so long.” The Head’s eyes passed over each of them. “I’m sure you’ve heard, but we will be having a guest observer on this experiment.”

Ophelia half listened as she focused behind him. The fae was there, her inhuman features startling against the industrial walls.

“This is Rhea. She is here to observe for the Murias Council. I expect everyone to be respectful to her.”

Ophelia tried to read her face without seeming like she was staring too much. She was rather feminine, but most of them were. Her mom always said that you should always be careful about the Fair Folk’s genders. They had more than humans, and it could get you into trouble if you didn’t respect them. Even from this far she could see the gold hidden in her brown irises, their sloped shape like a cat but more human. Her hair did a pretty good job of hiding her ears, but the tips still poked out if she looked close enough. Her human mind blared at her to step back, that the person before her was a dangerous creature made of magic. Her fingers even twitched, but she stayed still in her chair.

Rhea watched them; expression flat with just the smallest quirk at the corner of her mouth. “Hello.”

“Now. Let’s please get back to work. We need the base systems running.” The Head glanced towards Ophelia. “If you’d like, you can tag around Emma for today.”

“Help me set up the vials and measuring kits. They’re still packed.” Emma stood, leaving her hand on her arm.

The pulse of magic grew louder as the fae moved past the door into the room. It was hard not to miss the heart-constricting tension in the room throughout setup, how each student's gaze kept flicking towards where the Aos Sì leaned against the wall. They didn't move, even as everyone else would shift around the room. Content to watch in silence, Ophelia supposed.

The only person wholly unfazed seemed to be Emma, her focus set on typing the numbers into the tablet before her. Ophelia wished she could tune her out like that, but the magic made it impossible. It traveled along her spine, resting at the back of her neck and under her tongue. It made the air taste sweet around her, something she only experienced when building complicated spells back at home with her mother. It made her head throb with pain within the first two hours. The two iron wards from her bag, now wrapped on their leather cords around her wrist, felt hot against her pulse points.

No one else seemed to notice or were good at hiding the effects. Maybe because they were all human, the lack of magic within shielding them from the fae's. She felt like every time someone touched her hand they could feel the sweat forming on her palms. It was suffocating to feel the weight of her hair against her neck; the ends curling up and sticking to her cheek where more sweat gathered.

At the end she couldn't wait to leave the room, take a breath of fresh air. Yet, she was still buried in sorting the last stack of forms as most of the researchers left. It felt wrong to leave without completing all her work. She had to show she was worthy of being here after all, even if she was regretting it. Her body almost felt like it was vibrating as the only thing keeping her from being totally stranded with Rhea was Emma

and the Head himself. It was a bit better to have less nervous energies within the room, but it didn't stop the flow of magic.

“If you want to go ahead, I'll finish it up.” Emma slid up beside her, offering a soft smile. “You seem tired.”

“It's fine. I can finish.” She winced inwardly at the awkward stutter of her voice.

“Don't worry about it.” Emma pushed her gently with her hip. “Go ahead.”

Ophelia exhaled and nodded. A few steps and she was at the wall, bending down to grab her bag. She turned back around and slammed back into the wall. “Oh, shit!”

The fae, inches from her face, seemed to look guilty for scaring her. Or at least her mouth shifted into a frown at her outburst. Her cat eyes still seemed amused, however.

Ophelia clutched her bag close to her chest. “Um.”

“Sorry.” Rhea's gaze dropped from her face to her hands. “I did not mean to sneak up on you.”

“Are you okay, Ophelia?” The Head asked.

“Fi—fine.” She eyed Rhea before her, hand wrapping tight onto the iron charm on her wrist. She felt it pulse along with her blood. “Do you want something?”

“You are a witch.”

It wasn't a question. Ophelia's pulse quickened. “Yeah?”

“You are supposed to wear blocking wards. So my magic will not jump yours.”

Her head tilted. Hair slid to the side, revealing more of those long-pointed ears. They had piercings running the length of it, delicate golden things.

“I will next time.” Of course she would. She would never be caught unaware like this, not again.

She gave the tiniest hint of a smile, or maybe it was a smirk. It was hard to tell. It wasn't enough for her to see if she had the pointed teeth she'd heard rumors of. “Next time.”

Ophelia skirted towards the side, using the wall as a barrier for her back until she was well through the door, the whole time watched by those golden eyes.

“Shit.” She whispered once down the hall. “My mom's going to have a heart attack.”

CHAPTER 2

Rhea paced the length of the carpet stretched over the wooden floor, counting the number of times her feet could overlap the diamond pattern printed on it. In her hand the rune stone hummed, shrill in the silence. Outside the sun had sunk low in the sky, painting the walls with red and orange. She huffed as the noise continued. It took so long for Jaz to answer, and she couldn't figure out why. It made her ears twitch.

Her steps paused as the humming silenced.

“Rhea?”

“Jaz, took you long enough.” Her mother language flowed easy off her tongue, a welcome friend after spending all day forced to listen to the choppiness of English phrases.

“I expected you to call later.”

“What? At night?” She abandoned her place on the rug to flop onto her couch. The cushions had no give, nowhere as soft as the ones back home. These were stiff from un-use.

“No.” Jaz's voice was a soft rumble through the stone. “I just assumed you would be busy. How's the human city?”

“Boring.” She drew her knees up to her chest, pulling over the front of her sweatshirt to enfold herself into a cocoon. “I learned about how to measure the weight of potion vials, so you know when the variables change once actually adding ingredients.” She tilted her head to avoid a spot of sunlight that shone right into her eyes from the setting sun.

“Fun.” He snorted.

“There’s also a witch.”

“Oh?” She imagined the flash of a grin he was probably giving. “That’s exciting. How could that be boring?” His voice was pitched just to the side of annoying; a drawl she was used to hearing him whisper when mimicking one of his tutors.

She covered her own mouth to hide the smile that was growing. “Could you be any less sarcastic?”

“Have they tried to cage you yet?” His voice returned to normal, joined by a faint rustle of pages somewhere near him.

“Oh, please. Like they could cage me.” She rolled her eyes, thinking of the witch in the lab. She had stayed hunched over most of the day, her dark eyes turned from hers. She had lovely hair; Rhea could admit. It was black, straight, and smooth down the curve of her back. The cute way her mouth dropped open in surprise when Rhea had finally gotten close. The freckles across her face and dark skin.

Laughter from his side. “Just don’t let them try and take your blood. Or ears. I’ve heard they use those in their spells.”

She rolled her eyes. “Those are rumors to keep younglings from wandering off. You know they’re still just humans.”

“You never know with those magic thieves.”

The magic made his voice crackle as it fizzed before solidifying once more. Outside of the Court’s lands and behind the humans’ self-erected barrier of iron, the connection was harder to maintain.

A shout sounded outside followed by bangs and another shrill noise; her ears swiveled towards the windows, spine tensing. The rest of her floor was covered in boxes, and the sliding doors to her balcony only showed the railing and a darkening sky. In the distance she could see the jagged top of the iron wall. Human erected. It took a few moments for her heart to settle back down and her ears to unpin from the side of her head. “It’s so loud here.”

“All the weird stuff they have.”

“I know.” No more shouts happened, but her ears still picked up the continuous sound of wheels on pavement. She remembered the strange carts and carriages from when she entered. They were some prototype of something the humans had imagined, but apparently they lacked the knowledge to get it just right. They had to run on the fuel of energy spells, making them both loud but also unreliable.

The birds and animals she was used to back home at the citadel were silent here, if present at all. The trees were too small and young to sing the sounds in the wind she’d listened to since she was able to remember. The humans had cleared most to make room for their rows of buildings.

“Nothing sounds right. It’s all just machines and concrete.”

“You’ll have to grow some plants.”

She hummed in agreement.

“Is it true they have stores of just food?”

“I think so.” She held the stone closer to her ear and pulled her shirts hood up. It isolated her from the strange outside, giving her only Jaz’s familiar voice and enveloping her in the scent of wildflowers and green fields. It had been a gift from him once she told him she was going to visit the humans. A human item he had gotten from his guardian after they traveled into a city to trade. Its material was soft and smelt like home. “I saw something like that when I was coming back to the apartment.”

“Have you gone to explore?”

“No. I haven’t. There hasn’t been time to do anything. It’s only been a day.”

“I’m sure you’ll get into trouble soon enough.”

“You doubt how good I can be?” She said.

“Good is not a word I would ever combine with your name. At least without sex somewhere in that sentence.” He had to be grinning.

She snorted, covering her mouth. “Oh fuck off.”

“You’re always doing something to get in trouble. What makes this time different?”

“Well, I have a reason to be here. I have to do this job right, don’t I?”

“Standing in as a human Ambasadóir. Yeah right. You have another reason for being there don’t you?”

“You know me so well.”

“I should.” His voice was just on the side of too smug.

After rolling her eyes, just for the dramatics, she spoke once more. “I’m after the portal.”

He groaned, “Rhea... we talked about this.”

“Hush. I know what I’m doing.”

“If Ioana knew...”

Rhea laughed. “Jaz, it’s only a human month until I turn of age. She can’t do much during that time.”

He sighed. “I just don’t want to end up unable to see you before your ceremony.”

“Oh please. She adores you.” She laid her head back on the pillow, gazing at the ceiling above her. “Plus, you’re such a good influence.”

“Such,” he chuckled. “Speaking of your guardian. Have you called her yet?”

“She’ll call me.” Above her sat a small spot of darker paint, a stain on the pristine.

“Are you really all alone there?”

“Yep.” If she tilted her head just right the spot reminded her of a duck.

“No guardian? Not even a Watcher?”

“I’m almost 21 cycles old. I think I can handle myself. And so does Ioana.”

Maybe she should repaint it yellow, leave it as a surprise for whoever came here next.

“You don’t have your full name yet, let alone all of your magic. What if something was to happen to you?”

“What, like some human breaks in and tries to steal my blood?” She straightened up. “I already told you. Those are old myths. We have been at peace with the humans for over a century. No one’s going to harm me. They can’t.”

“But—”

“They have their own rules. And they follow ours. I’ll be safe.” She ignored his huff. “Plus, the other Ambasadóir aren’t far away from me. They have plenty of Watchers so that any weird things will go noticed. For earth’s sake, my whole apartment is set up for my safety. I’m surrounded by runes and blocks that’ll keep even witches at bay.”

“I’m really not worried about some silly witch.” His tone dropped.

Her eyes narrowed. “Jaz. The other courts would never try anything in a human city. Who wants those idiots crawling all over our affairs? Plus this is still our land.”

“Ioana is visiting Falias, well within other territory. What if they take her absence and your departure from the citadel as a chance?”

“They’ve never tried anything before. Just because I’m the Ambasadóir ward doesn’t mean anything.”

He huffed.

“I’m just here to watch this ‘special’ experiment. Then I’m coming home.”

“It’s boring here without you.”

“Don’t worry. Blink and I’ll be there.” She stretched her legs out, flexing her toes.

“I miss you.”

“Miss you too. Kiss before I go?”

She rolled her eyes, “Bye Jaz.” A pause as he chuckled. Then she pressed her lips together, letting the faint sound of her kissing the air echo down to him as she smiled.

The stone hummed then went silent. She tossed it onto the couch and stood, allowing her shoulders to pop as she rotated them. Her foot connected with a nearby box, and she nudged it to the side. Beside it was a larger crate, opened to show the palette of canvases within, many waiting to be primed. She knelt, shuffling through the mess to find her box of paints. They clattered on the hardwood as she dumped them over, soon joined by her jumbled collection of brushes. The supplies were expensive, some of the pigments handmade with ingredients from around the citadel’s forest. They had tried to limit her to only the necessary supplies, but Rhea would always get her way when it came to her paints. Even if it meant uphauling half her art supplies to bring them here.

The rush of getting here and dropping all the supplies off kept her from unpacking everything before heading to the study. It had been a long day. Longer than she imagined. At the start she had been excited boarding the carriage to come to the city, the walls of the citadel rising in the background as they wended up towards the farthest end of their land. Now she was running low on reserves, and the strangeness was making her miss home.

After emptying the supplies, she moved onto the next box, finding a stack of clothes. Hosting the bundle into her arms, she headed into the bedroom.

She thought the humans would be interesting. But they were so cold. Even the lesser fae who lived at the bottom of the estates pond were friendlier, and they couldn't even speak properly. She huffed, tossing the box onto the mattress which she had previously tossed on the floor.

“Idiots.” Her eyes rolled. “Over half of you can't even use magic outside of a prepacked infants kit, if at all. And your witches...” She trailed off, eyeing the pile on her bed. The human witches, they were something else. And that one who had been in the room, she most certainly was different. Perhaps different enough to feel... familiar.

Another shrill honk and she jumped, ears shooting straight up. “Holy Mother!” She stumbled back, hitting her back on the edge of the desk behind her. “Damn it.” She growled, “I hate it here.”

She looked up, staring at the glass of her window, its darkened panes reflecting her back upon herself. “I wish I was home.” She bit her lip. “I wish it was like Ioana said it was before. When none of us had to deal with this and the humans were just... were just...” She shook her head. She had no idea what the humans were before they separated. They just had to have been less of a thorn in their side. Which is exactly why she needed to find and open the portal.

CHAPTER 3

At home, Ophelia pushed aside the blankets on the edge of her bed so she could sink down on the mattress. Her sheets were in the washer after an accident last night with a spilt myrrh bottle, so she was perched on the edge against the wall. Its scent still hung in the air, a respite from the still lingering taste of lavender from the lab.

Her bag was dumped in the corner, and she'd already grabbed her spell sack, placing it beside her. Her stone was in her hand, lighting up as she whispered her mother's name.

Her mom answered after the second buzz, her voice echoing in singsong. "Hello, darling!"

"Hey. Are you busy?"

She could hear music in the background. Her aunt speaking. It was hard to tell over the crackling as her mother jostled the stone.

"Oh, no. Just give me a moment though. You caught me in the middle of sorting my shelves."

"No hurry." No hurry at all, she thought. Not like she had signed up to work in a room with a fae for a couple months.

She listened to the clinking of glass and the faint shuffling of her mother's feet. The music was still a faint echo, far away, but it sounded like cymbals being thrown into

a pit to be played by monkeys. Which meant her aunt must have a house call. She only played it when her parlor had guests. Something about lowering the tension to get a better reading. What kind of tension was lowered by loud cacophonous bangs, Ophelia had no clue.

“Okay, Hun. What do you need me for?”

“Something happened.” She tugged a blanket off the stack resting beside her, wrapping her body underneath. The quilted texture rubbed soft against her fingers as she played with the frayed edges. It still smelled of the homemade soap her mother used to wash their clothes.

“Something’s always happening, dear.”

She took a deep breath. “I met one of the Aos Sì.”

A loud clanging made her jerk the stone back. When she listened again she could hear her mother muttering some curse. “Minna! No get off that.” Her mother huffed. “I’m sorry. What was that?”

Ophelia sank back on her pillows. Her pulse jumped in her temples, and she could feel the nervous tingle of magic travel along the tips of her fingers. “Um, nothing. What is Minna getting into again?”

“That idiot cat tried to climb my plants. That’s the second time today.” She growled, spitting something just out of range of the stone, probably to the cat again. “But don’t worry. She didn’t get hurt. Just knocked a few pots in her haste to catch herself,

praise Gaia.” Her mother laughed. The music faded as she heard a door swing shut. “I let her outside. Maybe she’ll find better trouble out there.”

“Yeah. Maybe she’ll bring you a mouse.” Ophelia smiled. “Or even a bird.”

“Like I need any more rotting animals, what with your aunt and her strange experiment.”

“Is she still trying to bleach her own bones?” She bundled under the blanket, letting it fall like a tent over her head.

“Of course! I keep telling her she doesn’t need fresh deer to do it, but she wanted to see the whole process. She says it helps her connect more.”

Ophelia faked a gag, grinning at the laugh her mom gave. Bathed in the soft glow of the stone and the faint pink of her light coming through the fabric, she could pretend her mother was just down the hall from her, not two hours away. The laughter had soothed her nerves, had almost made her forget why she called. Almost.

“Enough of that.” Her mother sounded settled, no longer moving about. She must have gone to the back patio. Ophelia could even hear the soft tinkle of the windchimes they kept out there. “What did you call for again? Do you plan on coming up this weekend?”

“Maybe.”

“How are your studies going?”

“Well enough.”

“Learn anything I haven’t taught you?”

“Oh, you know. I can’t divulge any secrets.”

Her mother chuckled.

Ophelia smiled for a moment. She was the first witch in her family to be chosen for higher training, and no matter how much she might try to hide it, her mother’s pride was obvious each time she spoke. But she had to clear her throat, the truth a heavy clog in the back of it. “Uh, mom? I do have a question.”

“Go ahead and ask sweetie.”

“You know how I signed up to help with that study...”

“Of course. How could I forget, my talented little witch?”

Ophelia bit her lip. “There’s a complication. One of the...” She bit her lip.

“There’s one of the Good Folk, an Aos Si.”

Silence. “An Aos Si?” The laughter died in her tone. “Ophelia? Are you okay? What happened?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all! It’s just that the Comhairie Dhaonna have a deal with the Murias council. The other students said it sometimes happens. I didn’t know about it.”

“Hmm.”

Ophelia drew her knees even tighter to her chest until they were almost crushed. A pressure against her heart. “What do I do?” She wasn’t like the other students. She might have grown up with a mother who dealt with the fae, but she never had much of a chance to physically face one. It was already risky to pursue a degree as a healer; factors

like this weren't even in her mind when she stubbornly applied for it. Now she could get why some of her peers had gotten nervous when she mentioned she wanted to start joining studies. A witch and a fae in the same room was hazardous business.

"I assume they know your name?"

"My first name." Protection. That was one thing she knew. Names weren't as dangerous as they used to be, but she did know better than to just give her full name away to one of them. The Good Folk, the Aos Si, the Tuatha de Danann, whichever of the many names you chose to use, had ways to be warded against.

"Do you have theirs?"

"Um. She called herself Rhea."

"Short... so it's probably only a youngling. Good." Her mother exhaled. Ophelia could image her expression as she worked to figure things out. Her brows would be drawn together; her tongue licking her lips as she thought. "Those with half names are safer to be around. They don't have all of their magic."

"Half names?" She didn't know anything about that.

"I want you to call me if anything happens. And don't agree to go anywhere alone with them."

"I'm not an idiot Mama."

"Wear protection, Ophelia. Plenty of iron. Do you have that charm I gave you?"

“Yes, mom.” She’d dug it out last night from where it lay buried still at the bottom of her drawers. There hadn’t been any expectation to have to use it in the city.

“You never told me, what happens if I don’t wear wards?”

“The Tuatha de Danann feed off magical energies, sometimes even nonmagical ones. They could take control of yours without you able to stop it if you didn’t wear wards.”

“How does their magic work? Compared to us?”

Her mom let out a small sigh. “We don’t know for sure. The Tuatha de Danann have many secrets.”

“But you talk to them.”

Her mom huffed, “I trade with them. And I have wards against them. As any good witch does. I don’t get secrets from them.”

“But—”

“It isn’t a serious relationship. I talk numbers and ingredients, Ophelia.”

“Do you feel their magic?”

“We’re witches. We are going to feel magic in everything that has it.”

She was right. If it had magic they were going to sense it; it was how they knew how to create potions and how they knew what would awaken what. It’s how they ran their rituals. “Did you feel something Ophelia?”

“Yes. Goddess, it was like being trapped in a circle for hours. I could even taste it as I was falling asleep. I crashed as soon as I got home. How do you deal with it?”

Her mother hummed on the other end. “Well, you might just be sensitive to it. I always was. You are a full-blooded witch.” The chimes got louder then died down back to their faint background song. “Plus you had to spend a good amount of time in one space with her. You know I only talk to the traders for a few minutes every month. And they’re adults with better control of their magic.”

“None of the others reacted.”

“They probably just aren’t attuned to it. They are human.”

“The fae knew I could feel them.”

Her mother’s voice got louder, demanding. “Don’t talk to them unless you have to. Leave that up to the Head and stay away.”

She was startled by the shift, “I won—”

“The wards will block any magic you’re feeling.” Her mother calmed. “Just stay safe and do what you’re supposed to do. Just don’t let your guard down.”

“You don’t want me to just quit?”

Her mom sighed, “No baby. This is a good opportunity for you. I guess I should have suspected that a project with potions and magic would call attention to the Council. It was bound to happen. You might just need to get used to working with one of them...” The words trailed off as her mother’s thoughts started to run. “I’ve worked with the Good Folk for a long time, honey. It won’t get any worse so long as you respect them.”

“Okay Mama. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Her smile was in her words. “Stay safe. The Aos Si may not be what they once were, but they are still dangerous.”

CHAPTER 4

It had been seven days since the last moon and the start of Beth. Seven days since Rhea had moved into the human's city, and seven days since she'd been stuck in this boring room each afternoon for hours on end. Seriously, there was only one set of windows and no place to let air out. It was like she was stuck inhaling and exhaling the same things over and over, never anything fresh.

“Did you record the results for that test already, Emma?” The Head was lent over one of his charges, looking at the tablet before them. It shimmered faintly from the magic held within it helping to project the numbers on its flat surface for them to see. From her place at the wall she could read the numbers scrolling across; the same sequence that had been flashing each day. She'd tried to touch one once, but the magic in her hands had made the thing flare up before going dead. Just one more human thing she couldn't experience, she guessed.

“They still won't change.”

Rhea snorted, the sound making one of the humans sitting by her tense in his chair.

“Run through it again. Applying the acid base this time.”

“That,” the word was harsh as she spoke up, “will not change it.” Frustration had spread too far to let her idly watch failure again.

The Head turned, as did the rest of the necks in the room. Her ears pressed back, but she kept their gazes head on. Most broke the contact.

“You included caora dearga as a base. They will cancel... all.” Her tongue slid over the awkward vowels, the specifics of the words slipping past her. She still had enough to get the meaning through. “Whatever you do it will not change.” Her arms dropped from their crossed position back to her sides.

“Try sméara dubha.”

The Head’s eyes shifted from her back towards the simulator, brows pinched low.

Rhea sighed, “The berries.”

The human called Emma began to type something against the tablet, pale skin flushed red.

“She’s right.” Her fingers paused. “The type of red berry we used is saturating the effects of the rest because they have a denser level of sugar.”

“Shit, does that mean we have to rerun everything?” A male human, his name started with a S, but she hadn’t bothered with the rest, swiveled around in his chair at another desk. He was one of the few who met her eyes when she spoke. His red hair reminded her of courts further north. It matched the sunset.

“No, it’s an easy fix. Run through the simulator with the added changes.” The Head straightened up, removing his hand from the back of the girl’s chair.

Rhea's ears twitched in annoyance at not receiving a thanks, but she remained silent. She was already looking away from them, focusing on the door as it was nudged carefully open.

The witch had returned, arms loaded with stacks of parchment and folders, a small box balanced on top. Her black hair was pulled into a ponytail high on her head, and it swung as she walked. Her shoulders were bare in the sweater she wore, peaking through cut holes at the top. The freckles on her face continued down to them. If she was to paint them, she would have to splatter the canvas to get the right effect.

"I'm back." She announced. "Kyle said this is everything we asked for. Also told me to tell you that the next time we want such a large order ask someone else because he's had enough of copying and making pages to last his whole lifetime."

Rhea's head tilted, analyzing the stack. That wasn't enough to fill a human's life, was it? They were short she knew, but that short?

The Head gave Ophelia a smile. "Thanks. You can set them over there."

She tracked the girl as she made her way across the room. The steps brought her closer to her place at the wall; the table full of papers was on her right. The smell of wildflowers, stinging herbs, and melting wax floated off her, dampened by the rain outside. The witch had worn wards since the first time, but that didn't hide the simmer of magic Rhea could feel just outside her touch.

"Ophelia." She tried the name out on her tongue, the first time out loud. It felt too long in her mouth for a child such as her.

The witch stiffened, her knuckles whitening as the stack was pulled closer to her heart. Her hair covered her face from Rhea's view, but the thrum of magic heightened. Her feet shuffled, moving further out of the circle of space that encompassed Rhea, an unspoken boundary that separated the humans from her.

“Ophelia! Can you come hold this slide?” The redheaded male shouted out. He was watching them, half risen from his seat.

Rhea watched her shoulders drop, an exhale of air fluttering the pages. She sat the stack down and turned, pointedly ignoring her.

“Coming.”

Rhea flashed a grin at the male, even as Ophelia hurried towards his side. The male glowered back. She wasn't intent on bothering the girl; she was only curious. The witch was the most interesting thing in the room by far after all.

Progress was finally being made as the humans took her advice and reworked the formula. If her caretaker Ioana had been here, Rhea knew she would have instructed them ages ago to fix the damn problem, but Rhea didn't want to put more effort into something that wasn't her job than she had to. It was the human's potion, their own formula. She was just here to make sure they didn't break any rules of magic and science or hide something from them. It's not like they could hide much anyway. Not with how obviously oblivious they were.

She'd grown annoyed with standing, grabbing a chair someone's desk and shoving it over to the wall. Its previous owner watches her take it but stayed silent with his head bowed as he made his way to another place.

