

RAVEN

FAYE ELIZABETH

Raven

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“Darkness approaches from outside. I feel no light inside me strong enough to resist it.”

-Christopher Pike

<< ADRI'S NOTE >>

One murder made a villain. Millions made a hero.

Hah. If those who created this truly do believe, then they are fools. All of them. Fools I say! One murder might make a villain, and a million might make a hero, but honestly? It's up to those who commit that murder. Do they have good intentions or bad intentions? Who are they raising up? Others or themselves?

That's where you get your answer.

But oh, isn't it fun trying to guess who or what or when or where or why they are doing this?

Hmm. Nah.

It's more fun to be on the side of the who, what, when... you get the picture.

Think of the fairy tales you heard growing up. Did the princess in the tower end up a hero? Did the other princess end up going to the ball and saving her kingdom?

Yes, they did. All because they were "acting with courage and humility" and "true love conquers all."

Sounds like a happy image. A peaceful one.

Well, spoiler alert! Life doesn't work that way. It is hard and it is grueling. It is work and it is sweat. You may find love, or you may not. You may find that in your short, short lifespan, you find "the one" or whoever, but I doubt it.

That goes for Fae too. We are a capricious bunch, but we also lead much longer and much fuller lives than puny humans.

No offense to you guys.

Actually, all the offense. You are part of the reason why I am who I am. And you, my special someone, were the last straw. The last straw to my sanity, to whatever sliver of goodness was left.

One murder didn't make me this way. Two did. Does that mean that I'm on the path to being a hero? I hope not.

Goodbye, old self. Hello future. Hello darkness, my friend.

And oh, if you are wondering:

I *am* Fae

I *am* broken

I *am* dark

But that makes me who I am, and that, my supposed friend, although I have none, is why
I am.....

(What? Did you really think I was going to tell you?)

PROLOGUE

THE PROPHECY AND PROPHESED

Born of the Seed
Sacred to the Kind
Power freed
Protect or destroy, she shall find
Siol Realta, you shall heed

Six voices whispered the words of the Prophecy. The Prophecy of the Moors. The Prophecy concerning one girl, just barely born, but in whom power ebbed. The power of the *Siol Realta*—the starseed.

“She isn’t safe here. She must be raised in Auranor. She must not learn of her great power,” High Councilmember Nessa whispered.

“She is too dangerous,” agreed Councilmember Marcas.

“No, she must be raised here. She must learn to control her destined power,” objected Councilmember Astri, not bothering to lower his voice in the dark cave only illuminated by the glowing orb of a star, shining down on a little baby, barely older than three moons with raven black hair.

“No, Astri. Who will teach her? No one will understand the weight she is destined to carry. No one can know. She could destroy us. Destroy our image,” Bree said gently, her face illuminated by the starlight.

“But she could build it up higher than any of us could imagine,” Astri argued. “Leave her under my tutelage. She will be safe. I will teach her the path she must take.”

“No,” a voice said from above. “The vote is cast. Four for Auranor, one for the Moors. The Prophesized will be taken to the human village of Rian. There, she will learn love and humility, not power and greed. One day she will return and save us from ourselves.”

Astri’s face blossomed in anger at Highest Councilmember Conall’s words, his thoughts whirling along dark lines. A slow movement on his righthand side revealed a dagger. A much quicker one left Conall at his feet, the Fae’s throat slit by the gleaming blade in Astri’s hand.

“What have you done, Astri?” Bree whispered, drawing back with the rest of the council.

Astri turned around, blood coating his hands as he smiled maliciously, raising his hand to his face. He pulled it away to leave a bloody handprint on his face.

“There is no more Astri. I am Scrios—darkness. I will take this Prophesized, and I will train her to be the weapon she is destined to be.”

“No,” the councilmembers said in disbelief. “We won’t allow you to!”

“Yes! And what can you *pure* Fae do to stop me?” Scrios said. “Wait.” He narrowed his eyes. “There are only two of you. Where is Nessa?”

He strode to the starlight. The baby was gone. Only an empty cradle remained.

“No!” Scrios yelled, flinging the light off its balance point.

“You have been defeated, Astri,” Marcos stated boldly. “The child will be safe. She will be raised properly, and most of all, she will never become you. NOW!”

On Marcos’ command, Marcos and Bree leapt over the Highest Councilmember’s lifeless body, their power in their hands as they reached for Scrios.

Scrios laughed as he melted away into nothing.



The woman’s face was a mix of confusion and ecstasy as she nodded before peering down at the bundle in her arms with a smile.

High Councilor Nessa smiled before turning around to walk back across the border to the Moors. A shawl covered her unnaturally beautiful Fae features. She breathed a sigh of relief as she felt the familiar magic of the barrier surrounding her. A few more minutes and she would reach the teleportation gate and would be transported home.

Cold snaked down her back as a cold, merciless voice called her name from a grove of duilleoga trees.

“Astri,” she said, her voice shaking. The figure stepped into the light, the moonlight glinting off of his now coal-black hair that was a drastic change from his silvery-white.

“I told you before. I am Scrios, a Dorcha. Astri is gone,” he snarled.

“But Dorchas don’t exist!”

“Yes, they do. Dark Fae are very much real. We both know that killing transforms a Fae’s power. Unlucky for you, I value my power much more than your life and I’m not afraid to kill again. Say your prayers to the *Siol Realta*, Nessa.”

“No! I will not be another victim by your hands.” A great pop resounded throughout the clearing, and the Fae in front of Scrios turned into a tiny sapling, forever giving up her human form.

Scrios smirked. This was much easier than having to kill her. “You think you will get out of it that easily. But you won’t. You’ll join me in my new home, and when the little Prophecy girl comes, you can watch as she becomes what you most fear.”



SEVENTEEN YEARS LATER

ADRIANA

The smell of dye and sweat reached my sensitive nose as my hands dipped in and out of the blue-colored goop I was using to dye skeins of yarn. I kneeled on the dirty floor that was covered with old newspapers. Next to me, my best—and only—friend Cassie took the skeins I finished coloring and dried them with a hand crank before her older brother Abner hung them up to complete the drying process.

“Great job, girls.” The voice of my adopted mother called from where she was leaning in the doorway watching us. Abner gave a small snort at her words as he grabbed another length of wet blue yarn from his sister.

“And you,” Lori conceded with a smile.

I reached for the next string, my pure-black locks falling onto my face. Absent-mindedly, I brushed them back with my hand, scowling when I realized I had accidentally swiped bright blue dye onto my hair.

At my scowl, Cassie looked up to see what had caught my ire. Her soft, round, rosy face curved in a smile at my predicament while her sea-blue eyes twinkled with laughter.

“It’s not that funny,” I murmured.

“You’re right, it’s not,” Cassie tried saying with a straight face before it cracked into a grin.

“You’re the worst,” I said lovingly, wiping my hands on an old rag and standing up. However, with my back turned, I allowed myself a little smile. Cassie and I had been friends ever since we were five, for reasons no one knew, not even us. We were almost complete opposites. I was tall and pale and dark, while Cassie was short and bright and rosy. But she had been the only one to accept me, the only one to help me when my parents tragically died.

Freak was what most of the villagers of our small town of Rian murmured about me.

I stopped in front of the mirror in the room Cassie and I shared up in the small loft. My pale face stared back at me. High cheekbones, unnerving pale green eyes, and dark red, full lips were the reason I was so disliked. Long, raven-black tresses—except for the now blue streak—trailed from my head and ringed my face, adding a darker element.

Unnatural.

I scoffed at myself. I wasn’t one to care what others thought. I was my own individual, and I didn’t care if I was alone