Rhea just wanted the time to go faster so she could head back to the apartment. She'd started potting a few new plants on the balcony and needed those finished before it rained tonight. The tang of a storm was looming close by in the air.

The witch was still across the room from her, bent over the desk with the redhead, exchanging words now and then. The Head was making rounds to each station, taking his time as he read each chart. She could admire the detail the human was giving to each person's work. She'd learned humans had more than one instructor or guardian most of their life, but she couldn't imagine such replaceable figures would take time to care about their brief charges.

As he neared her he kept his space, only turning his head once to give a brief nod. She didn't respond.

There was a clack just then, a simple sound until the shattering of glass joined it. A burst of coppery blood stung her nose, raising the hair on the back of her neck. Across the room there was a hissed intake of breath.

"Oh my god, Ophelia are you okay?"

She was moving towards the source on instinct.

"I'm fine. It's nothing bad. I can fix it." The witch's voice was calm.

Ophelia was sat on the floor besides a small pile of glass, hand stretched before her. No one noticed as Rhea knelt on the floor beside her. She was holding her wrist, and Rhea watched as red blood bloomed from her palm, a tiny river pooling towards the side. She could smell the magic loose in the air.

“Uh, Ophelia?” a girl stammered.

“I’ll just heal it.”

Rhea could feel as the other humans retreated at her presence, but Ophelia didn’t look up. The magic grew stronger around them, breaking through even the wards to hit her with a full force of electricity. It tasted like metal on her tongue, like the time she forgot to ground herself and launched a bad spell during practice when she was younger.

The wound began to close, the small separation between skin flowing together. Rhea looked up from it, at the witch’s face. Her eyes were closed, brows tight together.

“You truly healed it.”

Ophelia jerked back, still bloody hand raising up between them, as if to ward her off. Rhea closed the distance, touching the palm with the tips of her fingers. The spark of iron and wards didn’t let her linger long, but it was enough to feel the heat and energy underneath.

Rhea met her eyes, now open and both circles of green. There were gold flakes hidden inside of them.

“How did you do that?”

“Ophelia, let’s get you cleaned up.” Hands were suddenly around the witch’s shoulder, helping her back to her feet. It was the Emma girl, her body angled between the two of them.

Rhea’s eyes narrowed.

“Come on.” Emma pushed the witch towards the door.

She watched them go, motionless. Her eyes never left Ophelia’s, who in turn stumbled back the few steps. She could have sworn she saw the faint sparks of magic leaving her.

“Um, pardon me. Mi...Rhea?” A throat cleared. “I need to be able to clean the glass up...”

She rose as the door shut behind the two girls.

“I think that’s enough for today. Everyone, clean up your stations.”

She headed back to her spot at the wall, ignoring as the students closest parted before hurrying towards their desk. All but the one who had been saying her name. He was watching, just like before. The redhead.

She paused by him, ears dropping from their alert stance as she began to relax. Her eyes tracked his as they jerked towards the movement. “Watch yourself.”

“Only if you do the same.” His voice was low as he answered. No trace of fear.

“Hmm.”

CHAPTER 5

Scrubbing her hand under the warm water, she watched the suds sink below the drain. Rhea's golden eyes wouldn't leave, imprinted upon the back of her lids every time she blinked. The shock of her touch. She was used to feeling magic in things around her, but it was unusual to have it encompass her so fully, like a blanket filled with static.

Emma stood by her side; a towel ready in her hands. "Are you feeling alright? You probably don't need to go back in if you don't want to. The Head would understand."

"I'm okay. Thank you though." She turned, offering up a smile as she dried her hands.

"You did amazing work, healing like that."

"It was only a tiny cut."

"Still," Emma sighed, her arms crossed over her chest, "I wish I could do that."

Ophelia shrugged. She'd heard the same things often growing up.

"Did you do it all on your own?"

She laughed, "Of course not. I have a few charms that help channel magic and tons of practice."

"Can you heal any bigger?"

She shook her head. She stepped back as Emma seemed to scoot forward, her skin tingling with the way her eyes stared at her clean hand. "I'm just a witch, not some magic entity." Her hands slid behind her back.

“I knew you were a witch, but...” Emma let out a nervous chuckle, eyes snapping to her face. “I just never met a real witch before. Not one I could see do actual real magic at least.”

Ophelia shrugged.

“Sorry, am I staring?”

She just wanted to get to the door. Out of another conversation that was never fun to have.

“My mom said she hired a witch to make her a love potion so she could date my father.” Emma followed as Ophelia circled around her, her braid swinging back over her shoulder.

“Some of us do that stuff, yeah.”

“Is it like the potions we make here, or like, is it different?”

“It’s hard to explain.” She chewed on her lip, glancing back down the hall at the lab where she knew Rhea was. “They’re different. In their own ways.” Which option was better, stay or go back to silence?

Emma was smiling. “That’s cool. Must be fun to be magic.”

“I’m not magic. We’re humans too.” Her voice was growing tired.

“I know but,” her head tilted, “you guys are different.”

“I suppose.” Ophelia turned away from the lab. Lesser of two evils she supposed. Plus what if the others were going to stare at her like Emma was, with that sweet curiosity that was supposed to be friendly but made her feel like a frog about to be cut open in the name of science.

“How come, if you guys can do that, you don’t all work as Healers?”

“Most witches can’t. It’s not like we’re Fae, I mean, one of the Fair Folk.” She glanced down the hall, momentarily worried speaking of her would summon Rhea to them, but it remained empty. “We don’t have our own magic or anything.” She picked at the edge of her shirt. “And magic and science don’t always mix well. Even though modern science is here because of witches...”

“I wish I was a witch. I bet it’s cool. Then I could do things like make love potions or read someone’s future.”

Ophelia’s fingers twisted tighter into the material. Those were okay, but they didn’t help anyone. They might be considered “serious” trades, but that’s all they were. Trades. Money to be made and a good to barter.

“There’s more we could do.”

“Is that why you signed up to join this project? Do you want to be a healer?”

“I hope to.”

“Wow. I bet you’re the first witch to say that.” Emma laughed, moving back from her and towards the lab.

“I doubt it...” She murmured. The first healers were witches, if anyone was actually taught history. But humans only viewed magic as two things: a fancy parlor trick or a curse from the fae.

“I mean if you have magic, why even worry about any type of science or—”

She was ignoring her now as they passed the labs door. Her bag sat outside, waiting for her to grab, but she couldn’t help a glance. Rhea was back in her corner; her head bowed, and curly hair dropped over her face. Ophelia wondered what would happen if they touched again.

On the walk home she kept tugging on the loop of her necklace. The charm on it was heavy, a cold weight in her palm as she ran her thumb over it. She'd made it with her mom's help earlier. An added protection from Rhea's magic. It bounced off any outside influence and stored her own magic energy within. The oil she had smeared on it before heading into the lab had long since rubbed away, but its oaky scent lingered.

All of magic was some form of energy. Energy moved from one thing to another. It was different for witches, those who could pull magic from natural things and could shape it with a little will and practice, than for Beings who contained magic in the first place. She could only heal small wounds because the energy needed was comparable to a light jog, and her cells were already present, susceptible to the magic to bind back together. Her charms provided the magic needed, and if she didn't have them she wouldn't be able to use anything. But Beings made of magic projected that magic onto the world. They shaped it, battered it down until it was what they wanted. They sucked it up like water. They had no limitations.

The words her mother whispered every time the trader's caravan came through entered her mind. "The *Aos Si* are dangerous, little one. Stay away from them."

The first time she could remember the warning was when she was six, the words ominous to be coming out of her mother's mouth while she stirred a pot on the stove.

"What do you mean, mama?" She'd asked.

Her mom only smiled, adding stems from the dried plants stored beside her. Ophelia had been too short to see in it, but the smell was strong enough to make her head spin. It had been earth and fire all in one, the herbs mixing with a heavy pinch of cinnamon and

some other spices she couldn't name. She was old enough now to know the scent was a protection spell, a heavy-duty mixture to leave anointed on the seals of windows and doors. Its scent chased away bad energies and, most importantly, kept any Fae from entering their home.

It bothered her though. As her mom still traded with them. Still bought precious ingredients and runes needed for certain spells. Always too far from the house for Ophelia to catch a proper glimpse of them. But if they were so scary why be with them?

“Why are they dangerous?”

“If you see one of the Fair Folk, you'll know they aren't like us. They're very old, and they won't like you much.” Her mom had paused, had moved across the room to prepare an order for a client into baskets to be sent away as the mixture boiled on.

“But why?” Ophelia had been at her skirts, tugging on the loops of colorful fabrics until she had looked at her. “Is it because they eat babies?”

“They don't eat babies.”

“That's what Gayla said.”

“Well she's wrong.” Her mother had smoothed back the hair that had fallen onto her face. “They don't eat babies. They only whisk them away.”

“But that could be fun.”

“Do you want to be taken from me, sweet little girl? Never see me or auntie ever again?”

Ophelia had shaken her head, looking at the window in fright the fae had even heard that and were now coming to pull her from her home.

“They will never get you baby. Don't worry.”

“But what do they do with the babies?”

Her mom had frowned for a moment. “It’s not important darling.” She’d turned back to the stove, leaning over to inhale the steam coming up, filling the room.

Ophelia had tried a different way, “Why would they hate me?”

“Hmm?”

“You said they wouldn’t like me.”

“They don’t like witches.” Her mother looked amused now. “They think we’re stealing their magic.”

“Are we?” Ophelia frowned.

Her mother smiled. “No, sweetie. Ours is a gift. Theirs is a curse.”

“Why.”

“Because they have no soul.”

Now that she’d met one in real life she still couldn’t tell what her mother had meant. All the warnings she had whispered, of *Aos Sì* and their magic, all of it still made no sense. Her eyes narrowed and she looked down at her hand. The place Rhea’s fingers had grazed still felt warm.

“There she is.”

“Ophelia! We’ve been waiting!”

She jerked, her toe catching on the concrete, causing her to stumble forward. She looked up, shocked at her name being yelled.

She spotted a familiar girl running towards her. She was dressed in a work uniform, black slacks and a red polo. Her pixie cut hair was half hidden under a cap.

“Kenna?” Another form followed steps behind, wearing his normal set of jeans and a shirt. They could be twins, if Kenna wasn’t half the size of he was. “Oh. Hi Ad.”

“What took you so long?”

“I have lab.” She frowned. “Were you guys waiting for me the whole time?”

Arms wrapped around her, and Kenna’s small body collided with hers in a hug, bringing an oomph from her mouth.

“We only just got here.”

The short blond squeezed tight before letting go, allowing Ophelia to catch her breath. “I forgot about that.”

“I’m sorry, but why are you at my house?”

“Mom is making dinner tonight, and she wanted to know if you wanted to join us.”

Adriel gestured back at her home where she saw his car parked in the driveway. A four door beat up mess of a thing. It ran on the normal reserve of magic fuel and Adriel’s willpower.

“I’d love to join.” She pulled her bag off her shoulder. “Let me drop this inside.”

Kenna grinned as they headed back, almost bouncing off the ground with the energy of her steps. “Good, because I need to update you on things.”

Ophelia caught Adriel’s eye. “Is this about a new girl?”

“Isn’t it always?”

Kenna finished rolling her eyes. “Oh, hush.”

Adriel pulled out his keys, unlocking the car with a faint beep. She diverted from them to dump her bag at the foot of her door. She gave a glance at the key ring to see who was home, wondering if Natalia was back from her job yet. It was empty.

“Should I bring something?” She called back to them.

Adriel was leaning against the open driver door. “It’ll be fine.”

She nodded, hopping down the porch steps and joining them. Kenna was already in the back, legs pulled to sit cross legged in the seat. Ophelia slid in next to her.

As Adriel pulled out, Kenna launched into her latest dating debacle. Something about a cute coworker and how they were supposed to meet, but they canceled. Ophelia let it and the rumble of the engine settle in the background.

She stroked the back of her hand with her thumb as she rested them in her lap. She knew it had been hours and nothing would be there, but it still felt like a faint tingle was running through her skin where Rhea’s fingers had grazed. Did Rhea’s touch do something? She frowned. She felt fine, so why was she so focused on it? Her mom never said that touching her would be a bad thing, but then again, staying away probably entailed not making physical contact.

Adriel pulled into his home’s driveway. Their mom, Thalia, was at the door. Ophelia smiled as she noticed the apron wrapped around her waist. She could imagine the vapors, like in a cartoon, coming from the door behind her. It had been a while since she had joined the siblings for dinner, and she’d missed a home cooked meal.

“I see our friendly little witch did decide to take our invitation.” Their mom smiled, kissing her cheek in greeting as Ophelia hugged her tight. Her perfume smelled like baby powder and fresh flowers mixed with the spices of her cooking. She never failed to make Ophelia think of the illustrations from cookbooks, one where a housewife leaned over an open oven with pearls on her neck and curls in her hair.

“Hello Thalia.” She smiled, pulling back to meet her eyes.

Thalia smoothed back the hair from Ophelia’s face. “I was worried you would be too busy again.”

“I can only turn you down so many times before it becomes rude.”

Kenna squeezed past them, already hurrying to the dining room. “Is everything ready?”

“Wait for everyone to sit down first!”

Adriel patted Ophelia on the back as he passed, giving her a knowing smile before slipping after his sister. “Kenna, slow down.”

“Glad to see nothing changes.” Ophelia followed their mom inside. The scent of food growing stronger. The table was set with four places, bowls of food ready to be placed on them arranged in the center. Seemed like she expected Ophelia to come, even before asking the siblings to fetch her.

“Thank you for inviting me.” She slid in the chair next to Adriel, watching Kenna already piling things onto her plate.

“Of course, darling. I’ve missed your face around.”

“You could always replace Adriel at dinner.” Kenna added.

Adriel rolled his eyes, “Or replace you.”

“I’m sure you would like that.”

Adriel’s eyes narrowed as Ophelia caught a glance between the two of them. Kenna was grinning, but her face ducked away as soon as Ophelia rose a brow at her.

“I can make enough food for four people.” Thalia slid down into place, having removed and hung her apron. Her blonde hair was pulled behind her face, and Ophelia

could see the faint smudges of mascara under her eyes from her makeup earlier in the day. “I did have to once.”

Adriel snorted, digging a fork into his vegetables.

“How have your courses been? Are you still trying to join the ones for Healers?”

She cleared her throat, focusing on scooping food onto her plate. Every adult wanted this conversation, and every adult gave the same response. Was there even a school that would take a witch? “Uh, I mean—”

Adriel cut her off, “She already has an intern position with the *Comhairie Dhaonna*.”

“Oh, really? That’s wonderful.” A faint clink as Kenna started to fill glasses up with water. Thalia was leaning closer. “What does your mom think?”

“She thinks I deserve it.”

“I’m sure you do. Must be hard as a witch to make any progress in such a non-magical major. You know if you can’t handle it you always have more suitable ones to fall back on.”

Adriel caught her eye as she shifted in her chair. “It isn’t non-magical, per say...” She mumbled.

“Hey mom, did you have any interesting clients today?” He pushed the salt Ophelia’s way, giving her an excuse to break contact with his mother’s much too sympathetic eyes.

“Oh actually—” Her face lit up, pulled from Ophelia towards her business, always eager to discuss the latest people to come looking for property.

Ophelia let her lead the rest of dinner, focusing on keeping her on the topic of work, on Kenna’s upcoming dance show, of how proud she was Adriel was also pursuing a

Healing degree. Information that Ophelia had heard many times, in some form or another, but it made her feel at home.

The dinner finished, plates in the sink to wash, and Thalia shooed them to the living room to clean. Kenna got a phone call, abandoning them to go to her room. Leaving just her and Adriel to sink down into the couch, worn with years of use. Its leather faded and peeling at places.

“Do you want to watch something?” He glanced at her before motioning towards the beaten up TV set in the corner.

She shook her head, resting it in her palm as she leaned against the couch’s arm. “I should get back.”

“Do you have lab again tomorrow?”

“Not this time.”

“Do you want to hang then?”

She looked over at him. “I’ll have to see. I was going to go home, but I might be too tired to make the drive.”

“I could always drive you if you want.”

She chuckled. “I really doubt after last time that you would want to go back to the mess of my house. My aunt’s running her own taxidermy experiments now.”

He snorted a laugh, “Seriously?”

“It’s what my mom said.” She grinned. Even being her oldest friend, there was much he couldn’t understand.

He shook his head, stretching his legs to get more room. She shifted to let him, his thigh brushing the side of her leg.

“So, you still haven’t told me what you do in this lab of yours.”

“I’m basically there for paperwork and an extra set of hands occasionally.”

“Yeah but, what are they studying?”

Ophelia shrugged, “Uh, well it’s a type of medicine, a potion formula. I think it’s supposed to help stop cancer cell growth in humans. But the results are showing nothing so far.”

“How many people are on the project?”

She shrugged, “Six.”

“Do I know any?” He asked.

“You know a lot of graduate students?”

“A few.”

She shifted, thinking of her coworkers’ names. “Emma, Sean, Jo, Clay... I forget the others to be honest.” She glanced at him.

“I know Sean. He used to be the TA of my Anatomy class. He was nice. Really red hair.” Adriel was silent for a bit. “You know, I heard there’s a member of the *Murias* court sitting in for it.” He laughed, “As if those silly fae would care about human research.”

Ophelia inhaled, “Um... well there is one. Her name’s Rhea.”

He straightened, feet falling to the floor with a faint thump. “So it’s not just a rumor?”

She shook her head. “No. But please don’t go telling everyone that. I don’t know if I’m supposed to share it.”

“They’re actually letting one of them on the project?”

“It’s part of the *Comhairie Dhaonna* agreement with the *Murias* council. Treaties so we can do research and they don’t have to worry about another revolt, I guess.”

“I heard stuff about that... but I always assumed it was just a way to keep us on our toes.”

“I mean...”

“I don’t like it.”

She sat up as he leaned towards her. “I don’t think anyone likes it.”

“You should drop out.” He was serious.

“I’m sorry?” Her brows raised.

“It isn’t safe to work with one of them. I mean, you’re a witch. You know that!”

“I have protection in place, Adriel. I know what I’m doing because I am a witch.”

His mouth pressed into a thin line as she met his gaze head on. She didn’t get why he was arguing with her. He should be happy.

“They’re supposed to steal babies. Did you know that? It’s even rumored they stole us and that’s why we’re here in the first place. Humans, that is.”

“Everyone knows that’s just a crazy story. They might not be nice, but everything’s different now after the war. Plus, I’m not a baby.”

“Not that different. We just live separate now.” He placed his hand on her thigh, pressing her back down to keep sitting. “According to them, we can live on this land so long as we still follow their rules. That doesn’t mean they have to follow ours, though they might play along for now.” His hand moved to her knee, squeezed. “What I mean is

you never know with the fae, especially not the high ones in the courts, the Gentry. They never let us humans know their plans.”

“I’m just working with them, Adriel. Honestly, I have plenty of wards, and I’ve talked to my mom. I’m not worried. Why are you?” She stared at his hand until he removed it, awkwardly placing it back in his own lap.

“I just want you to be safe. I care about you.”

“I know you care about me. But why are you acting like a mom? Your mom even. You know I need this opportunity. Most places won’t let witches work because of chances like this!”

“Because Fae and witches don’t get along. They don’t even get along with normal humans, Ophelia.” He gritted his teeth.

She hid her flinch at the emphases placed upon ‘normal’.

“What do you know about witches?” Her hands flexed, a flare of heat raising from her palms before she could calm it.

He didn’t notice, locked in on her face. “The Head knew a fae was assigned to this project, didn’t he? Then he should have warned you.” She tried to stand once more, stopping once he grabbed her arm. “Would you have done it if you knew before?”

She glared down at him, her body tense. “I’m sure I would.” She yanked her arm free. “I need to leave.”

“Think about it. Please. For me?”

“Tell Kenna bye.” She headed to the door. “And tell your mom thanks again for the food.”

“Ophelia.”

“Bye, Ad.”

“They’re going to end up hurting you. Or worse!”

She headed towards the door.

“The Fae aren’t good.”

“That’s what everyone says. But honestly, Humans aren’t either.” With that, she left.

CHAPTER 6

Rhea awoke with buzzing in her ears, which pinned flat to her head. The pressure on her chest ever increasing. She clutched the sheets and reached past them, searching for the ground and soil that was her home, but they met carpet instead. Her body shuddered and her eyes opened.

It's dark, it's dark, she can't see in the dark...

Then, she saw her room, the apartment's room, her vision turned gray by her eyes. It wasn't really her room. Just a place filled with objects that were semi-familiar. Objects left by others who had visited before her. She sat up, her chest huffing as she panted, searching for breath. She was in the human city. She was far from the citadel, but she was safe. She was safe.

Her ears and limbs trembled, and she got to her knees with jerky movements. She had no strength to stand, stretching up to the desk to grab her stone from the floored mattress. As she touched it, she realized the buzzing wasn't from her head. The stone was lit up, harsh and blue.

She squeezed her eyes shut and answered.

“Hello?”

“Hello Rhea.”

Her fingers almost let the stone fall. “Ioana!” She tugged at her hair, fingers catching on knots and curls. “I didn't expect you to—”

“I'll excuse the rude greeting. For now.”

“I knew you were a witch, but...” Emma let out a nervous chuckle, eyes snapping to her face. “I just never met a real witch before. Not one I could see do actual real magic at least.”

A glance towards the clock, and her ears dropped almost to her shoulders. It was 3 in the morning. Why did Ioana always decide to call at the worst times? It was bad enough she was sleeping at her age, let alone almost being caught for it. Ioana would have scolded her until her ears were ringing, if she wasn't going to already. “I wasn't expecting a call.”

A soft grumble, a sign of her unamusement. “I want to make sure your first days went well.”

“I was going to report to the *Comhairle* this morning.” More like drop off the papers and retreat to her apartment to start the painting she'd been wanting to start since she moved in. It was going to be a gift for Jaz for his own ceremony at the end of the year.

“I don't need a report on the project, Rhea. I want to know how you are.”

“I'm fine. I—”

“Have you kept up your studies?”

“Yes, of cour—”

“I do not want you to forget everything. This is the time that is the most crucial for your becoming, for you to join society and become something. But instead you volunteer yourself for this silly project and waste time.”

“I have plenty of time before—”

“Not enough. When you get back I'll have to make sure you're perfect.”

She stopped the sigh before it came. “Yes, ma'am.”

She stood up, looking out the window at the dark streets below. From the speaker she could hear nothing else but Ioana's voice as she spoke about more lessons.

It was impossible to tell where she was calling from, or what she was doing. Presumably, she was up in the north, within the heart of the *Falias* lands. Rhea always wondered what the other court's citadels and homes looked like. Was it filled with forests? Or was it just cold and rocky like she imagined the north to be.

"Rhea, are you listening?"

"Yes."

"You are not."

Her teeth ground together. "I am."

"Then what did I just say."

Rhea placed a finger against the glass, drawing a line down the center. She had no answer.

"Do not lie to me."

At her silence Ioana sighed, "You know I'm only doing what's best for you?"

"What's best for me?" A cliché line from a fairy tale. "What's best for me is best for you, huh?"

"Your behavior reflects me. Yes."

She stared at her finger, the imaginary line she had left. "What am I supposed to do then? For your sake."

"You act like I've done bad things to you."

"Haven't you?" That wasn't the truth, not really, but she wanted it to be.

"21 cycles old and you still don't know how to be respectful."

She looked down at her free hand, ears twitching.

“I saved you from your own mistakes.”

A car passed below, shining lights upon the black pavement. A ray of fake sunlight.

“You did.” A mistake made by a younger her, a version of anger and unrestrained magic. A her that was not exactly gone, just pushed far back in her mind. “And I suppose this is how I thank you.”

“Of all the versions of this conversation we have had, you have now just come to that conclusion.”

Rhea turned her back to the window, looking at the room with its mattress, empty desk and shelves. Well, empty of anything that meant anything at all to her. There were trinkets and decorations left by previous occupants, papers and pencils and books. She had kept all her art in the living room, the space that felt less invaded by others, by her society. “It’s the first time I’ve said it out loud.”

“If you do right, you won’t disappoint me. And your debt may be absolved.”

“I won’t disappoint.”

She was thinking of the witch’s blood as she spoke. The redness of it. So human. The taste of magic it held. So inhuman. It sang out to be brushed upon a canvas.

“Have you ever seen a human bleed?”

Another sigh. “What are you talking about?”

“One of them got hurt.”

“It doesn’t matter to you. They don’t matter to us. You know that.”

The same answer she got after every curiosity. It doesn't matter, Rhea. Pay attention to the books, Rhea. You need to stop asking questions about things that are normal, Rhea. The portal is gone, Rhea.

"Of course." The floor was hard and cold under her soles as she walked into the living room. She eyed her easel, the blank canvas primed and ready. "Sorry for asking."

"I'll let you go now. I have work to get to."

She was sure she did.

"Goodbye, Rhea. Get your work done and be good, okay? No more questions."

"Okay."

A click. The stone went dark.

She sat it down onto the counter. The only noise was the low hum of the buildings various machines, the loudest of which was the refrigerator in the corner. She felt no magic or energy with any personality besides her own. She thought there should at least be the residual energies of the ones who stayed before, but it was as if they had been erased.

She trailed her hand along the granite edge as she headed to the glass doors of her balcony. In the low light of the streetlamp below she could faintly see the green of her plants, some just starting to sprout from the earth while others she had brought to full size already. Their leaves swayed in an invisible wind.

Above the door was a ward, a rune placed and left a long time ago. Its original creator no longer there to place magic within it and activate it. She stared at it, tracing the curved lines of the stone. Runes were shared by the *Tuatha de Danann* and humans alike, but it was the *Tuatha de Danann* that gave them their magical meanings. It was her kind that

embedded them with the power they could now hold. She always wondered what would have happened if it had been the other way around. The witches could have figured it out. If they were around then, perhaps they wouldn't be trapped here in the *Sìdhe* and not able to see the other world where they came from. But the history of witches was blurry. The witch in the lab, Ophelia, just as much a mystery. She wanted to see her more. Figure out what she was about. She wondered if she could help her find the portal. Help push the humans back to where they belonged.

CHAPTER 7

Natalia, her roommate and friend, had started the tradition when Ophelia had moved into the house with her and the other girls. They had a big TV, and they needed an excuse to use it, and a movie night was the perfect one. Sometimes the others in the house would join them; sometimes Ophelia brought Adriel and Kenna, if she wasn't already busy with a date. Yet a lot of the time it was just her, Natalia, and Natalia's partner. It wasn't exactly third wheeling, Ophelia had to argue, but sometimes romance movies weren't fun when the people next to you were making out more than the characters on the screen. It could have been worse, she supposed.

Today though, Natalia had surprised her with a knock on her door and the news more people would be coming to their little function. Now she found herself in the grocery, looking for emergency snacks and supplies because the only food in their pantry were dried crackers and jam.

Natalia was by her side, reading off the list of requests. It was her friends after all, or rather her study group, a mixture of witches from her Secret Languages of the Universe class.

"Ryan is vegan, so we have to make sure we have snacks for him."

"Natalia, are you sure all of this will get eaten?" She picked up a bag of chips, looking it over. "It isn't as if this is party."

"If they don't eat it someone else will later."

“Like who? An army?” She chucked the bag inside the cart where it joined the ever-growing stack. “You know Linn would never eat this.”

Natalia shrugged. “I’ll ask people to take some home if they want...” She pushed the cart forward. Its wheels squeaked on the linoleum floor. “You said Adriel is coming?”

“He said he was going to try.”

“Are you guys dating yet?”

Ophelia stiffened, the cart rolling into the back of her shoe. “We aren’t dating.”

“It seems like you are.”

“We aren’t.” She felt the heat on her face, arms crossing tight over her chest. Her fingers sought the hem of her sleeve and twisted it hard.

“Just friends then?”

“Of course, we’re just friends. I can’t believe we’re having this conversation, Natalia. You know I don’t like him that way.”

“Then why are you always with him?”

“I saw him for the first time since *Beth* outside of class just the other day, and it was for dinner with his mother.”

Natalia shrugged, “I’m just saying, that boy is interested in you, and I feel like if you want to make a move, make it.”

“I don’t want to.” Her hands curled into fist, nails digging into her palm.

“Fine. Fine. I’ll leave it alone.” Natalia brushed off her anger, just like she brushed off everything. “Make sure you grab the popcorn.”

When Ophelia didn't move she sighed and maneuvered the cart around her. She watched her head down the aisle, knowing that asking for an apology was not worth the effort. Instead, she followed at a distance towards the checkout clerks counter.

She spotted her as they finished checking out, the money still being passed from Natalia's hand to the clerks. A hat was pulled low over her brows, hiding her long ears, and it was through the glass. But still, after a double take Ophelia knew it was her right a way.

“Oh my god.”

Natalia stopped in her effort to hook all the bags around one wrist to place them back into their cart. “What?”

“It's her...”

“Who?” Natalia pushed her towards the side, body leaning around the rack of books for sale posed next to the door.

Ophelia hissed, “Stop. We should get out of here.”

“Who is it?”

She was looking at a piece of paper. Her mouth was flat, but the tip of her tongue was just starting to poke out, like she was thinking hard about whatever she was reading. Her dark brows were drawn close together over the curve of her eyes. Outside the bright magic charged lights of the lab, she looked much different. Her hair was lighter, yet still a mess of curls barely contained within the hat. The sun made her deeper skin glow.

“Oh my god, is that the Fae that's working with you?”

“How did you—”

“Word travels fast when you know the right people.” She was moving towards the door, ignoring Ophelia as she grabbed for her arm.

“Where are you going?”

“What’s she like?” She pushed off her touch.

“Strange. Weird.” To call Rhea strange was an understatement. Her very presence seemed to challenge the idea of normal. “You don’t want to meet her.” She warned.

“I’m not going to miss an opportunity to talk to an actual fae.”

“Natalia.” She groaned as her friend pushed open the door. She turned back to grab the cart, and by the time she joined her outside the taller girl was already in front of Rhea, the excitement like a neon halo around her.

Rhea looked up from the paper, her golden eyes narrowed in what appeared to be confusion.

“Hi! Sorry to interrupt you.” At first she stuck her hand out, then withdrew it. Shuffling her feet as she did so. “I don’t really know how to greet you... but I wanted to say something.”

Rhea looked at her, before her gaze moved past, eyes locking with Ophelia’s. She straightened as she stopped behind her friend. The Fae girl was dressed in all black, with a shirt that hung loose on her frame, exposing her shoulders to the sun. The weather was nice today. But it was strange seeing her out of the basic black pants and white shirts she wore to the lab every day. Ophelia hadn’t imagined fae owning anything that matched modern fashion, but her clothes today looked as normal as ever.

“Hi.” The witch managed, plucking at a few hanging strings on her hoodie. She was starting to regret throwing it on in her haste to leave. She should have grabbed a jacket, or something better than the pale-yellow thing she’d had for years.

Natalia didn’t let Rhea’s silence bother her, rushing forward with her usual energy. “So are you Rhea? You work on the project with Ophelia, right?”

“I observe. Not work.”

Ophelia shifted; she was still meeting Rhea’s eyes head on. She was a full-blooded witch; she wasn’t going to be bullied by her outside of the lab. Inside may be unfamiliar and too confined, but she lived in this town and she was with her friend. This was the human’s city and they had gained independence for a reason.

“Oh my god, I love your accent.” Her friend was still beaming. Delicate hands moved as she talked, her charmed bracelets flashing. They were made of iron, or so Ophelia hoped. Then she would be better protected from any influence from Rhea. But the hope was a small one.

“Who are you?” Rhea asked.

Ophelia cleared her throat. “We should get going before someone shows up at the house.” She herself wasn’t wearing her normal assortment of protective charms. She only had her necklace with an iron rune of defense hanging off the end and a few spell ingredients mixed into her perfume for the day. She could already feel the pressure of Rhea’s magic as it contacted her own.

“I’m Ophelia’s friend. I’m sure she hasn’t talked about me. She certainly doesn’t talk about you.”

She barely caught the grin Rhea flashed, but it was enough for her to feel goosebumps rise along her spine, however.

“Oh, you are keeping me a secret?”

She bit her lip, narrowing her eyes. “I don’t have any reason to talk about you. And gossiping is rude.”

“Am I not interesting?” The amusement that glowed in the fae’s eyes seemed to dull, her head tilting like an animal who just saw something curious.

Natalia laughed, scratchy and forced from her throat. “Ophelia doesn’t share much about her jobs.”

“I am not a secret am I?” Those same curious eyes that had looked at her when they touched her palm, after she healed it. It made the hair on her arms stand up, made her ears buzz with the new rush of blood to her brain.

Natalia glanced between the two of them. Her hands had stilled by her side now, and the previous glow was dying. The sparks of nervous magic coming from her friend made her skin itch.

Rhea seemed to notice the dip in her energy, her focus suddenly shifting to her. “You are a witch also.”

Her friend’s skin was too dark to show her blush, but Ophelia knew her well enough to see the heat on her cheeks. “Yes, I am. But not as good as Ophelia of course.”

Ophelia could see the twitch of Rhea’s ears just under her hair. It wasn’t the first time she spotted the movement, but it was the closest she had been to see. Were they a normal fae attribute, or was Rhea different?

“I’m studying Languages right now actually. I mean, we don’t study Gaelic or anything...”

“Are you allowed to?”

“I don’t... I don’t know.” Natalia for a moment lost her smile. Of course they weren’t allowed to. The *Aos Sì* removed their ability to use their language after the war. It was one of the many things they took in exchange for them to have this spot of land, to have some sort of freedom. Things Ophelia had never thought about until she was forced to look at the reason for some of the human’s limitations.

“Shame.” Rhea’s eyes drifted back to Ophelia’s, who jerked her own away to look at a family loading their stuff into a car not far off. She was surprised no one was staring. Rhea wasn’t exactly blending in, to her. Could they not at the very least feel the steady thrum of magic around her?

“What are you learning then?”

The question excited Natalia in a way Ophelia was too familiar with. “This semester I have runes but last...”

Ophelia realized what was happening. The energy coming from her friend wasn’t just her imagination. The spike of magic that was burning her own skin was also flowing forward, towards the fae. There was a link starting to form.

She stepped forward in an instant, placing herself between the two. “You know, we really should get going.”

Natalia frowned, looking at her in confusion, “But—”

“Adriel told me he might be early, and who knows if someone isn’t already waiting.” She pushed her friend, as gentle as possible, though she wanted to grab her arm and run away with her. “Let’s go.”

The sun was slowly being encased by grey clouds, darkening Rhea’s eyes before them.

“I... well it was nice to meet you.” Natalia frowned, making small stumbling steps as Ophelia guided her away from the fae.

Rhea nodded, but that sharp smile was back. “You as well.”

“Come on.” She managed to turn her friend away, getting her started on the walk towards the car. She hadn’t been mistaken, as soon as Natalia was a few feet from the fae the energy began to fizzle out. Rhea had been trying to drain her, to pull her magic for herself.

A hand closed around her wrist. A shock traveled through her arm, straight to her brain. Her body jerked around; face heated with the best glare she could muster. Her charm burned against her skin like a feverish palm, the pulse of it a comforting weight.

Rhea let go of her arm, her fingers and hand curled towards her chest. Her eyes wide with pupils so black they covered the gold entirely.

“I—”

“What?” Ophelia hid the shake in her voice by stepping forward, forcing it out in a hiss. “What else do you need?”

“I just...” She shook her head, appearing to be flustered, the motion making Ophelia’s face soften more in its humanness. “I was wondering if you knew where the council building was. For the *Comhairie Dhaonna*.”

“Oh.” Ophelia stepped back. “It’s down the road. The city’s center. Just follow the main street.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me.” She watched her closely still, backing away towards where Natalia stood by their car. “And don’t fucking steal my friend’s energy.”

The hand that wasn’t pressed to her heart waved her off, as if the fact Ophelia knew what she had been doing wasn’t a big deal. “I was only taking what was freely given.”

“Fuck off.”

“Ophelia!” Her friend called.

“I’m coming!” She gave one final glare, face hot with fury, before leaving her behind.

CHAPTER 8

Rhea stayed up that night. At first, she had been too absorbed in painting, in laying down the lines of blue she was wanting to use on the background, that she'd missed the sun setting. Sleep had eluded her after a string of haunting nightmares and the added guilt of knowing she wasn't supposed to.

The nightmares held visions of human blood, crimson and flowing like rivers, crawling across the grass and soil to mingle and blend with the silver blood of her people. It created a swirl of pink, darkening as it sank into the dirt. Her mind supplied no answer for where all the blood came from, which made her more uneasy. She had even smelled the heavy scent of death, rot and waste left out in the open air. Every time she had closed her eyes the vision always returned, driving her out of the comfort of her blankets in heaving breaths.

Now she was in her room, letting the open window bring in fresh air onto her face and raise the fine hairs on her arms with the chill. She was only wearing a loose shirt, handwoven from the citadel. Between her palms she passed a small jar of stones, swirling them around to listen to them slide together.

She poured them out onto the desk, spreading them out with the tips of her fingers. The designs in the wood glinted under the light overhead as she arranged them. A half circle. A full circle. Now a circle within a circle.

She'd had the stones for years. Pebbles collected from the sand of the ocean's beach. They still carried the smell of salt and grit.

Leaving them she reached for another jar. Inside sat a bunch of twigs, the inside tinged with pink sap. A cluster of dried red berries sat at the bottom. The portal was supposed to connect to Hawthorn trees. But none of the trees or bushes she'd come across had any sign of magic, much less a doorway to another world. Even these sticks did nothing.

She pulled out a twig and crossed it over the circle. Added another for an x..

Her stone lit up, a soft red. A quick movement and the crackling sounds started.

“Hello?” Her spine was tense, but the stone hadn't been Ioana's color. She had made sure to tune it properly to not make mistakes like last time.

“Hey. Are you busy?” It was Jaz on the other line.

“Not if you want to talk to me.” She smiled, relaxing back into the chair. “What are you up to?”

“I just finished running training exercises with a few of the younglings.”

“Combat?” She questioned; ears perked up.

“Just a few physical drills.”

“I thought all of Nesrin's charges were older? Why are they running drills?” She remembered when she had to do that. It was before she went to Ioana. When she still was one of the group of Nesrin's charges.

“I don't know. Nesrin asked for it.”

“Hmm.” She leaned her head all the way back onto the top of the chair. Her neck popped as she let it hang back.

“What are you doing?”

She hummed, thinking. “Building.” “What are you making?” He asked.

“A portal.”

He sighed, “You still want to try and find it?”

“It’s the most interesting thing right now. So of course.”

“Does Ioana know you’re looking for it?”

She rolled her eyes, “Stop asking what Ioana knows.”

“I know you don’t like all her rules, but it’s not like you’re an exception. She’s your guardian for a reason.”

“Blah blah. I know.” Stupid fucking reasons she needed to get absolved from.

“She’s good.” Jaz said.

“Yeah. Sure.” Good didn’t mean helpful. Or nice.

“She can help find the portal.”

She swept her hand through the circle of pebbles, sending them skittering across the desk. “She’s never seen one.”

“But she’s old enough to.”

“She helped with the territory wars. There wasn’t any time for exploring then, she said.”

“Still, someone had to travel through. Battles were won because of human aide.”

“Then the humans made their own war a problem.” She flicked a loose stone into the wall, letting it ping out into the room. “If it was so useful, why is no one worried about it?”

“I don’t know Rhea. It is probably closed for a reason.”

“They say everything is for a reason.” She flicked another stone. Her mind wouldn’t empty itself of the visions of blood.

“But it is.”

Jaz was also so sure of these things. It made her want to punch him.

“Then I want to fucking know the reason. And if I must dig it up, like I always do then I will.”

“You know how dangerous things get when you mess with stuff you don’t control Rhea.”

No books. No records even, other than fragmented scrolls she dug up from the back of the library shelves. It just didn’t make sense. She picked another stone up, readied it before her finger. It hit the wall with a slight plink, just like the others. Except this one rebounded back for her, connecting with the side of her cheek.

“Ow!”

“Are you listening?”

“I’m not messing with anything Jaz.” She frowned brushing the pebble off onto the floor, “Where’s Nesrin?”

“Reading? I’m on break.”

She glanced over at the shelf of books on the wall. Most of them were blank sketch journals, old copies of texts. Most of literature was kept back on the citadel. The ones they owned at least. Any human texts were destroyed to keep them out of the human’s hands once they rebelled. “When I get back do you think I can get into his private library?”

“You have to ask him. But there’s nothing interesting in there anyway.”

“Not for you. You wouldn’t pick up a book without him threatening you.”

Jaz laughed. “I’d rather do something productive.”

“It is productive.”

“As productive as sitting in a lab all day.”

She groaned, “Stop reminding me of that. It’s honestly so boring.” She searched the ground for the stones she’s dropped. Thinking of how stuffy and uninviting that room packed with humans was made her shudder, until a reflection came to her. “Except the witch.”

“The witch? How isn’t she boring?”

“She feels like... something?” She wondered why that was so. It was as if her red blood had awoken something. A memory, a primal sense buried below. Could that explain all her strange dreams? She wasn’t sure yet. It was odd, she never thought of witch’s blood being anything different. But they were human.

“Alright. You sound crazy but whatever.”

“I mean, probably.” She stood up. “Do you think it would be weird to like... talk to her?”

He snorted, “What? Like hold a conversation?”

“Yeah.”

“Are they capable of that?”

“I- why not?”

“Are you trying to get trapped?”

“What? Like she’s going to murder me in the middle of the city?”

“That is how everything started.” Jaz said.

“She is not just going to stab a knife into my chest if I ask her a question.” She huffed, “I don’t even think she carries a knife.”

“You should carry a knife.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. Sacrifices.”

“Oh shut up.”

“Seriously. I don’t think you should be asking a witch questions.”

“What if she knows something we don’t.”

“The witches don’t know shit.” He huffed.

“You never know.”

“Rhea, witches are really dangerous. You really should just leave her alone. The portal isn’t that important.”

“Come on Jaz. You sound like a coward.”

“I sound like someone who knows to listen to rules.”

“You’re being stuck up.” She replied.

“Ioana would never let you live it down if you got injured.”

“I’m not going to be injured. And she is not going to know about it.” She tapped a finger against the top of her desk, glancing out at the window at the empty street.

“You have to tell her things Rhea. She’s your caretaker.”

“I’ll tell her what she needs to know.”

“like you’re going to be talking to someone who may very well try to kill you?”

She didn’t answer.

“If you talk to her Ioana could have you locked up. For real this time.”

“I’m not turning traitor.”

He made a noise.

“If you do find a portal, will you share it with me?”

“Of course darling. I share everything with you.”

The dead trees creaked in the wind above her as she stepped out into the street. Far away she could hear the sounds of a distant hurling match. It was cold. Cold enough to break through her coat and deep into her skin, sending faint shivers along her arms to her ears. A human passed her; scarf wrapped tight around their face. Rhea headed towards the lab as quickly as she could. A few times a car passed her, the vibration of so much iron so close to her making her head spin until they were gone.

Once at the lab, things didn't get better. Everyone looked exhausted at the start, and they only seemed to grow more so as the day progressed. Everyone was frustrated, the results not being yielded. Even after previous changes the cells weren't being affected in their sample batches. Because of that, they had been unable to run any further in their tests; a fact all the humans were visibly upset about.

Even she was starting to grow uncomfortable. While no one threw magic or energy out like her people would, she could still sense the anger. She had no personal reason to be upset about the experiment, but she was growing bored of seeing the same thing repeated over and over. Her skin was prickling like it was bathed in acid and her ears were so tight to her skull they were starting to ache.

The sun was sinking low in the sky through the windows when the Head finally dismissed them.

Ophelia was grabbing her bag as Rhea slipped out before her and the others. She considered the amount of time she had left before it went completely dark. That wouldn't

stop her, not really. She could see in the dark, just not with the color she needed to finish painting.

She was almost at the hall's end when she paused. Maybe there was something better that she could do besides painting.

If she remembered right, the witch was usually the last to leave. Which meant she just had to wait for the others to pass. There was a hollow in the wall, a place where decorations could be placed. It was empty now, just the right size for a body to fit, letting her slip into it easy.

Two girls passed, chatting with each other enough not to even notice her. The tall boy trailed behind them; head buried in a notebook. The last, Sean, however, came down the hall much later. His eyes locked with hers as soon as he passed, his steps coming to a standstill.

He was frowning, "Don't mess with her."

Her brow rose.

"I'm only warning you for your sake. She may not be your kind, but she's strong enough to handle you."

"I'm surprised a human would warn me about something dangerous."

"Oh, I want her to burn your ass as much as the next person, but I'd rather save her the effort." He glowered before moving on.

It wasn't long before she felt the familiar magic moving close.

She stepped out before she could even pass, making the witch jump.

“Shit.” She was gripping her bag, her other hand raising in a defensive posture. Her eyes narrowed upon recognizing her, and Rhea could see that small flame from the other day start to emerge in her eyes.

She stepped a tiny bit closer, enough she could feel the wards working to block her off. “How come you feel stronger than that other witch?”

“Feel?” Her voice pitched high, forcing her throat to clear. “Do you mean feel, like magic?”

“Yes magic.” She looked at her nose as it scrunched up, the slight crookedness to it. The dip between it and her lips, pressed in a line. Freckles covered her cheeks. “Not our magic.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. Its magic.”

“But you are different.” Rhea dropped her gaze to the cord around her neck. A charm, half hidden under the collar of her shirt, pressed close to the skin of her throat. “Even with your charms, I can feel yours.” Not as strongly as she liked, but its life pulse was still there. Faint.

The witch shifted; feet shuffled a few inches back. “You’re blocking my way.”

“Not physically.” Her hand gestured at the space between her and the empty hall beyond. Plenty of room for the witch to skirt around.

Ophelia huffed. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

“I want to.”

The witch’s eyes blew wide. “After what you did to my friend?”

“I told you, I was only taking what was given.” Her eyes rolled before she stopped them. It was obvious her friend was trying to be friendly, to form some sort of

bond when she approached. She'd been freely giving off the energy, Rhea was just being polite by accepting it. It's not like she needed it. "Maybe your friend could learn to control her energy if it matters to you."

Ophelia's hands clenched into small fists, meeting her eyes. A flash of magic; enough to pin Rhea in place and left to stare into her eyes. "Stop lying to me."

She recoiled back; ears flat to her head. "I am not lying."

"It wasn't given to you. No one just gives magic energy. You were draining her for... for fun or something..."

"I—" Annoyance began to pulse through her. It left a black taste in her mouth to be criticized by a human of all things. "I do not understand. Drain? Why would I?"

"Of course you don't." Ophelia sighed, a hand tugging at the end of her hair where it hung over her shoulder, slipped free from under the pack's strap. "You can't understand anything normal, can you?"

"Are you insulting me?" Her agitation was translating into the air around her, a faint burn of magic like sulfur.

"You don't know anything about humans, about how to act." She snapped.

Rhea's mouth twitched, the baring of teeth like a cornered animal.

"You don't understand how to behave." The girl started to move around her, an arm encircled by cuffs of iron raised to ward her off.

Before she could get far Rhea snarled, "You think that telling a fae how to behave is smart?"

Her face paled, foot hovering on the next step.

"If you do think the way I behave is so horrible, why don't you teach me?"

She looked stunned. “What?”

“Talk to me.” She challenged, “if you want to be brave and tell me I am wrong, then actually correct me.”

At the narrowing of her eyes she dropped her arms.

“I swear I do not mean any harm. Just curious. If what you say is true, then I do not know how to behave.”

“Seriously?” Her voice was doubtful.

“I swear on the Mother.”

Ophelia still stared at her, skepticism all over her face. But Rhea could see the interest trying hard to hide in her eyes. “I won’t meet you in places that aren’t public.”

“I can do that.”

Ophelia eyed her as she drew her stone from a pocket. “I’ll call you.” She held the stone out, letting her take it from the very tips of her fingers. “I’ll contact you.”

Her gaze was hot on her hands as she swirled her thumb to add her inscription to the stones database.

“I determine the time and places. Okay?”

Rhea could detect the forced control in her voice. “Okay.”

She returned the stone, dropping it into her open palm. Her iron ring caught the light.

“Can you do tonight?”

Rhea frowned, “Yes.”

“There’s a café on Northwest street. Meet there at 9?”

She nodded.

Ophelia eyed her once more, “No games.”

“I swear.”

She watched her continue past, down the hall to the doors.

The shop was hard to find at first. She even walked past its alleyed entrance twice before realizing that she had to turn. Eventually she saw the sign, half hidden under dead tendrils of ivy, and made her way inside. The overwhelming scent of coffee and paper coated the air. She maneuvered the cluttered tables at the front and made her way back to find a place. The shop was filled with people despite the late hour.

There was an empty chair, the soft tan leather worn with age, over by a window with a short table separating it from another. Its twin in every way except the deep red of its color. Soft instrumental music flowed out of the loudspeakers above her as she hopped back onto the cushions. Not a bad place really. It was comfy.

She took the rest of the café in now that she was sitting. She didn't see the witch yet. Most of the people around her were on tablets, but a few had actual books out or were scribbling something in what she assumed were spell books. It was a common enough site on campus. Soft fake-leather bound notebooks were even available in the bookstore. For a university with more than half of the student body devoted to the arcane and magics, it was doing its job well. At least for a school that used to be the grounds of a *Murias* noble family's estate. Now they existed no more. Rhea might have thought it cruel, if she cared. Really it was just another example of how parasitic the humans had become.

She had gotten a few stares as she entered and was getting even more glances now that she had sat down. Her hair was pulled back to keep it off her neck, but the price of that was exposing her ears to the air. She glowered at a few of the bold gawkers, who quickly turned their curiosity into uncomfortable shuffling as they shifted in their seats to look away.

The bell rang out, a familiar face stepping in past the frame. Ophelia was changed out of what she wore before, wearing a blue shirt and a pair of jeans that looked like they had been ripped to shreds. Rhea loved it. Anyone who took time to destroy something in such a way certainly had a good idea.

Not to say the witch wasn't still coated in wards. The iron charm dangled from her neck like usual, and a few bracelets had joined the others, catching the light as she closed the door behind her.

Rhea straightened in the chair, catching Ophelia's attention. She began to pick her way around tables and lose chairs to join her. Her hand was wrapped tight around the strap of her bag as it bounced on her shoulder as she approached, still not meeting her eyes all the way. She was wearing a pair of glasses, and Rhea worked to remember if she'd ever noticed them before.

She started to greet her, but the other girl spoke before the sound even left her mouth.

“Promise me again you won't harm me.”

Her nose scrunched in confusion. “Um. Of course. I promised before.”

“Promise again.” Her jaw was tight, the pulse visible under thin skin.

“I promise.”

Rhea rubbed her thumb along the back of her hand, watching for any sign of the tension to leave. Ophelia was still sitting hesitantly close to the edge of her chair, hands sitting on the surface so her fingers could pick at the edges of the cracks snaking down the faded leather.

No one wanted to speak first.

The witch sighed, head twitching away. “If yo—”

“Can I ask you a question?” Words spoken fast. An effort to stop the other’s obvious want to leave.

She frowned. Nodded.

“Your name. Ophelia. That is all of your name?”

Her lips pressed whiter. “No. I’m not answering that.”

“Why not?” Rhea crossed her legs. The leather was sticking to her pants, making noise as she slid across it.

“You know why not.”

She rose a brow, “No. I do not.”

“No human has given a f—” she cleared her throat, “a member of the *Aos Si* their whole name since this city has been founded.”

Rhea blinked, then laughed. “I don’t care about your whole name.” The confusion on her face made her laugh just a bit harder. “I want to know why it is so long.” She stifled the giggles behind a hand. “Ophelia. Oph and e and lia. Three sounds together.”

She was bristling now, like a hedgehog caught outside its den. “So? What does it matter?”

“Only actual...” She searched for the word, tapping fingers against the chair’s arm. “full grown... people... get long names.”

“Maybe to you. That isn’t a thing to us.”

“Then I could change it? To something easier and it would be okay?”

“What—”

“I could call you Lia.” It felt more comfortable coming out. Someone so young didn’t fit with such a long name.

At that Ophelia stood, her fists tight against her legs. Her bracelets clinked, and the sudden movement caught the eye of a few people nearby. “You can’t rename me! I’m not a toy!”

Rhea’s eyes widen just as a burst of angry magic hit her. Her ears sifted down and she began to slide back in the chair.

“I know you find it funny when you make fun of humans, but it’s really not.”

“Am I making fun of you?” It was like the parking lot all over again. The magic sent pinpricks along her skin and made the fine hair on her arms stand up. She suppressed a shudder, pressed deep within the cushion behind her. It wasn’t as bad as Ioana’s, but the chill of it felt too familiar.

“You... you’re making fun of me. Right?” Her voice lowered as she peered down at her. The magic slowly began to fizzle down. “Right?”

Rhea stared at her, blank faced. “I did not mean to. I... if I offended you I did not mean to.” Her eyes glanced at the others around them. “Is this because you think I want to take you away? I can’t do that.” She shook her head. “I cannot make deals. And

humans cannot be taken from the city without their consent.” Her hand squeezed the top of her other arm, nails indenting the skin with white lines.

Slowly, Ophelia sank down in the chair. “No. It’s just—” Her lips were white, face a bit grayer than before as the deeper umber tones of her skin dulled. “Never mind.” Her eyes wandered. Rhea stayed silent, hunched over in the chair. “You can’t call me that. It’s not my name.”

Rhea’s body uncoiled from its tight curl in the seat. The soft tones of the café filtered back in as they stared at each other. The magic was a lower pulse, blending in with the hum of humans around her somewhat.

She kept her gaze even, still feeling the lingering effects of Ophelia’s magic from earlier. It had been strong, strong enough to break through the witch’s own bonds. The onlookers had turned their attention away as the silence progressed, but Rhea couldn’t put them out of her mind as she watched the dark-haired girl’s hands fiddling with the bracelets on her wrist. The other’s eyes made her uncomfortable in a way she hadn’t experienced before. She had grown used to the way Ophelia or the other scientists let their eyes drift past her. Not how the witch’s were trailing over her now, a gentle curiosity. Not like the intense hatred or fear that the other humans had, like they wished they were just waiting to turn on her, or for her to turn on them. It was why she normally hid her ears, why she finally understood the spitting tone in which others spoke about them. But with the witch, there was more inquisitiveness than the hunger behind the other humans.

“You said that I’m not old enough for my name. Is that why your name is short? Rhea? Does that mean you’re not grown?”

“I’m not a...” She concentrated on the table as she thought, the word slow to come to her. “...adult? Is that how you say it?” She looked back at her. “I’m not of age.”

The witch’s fingers stopped twisting the bracelets. Her eyes had been looking at Rhea’s lap, but they trailed back up to her face. Rhea watched their movements closely. The sound of the café was growing more annoying, morphing into a buzz that settled deep on the top of her skin.

“I mean, I am not old enough to do those things you humans are so scared of.” Not for another month at least. “This is why I do not have a long name. Just Rhea.” She frowned. “Were you not aware of this?”

Ophelia shook her head. “Is that why you’re in the city?”

She grinned a bit awkwardly, trying to use the motion to bring back familiarity to herself. It fell almost instantly. “No. It is because my caretaker, Ioana, could not come.”

“Caretaker?”

“She is like... like your parents?”

“Oh.”

That wasn’t the best explanation. Rhea might know the human’s language, but that didn’t mean she knew their society enough. Talking was also becoming harder to do. Her back pressed into the chair once more, hard enough for it to scoot back against the ground with a faint screech. Her ears twitched, and she had the sudden urge to cup her hands over them.

“How old are you?”

Human years versus their cycles, the complicated math involved. “It doesn’t matter.”

“What happens when you do come of age then?”

The buzzing wouldn't stop, an itch that made her suddenly wish she was back home so she could press her face into her caretaker's hands like when she was still very small and make it stop. Her eyes shut. It was hard to place if it was the magic or something else fighting to worm under her skin.

“Rhea?”

She jolted back. A hand was by her face, hovering close enough the heat radiated upon her cheek.

“What?” Her voice was weak. How long had her world been in black? All she could see was blinding lights, until the hand waved before her eyes.

“Rhea, are you okay?”

She followed the hand as it retreated to Ophelia's side. She was leaning close, enough that Rhea could smell her, the scent of earth mixed with incense.

She straightened up. Her shaky hands unbound the tie of her hair, letting her curls fall around her face and down her shoulders. It worked to muffle the sounds some.

“Sorry. It's loud in here.”

Ophelia frowned, “You seemed zoned out.”

Her ears twitched and she found her fingers pressing into the base of her jaw. Her heart beat fast. Things looked blurred, and when she tried to focus on them it only made it worse.

“Rhea? Seriously, what's wrong with you?”

She shook her head, but her knees were already pulled towards her chest. A hand grazed her shoulder and she jumped; head tilted back. For half a moment she expected to see Ioana, frowning down at her, but it was just Ophelia, brows creased in concern.

“I can.. you feel... I can feel your energy. It keeps jumping.” Ophelia’s voice was a whisper.

A laugh came out from her throat, dry and raspy. The wards weren’t doing anything to stop the way she could feel the witch’s magic blend with hers. But she wasn’t causing this. It must have been Ophelia herself.

“What are you doing?” She sounded shocked.

“Nothing.” She reached out and grabbed hold of the shorter girl’s wrist. The sting of iron was instant, and she let go with a hiss. “Y.. you are.”

Ophelia stepped back in similar shock, her eyes wide as they met Rhea’s. “I—”

“You have to stop it.” Rhea sat up; the effort greater than it deserved. “It is making my head hurt.” As this point her accent was slipping further into the language, but she didn’t stop it. She pulled on her own magic, restraining it from connecting with the witch.

A few people were taking too much notice, she needed Ophelia to step back, or else she really would have another attack of... something. Fear flared. What if it was the fire over again?

“Stop it? Stop what?”

Rhea grabbed her again, ignoring the burning that came with it and pulled her down onto the chair’s arm. “You keep letting out the magic. Keep it in. Put it inside.”

Having finally gotten her to sit, she let go. The wards she was wearing fizzled in the air at

her being so close, but there wasn't anything to be done about that. It was starting to faintly smell like smoke.

Ophelia was staring at her empty hands, turning them over and over. "It feels like when I heal."

"Just pull it back into you."

"How?" She whispered.

"Hold it in your hand. And breath." She watched the girl's fingers curl carefully into her palm, her chest rising and falling in slow motion. "Breath." It was the advice they gave to training younglings.

A chair squeaked close by, a person standing and stepping towards them. Her head snapped in their direction, ears up in alert. They stopped once she made eye contact, turning away. The concern was obvious on their face. Ophelia needed to calm down so she could leave before someone called authorities on them. It would look bad if Ioana had found she was communicating with a witch and causing a public scene while doing so.

The magic jumping on her skin starting to sizzle out, along with the static within her own head. They had built upon each other, she recognized. A domino effect after Ophelia's first angry push of magic unto her.

"Is it better?"

Rhea nodded. She slid out of the chair and stood.

Ophelia's fingers twitched. "What happened?"

"I should go."

"What. Happened?" louder this time, meeting golden eyes working to look away.

"Tell me."

Rhea shook her head, “No. I do not know. I cannot tell you.”

“You do know.”

She sighed. “You let magic out and did not control it. It tried to connect with mine.”

“That’s impossible. I’m a witch.” “I do not know how witches work.” She shrugged, her ears twitching as she rubbed her arm. Her fingers were raw with the burns sustained by touching her skin. “That’s what happened.”

“But my magic doesn’t connect to yours. We don’t connect to magic. We just use it. You have to pull it from us.”

“I did not pull it. You were trying to pull mine and place it with yours.”

“I can’t—”

“You did.”

Ophelia’s mouth shut. Her brows were drawn down and she kept looking at her hands.

“People are watching.”

Her lips pressed tight, “Go then.”

Rhea stepped back. Then grabbed her bag. Stepped further back. “I do not understand what happened any more than you do.”

“You said that. Now leave if you’re going to go.”

She tightened the strap. Looked around. Then backed away, avoiding the center of the room as she slowly left. She kept looking at the witch, at her slouched form on the old chair. Her green eyes were watching her at the same time, just like the other day in the lab when she healed herself. But there was no spark in her eyes. Only confusion.

CHAPTER 9

The drive home went much slower than the drive up to the university. She'd borrowed Natalia's car, the rusty metal creaking with every bump and curve. She counteracted it with blasting music from the stereo, trying hard not to think about the last week. If she didn't think about it, maybe she could pretend she hadn't broken her mom's rule. She also could pretend nothing freaky happened with her magic, but that was even worse.

Her mother lived on the outskirts of the human territory. She'd grown up far from the iron gates and sentries posted to ward off any fae attacks. Out here, on the edge of nature, the only protection they had ever needed was the wards of her mother and the other witches. It was peaceful.

Heading up her driveway, the wheels bumped along ruts in the dirt, almost mud from the most recent shower. The trees lining the path were gaining back their green full force. All along the drive mossy stones sparkling with water droplets in the sunlight. The nature thinned the further she went, until she broke into the open space of their front yard, a jungle of bushes and flowers contained in a mess that seemed unorganized but were each cultivated by her other specific purposes. The garden walls that were standing before her mother was born, laces of carefully placed stones one against the other, kept everything enclosed within.

Her mom was already out on the porch of the cottage, watching as she parked. Her skirts blew in the wind, a tapestry of rainbow colors and fabrics. She smiled as

Ophelia walked towards her; arms already open.

“Welcome home, A stóirín!”

Ophelia let herself be wrapped into her embrace, burying her face in her shoulder where the flavors of herbs and spices always lingered. Her mother’s hair was bound up in a silk wrap, twirled into a knot on the front. A style she said her own adopted mother used, a style from the land long before she was taken into the world of fae.

“Is that her?” A shout came from inside.

“Of course it’s her, Melonie. Who else would be here at 8 in the morning! Certainly not one of your clients.” Her mother answered, not even looking back at the door as she rubbed her back.

“Now, don’t make it sound like I do something I don’t.” Her aunt appeared, a wide smile on her face. “Hello Ophelia.” She was in her robes still, the silk fabric vibrant orange and purple in the midmorning sun. Her red hair was loose, framing her dark face with fire.

“Hi *aintín*.” She moved from her mother’s side to let herself be pulled into another hug, warm hands smoothing her hair. “You changed your hair again.”

“Purple wasn’t doing it.” Her aunt placed a kiss onto her forehead. “Welcome back.”

School was a chore. Home made her happy. Home didn’t have *Aos Sì* asking things of her or taking her magic. Home was filled with the warm scent of cookies baking and the sound of water boiling on the stove. Everything that filled the house came with the heady scent of flower pollen from buds that were always changing. It mixed well with the kitchen herbs her mother utilized with her kitchen witchery. During summer days, on

the back porch, the salty scent rising from the nearby sea sometimes mixed with the earthy tones to create something so perfect she wished she could bottle it. “What have I missed?” She asked.

“Only the usual.” Her aunt guided her through the door, underneath the archway decorated with charms. The inside smelled just like she remembered, like a witch’s home. “I made tea.”

Her mother followed, skirting around them in the small entranceway to duck ahead into the kitchen. “Your cat will be happy to see you.”

As if the words had summoned it, a black shape jumped down from the shelf cluttered with winter coats and shoes beside her. It collided with her leg with a loud murrumph.

“Mina!” She gathered the furry mass into her arms, letting her nuzzle her face. “Hello baby. Did you miss me?” She scratched behind her cat’s ears, listening to the purr vibrating her chest. It was nice to have her in her arms, to have something to bury her fingers in to hide their twitching.

“She’s been a real nuisance lately.” Her aunt waved her forward.

Ophelia chuckled. “Have you been a bad girl?” She stepped over the threshold into the kitchen, the old wooden board creaking its familiar greeting.

“Are you sure you don’t want to have her in your own home?” Melonie glared at the cat, who only blinked back in response. Her tail twitched against Ophelia’s arm.

“We can’t have pets. I told you.”

Her aunt huffed, but the smile on her face betrayed her lack of anger.

“I made fresh bread. And some jam for you to take back.” Her mother approached them; a basket cradled in her arms. It was filled with jars and a few other packages wrapped in white cloth with wax seals of various runes on each.

“Thanks. My roommates will be so excited.” She smiled, taking it with her free hand. “Natalia wouldn’t stop raving about your last cake.” She ducked under the drying herbs tied up to the ceiling’s exposed beams to sit at the old oak table in the center of the room. Once on the stool, Mina hopped from her arms onto the table’s surface.

Ophelia watched as she wound her way among the various jars and candles that covered the whole table to find a clear spot to settle.

“How are your classes?” her aunt placed a cup and saucer, steaming with hot tea, before her.

“Well.” She nodded her thanks, “Nothing too hard or exciting. I guess.”

“Your exams?”

“I’m only worried about advanced Chemistry and Anatomy.”

Her aunt leaned against the counter closest to her. “You didn’t manage to squeeze in that Enchanted Objects class?”

“No *aintín*...” she sighed, “It was the same time as anatomy.”

“Hmm... right. I remember now.” She frowned.

Ophelia looked away from her at the flowers being stirred up by Mina’s twitching tail.

“How is that internship?” Her mother settled beside her, smoothing the folds of her skirt under calloused hands.

“Interesting.” She ran her fingers along a groove in the wood, tracing its path towards the edge. “Tiring. Sometimes, at least.”

“Do they have you running paperwork?” Her aunt asked. She had moved to the stove, a pot boiling on it like always.

“Only sometimes. Most of the time I just watch what’s going on.”

She thought back to Rhea, to the café. Her fingers tingled at the memory alone. It was the third time they touched. She wrapped them around the hot cup to stop them. Her mom had warned her to stay away, but she didn’t listen, did she? For the first time ever, she ignored her advice.

Her aunt hummed a faint tune under her breath as she stirred the pot. Her mom took hold of her hand and held it gently in her lap, tracing the lines of Ophelia’s palm with her finger. Ophelia caught a whiff of the scent of the boiling liquid. The smell was strong enough to make her head spin. It was earth and fire all in one, the herbs mixing with a heavy pinch of cinnamon and some other spice she couldn’t name.

“Did you enjoy it?” She asked.

Ophelia nodded, twining her fingers within hers. “It’s cool to see all the advancements being made by taking magic and combining it with science.”

“I still don’t think humans should be messing with things they don’t understand.” Her aunt huffed.

Her mother hushed her. “Melonie, don’t start this again.”

“More witches are joining them.” Ophelia added.

“Like you.” Her aunt set the spoon down.

“Like me, *aintín*.”

Her mother sighed, dropping her hand to stand. “Melonie, I’ll take care of the pot. Go check on the chickens. I don’t think they’ve been fed yet.”

Her aunt frowned at her mother, but something in the look she returned kept her silent.

“I’ll be out back then. If you need me.” She brushed a hand over her apron and grabbed a scarf to throw over her hair. She had already started to wrap it up as she went by the door. “Don’t you dare leave without saying goodbye to me, young lady!”

“I wouldn’t!”

“Good.”

Ophelia smiled faintly as she watched her duck out the door. Mina meowed before hopping off the table, squeezing through seconds before it closed with a flick of her tail.

Silence descended in the kitchen as her mother leaned over the stove. The quiet of her home relaxed her, brought her back to when she was young. She’d learned many things in this kitchen, had watched her mother or aunt craft spells that would be sold or traded. She’d played under the table with dolls made of leftover sticks and bundles, with furniture made of cloth sacks and crystals serving as their décor.

If she went across from the kitchen she would find the living room, decorated for auntie’s customers or for various visitors. It was covered with curtains and soft sofas and cushions; a place where she built forts or read during stormy nights while the fire glowed in the fireplace.

She sipped at her tea, eyes rising to look at the ceiling. Past the dried herbs and vines, she could see the runes carved upon the beams. Just under her bed.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong or are you going to keep it a secret?”

She sighed, “Mom... how long were you waiting to ask that?”

“As soon as you came in the door.” Her mom’s voice was soft, gentle as always.

“I can feel the way you’re unsettled.”

“I’ve just had a long week.” She pushed back from the table.

“You’ve been wearing your wards, haven’t you?”

“I didn’t forget them! And they helped. Really.” She trapped her lip between her teeth as her mother’s brow raised. “I followed your advice.”

Her mother’s hands came together. “No issues then?”

“Nope.” Ophelia rubbed her arm for a second, then dropped her hand, working to keep her body relaxed. “You didn’t tell *aintín* about Rhea, did you?”

“The *Aos Sì*?”

Ophelia nodded.

Her mom shook her head. Her hair was falling loose from her scarf, the black strands a match to Ophelia’s own.

She looked down at her shoes, rubbing the scuffed edge against the stone floor. She couldn’t tell her, not yet. “Do you, when you trade, do you feel like... like the magic you have is... exchanging with theirs?”

Her mom frowned, “If she’s taking your magic—”

“She’s not.” She shook her head, stopping her mother quickly. “She isn’t taking anything, I... I wouldn’t let her.”

Her mom’s face didn’t soften. Her brows only drew closer together. Her hand had dropped, and she was smoothing out the edges of her skirts.

“They can use our magic, right?”

“They will steal our magic and our energy if we let them. If you let her.”

“But... can we use fae magic?” Ophelia asked.

“No.” Her mom’s voice was firm. “I told you to leave her alone, Ophelia. Did you listen?”

“I know, but I felt... I had something happen and it felt different... like I could connect with her.”

“Connect with her?” Her mom looked startled. “In the lab?”

“No—I mean, yes.”

“You didn’t meet her outside, did you?” Her mother stiffened, the concern wrinkling the corner of her eyes.

Her lips pressed tight.

“Ophelia?”

“I... um I just saw her once. Um, at the lab’s hallway. It was only a second.” Not the truth, but she couldn’t bring the truth up.

Her mom still frowned; her brown eyes unreadable to her. She could feel the faint pulse of anger mixed with anxiety coming from her aura, the magic of the wards starting to awaken at the faint hint of danger.

Ophelia gulped. She then spotted the water bubbling higher and higher behind them, towards the pots edge. “Mom! The potion!”

Her mother turned in one swift movement, pulling the pot off the burner and onto a cold one.

Her mother stirred the pot until the rolling liquid calmed down. The tension was still in her shoulders and the air around her.

Ophelia bit her lip, twisting a hand into the hem of her shirt. “Am I in trouble?”

“Have you ever been in trouble with me, sweetie?” Her mom gave her a gentle smile, but it didn’t fill her eyes. “I just want to make sure you’re safe. And I want you to be able to tell me the truth.”

Her hand settled on her back, a soft push towards the door. “I want to talk to you in the living room. It’ll be easier.”

“Can’t we talk in here?”

“I’m not as young as you, darling. I do need to rest.” She reached up to pull a few vials from the shelf above. “And it’ll be more comfortable.”

Ophelia looked back at the potion then at the door. “I already told you—”

“You know full well that I know you haven’t told me everything.” The glare her mom gave her was mild, but she still felt the disappointment in her bones.

“Are you sure I don’t need to help.”

“Go.”

“Okay, Okay.” She backed away, watching for a bit as her mom started to funnel the liquid into the decanters.

She still couldn’t help but feel that her mom was mad at her. An occurrence she hadn’t known since she was younger and was occasionally scolded for getting into things she wasn’t supposed to.

The beads on the arch clinked together as she ducked under them into the salon. The curtains hung there to separate it from the rest of the home had to be pushed aside,

their fabric sliding under her fingertips. Her shoes sank into the layers of carpet, multicolored rugs strewn about and stacked on top of each other. The coffee table in the room's center was empty except for a cradle set for incense, the stick inside not lit yet. She nudged cushions out of the way to make it to the couch which sat shoved up against the bay windows. The sunlight made the room brighter, bringing out the rich colors and jeweled tones that her aunt loved to decorate with. Plants were scattered in various corners and placed on the shelves on the only wall empty of draping cloth. Those were her mother's touch, and her own. Their leaves fanned out towards the sunlight and the room's center, bringing life and natural energy to the space.

One such plant was situated by the couch, and she paused to check on it, running a finger down the middle of one of its large elephant ear shaped leaves. This close, she could smell the dirt underneath it and the green smell of fresh oxygen coming from it. She remembered planting it when she was only five years old. It had been a gift from her mother, along with the chance to start to raise something by herself.

By the time she'd settled down, a patchwork blanket draped across her lap, her mother was ducking under the arch, a plate in her hand.

"I brought some of your aunt's veggie pies."

"Oh, good. I'm starving." She sat up and let her hand the plate to her. Its warmth seeped through to her palms.

Her mom settled beside her. Ophelia focused on cutting a bite out of flaky pastry.

There was a moment of silence, before her mom took in a deep breath. "They don't like witches. None of the *Tuatha de Danann* do." Her mother took up the edge of the blanket, running a finger along the seam. "They think we stole their magic."

“Did we?” She swallowed down the pie, looking at her mother’s hand as it moved. She thought of Rhea the other day. Did she hide hate behind the curiosity she claimed to have? She certainly hadn’t felt any malice from her.

“No.” Her mother gave a faint laugh. “Of course we didn’t. You know how we got our magic, darling.”

“But why do they think that then?” She crossed her legs underneath her.

“They tell of our birth differently.”

“What do they say?”

Her mom’s hand stilled. “Instead of the Goddess granting us a sliver of her talent, they claim we took our magic from them. From their own flesh and blood.”

“Hmm.” She sat the now mostly empty plate onto the table. The fork clicked against the ceramic surface. “Rhea doesn’t seem angry with me.”

“What?”

“Rhea. The fae at my intern job. She doesn’t seem mad at me.”

“She isn’t just going to be mad at you.”

“But you said they would be.”

“I said they don’t like us.” Her mom leaned forward, adjusting the incense holder so it was more centered.

“She said she was curious about me.”

“When did she say that?”

“When w— um—” She gulped. “When I agreed to meet her.”

Her mom’s body went completely still. It was if the blood and muscle within her had frozen.

Ophelia bit her lip. “Mom?”

“I thought you just spoke to her for a minute.”

“I did but... then she asked if—”

Her mom straightened up so fast it startled her from her place. Ophelia’s legs shot out to stand.

“You agreed to meet with her?”

“In a public place.”

“You agreed to do a favor for her?”

“A favor? No, I—”

“Why did she ask to meet you?” Her mom took her hand, keeping her from fleeing the couch. The touch sent faint sparks of nervous energy up her arm.

“She just asked to talk, just to learn more.”

“You offered to teach her?”

“I guess so?” She felt her mom squeeze her hand, hard. “She was taking energy from Natalia one day. When we ran into her. I just didn’t want her to do that. I mean she claimed it was given, but that was bullshit. I mean I never did anything else with her, I didn’t do anything else.” She was rambling now. Her mom’s sigh made her drop silent.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not mad. But I warned you. To stay away from her.”

“I know—”

“It’s for a good reason, sweetie.” She pulled her closer, her touch gentle and soft. She wrapped the blanket back around her lap. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Ophelia pulled the soft material up to her chin. “We met in a coffee shop. She didn’t hurt me.”

“Did she ask you to do any other favors?”

She shook her head. “She said something about being unable to make deals.”

“Right, she’s a youngling... That makes this better.” Her mom took a deep breath. “That means this is fixable.”

“What’s the big deal?”

“Favors are important to fae. And it’s favors that get humans into the most trouble.” Her mom stood, crossing the room towards the bookshelves. “The lesser fae, the ones who live with the *Aos Sì* back in their lands, don’t often come across humans. But there are accounts of them. And it’s these encounters that almost always result in humans asking something of them, something only those made of magic can grant.”

She watched her select a book off the highest shelf, its spine red and unlabeled.

“These fae were mostly harmless in their favors. But it’s the Courts that were tricky. They’re older than any of the others.”

Ophelia watched her mother with rapt attention. She had never spoken of the fae, of their history with humans or witches, all to ready to push aside any questions as superstition.

Her mom rejoined her on the couch. “They used the human’s innocence about favors and magic to trick them into situations that were at the very least inconvenient, and at the worst murderous for humans.”

“They would kill them?”

“If it amused them.”

Ophelia touched the cover of the book, feeling its soft leather. “They say we had the war to push them off so we could have our own land. Because we weren’t represented by them.”

“The court that controlled these lands did unfairly treat humans, that is correct.”

“Because of these favors?”

“The favors are how they tricked humans into servitude.” Her mom looked behind her, out the window. “Humans don’t come from this land. It’s the fae, the *Tuatha de Danann*’s land originally. And it is now. But humans refuse to think otherwise.”

“That’s not in our history books.”

“Most human books say we traveled and settled here from far away, but there is no far away. Only the other lands of the courts and the ocean. Humans are displaced into a society that looks down on them.”

“Then why—”

“Because the truth is scary. That we were once safe from them, but now we must survive together. That somehow we aren’t from here, but we don’t know how to get back. That is too scary for people, and they chose to rid their minds of it.”

“But where is this other world if we really are from it?”

Her mom shrugged. “The old witches tried to find it, but as far as we know, even the *Aos Si* have lost the knowledge of how to get to it.”

“And how do witches fit into this? We come from the Goddess.”

“Yes. It’s like you know. The Goddess saw her humans in need and gave us a touch of her magic. If it wasn’t for us, we wouldn’t have won the war.”

“And yet no one talks about us.” She also knew that. A bitter thorn in her side in every history class. The fact her people were praised as giving aid, but only at a superficial level. They never talked about how the revolution against the fae was started by witches within their community, or that without their potions and charms the humans could never fend off their superior forces.

“A price we paid to stay out of the fae’s wrath.”

“But what does all this have to do with Rhea?”

“The *Aos Sì* can still do favors. With bad consequences. I don’t want you to end up accidentally making a mistake.”

“You trade with them all the time.”

Her mom frowned. “That’s different.”

“How is it? You never tell me anything about them and yet you always meet them. And never let me even go with you. You teach me everything but this important stuff.”

“I’m protecting you, Ophelia. I know how to handle the ones I trade with because I have experience.”

“Then let me have experience! Maybe if I had it, I wouldn’t be so bothered by Rhea at work.”

“You shouldn’t need the experience.” Her voice dropped, “I thought you wouldn’t...”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve always protected you. For your own safety, Ophelia.”

She breathed in deep, reining in her frustration before it exploded out of her. “I still deserve to know.”

The tinkle of shattering glass sounded from the other room.

Her mom turned in alarm “What was—”

A black shape, then a brush of fur against her knees.

“Mina!” She leaned over to look under the table, catching sight of gleaming golden eyes and the pink of a hissing mouth.

“What has she gotten into this time?” Her mom sounded exhausted, rising from the couch.

Ophelia worked to gently coax her cat back out in the open as her mom ducked into the kitchen.

“Damn it, she broke the flower vase.”

“Do you need help cleaning it up?” She rose to a crouch.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, sweetie. Get her calmed down, but I think she should stay in your room for the rest of your visit.”

“Okay, mom.” She wiggled her fingers until Mina slowly peaked her nose out. Her yellow eyes glared accusingly towards the kitchen like it was the vase’s fault for falling. “Come on, baby doll. Let’s get you upstairs and away from all this.”

She headed towards the stairs, cat in her arms.

“Oh, and Ophelia.” Her mom peeked her head out of the kitchen archway. “I really don’t want you to meet her again.”

Ophelia nodded slowly. “Okay.”

CHAPTER 10

It was almost the end of the weekend, and she still hadn't finished the base layer for the painting. Yet, her creative energy was waning. Instead of working, she was lounging on her deck, letting the sun hit her face. Then, her stone buzzed. Her ears twitched and she sat up. It was on the little table where she threw it, the surface a faint green. The white plastic chair squeaked and slowly she stretched her arm out and picked it up.. Her head tilted as she looked at the fading light.

She hit the middle to answer.

A faint rush of sound, then a soft voice. "Rhea? This is Ophelia. Um..." She was almost whispering, and Rhea had to hold the stone close to hear.

"Hello?"

Her arms wrapped through her legs, under her knees, pulling them to press tight to her chest. Her ears wouldn't stop twitching, and somehow she had never found it so hard to breath.

Finally, she inhaled. "What do you want?"

"Can we meet?"

After last time? She couldn't help the way her brow quirked at the question.

"Why?"

"I want to talk about what happened. And you did say you wanted to know more."

A huff. Her fangs biting down onto her lip to stop the laugh she wanted to make at the words. "If you want to talk then can we not talk like this?"

A shaky inhale picked up easily by her sensitive ears. “Face to face. I just want everything to be clear.”

“Where?”

“Same place. In an hour?”

After thinking for a moment, she shrugged. “Yes.”

She was supposed to go to the council in a few hours anyway.

“Okay. Good.” Ophelia cleared her throat.

Silence.

“Goodbye?” Rhea said.

“Oh, yeah! Bye.” The witch stumbled out, then the stone’s light died out.

Rhea stood, rolling her shoulders back. Time to start a new string of mistakes.

The cafe was less busy this time around, the tables mostly empty with only one or two people set up at them. Ophelia was already there when she arrived, sat in the same armchair as before.

Rhea approached her with soft footsteps, the girl not noticing as she made her way behind her.

“Have you always worn glasses?”

Ophelia jumped and turned, a faint flare of the taste of magic as her startled nerves sent charges to her wards.

“Mother! You snuck up on me.”

“I apologize.” Rhea rounded the chair and plopped down into the other, the same leather squeaking under her weight. The sound joined her soft chuckles of amusement. “I

mean... I am not sorry, it was funny. But I do apologize.” Her head tilted, and her ears twitched in amusement. They were hidden in her hair this time. She learned since last time; she didn’t want the stares.

The witch just narrowed her eyes some, shifting in her own chair. Rhea was glad to see her posture was less stiff this time, but she was no less distant than before.

“I want to make clear, again, that this isn’t some form of deal or promise. I’m not being forced into doing a favor for you. Right?”

Rhea sighed, “I already told you that I cannot make deals. Why must you keep asking?”

“Because it’s important.” She frowned, but even she seemed unsure. “I just... I was warned and I want to—”

“You were warned? Are you following that warning then?”

Ophelia looked to the side, at one of the patrons nearby. “Um—”

“You are not? What is it?”

“I was warned not to meet with you. I’m supposed to leave you alone.”

She tilted her head. “I don’t think I am supposed to talk to you either. If that gives you a better feeling.”

The witch looked back at her, her hands tightening into tiny fists at the top of her knees. “What do you mean?”

“I’m supposed to watch the experiment. I am not supposed to meet with a human, a witch even. But I want to. So I am.” She looked at her nails, spotting bits of blue paint still stuck under one. She frowned.

“When you say you can’t make deals, that means any type of deal?”

“If you asked me to grant you power or wealth, I could not give it. I do not have enough of my magic to grant that. So if I can’t grant you a real favor, then I cannot ask for a real favor back from you.” She stopped picking at the paint to look up at her. “I am not tricking you. Right now. I am not that bored.”

“But you would.”

“If it was amusing.”

Ophelia let out a soft puff of air, her mouth twisting down and her brows pinching together. “You think of us as toys?”

“Everyone is a toy to someone.” She looked back up at her, resting her hand on the arms chair and letting her fingertips trace the cracks. “It’s just a matter of who is higher on the food chain.”

“But what about equals?”

“Do you think you are an equal to me?”

Ophelia’s glare grew stronger. “We beat your kind in the war. We proved that we aren’t just servants for you.”

“You don’t have to direct your anger at me. I was not alive then.”

“Neither was I.” She drew her body up. “But you have the same mindset of those we fought. You’re acting like I’m a rat and you’re a cat, tossing me around this way and that, until you grow bored and let me die. If you are no longer curious, as you say, about me, then you would just start to ignore me. Would you trick me then?”

Her brow rose, surprised at the fierceness the younger girl was showing. She could feel the pulse of energy that thread through her veins from where she sat, a pulse of magic that called to her even now. “You are not a rat to me.”

Ophelia frowned.

“If we went by your analogy, you are another cat.”

“Can I help you two?” A woman appeared at Ophelia’s side, making the two of them tense. Rhea hadn’t even noticed her approach, making her feel silly. She should have been looking around more, not just focusing on the green of the other girl’s eyes.

Ophelia looked up at her. “Could I just get a coffee with almond milk? No sugar.”

Rhea blinked; her brain blank.

The woman was staring at her.

“Um.” Her ears dropped.

“She’ll have the same. Right?”

Rhea nodded, still staring at the woman, at her hands that fiddled with a pad of paper. The woman smiled and moved away, but Rhea’s gaze followed.

“Stop staring. It’s rude. And weird.” Ophelia whispered. It pulled her back.

“I wasn’t trying to be rude.”

“Right...” She had leaned back in the chair, the appearance of another human seeming to relax her some.

Rhea eyed her over. “Is looking rude?”

“Watching someone like you want to eat them is.”

She snorted. “I was not going to eat her. I would not eat anyone. That’s—” She frowned. “How do you say it? Bad?”

“Bad tasting?”

“Yes. That.”

“Gross. You would say gross.” Ophelia sighed.

“Oh, I don’t know that word.”

“How do you know our language anyway?”

Her thumb ran along the seam between the arm and the hard side of the chair. “I learned it?”

“They taught you it?”

“Of course.” She crossed her legs, folding them into the cushion. “Why else do you think I would speak it?” It seemed self-explanatory.

The witch picked something off her jeans. “I don’t know. You don’t seem to know proper etiquette, but you speak really well.”

“I practiced a lot. When I was a very young youngling.” Her head tilted. “I think your language is amusing. But it is hard on my mouth.”

Ophelia was watching her again. She liked that, having her eyes on her.

“We don’t learn Gaelic.”

“I think your friend said that.”

“I just assumed if we couldn’t learn Gaelic then you—”

“We couldn’t learn yours?” She gave a laugh, unable to hide it. The witch’s cheeks turned darker under her olive skin, and it made her freckles even more adorable.

“I don’t know why you cannot learn Gaelic. I am surprised. I thought you were able to.”

Ophelia seemed to examine her, as if she could read if she was lying or not by just looking closer. It was cute as her nose wrinkled some.

“If you think I am trying to trick you again, I am not.”

Her face didn’t lose its intensity. “You don’t know a lot about humans?”

Rhea shrugged. “Why should I? I know your language. I can read your stuff. I can watch what you are doing.”

“But you don’t know how to act.”

“I am not a human. Of course I am not going to act like one. Why would I want to?”

“My friend said that your kind used to steal our children and change them.”

Her body stiffened. The ringing from last time sounded faintly in her ears and she shook her head, hoping to clear it off. She couldn’t blame it on magic this time. “What?”

Ophelia leaned forward. “Did you?”

She didn’t look at her, focusing on the floor. “No? What? Why would... I never heard of that.” Her fingers curled into her palm, the sting of her nails grounding her. “Is that another reason you humans act so silly around us? You think we would just take you?”

“My mom said that’s how we got here.”

“It is not true.” She looked up, eyes blazing. “Every one of our kind is born within the citadel, and we are all raised together until we can be chosen by a caretaker. None of us are stolen,” she spat the word out, “and we were not human to start with.” Her eyes narrowed. “And our history shows that has been the case since we have existed. It is you humans that leached off us.”

Ophelia raised her hands in defense. Her eyes had gone wide. “Okay, okay. Chill.”

The ringing was fading a bit, and she realized her ears were trembling with how tight they were pressed to her head.

Ophelia motioned her hands once more. “Chill. I told you I didn’t think that.”

“Then why ask?” She still snapped at her. Annoyed by the reaction it had caused more than the girl or the question itself. Ioana had never told her about that, had never even mentioned that as a myth the humans believed. To be fair, Ioana didn’t talk much about the humans besides how much of an annoyance they were, but the *leabhar staire* would have recorded any such incidences.

“I was just curious.” Her frown was back, but this time Rhea’s annoyance didn’t seem to scare her. “Your accent gets stronger when you’re flustered.”

Rhea recoiled back. “I... what?” Now her own cheeks felt hot and her ears flipped back in embarrassment and startled surprise. “No, it does not. I do not know what you—”

“It’s fine.” Ophelia smiled, then a sound like a tiny laugh came from her. “It’s fine. It’s kind of cute to see. It’s just... you get flustered at random stuff.”

Rhea bit her lip. “Oh. I...”

“If you’ve studied our language, does that mean you’ve watched like movies and things?”

“I don’t know what that is.” She touched the tip of one ear, tugging on it in a gesture she often did as a child. Many younglings did it when they started to get use to the size of them on their head. She hadn’t done it in years but twisting the golden hoop at the end felt better.

Ophelia was watching her hand as it moved. “You don’t know what movies are? They’re new. Only a year older than me, I guess... but I always assumed everyone had seen them by now. They’re like moving pictures.”

“Moving pictures? Like you animate them?”

“They’re recorded. So, the picture wasn’t flat to begin with. They usually don’t have color, but I think they’re trying to figure that out. They have sound at least.”

“We can animate pictures. You just do it with simple magic.” Her head tilted. “But you do not get sound. But no one really does that. It sounds boring.”

“What do you do for fun then?”

She smiled a bit. “I paint. But Ioana doesn’t like that much. Younglings are supposed to focus on learning, she says.”

“Is Ioana your... your caretaker?”

“Yes.”

Ophelia was still looking at her.

“What?”

“Sorry it’s just... your ears are so different. And they... they move.”

“It is not weird for me.” She frowned, letting go of her ear to glance towards a window. Her reflection shimmered back at her faintly. The same face she had seen her whole life, the same shape of her ears under her hair. It was a feature everyone had around her, excepting the lesser creatures, excepting the humans.

“I... I know that your kind have them, but... I guess I never saw how different they are until... until I saw you.”

“Are they scary?”

Ophelia frowned. “No. I think they’re pretty.”

“Your coffee.” The waitress was back, placing a platter on the low sitting table between them. “With just almond milk.”

Rhea felt the heat on her cheeks at her words, a reaction she hadn't had since she was still a youngling. The witch had called them pretty. "They're just like all the others. Humans have the weird ones."

Ophelia snorted, and picked up her cup. "I know we disagree on that."

Rhea glanced at her cup, then at the clock far above their heads. The human's hours were odd, run by a schedule of numbers and hours she had yet to comprehend fully. But the time was inching closer to when she had to go.

"I'm supposed to see the council today."

"The council?"

"For being in your city. I have to report what I am doing so the *Murias* court does not worry."

"Oh." Ophelia sipped at her drink, nose wrinkling as the steam hit her glasses.

"Do you need to go?"

Rhea touched the rim of hers, tracing the moisture left by the heat. "I think I do."

"Will they get mad at you?"

She shrugged, picking up the drink. It was heavy in her hands, and she held it close to inhale the rich scent. "What is this again?"

"Coffee. Have you had it before?"

"I do not think so."

"You should try it." Ophelia smiled, setting her mug down to watch.

Rhea raised a brow before tipping the mug back. The heat hit her face, then a splash of bitterness as the liquid hit her tongue. She flinched, yanking it back.

"Ew! What was that?"

Ophelia laughed. Rhea felt her ears grow hot, dropping low to her shoulders.

“Hey, it is not funny! That was... what did you say? Gross?”

“I like it.” Ophelia still laughed, but softer now. “I thought you might.”

“It tasted like I would die.”

“I guess it can kill some animals...”

“You tried to poison me?” Her ears shot up.

“No! No!” Ophelia hurriedly put her hands up. “It can only kill like dogs and stuff. I mean... I don’t know what you guys can and can’t eat, but I didn’t try and kill you. I swear.”

Rhea pushed the cup as far across the table from her as she could. “You swear.”

“I swear I would never aim to hurt you.” Ophelia looked at the two cups. “Never ever.”

“Huh.” Rhea’s ears twitched.

The witch settled back in her chair, small hands folding closed. Behind her was a window, through which the normal life of the city continued. A flow of humans from place to place, some with bags and some empty handed. The movement here was fast paced. Rhea could never get used to how close everything was, buildings stacked on top of each other. There was no room for gardens in such a place, only small plots of lands. It was so different from the vast estate she came from.

“You... you wanted to ask questions? Do you have one? Besides what coffee is, I mean.”

The original thoughts of questioning the witch over the portal had long since left her mind after the first meaning. Honestly, she expected the witch would never want to

talk again, and she really wasn't going to blame her. But now the opportunity was back in her lap.

She focused her eyes back on her face. "What do you know about us?"

Ophelia bit her lip, "I don't know much. Actually. My mom never taught me anything... I mean not until..." she shook her head, interrupting her own speech.

"History books say that you trapped humans and that the war was necessary for us to live."

Rhea shrugged. What the humans had done in this city was unnatural, but she didn't blame them for trying to find some sort of independence. A necessity however, she doubted that.

"But the history books say that the *Aos Sì* and humans existed here at the same time. Which isn't true. According to my mom."

Her head tilted, drawn in by the hesitancy within her voice. "What does she say?"

"She said the *Tuatha de Danann* brought us here." She whispered the words, eyes partially focused on Rhea's face as they gazed towards something else in her memory.

"Brought you here?" Rhea could feel the grin starting on her face, leaning close. "How? Does she know how?"

Ophelia shook her head. The look in her eyes vanishing. "She said no one knows."

The glimmer of hope she had was starting to fizzle out. "No one? Not even the witches?"

She shook her head once more.

Rhea bit into her lip, worrying it under the pointed tip of her fang. "I know how."

Ophelia tapped her finger against her knee. “What?”

“There’s a portal. Or there was.” Rhea shrugged, “I was hoping you would know more... but I guess you don’t.”

For a moment the witch stared at her. Her eyes were narrowed in confusion. Then, as if she just remembered, the witch jerked forward to pick up her cup. “You said you had to go soon?”

Shit. The council. She checked the clock, noting the hour was far past when she was supposed to have gone. “They are going to be upset.”

“Oh, go now if you need to.”

Rhea rose from the chair, her mind running through possible excuses to present on why she was running late.

“Can we meet again?”

Her ears twitched, but the words drew her out of her panic. “I... call me. I will answer.”

“Okay but—”

“I have to go.” She ducked her head to say goodbye, before she rushed to the door. She didn’t have time to discuss. If she got there fast enough maybe they wouldn’t alert Ioana, and she wouldn’t have to try and lie to her. The one thing she never could successfully .

CHAPTER 11

It was a rare nice day. One where the sun was shining, and everyone was out for a walk. The lab wasn't meeting. In fact, it had been put on pause the last week once the Head announced they had to wait for the results sent to the *Comhairie Dhaonna* to come back before any more work could be done. The timing had worked great for Ophelia, lining up with her two hardest exams of the semester. The time spent away was a good time for studying, but it felt unnatural. Without the study, she was place back in her normal routine. Natalia was busy with her own exams, and she hadn't heard much from Adriel, not since their fight. He had kept quiet, the only news of him she had through his sister. It had started to feel lonely.

Which might account for why she was where she was now. Out in the open, under the shade of a tree as an actual member of the *Aos Si* lounged beside her. *I really don't want you to meet her again*, her mom had said. She'd already broken that by calling her the last time. It was getting harder to feel guilty, when every time she was with her, her stomach felt dizzy.

"How did you get your name?"

"Hmm?" Ophelia tilted her head up, squinting at the sunlight bouncing back into her eyes. "My name?"

"Yes." Rhea was sprawled out on the bench across from her, one leg dangling towards the ground while the other was bent. A hand was twisting the stem of a flower while her golden eyes watched her under the shade of the second. "It sounds old."

“It’s from a play. I think. My mother found it in an old book, and I guess she liked it.”

“A play?” Her gaze floated away from her. The dress she wore rustled against the stone as she sat up. “I know a lot of plays, but none of them with that name.”

Ophelia sat the pencil and notebook she had been doodling in down to the side. “I think it’s one of the destroyed texts. Or else my mother would have said more.”

Her legs were bare in the shorts of her romper, the violet cotton material blending in with the budding bush behind her. She usually didn’t dress up from going to the park, but when Rhea had called her about it, asking if there were any spots out in nature, she had already been wearing it, and she’d felt cute. Now she was glad, because the dress Rhea was wearing looked like something out of one of the magazines Natalia sometimes found at the shops and would purchase on random whims. Its material some sort of silk, flowy along her body with curves she wasn’t aware the fae had possessed before then. She’d asked her why she had it but the taller girl had just shrugged and mumbled something about needing to try on clothes.

“Destroyed text?”

Ophelia shrugged, averting her eyes from the way the sun made the hollow of her collarbones stand out. She shouldn’t be staring. “It happened centuries ago. Some pieces of writing were taken and destroyed because they didn’t match with the revolutionaries view during the war.” She paused. Was it safe to discuss the war with one of the *Aos Sì*? They had been the losing side.

“And we destroyed the rest...” Rhea’s voice dropped, and she rose from the bench. “Such a loss.”

“A lot of people are working to restore them, but I don’t know much else about the progress.” She picked at a blade of grass. Her sandals lay on the ground beside her. Rhea’s own shoes had joined them before she climbed onto the stone.

“Hmm.”

A pause. Ophelia stopped picking at the grass and looked up. “What is your name from?”

“My name? You mean Rhea?”

She nodded.

“It is half of my real name.”

“Real name?”

“You get a full real name when you finish the—” She paused, and her lips pursed. She then said a word that Ophelia didn’t recognize. It sounded like vowels running together and it made her arm hairs stand up.

“What was that?”

“I do not know the word in your language. It is like birth to you, but it is not.”

“Is it like a birthday?”

Her head shook slowly, then stopped. “I do not know that. I do not think so?”

“A birthday is when you grow a year older. Like how when I turn 21 I will have my birthday.”

“You are 21?” She asked.

“I’m only 20 actually.”

“I will be 21. But we do not have the same cycles you do.”

Ophelia frowned. “We don’t?”

A corner of her mouth quirked up. “I am certain I was alive before you or your parents were born.”

“So your cycles don’t match our years?” She rose to her knees. “That’s interesting.”

Rhea only shrugged in answer.

“So it’s like a birthday. But not a birthday?”

“It could be a party. But it is an important party.”

“A ceremony?”

Rhea brightened, and she could spot the movement of her ears rising. “Yes! That is it.”

“It’s a ceremony for your 21st cycle?”

A nod. “I am leaving to complete it in three days’ time.”

“What happens?”

“I don’t know. Just that I get all my magic then. And then I will be an adult.”

Rhea shrugged.

“Huh.”

Rhea sat up and slid off the bench, joining her in the grass. Her knees almost touched hers; her golden skin almost gleamed in the sun. Ophelia realized how close she was, but she didn’t make a move to get away. Her wards were starting to tingle, but the feeling wasn’t as comforting as it usually was. It almost felt like a hindrance now, as they pulsed to drive off the fae girl’s strange magic.

“Are you not born with all your magic?” She asked.

The fae giggled softly, and her hands pressed into the ground on either side of her as she leaned closer. As close as the wards would allow, Ophelia assumed. The iron kept her from physically touching her, but it didn't stop her curious gaze trailing over her. Nor did it stop Ophelia from almost tasting the sweetness of her magic fizzing around them.

“Are witches born with all of theirs?”

“Witches only use magic that is already there. We just have the gift to sense and store it. We aren't born or made with it.”

“Hmm.” Her breath ghosted across her face. Goosebumps rising on her arm. The smell of lavender was everywhere. “I assumed you would have your own. Based on what you feel like to me.”

“What do I feel like?”

“Tell me what I feel like and I might share.” She grinned. Her teeth were slightly pointed in the corners. Her golden pupils flashing in the light. Mina, her cat, came to mind.

Ophelia didn't have to think to respond. “You feel like what I would imagine the sun is to a solar panel.”

“I—a what?” Her head pulled back, the confusion plain. “What is a solar panel?”

“It takes energy from the sun and makes electricity with it.”

“Oh.” She frowned.

“It's what we use, along with wind, to keep lights and things on. Besides magic of course.”

“They are not all simply run with magic.”

“No. Of course not.” Ophelia laughed.

“Is that why they always sound like humming?”

“I... I suppose.” She never noticed. “Do you f—does your kind run things with magic?”

Her eyes blinked and she tilted her head. “Some things. But we don’t have all the same things.”

“Do you have cars?”

Her lip physically curled, baring her pointed teeth. “Those machines that make so much noise? No. I could never touch one of them. They are made of metals.”

“Oh.” She always assumed they would have them. But it made sense.

“We have a lot of horses.” Rhea laid back in the grass, her hair falling across her in a halo of curls. “I mean. A lot.”

Ophelia hummed. She laid down beside her, looking up at the clouds. “You didn’t tell me what I feel like to you.”

“You feel like a spark off a blazing fire, just the smallest part of something bigger.” Her head turned just as Ophelia did, and she found herself face to face, inches from those golden pupils. It was all she could take in. “But not like you’re dying, like a spark will. But that right now you are just the start of something big... like you are waiting to ignite.”

“Ignite... huh. I like that.”

They laid there, staring at each other before Rhea moved, backing away.

Ophelia cleared her throat, cheeks hot. Her mind turned fast to figure something to say before she embarrassed herself.

Rhea beat her to it, “Speaking of magic. Your nature here... its so very quiet compared to ours.”

“Huh?”

“The trees don’t speak like they usually do. They barely whisper.”

“I’ve near heard of trees speaking.” Ophelia’s head titled, watching as Rhea smoothed down her dress, settling deeper into the plush grass. “I know at my house, far out of the city, that the nature feels.. freer. So I kind of get what you mean. Maybe it’s the concrete.”

“Have you ever felt anything... strong in nature?”

“Strong how?”

“Like.. magically. Have you ever found something near your house, or even in the city, that feels... feels different than anything around it?” The fae looked around them, at the trees and moss clinging to their sides. Ophelia could only shake her head in reply. She never had. “I used to look at Hawthorn trees to try and feel them, but they usually all felt the same.”

“Why?”

“I want to find the portal... the one that brought the humans here. Brought you here.”

“That my mom mentioned?” She asked.

Rhea nodded, then sighed. “I always wondered where it could be hiding. It had to be powerful enough to feel... to feel like something. It should not be able to hide so easily.”

“Maybe it isn’t active. Maybe it’s like runes. You have to activate them before they use any magic right?” Ophelia said. “Otherwise runes just feel like blank space.”

Rhea started to open her mouth just as something flew towards them. Ophelia flinched on instinct, her arms raised up, but before anything could connect something thumped to the ground. She frowned, looking down to find a football resting in the grass at her feet. Rhea’s hand was still up from where she knocked it down, slowly moving back to her side.

“What was—”

“Ophelia!”

She looked up, shocked at her name. A figure ran towards her, familiar in the light of the sun.

“Adriel?”

“Ophelia, what are you doing here?”

Behind him lagged Kenna, panting from running.

Rhea shifted away from Ophelia, her hands going to touch the scarf she wore wrapped into her hair, tucking the edges to hide her ears better.

Adriel was smiling at them both, his hand outstretched. “I’m sorry if I hit you.”

“You did not.” Rhea stood.

He gazed from Ophelia to Rhea, taking in her height as she moved back towards the bench to grab the bag she had brought along.

“Hey Adriel.” Ophelia stood with her. “I thought you had class today.”

“Let out early. I was going to play catch with some friends, but they’re all late.”
He still watched Rhea, who kept her back towards them. “I thought you would be at home.”

“I decided to get some fresh air.”

“Who’s your friend?”

“Ophelia,” Kenna’s nasally voice broke over his, “when are you coming back over again? I need to share so much stuff with you. You missed Natalia at last week’s party. You should have been there.”

“Sorry, Kenna. I’ve been busy with classes and the lab.”

“Right.” Adriel frowned. “The lab.”

She sighed. “Ad.”

He just shook his head, the frown gone in a flash, replaced with his signature smile. “We’re going to a party this weekend. Come with us, Ophelia.”

“If you don’t come I have to tell everyone how lame you are.” Kenna grinned.

“I don’t have any homework I guess...”

“So I’ll pick you up at 8?”

“We’ll pick you up. Don’t forget about me, Ad.” Kenna whined, elbowing him.

“Alright. And you too.” He was looking back at where Rhea was standing.

Ophelia looked to, but nothing was there. She had drifted silently away.

Ophelia bit her lip, “Bye, Ad. Bye, Kenna. I’ll see you!” She scooped up her purse, making a quick getaway between the trees before he could ask any more.

CHAPTER 12

She remembered Ioana's words.

Before the humans came, there was only us and the great ones. We had control; we were the ones with power. As it should be. Then we brought the humans here, to help us. But the humans were not content with their place. A few searched for ways to become our equals, however impossible it may be. They stole among us, taking the lives of our own kind to bleed the magic into their own. They made witches. Born out of our own blood.

How could she hate the witch? She knew she should. But after spending time with her she couldn't imagine feeling threatened. The magic she had was soft, strong at times, but not threatening. It didn't feel like the icy cloud that Ioana always projected around her. It wasn't even like Jaz's, who used to feel the most comforting out of everyone she knew. No, the soft fire of the witch felt natural, it called to her.

"I swear I would never aim to hurt you." Ophelia had told her. *"Never ever."* What a strange concept, to trust an enemy of your own kind.

But now she was no longer alone, and the excuse of boredom for wanting to see her was starting to become flimsy. Because now Jaz was here, not only to visit, but to bring her home.

"You know if we're just going to stay inside my apartment then there isn't much point to you being here." He'd only been in the room for an hour, and his constant pacing was getting on her nerves. Well, pacing wasn't the right word. Maybe snooping fit better.

He'd already gone through her canvases, thankfully his gift had already been hidden away before he arrived and was now scanning through her kitchen cabinets.

"Those are empty, you idiot."

He shrugged and closed the one he had been peering into. "Just checking." The smile he gave was lopsided, like it always was. His golden eyes scanned the apartment behind her.

"For what? Stolen goods? There is nothing here, Jaz."

"I'm just curious." He turned back to her, hands up in surrender. "Are you sure you have everything packed?"

"Of course." She leaned against the counter, folding her arms underneath her. She was wearing a shirt that he'd brought, an old one that he'd grown out of. The soft material felt even better than the human's odd textiles that she was slowly becoming used to. "Now are we going to do anything fun?"

"Hold on. Hold on." He laughed leaning across from her, resting a hand over her arm. There was the familiar heat of his skin and the gentle glow of his magic. "I just got here."

"Yeah? Are you're only here for what, hours? That's nothing."

"We'll do stuff. I swear." His tongue flicked out over his lips. "I just have stuff I got to ask first."

She drew back, ears tilted forward, and brows raised.

"Now don't give me that look."

She pushed his hand off her. "Are you here as Ioana's messenger?"

"Rhea."

She shook her head, not hiding her anger. “You are. And I thought you were my friend.”

“She’s just concerned. She wanted me to make sure everything was okay with you before we get back. That’s all. Honestly, Rhea.” He was pleading, slightly. The tone he always used to appeal to her. He knew it would work. It always worked.

She still snorted. “Sure.”

He frowned, leaning against the counter. His ears were lowered in his apprehension. “Have you talked with her?”

A nod. She had talked to her just after returning from the park, and before that too. She was told to try on the dresses for her ceremony, to find a fit that worked best. It had been the frustration of having to listen to Ioana critique all her complaints about them that had driven her out of the apartment in the first place, to seek the witch. That had been just a day or so ago. Jaz had arrived this morning with the rest of the supplies to bring her home, bringing an end to Ioana’s annoying messages for the time being.

He moved around the counter in a slow circle, carrying with him the scent of home he had brought into her apartment. It still threw her off, having not been surrounded by its familiarity for weeks now. It was a shame his questions were getting in the way of her enjoying it. They just added to the weak hurt in her stomach that had started the moment he’d shown up at her door with the horses.

His ears twitched at the motion. “Come on, Rhea. I know something’s wrong.”

“Everything’s just happening so fast.” She moved away from him, pushing for her own space. He only followed, even as she left the kitchen space and crossed into the

living room. She sat on the couch, crossing her legs and arms. She refused to look at him directly.

“Aren’t you excited?”

“What if I’m not ready to go home? What if I’m not really ready to become an adult.”

Jaz let out a soft sigh, his magic brushing against hers with the calming tingles it always exuded. She let it, even though she still refused his physical touch. She could never push him fully away. “Have you told Ioana all of this?”

“She would have made me come home early. I only had these few days left.” His magic seeped under her skin, helping the joints of her jaw loosen from their tight clench. “I was hoping it would pass.”

He sank down to the floor beside her, his head tilted up. The position made her tense; it made her taller than him, at the advantage. And he was letting her have that advantage as he made eye contact; no matter which way she turned her head he followed.

“Why do you want to stay?”

“I…” Her voice trembled and she shut her mouth. Her ears brushed the top of her shoulders, the tips trembling slightly.

“Rhea?”

“I don’t know.” The reason was starting to get convoluted. She still had the portal to find, and now that the witch was talking to her she was starting to feel like maybe it wasn’t so bad here. Maybe she was even making a friend. Which was a truly dangerous thought.

Jaz didn't touch her, but his hands hovered close by her thigh. His magic pulsed light a heartbeat beneath her skin. "You do. You do, Rhea. Please. Just tell me."

She pulled her lower lip under her teeth, letting the sharp edges prick into the skin. "You wouldn't understand."

Jaz only frowned, leaning closer to her so more of his magic could seep into her aura. It helped with the way her stomach was starting to twist. She rubbed her thumb against the top of her arm.

"If it's about the portal? You're right. I wouldn't understand." She finally let him take her hands in his own, press them to his face and inhale her scent. It was like when she used to scrape her knuckles playing games out on the beach. "Your magic is getting stronger, Rhea. You're going to be 21 cycles old soon. After the ceremony you'll have so much more to occupy your time. You're ready for it. Can't you tell?"

"But right now I have nothing. All I want is to find this portal, fix a problem, and not even you want that."

"It's not that I don't want you to find it. It's just there's no reason for it. You're chasing after something even Ioana has said is useless." His breath whispered across the top of her skin.

"She says everything is useless."

"You just need to come back home. Then you'll see how much you missed it." He was smiling, placing a kiss to the top of her hand. "You won't even remember your time here; you'll be too excited. After the ceremony you'll no longer be a charge, you'll get to learn so much more and find your true purpose then. Will the portal even matter then?"

She shook her head.

“Ioana asked this of you. You need to do it.”

“I need to do so many things, does that mean I do it?”

“This is more serious than just skipping a tutor session. More than just your comfort is on the line.” His voice dropped; his grip tightened.

“Then tell me what is on the line.” She glared at him, meeting his eye directly. He only looked away.

“That’s not for me to explain.”

Her teeth ground together in frustration, but she could tell she was getting nothing else out of him. “Fine.”

“Just focus on your job and forget about the portal. You get to join the court soon. And I’ll join with you in a month’s time.”

She nodded, mainly so he would stop looking at her so intensely. It wasn’t that she was upset about not finding the portal in time, she could search after, even if everyone still was saying it was useless. It also wasn’t because she was going to miss the human city. It was that... she was going to lose her time with Ophelia. As Jaz turned away from her she took a deep breath. Admitting it made her stomach hurt less, but it didn’t stop the way it twisted. Maybe it wasn’t just the portal she needed to forget.

CHAPTER 13

She ducked into the passenger seat of Adriel's car, already feeling the impending headache this party was going to induce in her. Her hair was pulled back and she had chucked on her normal pair of jeans and a shirt. Her hoodie was draped over her arm, which felt empty from the removal of her iron bracelets and wards. The necklace her mother had given her remained, blessed by cleansing water and incense.

"Whose place is it at again?"

"Jarret's. Out by Old Town." Adriel pulled out of her drive, headed down the street. The soft thumps of bass filtered through his speakers. "I heard it's going to be pretty lowkey though. Only a few people."

"Natalia said she was going." She shifted her bag out of her lap and onto the floorboard. She glanced back in the mirror to Kenna, who lay slouched between the backseat, head downturned.

"What's up?"

"Her girl stopped talking to her."

"Don't talk about it." She growled the words, her stone fist closer to her lap. "She's just busy."

"I'm sure she is, Kenna." Ophelia said, giving a look at Adriel. He shrugged and focused on the road.

It took over an hour to reach the house, which she could spot well before they hit the end of the mile-long drive. The lights were blazing through the hazy dusk already, competing with the setting sun. The shrill beats echoed into the car before they even opened the doors.

Kenna hopped out as soon as they parked, running up the drive towards a group of girls Ophelia had seen around before.

“I think it might be bigger than I thought...”

“You think?” She opened the door, swinging herself out onto the dirt. Their car had joined a multitude of others pulled into the lawn. She hoped Jarret wasn’t worried about landscaping.

“It’ll still be fun.”

“I don’t like crowds.”

“Get drunk enough and you won’t mind anything.”

She rolled her eyes, but let him take her arm, pulling her towards the steps.

Kenna gave a wave as they passed on into the foyer, the music louder from inside. It made her arm hairs stand as it vibrated through, joined with the pulsating auras of the many humans around her. She could already feel the scattered buzz of drunk college students.

“Jeez it’s not even late and people are already wasted?”

Adriel laughed, “Why wait?” He let go of her, ducking through people to head towards what she assumed was the kitchen.

She huffed, pressing herself against the wall to stay back from the wave of sweaty people. A few smiled and waved at her, most complete strangers. She thought she spotted

Natalia across the room, but she was blocked by the sea of figures. Why had she agreed to come again?

It was getting later and later, people packing themselves into the house's living room to dance under the lights. She'd been nursing the same drink the whole time, still unsure of what to do. This wasn't her scene, the noise too much and the energy from the people around her making her feel like vomiting.

Now though, she had to deal with the arm loomed tight around her shoulders. "Let me go, Adriel. You're drunk."

"Dance with me." Her was laughing in her ear. His body already swayed to the music.

"No."

He let out a growl, tugging harder on her arm. "Come on, you aren't being fun."

"You're drunk!" She slapped his hand away, heading towards the door.

He followed right on her heels, barely dodging the bodies of people as she pushed them aside. Everyone was too far gone to put up a fight against her as she shoved her way to the front.

"Ophelia." His voice was sing-songy. "Ophelia, wait!"

She breached into the fresh air, crisp in comparison to the booze-filled haze inside. She ignored him, marching towards the car.

"Oh, you want to go for a ride?" He grabbed her arm.

"I'm just trying to get away from you." She hissed, but her arm remained in his strong grip. She couldn't tug it free.

He only grinned before backing her up the last few inches into the passenger side of the car. "Come on." Before she noticed the door was open, and he was shoving her inside. "Just a drive."

The door clicked shut and she growled in frustration. She kicked at it, but it remained stuck. Panic started to build. "Adriel. Adriel, let me out."

He sat down in the driver's side.

"Adriel, your door is stuck." She turned to him, still tugging hard on the handle. "Open the door."

He closed his, keys in hand. He was laughing.

"It's just old, Ophelia."

"Open the damn door!"

The car growled as it started.

"You like danger don't you?" He was pulling out, and she was still stuck.

She expected him to stop at the roads end, that the joke would be over. But he kept driving.

The music was blaring as he roared faster down the road. She dug into her pockets, searching for her stone. If she could get Kenna or someone to answer maybe they could talk him down.

As her fingers hit it, the small stone slid out to clatter onto the middle consol. She cursed, the sound making Adriel turn towards her.

"What are you doing?" His fist snatched the stone up before she could even grab it. "Who are you calling? That fae?"

"What does she have to do with anything?"

“I know that was them the other day. My friends saw you with it in the café too.”

“We should not be having this conversation going 90 down the road.” She was shouting at him, fist still closed around her own door handle.

“What are you doing with them?”

“Stop the car Ad.”

Rain started to pour down. He slammed up the wipers, the sound of them thumping against the hood joined the music. “Answer the question.”

“I’m not—”

He grabbed her wrist, yanking her almost over the console and into his lap. The gear shift dug into her hip as she struggled to pull away. “Ad!”

“Tell me. Just tell me what type of deal you’re making with it.” The whiskey on his breath stung her eyes, or maybe those were the tears already falling from them.

“Adriel let me go!”

His leg moved, and the car jerked to a stop, the wet pavement below making the tires squeal. She was screaming. He was saying something in her ear again, but she couldn’t hear.

Then they were still. Just the sound of the pattering rain and the wipers, going up and down.

“Fine. Get out then.”

He shoved her back, into the door. She held her arms in front of her chest and face as he reached for her again, but it was only to force the handle up. Her balance failed as the door popped open, and she tumbled into the wet dirt below.

“Adriel?” Her face still felt wet, now rain joining the tears. Her hand grabbed hold of the door to pull herself halfway up. He was glaring down at her, eyes rimmed with black from the alcohol.

“I don’t have time for games. If you want to waste your time with that bloody parasite then go ahead. See what your deal gets you in the end.”

He threw something at her. The object glanced off her shoulder and into the mud. The car’s engine revved and the door was yanked from her fingers, slammed closed.

She screamed out again, but he was already moving forward. She could only watch as the car sped off, leaving her in the darkness, huffing for breath as panic threatened to overtake her.

CHAPTER 14

Tonight was the last night she would be here. The thought still bizarre in her head, even after the conversation with Jaz. It had started to feel better, the more it settled in.

Becoming an adult, completing the ceremony, would free her from the responsibilities of Ioana's charge. She could take on her place in society and then maybe prove to everyone why the portal was important.

She'd been thinking about what the witch said, about deactivated magic being hard to feel. The thought just wouldn't go away. Nor would the sight of the pink blush on the witch's cheeks. If she was going to go home and be changed forever, she might as well make some effort beforehand. She didn't want to waste the time she still had.

“Did you know who created runes first?” She was fresh out of the shower, one human invention she was happy about. It was much faster than going to the pools to bathe.

Jaz hummed under his breath, pausing his hand movements. He was laid out on the floor, sketching something in charcoal on a spare scrap of parchment she had dug up for him.

“It was the gods. The one we came from. Or so that's the rumor.” She unwound the towel around her hair, scrubbing at the moisture still left on her scalp.

Jaz sat up slightly, turning his ears towards her as he still peered down at his drawing. “What's all this about?”

“Runes have to be activated to work. They also need to be redrawn if they get ruined in anyway. Right?”

Jaz raised a brow, “Yeah?”

She leaned against her counter. “So what if the portal was created with runes. The ancient ones. So that when they got ruined maybe no one knew how to fix them. So that means that it just ended up lost somewhere with the runes dormant. It has to be activated.”

He sighed. “Rhea. This again?”

“What if I walked right over it? What if we all walked over it?”

“Rhea.”

“I’m serious Jaz. If we figure out the runes, we could activate them. We wouldn’t have to find it. It’ll be flooded with magic, and we could just go right to it. It shouldn’t take that long for us to run an activation spell tonight.”

“Rhea. I know this portal is important to you, but you have to let it go, at least for now.”

Her heart stopped its excited fluttering in her chest, almost chilled to stillness at the softness of his tone. “What?”

He stood, taking the time to stretch out his body, adjust his clothes. It made her sit in the sudden quiet. As he made his way over to her, she stepped back, hands raised to stop him. He gave her the room, like he always did.

“I know you said I should be focusing on other things, but I’m close Jaz. I could figure it out now. Even if it is useless, like Ioana says, wouldn’t it still be good to know how to get it to work. What if we need it?”

“It’s more than just opening an old portal Rhea.” He kept his eyes focused on her face as he talked. “We don’t know why it was closed. You have no clue what type of old magic it could even use. What if they sealed it away to keep us safe, to keep our world from falling apart?”

“I—” She never considered the portal being anything bad.

“I’m not saying you’re wrong. I just really want you to be safe. Chasing after this portal is dangerous.”

She huffed and crossed her arms. “Jaz. If I don’t take advantage of tonight…”

“Please.” His voice trembled, for the first time she had ever heard. “Wait for after your ceremony. That way the council can help you. Tomorrow might change you, might show you the truth. I don’t want you to make another mistake… not like the last time.”

Her eyes and ears dropped. It felt like ice was trickled down her spine. The concern in his eyes twisted her heart. “Are you doubting me?”

“No.” He placed his arm on her shoulders, ignoring the droplets from her hair. “No. Not at all. I just doubt even our judgement. There are so many things we’re too young to know.”

“After the ceremony, will you help me if I ask then?”

He paused, then squeezed her shoulders tight. “Yes. I promise. After you get your full powers and Ioana is no longer the one in charge of you, I’ll follow whatever you say. But only then.”

She nodded. “Okay… I’ll hold you to that.”

CHAPTER 15

She was with her stone slipping under her thumbs as she frantically dialed. It was the last pattern she had used, muscle memory, an accident really. She couldn't see the color, only knew that the stone had finally lit up. She shook and pressed it to her ear. The rain pounded the muddy ground around her, the thunder rattling her even more as she shook under the cold. The droplets melded with the tears already staining her cheeks. The ringing was faint over the noise, she could almost say it was part of her imagination.

“Please, pick up... please.”

There was a click, then a voice, raspy with sleep. The word was strange, bizarre but almost like a hello. She was just relieved to hear a voice.

A sob pushed out before she could stop it. “Thank Goddess, I...” Then realization. The voice at the other end was familiar. But it was not her mom, her aunt, or her roommates.

She heard the rustling of sheets, a soft groan in the background, followed by a distant whisper. Her heart beat faster. “Rhea?”

“Who? Who is this?” The speech was slurred.

“Ophelia.” She squeezed her eyes shut. She made a mistake. Another one in a shitty night of mistakes. *What type of deal are you making with it?*, his voice echoed.

For a moment only silence greeted her, followed with a faint huff of air.

“Ophelia? What are you calling me for?” The words might have meant to be angry, but

she could hear the faint concern under them. Rhea's voice was drowning in her accent, now that it was mixed with sleep.

"Rhea." Her voice shook. "I need help."

Silence.

"Please. It's raining. I'm cold." She felt more tears sting her eyes, her shivering now out of control. The stone barely stayed in her trembling hands. "I'm lost."

"Where are you?" She could hear something metal clinking.

"The highway... somewhere... somewhere near the old town." Panic surged as she was once again reminded of how far out she was. Thunder cracked and she yelped, pressing the stone closer as she whimpered, "I don't know. Please."

"Shh... You need to breathe." The softness of her voice smoothed out the tangled knots that were winding through her stomach. "I'm on my way to get you. But I want you to stay talking so I can hear you."

Ophelia nodded before realizing she couldn't see. "Yes. Yes. Okay." Like she would ever let go of the landline that her voice gave her. The rain seemed to dim around her, the chill less impressive. She hugged her free arm tighter to her chest, and let the stone press hard against her ear.

"Do you need a healer?" There was now a rustling of some material, a door opening. The sound of rain was now echoed back.

"No." Her legs quivered under her and she sank down onto the muddy ground. Her jeans were soaked through, but it didn't matter at this point. She didn't care. Her fingers tugged tighter on her hoodie's drawstrings, hoping to block out the rain from her face.

“Okay. Can you tell me anything about where you are? Signs, landmarks, anything unique.”

“I... no.. I don’t know.” Her lip trembled and her breathing quickened. It was impossible to know where he had driven her. He had been so mad, had driven so fast.

“Ophelia? Breathe with me. Take a deep breath.” Rhea had to have heard her panic. She had to know.

Ophelia closed her eyes, breathed in deep.

“I need you to look around. You can do that. I have to know to find you.”

She nodded and turned her head. It was hard to see through the blinding rain, but she could spot the faint outline of a green sign just down the road from her.

“There a sign. Old Mill, or Old Mile. I can’t tell.”

“Okay. Good.” There was a slight jolting, the noise unfamiliar to her until she realized Rhea must have moved the stone in some way. “Tell me more.”

“Okay.” She focused on watching the pavement before her. “It’s muddy...”

“Uh huh.”

“Are you using magic?”

“I have to use magic. I do not know where you are.”

“Oh.”

“Keep talking and it will work. I’ll find you.”

“Okay. I can do that...”

It took a while, the minutes, all filled with her shivered mumbling to help whatever spell Rhea was using, stretching into what felt like hours, but soon another

sound joined the rumble of the storm. She straightened, watching as a light started to grow out of the dark.

“Rhea?” She pressed the stone to her lips. “Is that you?”

There was no sound, but the heady scent of smoke floated down to her. The glow was too bright of a yellow to be a fire, and it only seemed to shrink as it grew closer. Its intensity stayed the same, however, making her eyes squint to see into it.

“Rhea?”

“Relax.” The smooth drip of her voice echoed out from before her and through the stone. “I’ve found you.” The relief that came through was painfully bare and it stung her heart.

The exhaustion she had been fighting now came out full force. A form hurried towards her, but it didn’t quite make it before her knees gave out as she sunk to the ground.

Arms wrapped around her, slender and strong. Hair brushed her cheek and she pressed close as she was half lifted and half pulled towards the light.

“Ophelia? Are you okay?”

She realized she had been speaking before, but it was now just coming through.

“Rhea?”

Her head tilted to look at the face above her, the same familiar angular plains and honey toned skinned framed by dark hair. It was pulled back into a messy bun, exposing her long ears. *Aos Sì* ears. Ophelia almost laughed; she was in the arms of one of the fae. A pretty one. Then she did laugh.

“You’re soaked.” The statement was followed by the warmth of magic, seeping deep into her bones. She almost groaned at the relief of it all. Around her a glow wrapped itself over her eyes, until even closing her lids did nothing to block out its sunny warmth.

“Are you okay?”

“Tired.” Her reply was weak, the effort to push it from her throat enough to leave her dizzy.

“Are you sick?” A sharp pinch on her cheek. She jerked back, but even the sting of pain did very little to ward off the tiredness.

“I want to sleep.”

A deep sigh, one last gentle pat on her cheek before the arms holding her shifted, taking all her weight. Magic pulsed. It beat with her heart.

Her mind was ready to crash, and so her eyes slid closed once more. The old fairy tales of fae kidnapping humans danced through her mind just enough to have her wrap a palm tight on the amulet on her neck. She asked for Gaia’s blessing before she slid off to sleep, straight in the fae’s arm.

The room she woke up in was strange.

Sunlight dappled her arms through the closed blinds, the white sheet tangled around her legs glowing even in the faint light. The mattress, thrown on the floor, creaked as she sat up. The sheets were soft, whispering over her legs as she pulled them to her chest. She didn’t remember how she got here. Her hand went up to her necklace, the charm hot on her skin. Her hair was damp and for a moment she wondered if she had gotten drunk enough to end up in a stranger’s house.

She noticed the heavy scent of lavender in the air around her. It was mixed with faint herb, like a perfume she couldn't identify. The smoke was sweet, sweeter than any she had smelled before.

Her gaze floated over the white walls, decorated with star charts and fancy diagrams, landing on the wooden desk rising just across from her. Its top held boxes, the tops unsealed and let open, but too high for her to see the contents inside. Beside them were various age-old books and bottles, filled with liquids she couldn't hope to know, scattered about. A small jar of pebbles spilled out over the wood. There were a few drying canvases and stacks of what looked like sketchbooks by the window, a sheet halfway pulled over to cover them.

At her feet lay a stack of loose papers, covered in black smears that formed into clearer shapes as she leant closer. It took a while for it to register, something from far back in her elementary studies. Runes. But these weren't like the basic ones she'd studied, ones that everyone recognized from fortune cards or safety spells. These pulsed with an unfamiliar magic, a darker tinge that seemed to emit an inky blackness that welled up past the parchment. She leant away, but the runes seemed to remain imprinted on the back of her lids, flashing each time she blinked. All of this was strange magic a simple witch like her had never encountered. This was magic made for the fair folk of old. How had... her mind jumped to the rain, to the wet mud, to the arms that had wrapped around her. Those golden eyes staring out at her in the dark.

“Oh. You are awake.”

The sound of her voice could have jolted her soul from her body. Even surrounded by all her stuff she could almost push away the moment as a dream, but not with those words.

“Rhea?”

“Good morning, Ophelia. Or afternoon. I guess.” Her voice held days of sunshine and warmth, a melody only Rhea had the ability to bring forth. That a fae could conjure. It still brought chills to her spine. This was not the same as seeing her in a public park. This was far darker. Far worse.

“Where did you take me?” She did not sound as demanding as she wanted to.

Rhea stared at her, then shrugged. “My apartment.”

She sat up straighter, fists clinging tight to the sheets in the hope to ground herself in them. “What happened?”

Rhea’s lips pursed, her shoulders dropping back. “I should be asking you that.” Her eyes, so inhuman, glinted even more as she turned her head towards the sun.

“I had to bring you here. I do not know where you live.” The gaze that had been meeting hers so intensely suddenly dropped. She even dipped her chin, half her face becoming hidden behind black curls. Every movement felt like a mimicry of a human. Ophelia couldn’t trust it to be real. “If that was rude...”

Ophelia kicked off the sheets, standing. There was too much inaction. She needed to move. “I have a house.”

“Oh. Good.” The response sounded automatic, but Rhea did finally look back at her. It was hard to tell what she was thinking. She wasn’t pressing her about that night, yet.

“My roommates are probably looking for me. I should call them.” It was honestly just an excuse. She doubted her roommates cared if she was gone for one night, especially since they saw her leave with him.

She glanced down for her stone, but it was nowhere in sight. In fact, now that she took the time to notice, she was no longer wearing the clothes she wore last night. They were probably soaked, so she guessed it was a good thing, but the revelation still brought goosebumps to her arms. Rhea had to undress her, or maybe she undressed herself in some half-asleep haze. Either way, the shirt she wore was too big, a soft white cotton. She felt her cheeks get hot at the thought that Rhea might have seen her in only her underwear. Shit, bad thought.

Then her heart beat fast, hand flying to her neck to see if her wards were still there. Her amulet hit her palm and she relaxed some. However, she could tell that the only other bracelet she had thrown on before leaving the house last night was missing. She searched her energy, trying to detect any hints that Rhea had somehow done anything. It wasn't that she didn't want to trust the fae, it's that she couldn't.

“Roommates?”

Ophelia dug her nails into her palms. Her energy felt fine. Refreshed even. She took a deep breath and replied, “Yeah. People I live with. You don't live with anyone?”

Rhea's eyes only narrowed, one thick brow arching up. “I'm just wondering why you didn't call them, instead of, you know, me.”

Ophelia gulped. “Oh.”

Rhea rolled her eyes.

“Your stuff is in the kitchen.” She stepped back through the doorway. “I washed and dried your clothes. But your shoes are very messy.”

“That’s fine. They always are.” Don’t say thank you. Don’t act like you owe her anything. Just get your stuff and leave Ophelia.

As she moved closer, Rhea stepped back to give her space. Her ears were hidden, Ophelia finally noticed. Her wild mane of hair kept them mostly out of sight, but Ophelia knew her enough that she had to have been pressing them far back for her to see none of them, not even those pointed tips.

“I’ll grab my stuff and get out of your hair.” She paused. “Didn’t mean to bother you, by the way. It was a mistake.”

Rhea’s eyes softened, and her arms dropped. “Are you sure you are okay? You are angry?”

“I’m fine.”

“And you don’t want to talk about why you were wandering around in the rain?”

“Absolutely not.”

Rhea sighed. Her feet crossed over the padded carpet and onto the hardwood as she made her way ahead of her into the short hallway. Ophelia followed, but only because she had to, not because she wanted to see if she could catch the scent of lavender on her once more.

Rhea gestured towards the kitchen, as if the hallway hadn’t opened right into it. “On the counter.” She watched her go towards it before she moved to the side of the couch. Ophelia spotted her phone on the bar right away, next to an empty bowl and above another half-opened box.

As her feet hit the cold tile she paused as Rhea spoke. She turned in response, but it wasn't to her, in fact, it was in the same strange language from the phone call. Rhea had bent over the side of her couch, talking to someone hidden by its cushions. She could hear shifting, and her face turned hot. She hadn't walked out of the room expecting to see someone else half-naked. But the person didn't sit up, only murmuring something back to Rhea before shifting again. Was this the person Rhea spoke to last night? Ophelia bit her lip. She probably interrupted their night, and not only that, it seemed she'd thrown not only Rhea out of her bed, but a guest as well.

Rhea pulled back from the couch, pushing her hair back from where it had fallen over her shoulders. Almost as if she felt her watching she glanced back, meeting her eyes. "Yes?"

She ducked her head down and grabbed her stone pointedly ignored Rhea's frown that was now thrown at her back.

Across from her something squeaked, and she glanced up to catch sight of Rhea leaning up to grab something from her cabinet. As she reached she spoke, seeming to once again know she had her attention. "Did you find a way?"

"Huh?"

"A way. Home. Or do I have to take you there?"

She looked back at the stone. "I'm working on it." God, she hoped she didn't have to ask her for another favor.

Rhea leant back against the counter. "I can take you if you need it."

"No. I don't need any more help." Ophelia's stone beeped in her hand.

The fae's hair stirred as her ears twitched.

Ophelia glanced down spotting Natalia's color. "Oh! She's up." A pleasant surprise.

Rhea straightened and moved closer to her. Ophelia answered quickly.

"Hey. Are you at home?"

"Yep. Calling to see where you ended up last night." Natalia yawned in the middle of her words. There was the creaking of her bed as she presumably sat up in it.

"I uh... need a ride back."

"Oh?" Her friend's voice spiked with curiosity. She pictured her face lighting up on the other end.

"Look. Can I just tell you the address and you get me?"

"Course."

"Awesome." She looked up at Rhea, who had inched closer from her side. "My roommate's coming." Ophelia looked towards the closest window she could see. The rain from last night had stopped. The buildings were unfamiliar, but they were still in the human city limits.

"Good."

"What's your address?"

The fae rattled it off, letting her repeat it back to her friend. It didn't sound far out from the university. Walking distance, but Ophelia didn't want to risk walking alone.

There came the echoed sound of scratching on paper as her roommate wrote it down. "I'll be there soon."

"Thanks Natalia."

"No prob." The stone died.

“I guess I just need my clothes.” She looked up at the fae.

Head tilting in response, it seemed to take a moment for her to remember. “Oh. Yeah. The dryer.” Rhea turned her head and gestured with her hand towards a set of doors across the way. “Behind those.”

She nodded.

“You can change in my room if you want.”

“I’ll use the bathroom.”

“Okay.” She only watched as Ophelia shoved her clothes into her arms. The sooner she changed the sooner she could get out of this mess. It wasn’t until the bathroom door shut behind her that she realized the usual suffocating buzz of Rhea’s magic had not been there like it used to. In fact, separated from it now made her feel like something was missing.

Natalia picked her up in her small car outside the apartment. Crawling into the passenger seat, no bag in hand, and with clothes obviously still wrinkled from the dryer, she felt like she was returning from some bad date. Her hair wasn’t even brushed, run through with fingers and a strong will until it was wrestled into some sort of ponytail. Great. She could tell her roommate was struggling to hide her smug grin with a carefully placed bitten lip.

“Hey girlie.”

Ophelia grunted out a soft reply and pressed her palms over her eyes. Now that she was out of Rhea’s apartment, and out of sight of her piercing eyes, she could give into some of the emotions starting to build. Her cheeks should have been permanently

stained red by that point honestly. The heat that filled her cheeks felt like it would never leave. God damn it, she'd never live this fucking mistake down.

Luckily, Natalia was content to drive for a while, giving her time to sort through whatever story she was going to have to concoct to explain this mess because it wouldn't be long before her roommate's natural curiosity won over. But, whenever she closed her eyes, all she could picture were dark curls and a faint golden light.

“So whose place was that? Some one-night stand.”

“Please...” She groaned. This wasn't a time to talk about this. There was never a time to talk about this. It was never supposed to have happened.

She hoped her silence would keep Natalia from asking anything else. Her gaze focused through the glass to the passing town. Outside the window flashed buildings of various sizes, all mockingly ornate and statuesque against the cloudy gray sky. It was familiar, in the same way a reoccurring dream was when it returned from months of dormancy. This was the road she took when she first came here.

Natalia snicker broke through her dreamy haze, ruining the gloomy mood Ophelia was trying to build. “Okay, sorry. I'll leave it alone.”

“If you really care, it was just an old friend.” Good one Ophelia.

“Oh?”

“And all I did was sleep. Alright?”

Natalia chuckled again, but it was softer this time. “Alright.” Her hands circled the wheel as she turned into the busy main street. “I believe you.”

Shifting in her seat, she uncrossed her legs. Her clothes were clean of the dirt and mud from last night, but the price of that was the smell of Rhea's detergent. It didn't

smell store bought. Probably wasn't. Did the *Aos Si* even buy stuff from a store? Hell, who the fuck knew.

“Thanks for picking me up.” She forced the words out, looking for something to do outside of her own overwhelming feelings.

“Oh, no problem.”

“How the hell are you not hungover by the way?” Her mind flashed back to her friend dancing on the lawn.

“Oh, I have my ways.” Natalia laughed. Knowing her, she probably had Linn fix up one of her homebrewed testers, but who knows, maybe she was good enough to pick up real medicine from the store.

“Of course.” Her stomach growled, and she bit her lip. “Don’t you have any food?”

“We’ll be home in five minutes, just chill.”

She groaned, more for dramatic effect, leaning her forehead against the glass. The cars were starting to thin out as they headed into another neighborhood. “I didn’t know it was this far...”

“Well that apartment is on University grounds.”

“Ugh.”

Natalia laughed.

A drop of water fell against the windshield, and it wasn’t long before more joined it. Natalia cursed and turned on the wipers, but Ophelia just simply stared. This was nothing like the downpour of last night, just a simple drizzle, the kind she loved to watch

from her kitchen table as she drank tea. It was strange how rain could vary, in the end wasn't it all just water from the sky?

It took a while before she realized Natalia had asked something.

"Huh?" She glanced towards her, hand falling from the glass and back into her lap.

"I asked, is your friend a student?"

"Oh, yeah." A little lie didn't hurt. Not with the others she was telling.

She whistled. "Fancy."

"We're students too you silly."

"Yeah but I don't know very many students who get the privilege of living in a place like that." Natalia tapped her fingers against the wheel. Even out of the corner of her eye, she could see her eyebrows raise.

Ophelia shrugged. It wasn't her business to know. Rhea's apartment had been nice inside, but it wasn't anything unusual. Just the stuff that filled it.

"I mean I'm not judging."

Suddenly Natalia gasped, "Don't tell me it was her!"

"Please Natalia." The soft leather of her seat was suddenly very interesting to touch, her nails digging into the upholstery like a lifeline. She felt like she needed to speak up, to stop what was coming, but she didn't know what to say.

"It was wasn't it." Her hand slapped down on the wheel. "Holy Shit. And you didn't tell me?"

"It wasn't on purpose."

"How the hell else did you end up in her apartment?"

“I... it was an accident. I just rang her and...”

“You knew her pattern enough to call her? Ophelia are you serious?” The car swerved a bit as she looked over at her, panic all over her face. “How long have you been talking to her?”

“Just... just a few weeks.”

“Holy Shit.”

She leaned forward in her seat. “I wanted to meet her because I’ve never seen a Fae. Not in person. And I knew meeting her wouldn’t harm me. I mean, she does have rules I guess. To stay in our city.”

But Natalia was almost hurt. She thinks back to the energy she had felt, how Rhea had been pulling from her friend, for what result she didn’t know. Natalia hadn’t even noticed. She didn’t even notice it now. Oh god, could Rhea be doing the same to her without her knowing. She’d worn wards but, what if they weren’t strong enough.

She looked down at her arms, at their emptiness. She had been wearing no wards at all. Sure she had tested her magic, but if Rhea had a secret way of messing with it.

Her heart beat faster, panic clutching her throat. “Oh god.”

“Ophelia?”

“She touched me... I... I forgot... I didn’t have my wards and she touched me.”

“Ophelia, you’re breathing too fast.” The car was slammed to a stop. Hands were on her shoulder, then her face. They cradled it as her eyes squeezed shut.

“Shit. Shit I fucked up.”

“It’s okay.” Natalia pulled her closer to her, holding her tight until her breathing slowed. “Tell me what happened so we can figure it out.”

“I was all alone, and I called her, and I needed someone to come. And she came. But I don’t know how she found me. She had to use magic or something or... I don’t know. I just remember this yellow light...” Her hands were shaking, and she buried them in her lap, pressing hard against the inside of her thighs to still them. “I passed out. After she picked me up. I thought I was tired, what if I wasn’t tired? I didn’t wake up. Not until I was at her place and even then... I was asleep the whole time. And she undressed me. I didn’t have wards. I didn’t have anything. What if something happened Natalia?” Her voice trembled. “What if something happened?”

“Shhh, it’s okay. If something happened we can handle it.” She smoothed down her hair, gentling her breaths. “What happened when you woke up?”

“I got my stuff and left. She didn’t really say much...”

“I don’t think that sounds too bad Ophelia. It isn’t too bad at all.” Her voice was calm.

“Does my magic feel different?” She asked, peering down at her hands. “I tried to test it but what if...”

“No. Not to me.”

“You really don’t feel anything?”

“I really truly don’t feel anything. You’re just the same as before.” Natalia shrugged. “I know you’re freaking out but since nothing happened... I think you’ll be fine.”

“Okay...” She doubted that.

“Maybe ask your mom if you’re worried.”

“My mom would kill me.”

“Better her than the fae.”

CHAPTER 16

She had woken up to the stone blaring in her ear. The request of help from the witch shouldn't have been as compelling as it was.

She remembered stepping out of the light of the ley line, having used its magical properties to travel to the panicked girl faster than running would have. Those weren't illegal to use, but the treaties with the humans had said that fae weren't supposed to use them within the human city, but she was sure that wasn't going to be an issue for this case. Just seeing Ophelia had left a shock through her system. Nothing nonhuman about her, not with those soft rounded cheeks and ears with hair made frizzy by the rain. It was a beautiful black, perfect against the warm umber of her skin. The type of skin that made Rhea want to trace patterns on her arms, following the faint lines of her veins underneath. Even if it would have been largely inappropriate to do in such a dire time. It was just hard to resist.

Even with the witch now gone from her apartment, the spark of her scent of magic still lingered.

Her fingers wound their way into her hair, tangling and snagging only to pull painfully through. What had she done letting a human into her apartment? So many rules had been broken. Just because she couldn't hang up on that terrified voice.

The tiles under her bare feet were warm from the late morning sun that glowed through her kitchen window as she watched the car pull away, head tilting as she gauged the feelings in her chest.

Honestly, it was better that she was gone. There was still tightness to her muscles, but her ears finally relaxed from their place next to her skull. Now she could face the mess she'd just caused.

“Rhea?” The voice pulled her out of her intense staring contest with the stove and back towards the living room. “Can I get up now?”

“Yeah. Sorry.” She said in Gaelic.

She turned, watching as Jaz's head rose up from behind the back of the couch. His brows pinched together in concern as he met her eyes. He opened his mouth, and she tensed, readying herself for the questions. Slowly, he shut it, rising from the couch and rounding it to walk towards her. His bare feet were soft on the tile floor, and he was still only clad in the sweats he'd worn to bed last night.

He stopped on the other side of the bar, letting his palms rest against the marble. She looked down at his hands, finding it easier to trace the dark skin, patterned with old scars and faint marks than to look at his face. But she knew his lips were pursed, ears already drawn forward in sympathy. “You want to talk about it?”

Rhea snorted, it came out weaker than she wanted, and waved him away. “Nothing to talk about.”

Jaz offered a smile, his brown eyes, always so soft, cracked on the edges. “If you say so.”

Her hand rubbed against the skin of her forearm, letting the pain ground her. He'd heard the conversation, there was no way he didn't. He had woken with her, had watched her run out to save someone she had never told him about. And here he was, letting her say what she wanted without prodding. It was almost infuriating, if it had come from

someone else she would have known it was just a tactic to get her to spill. But with Jaz, it was sincere.

He seemed to follow her gaze out the window, his eyes shifting from it to her in a way that betrayed his curiosity. He still wanted to know about last night. Maybe she should tell him. She used to tell him everything. But it didn't feel right.

"I know you probably don't want to talk, but you need to."

"I don't."

He wouldn't be mad at her, would he? He hadn't acted mad. At least he hadn't told Ioana yet.

"You brought a human here. Not just any human. A witch."

She opened her mouth, attempting to lie. If he knew she was a witch it would be so much worse. But he finally looked up, and she went silent.

"I could feel their energy."

"She isn't—"

"She is." He moved closer. "And I let it happen. But I need to have some sort of explanation now."

She looked away from him.

"You can't just leave in the middle of the night, pick up a human, and then expect me not to wonder."

"She's a friend."

"A friend?" His hand grazed hers, but she pulled it away fast. "You know her? You know her well enough to call her a friend? How?"

She tucked her hands under her arms, pressing hard enough they started to tingle.

“Is this the witch girl you were talking about before?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

The next question came out weak from her throat. “Please Jaz... Don’t tell Ioana. She’ll be so mad.”

“Rhea...” He sighed, “Ioana’s your caretaker. She had to know everything that’s going on.”

“Can’t we just forget it?”

For a moment he looked ready to agree, his eyes softening as she turned towards him.

“It’ll be just like old times. Just another itty-bitty secret?” She asked.

Then his mouth set into a hard line. “You can’t hide the fact you started a relationship with a human, a human witch in fact. The council will throw a fit if they found out we hid this.”

“But—”

“You are about to not only turn of age but be initiated into our court with your full powers Rhea.”

Her stomach turned. “I know that.”

“That means any secrets like this are no longer yours to keep. Ioana needs to know. She needs to help you fix this. If you accidently created a deal with this witch and don’t even know it...”

“I never made a deal with her.”

“You helped her.”

“So I—”

Oh. She realized. Just as his hand closed gently around her wrist. Oh. She had helped her. Perhaps even saved her life. That meant Ophelia was in her debt. That meant she had broken her promise. She’d made Ophelia make a deal. But what did that mean for the girl?

His magic flowed into her skin, a grounding spell to stop the way her breath was starting to pick up way to fast. “I’ll give you time to think. But you either tell her. Or I will.”

He slowly let go and stepped back, giving a faint nod towards the counter where her stone sat unused. Her saliva felt sticky in her mouth and seemed to ball up as she tried to force it down her throat.

As she lifted the stone up, she immediately wanted to chuck it in the garbage, her lip curling up. Fear laced through her like an arrow, straight into her spine and out her throat. Jaz didn’t even move from his place on the floor. Slowly she tapped out her pattern.

She picked up right away. “Hello dear.”

“Hello.”

“How are you?” Ioana asked, her voice slippery sweet.

“I’m fine.”

“Is there a reason you’re calling?”

She glanced at Jaz. He still wasn’t moving.

“I…” She closed her eyes. “I have something to tell you.”

“Hmm?”

“I think... I accidently made a deal.”

“A deal?”

“I met with a witch and.. and last night I helped her.”

Her caretaker let out a surprised little hum.

“Am I in trouble?”

She clicked her tongue, “No. You aren’t in trouble.”

Her body loosened.

“Now, explain to me what happened.”

“I got a call last night... it was this girl who’s a part of the study. She was asking for help.”

“You’ve talked to this girl before?”

“Yes.” She whispered. The icy disappointment in her voice brought an instinctual response to draw her arms closer to her body, shivering slightly.

“What did you do?”

“She asked me to find her... so I tracked her and traveled through the ley lines to get to her.” She inhaled. “I saved her from the rain and took her home. Nothing else happened. Jaz was here, he can tell you.”

“So you think you made a deal with her?”

“I... I’m not sure.”

Ioana breathed in, the sound loud enough for her to hear through the stone. For a moment Rhea expected her to start yelling, but she got was a loud sigh. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of everything. You just come home with Jaz, get ready for your

ceremony.” Honey. Her voice was like honey. None of her normal iciness. Something was starting to hurt in her stomach.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course darling. I have everything under control.

CHAPTER 17

It wasn't until they got back to the house that she uncrossed her arms. Her fingers had taken to pulling at the fraying strings hidden inside her hoodie sleeves, twisting tight enough to sting against her skin. The rain had settled into a soft drizzle, the fine droplets misting themselves against her face and hair as she stepped onto the gravel driveway. The hum of quiet suburban life echoed around her as she looked up at the old cottage before her. It was different than Rhea's sleek apartment building, but it held more charm. The houses walls peeled with yellow paint, even now a cheery contrast to the surrounding gloom.

Inside she pounded up the stairs. Her door was halfway open, and she shoved it the rest of the way with her foot. The inside was still a mess from last night, but it looked pristine compared to the state Rhea's had been. Her small closet was ajar, clothes tangled on the floor of it or hanging halfway off their hangers.

She scooted a few stray pieces back with her foot as she made her way to her small twin bed. The quilt thrown over it barely hid the mound of pillows underneath, and it was onto these she flung herself. The rain was starting to pick up again, and she closed her eyes, exhaling slowly, letting both thrumming sounds into her brain.

She was hit once more with that soft lavender smell from her hoodie. For a moment she let herself rest in it before it made her stomach turn with unwelcome feelings. Sitting up, she yanked the hoodie over her head and tossed it towards the dirty clothes pile. She wiggled out of her pants next and let them join it.

She grabbed an old jumper and some joggers and pulled those on instead, revealing in the factory-made detergent that made it smell like some false spring air. It was familiar. Human.

Maybe it was finally time to tell her mom. Everything

So Ophelia made herself breakfast and a large cup of green before grabbing her fluffiest blanket. Readyng herself back up in her room, stone in her hand, and she just couldn't do it.

If she called her mom now how would she react? She disobeyed her multiple times. Hid things from her. This was something Ophelia had never encountered before. Her fingers flexed around the stone. She couldn't call her unprepared. She needed to get her thoughts together first.

Hopping up from the bed, she sat her mug onto her desk. "Natalia I'm going for a run!"

There was a faint yell back to her, a probable okay.

She shoved her feet into her sneakers and headed down the stairs.

The sky was dark with clouds, but it was dry enough for her to go out. As her feet hit the pavement in even strokes she tried to focus on what to say.

"Rhea was nice, mom. She asked me for help. She wanted to learn." She tried out, whispered in puffs into the crisp air. "She saved me. I some way."

Ophelia shook her head. She could admit her mom wasn't wrong to warn her, and she had to admit that she really didn't originally intend to ignore the advice. It all started as an accident. Hadn't it?

“Rhea and I just talked.” They just talked about mundane things. And magic portals. And about what their magic felt like.

She tried again, “Rhea never forced me to do anything, mom.” Like give over her magic. Or make her pay any sort of price. Well, not yet.

Her mom would probably argue. Say Rhea never let her know that she intended to do anything. But Ophelia could swear that every time she looked into the other girl’s eyes, all she saw was genuine curiosity.

Then Ophelia would have to explain last night. That was an accident. She swore on the Mother she had no idea she was calling the fae. The pattern was just... it was just close to Natalia’s. Anyone could mix the two up. And Rhea had saved her. Saved her from getting sick and cold, or from being picked up by some creeper. Or from Ad returning and making the situation worse. And Rhea had asked nothing for it. She knew that was the most important part. Rhea had asked nothing. Had never said that Ophelia owed her. Had only watched as she had packed her stuff and left.

Sure it was a bad thing that they’d touched without wards. And maybe Ophelia should be more careful about seeing her. But nothing bad had happened. Ophelia’s magic was normal. According to Natalia at least. Maybe she could ask her mom to look at it. She would be reassured that way, both of them would. And since she was calling her mom, her mom could help her come up with ways to avoid it if Rhea did decide to ask for a favor back. Her mom had to know something. That’s why she was telling her. That’s why she was risking her wrath of course. Because she loved her mother. And sure, she hadn’t listened in the past. But she’d listen now in the present.

Her mind kept spinning, unfocused from the world around her as she ran her usual patterned route. It wasn't until her train of thought slowed a bit that she noticed movement. She stumbled to a jolting halt as a person stepped out in front of her. She had to grab a rail to catch herself before she fell face first into the dirt.

“Oof...” Her hair fell into her face and she inhaled large amounts of air to catch her breath. “I... I'm sorry I didn't mean to...” She started to look up at the stranger, apologies still falling out of her.

“You must be Rhea's little friend.” Their voice slithered down her spine, made her throat dry up.

“What?” She straightened.

Golden eyes flashed. A twitch of long pointed ears.

“I'm sorry, who are you?” Ophelia asked. Already she was moving to back away, bitterness rising on her tongue. She reached for her wards, but they were gone. She hadn't put any on since she got back. The magic around her thrummed, but it was thin. Too thin, and slowly fading away as the fae crept closer.

“She told me she rescued you out in the rain. Had to use lay magic for it too. That's a lot of hard work for one tiny human like you.” The creature leaned closer, inhaling her scent. “But you aren't just human. You're a witch.”

Her heart was running so fast in her chest it was starting to hurt. Everything was starting to hurt actually. The air was coated with the scent of something burning. “I need to get going.”

“Come with me. Little Ophelia.” Her body was locked up. Eyes stuck on the hand extending towards her. Their touch felt like a brand as it sealed around her arm. “You owe Rhea a favor. And since she is not of age to collect, I think that it’s now my job.”

CHAPTER 18

Rhea watched as the gold paint dripped from the brush back into its copper bowl. The swirls of loose pigment danced under the sunlight in their pool of oils, and Rhea had no clue what else. The brush lifted towards her face and she turned to the side, letting the artist knelt before her mark a thin stroke along her cheek bone. She turned once more, feeling the cold wetness of the paint already setting to dry as more strokes were added to the other side. One last over her cupid's bow and her bottom lip sent a soft shudder along her spine.

The artist gave a small laugh as she dipped back into the bowl. The cushion she knelt upon matched the one under Rhea's own knees, the fabric a soft satin that slide along her skin with every shift. "Are you excited?"

Rhea's eyes dropped to watch the movement of the brush, then closed as it neared her lids. "Nervous."

The artist hummed in response, swiping the golden paint across each eye before settling back. Rhea stayed motionless, absorbed in the faint red behind her lids, until the wet feeling of drying paint lessened. Slowly she lifted her lashes, giving a few test blinks.

"Would you like a mirror?" The artist sat down her brush.

She nodded, shifting on her pillow. Her knees were starting to ache, and she itched to lift the uncomfortably low neckline of her dress. Its thin straps and flowing material made her feel exposed, sexual in a way she hated. She had told her caretaker she preferred the other design, but Ioana didn't seem to care about her opinion. As was usual.

She didn't move, just watching as the mirror was lifted before her, reflecting someone (something?) that could almost be her. It was still her face, but it lay touched with gold and glitter, startling against her other skin. Stripes along her cheeks, nose, and mouth sparkled under the lights overhead. They were less opaque than she expected, more of a faint glimmer of gold color with all the shimmer. Her eyes stood out the most. Dark coffee irises framed with startling black lines and brighter gold lids. They almost looked wet, though she felt nothing on them. Now she was for sure a painting, or some disowned goddess knocked down to earth. There would be no mistaking her for a human tonight. She would be one of them. It was her becoming.

Quickly, she pushed the mirror down.

The artist didn't seem to notice the way her lips pursed, nor could she see how her ears were starting to fall underneath her mess of hair. Rhea could feel them, could sense the tremors that were starting to run up the length of them. This is what she was meant to be, right?

Bracelets were clasped around her wrists and a delicate chain draped down her chest. Paint had been added there too, at the very start of the session. Gold streaks on her collar bones, shoulders, even some down her arms. It was all to draw attention to the skin there, to show the bronzy tones of her skin, like her caretaker's, like her court favored. She sat in silence, hardly moving as she was adorned with whatever would match the pale gold of the gown her mother had selected.

Finished, the artist began to gather her supplies up, Rhea eyeing the pigments and paints as they were slid back securely into their little bundle. They were enchanted of

course, with spells to make them dry fast and stay in place even through water and sweat, but they also held something more, something Rhea had always wanted to find out.

There was a soft knock and the artist straightened.

“Are you finished?”

“All ready my lady.”

The door glided open and Ioana slipped in, already adorned in her own paint. The artist gave a short dip before exiting.

Rhea met her eyes from where she knelt in the cushion. They were already flowing down her body, sharp and critical. Once they traveled back up, Rhea dropped her gaze. She inspected the back of her manicured hand, ignoring her caretaker’s approach. With every soft click of a heel on the floor, her heart speed up a bit faster. She refused to look up, even after they stopped, not moving from her position until a hand was on her head, sickeningly gentle.

She tilted back, face set in stony boredom. The dress Ioana wore was a soft green, and she had to admit, stunning for a woman who had to be over 200 cycles old. But then again, she had been a fae for a very long time.

“Well now, that’s a pleasant sight.” She smiled, her sharper canines giving it less of a “I want to praise you” and more of a “I want to eat you” effect. “Isn’t the gold stunning?”

Rhea forced her eyes to roll, forced her knees to unlock and muscles to move. It was hard work standing after spending so long on the floor. As she straightened she stretched her arms. “It doesn’t look bad.”

“Your hair is still a mess darling.”

Rhea turned to the full-length mirror behind her, making a show of smoothing down the curls before twisting the bottom of one strand around her finger. The whole time she kept a watch on Ioana behind her, dutifully ignoring the odd not her reflecting. “I like it. I heard messy was in.”

Ioana’s mouth puckered, her nose wrinkling like a smell had filled the room. “You’re pulling it up.”

Rhea sneered at her reflection, but it dropped as she stepped closer. The scent of her perfume, heavy spices mixed with something sweeter, wrapped itself around her head. One again she was a child, her spine stiffening as her caretaker’s warmth spread across her back.

She dropped her gaze as the older fae wrapped her hands through her dark curls and pulled it back from her face. Rhea couldn’t hide her wince as long nails caught on a few snags. She ignored it, taking the hair off her cheeks, behind her ears, and twisting it into a high ponytail.

“There. Much better.” She played with a few loose strands, getting it to perfection, ignoring the glare her charge was working to send her way through the glass. Her hands settled on her shoulders, covering the golden swirls painted on them. She felt too naked, exposed to Ioana’s claws. Rhea wanted to spit at her, give her some retort, but she couldn’t. This wasn’t some human. Ioana was stronger, teeth sharper, and wiser than she was. Her ears dropped, the tips turning red.

At the sight of her, her caretaker frowned. “Now don’t pout. It isn’t pretty.”

Rhea felt the grip on her shoulder tighten and pull. With little resistance from her part, she was spun around. Her head tilted back to meet her gaze, hatred flaring at how

much taller than her she was. It was much easier to glower at someone when it wasn't just directed at their mouth.

Ioana patted her cheek. "Go put your shoes on."

Rhea dropped her glare and her head at once. It took effort, and a bit of maneuvering, but she squeezed past her to get to the vanity. "Okay. Fine."

When no other comment came though, Rhea turned. She was eyeing her again, a finger pressed to her lips. Shit, what was wrong now.

"Rhea, where are your earrings?"

She groaned. "Fuck. Really?"

Ioana's eyes grew dark, lips pursing into an all too familiar face.

"Oops." Rhea's ears swung back, pinning tight against her skull on instinct.

"Sorry."

"You know I don't tolerate that language Rhea."

"It was just a slip."

Ioana stepped forward, once more way too close for comfort. Rhea's fingers curled tight into the silky fabric of her dress. "Honestly. I'm disappointed. Haven't I raised you better?"

"Yes."

"Then act like it." She pinched the tip of one of her ears. It sent a jolt from her ear down her spine all the way to her toes. She couldn't stop the yelp she let out, nor stop how her body curled in to get away from the pain.

"Okay! Okay! I promise I will."

“Good.” She held it for a few moments, watching it twitch helplessly in her hold, before letting go. “Now, where are your earrings?”

“The artist probably left with them.” Her voice was small; hand pressed to her stinging ear. She knew it had to be bright red, just like her face.

She sighed. “I suppose you’re fine without them.” She smoothed her hand down her arm. Rhea guessed it was meant to be a loving gesture, but it made goosebumps raise on her skin. “Finish getting ready. Everyone is waiting. Plus, I have a little treat for you after the ceremony... you don’t want to delay even more.”

Rhea held her breath until she left, trailing her perfumed scent out the door with her. Her legs still shook, and her ears trembled against her head as she pressed them tightly back. It was going to be a long night.

The grand hall was covered in ribbons, its floor coated with golden yellow petals in a carpet. Rhea felt out of place in the big space. She’d only come to this place in the citadel when she was very young. Too young to have done much but hold her caretaker’s hand. And that had not been a good day.

It was crowded with her court and the *Falias*’s visiting members, brought by Ioana to help celebrate. It was a custom a lot of courts used; one she had expected. A ceremony like this was a time for celebration and peace. Music filtered over various voices, some accented and some flat. Her eyes couldn’t track all the glittering gowns and jewels that spun past her. The celebration was vastly different in comparison to the younglings’ feast. There it had been easy to slip away with Jaz into the forest to dip into

the lake or to sneak onto the highest tree branch and watch the party down below. Now it would be impossible to slip out. She was the guest of honor after all.

At least no one was staring. Yet. They would be soon enough.

“This is Vada *Falias*.”

Ioana’s voice brought her back to where she stood.

The girl next to Ioana was tall, almost as tall as her caretaker. Her skin was darker than the rest of her court, a light olive that shone next to her pale cream silk dress. Her brows were dark and heavy, framing her bare angular face along with her long loose black waves. She was pretty. Prettier than Rhea thought *Falias* could be. She thought they would be as icy and pale as the paintings made them seem.

Rhea gave a short bow, her eyes never leaving her jade eyes.

“It’s nice to meet you Vada *Falias*.”

“You can call me Vada, Rhea.” She smiled; Rhea was unable to ignore the sharpness of her canines. They were just like Ioana’s. Like hers were growing to be.

Her spine tingled, as if eyes were laid upon her skin. Ioana was giving her a grin like she had just cornered a mouse or had just finished feasting on one. Both seemed applicable.

“Vada is one of the *Falias* courts *Ambasadóirs*. She came with her court to join your celebration.”

“I hope you are enjoying it.” She replied on instinct. It was not like she knew what a normal celebration was supposed to be.

Vada seemed amused at her response, however. A sight she was glad because in turn, Ioana seemed to relax.

“I was hoping you’d keep her company tonight. Before the ceremony.”

Rhea nodded.

Ioana raised a brow, one ear twitching towards Vada.

Rhea straightened, “I would love to.”

At that Ioana seemed pleased, nodding before she drifted from their sides, leaving her alone with the stranger.

For a moment she only stared at the floor of her feet, noting the other girl was wearing only sandals, the straps studded with jewels.

“Are you nervous? It’s okay to be. I just had my own ceremony a few moons ago. It can be quiet nerve wracking.”

“Yes. A little.” The admittance helped her pulse settle, perhaps stave off the impending headache. Everything was too confusing. She wished Jaz was here. “There are more people here than I thought would attend. And I’m not sure what’s expected of me...”

Vada didn’t react to the fact she was avoiding her eyes, just giving a faint hum of agreement. “You’re doing well. Everyone has anxiety at first.”

Rhea caught the smile on her face. It wasn’t as soft or innocent as the witches would have, didn’t carry the same reassurance, but it didn’t feel as sharp or judging as she would have expected.

“Do you like the music? We brought the band with us. They’re quite good.”

Rhea looked towards the stage, at the group of performers. “Are they... are they human?”

“Of course.” Vada’s arm wrapped around her own, pulling her close like an old friend. It made her ears tremble. But the touch was gentle, and she found herself relaxing into the heat of the other’s body. “We find the best and select them. Training a human might be short lived, but there are ways to make them last longer. I think it’s worth it.”

“They agree to do that?”

Vada snorted, leading them to the left. “Do you want to dance? I think we should dance.”

“You want to dance with me?”

She gave a delicate laugh. “Of course. It’s what one does at these things. I’m sure everyone will want to dance with you tonight. Especially after the ceremony.”

Rhea let her spin her onto the gilded floor, her shoes sliding on the golden petals. Her hands rested on the taller girl’s waist, letting the familiar movements of the dance flow through her. The humans were playing a slow song, allowing her to soak it in as they moved among the other dancers. Vada placed her hands gently onto her bare shoulders.

Her skin wasn’t painted. None of the *Falias* court was. Instead they wore jewels and chains, wrapped around their chests and arms. Vada’s were embedded with emeralds and snaked down over her neckline and shoulders. Her fingers had a few rings, and the stones continued through her ears, flashing as she turned them towards her. They were blinding.

“Your caretaker told me you visited the human city.”

“Oh. Yes.” The words brought her out of the flow, making her stumble on the next step. Vada just smiled.

“What’s it like?” Her fingers traced along her back where the gown dipped low. They were warm, not the heat of skin but of magic. It brought goosebumps up her arms.

“You want to talk about it?”

“Of course.” Vada grinned, “Humans can be... interesting.”

“They’re loud.” She frowned, thinking of Ophelia. “But they can be nice.”

Her hand came up, brushing the edge of her jaw. She flinched back, ears flicking like a startled cat, the contact too familiar to Ioana’s just before she would grab her chin.

“I’m sure they are. The ones you have here are quite... free willed. The city they’ve grown is rather bizarre.” Her hand drifted back down. “I don’t understand how you let them grow so rampant.”

“Me?”

Vada pulled them towards the floor’s edge, away from the bigger mass of bodies. The music had picked up, the movements around them growing faster and jollier, but they stayed locked still, hips swaying to their own slow beat.

“Your court.”

“The humans just won the land.” Her hand brushed one of the chains around Vada’s neck, and she mentally traced it. She couldn’t help but notice how it matched the gold painted onto her own skin.

“Only by luck.” Vada led them in smooth circles. She never seemed to slip on the petals, but Rhea was always weary of them underneath her. Perhaps the grace came when she changed.

She leaned close; breath hot on her trembling ear as she whispered. “The time has come that we take back what’s ours.”

As she drew back, Rhea stared.

“Is that why your court is here?”

“You invited us here. And this is a time of celebration. We want to congratulate one of our own for joining the ranks.”

She blushed. “I-I didn’t mean to sound like I doubted that.”

“No, I understand.” Vada smiled. “We’re here to visit. And to make peace. Our courts have been separated for a long time.”

Rhea nodded.

They passed by a circle of non-dancers as they spun. She felt off balance after so long. She couldn’t remember when they had started, and the laughter around them was getting louder. She was starting to wish she could remove her shoes and walk among the petals bare foot. Vada’s touch that was once soothing was starting to grow hotter, making sweat bead up along her skin.

From the group a voice floated above the music and right to her. She paused, her ear twitching to pick up the words.

“Witches have corrupted the world for long enough. Vermin among the pests of humans.”

It was one of the *Falias*. A male most likely, with jewels threaded through his braids of golden hair. It was almost white under the light. She could see a few of the *Falias* nodding along with him.

“They should be exterminated for their crimes.”

A few of her own court were also listening. Their golden paint flashed as they shifted closer towards the speaker in interest. Many an earring sparkled as ears twisted in attention.

Her body stopped, and Vada stopped with her. She had a brow raised, questioning the sudden change, but Rhea only looked at the group behind her.

“How so?” She spoke up. A few heads turned towards her. The rudeness of her interruption made the speaker pause.

Vada slipped before her, offering a small bow to him. “Master Vani.”

He nodded his head towards her. “Vada *Falias*.”

“This is Rhea.”

Rhea hid the way her face wanted to twist in response to this. She could speak for her herself.

Yet, his ears perked up. “Ah. You are Ioana’s charge.” A smile grew over his flat expression, and he gave a short bow. “Congratulations.”

Her ears twitched at the whispers and glances the words garnered. Her head dropped just slightly. “Thank you.”

“You must be excited.”

She gave a small nod of her head, barely enough for a movement. Now that she was no longer moving, she could notice the blatant stares of everyone around her. “I was wondering... about what you said earlier. About the witches.” Her posture shifted as she worked to keep her voice even and low, respectful. “What crimes have they done, exactly?”

A few of the surrounding members hummed in agreement to her question. One of her court, swathed in luscious blues and golden stripes of paints like one of the mythical cats of old, stepped forward. “We know they stole our magic. But should that stand as one crime, and not many.”

The *Falias* courtier grinned, “They did far worse than that. They allowed these humans to revolt, to pollute your lands.” A faint grumble, hushed by his calmly raised hand. “Not only this. They stole from us the power that had always been ours in the first place. They closed the gate between worlds, sealed all of us here left to fight amongst ourselves.”

Rhea drew in a breath. At the same time a cold hand pressed upon her shoulder. Ioana loomed over her, looking down with a short smile. “The time has come darling.”

The *Falias*'s speech was quickly forgotten as all eyes turned once more to her. She straightened, despite the urge to retreat, hide behind her caretaker's skirts like she could as a much smaller youngling.

“Follow me.”

CHAPTER 19

Ophelia really had no idea where she was. One moment a hand, skeletal and cold, had wrapped around her arm. The next she was in this space. She said space because it certainly did not feel like a room. The walls were blank, uncomfortably slippery to touch. Not like any place she had been in before. Underneath her feet the floor felt like dirt, but the color was red and sandy. Nearby she could hear the faint sound of music and floating voices, but nothing she could make out.

“Hello?” She tried again, but once more her own sound floated back to her like an echo, going nowhere. “Where am I?”

She knew that woman had something to do with it. That she was connected to Rhea, so this had to be a fae trick. But, why would she bring her here to sit uselessly.

She stared at the wall in front of her, searching for some type of seam in the material. Not an inch of it was cracked, solid all around.

A few more moments of staring and suddenly, a shift. The white started to fade, flowing like a sheet in the wind. She stepped forward, testing it with her hand. No slime this time, just airy gauze. It was if it had become a sheet on a clothesline.

Before her opened a platform, a stand set over a grand hall. The music from before loud and bolstering against her ears. Below flashes of color and movement drew her eye, and she saw dancers spinning on the floor before her. Their movements were slowing, all converging towards one point in the center.

Each dancer sparkled under the floating luminescent spheres high above her. Some wore jewels that flashed as they moved their arms or heads, the tiny pinpricks of light dancing across her eyes. Others were coated in gold, the marks less gaudy, but still adding to the spiral of sights now before her. Along with this was the heavy pulse of magic, consistently pressing onto her skin and making her body feel as if lightening was sizzling just along the surface.

She tried to move, to speak, but it felt like a hand was pressed hard on her muscles, holding them tight. They didn't even let her wobble off balance, locking her legs for her as she tried to fight the nausea of so much all at once.

Under her a circle formed, the music slowing down before the whole room fell into a soft silence. There was still the hushed tones of whispered voices and rustling clothes as all the figures turned inwards.

Two figures emerged into the center where runes were carved deep into the marble, starting from what she assumed to be a middle point and converging outward. Both dressed in gowns, one gold the other green. Their hair was dark

She recognized one.

"Rhea?" her mouth moved, but she stayed silenced. "Rhea, help me!" No voice came.

CHAPTER 20

Rhea could feel the pulse of magic before the ceremony began. It flowed through everyone around her, into the very air they breathed, like a river's current. Ioana's hand was on her head as she lowed herself to her knees. Her eyes were trying hard not to focus on the others around her, locating a spot in the circle's center before her. The intricate stonework inlaid into the polished surface sparkled and danced before her eyes as it lit up; joined by a spiral of runes spanning from where she knelt to the circles edge. The brightness made her feel dizzy, off kilter.

Fingers pressed into the side of her temples as hands tilted her head back. She was breathing hard already, her body shaking with a sudden chill and something deeper. Before her danced motes of golden light, the dizzying display making it hard for her to focus. Another hand brushed against her cheek, and she would have flinched away if she was not being held. The sounds of the revelers had vanished, replaced by her blood pulsing through her ears. Her eyes slipped closed for a moment.

Before her rustled silk upon stone, beckoning her to look once more. Her eyes opened, but her head stayed low, heart beating in her chest. All she could see was gold and the light of her caretaker's magic. The motes had drifted closer, spinning around Ioana's face as she gazed down at her.

“Drink.”

She hadn't noticed when the cup was pressed to her lips, but her mouth opened instinctively. Down her throat flowed a river of cold, sending shudders down her spine. It coated her tongue in a heavy layer, the sweet taste of honey mixed with the smoky taste of ashes. Her eyes shut against the sting, and she fought the urge to spit it out but worked to drink all of it, to let it sink down into her very being. This was all for the better. She would join her people with her full magic, be able to help them. She would make up for her mistakes in the past, do this one last thing Ioana asked of her.

The cup was lifted away, leaving her gasping for breath.

"Rhea..." Her name echoed into her ears. It sounded like Ioana, the edge of her gown right before her, but her voice was so far away. She swallowed, kept her focus on her white knuckles, clenched over her knees in small fists. "Do you wish to be changed?"

She thought of the portal. Then she thought of Ophelia, the witch's eyes when she had knelt over her in the park's open field. Would she be able to see her after this?

"Rhea?" Her caretaker's voice was still far away, but she could hear the sternness. She had to answer the question. She was here, before all her court and another.

"Yes." She whispered.

She felt the magic wrap around her torso first. Decay and rot replaced the bitter scent around her as her lips parted, the light solidified before pouring down her throat. Her head dropped back, body shuddering in instinctual fear as she gave herself up.

"Welcome Rhiannon, to your new role."

The passage of time meant nothing. All she could feel was her own body, the flow of magic that felt like it was squeezing itself into her very pores. It felt like swimming in

a pool of honey. Slow to pull out of, gripping tight to her body as she fought to reopen her eyes.

Ioana's hands were on her shoulders, helping her up. Her touch smoothed along the goosebumps risen on her arms, bringing warmth back into them. The sounds of celebration and congratulations echoed back into her ears; more touches joining Ioana's as she passed with her through the crowd.

"I have a gift for you, darling." The words were whispered against her ear, hot on her skin.

She was still coming down. Still reeling from what felt like the greatest blast of magic to hit her. The world looked so similar, but around her everything was filled with sights previously invisible to her. Strands of magic wove between people; some strings connecting while others trailed off into the distance where she couldn't follow. Her body was light, floating with her caretaker across the petals that used to be so slippery. Her head felt higher; her body connected as one unit, a unit of magic that pulsed with her very life. She felt powerful.

Her caretaker left her to stand in one of the small hallways branching off from the central room.

Ioana brought forth a person. A human. For a moment the sight of her sparked something inside her mind, a flash of red cheeks, red blood. But it flowed away, replaced with the current of magic. Buzzing filled her mind, forcing her to shake it until it went away, and the world returned to a blank slate.

"Rhea?" The girl whispered, terror lacing the name with tremors. They were leaning hard against Ioana's grasp, but it was doing very little good for them.

Her head simply tilted, “My name is Rhiannon. And who are you?”

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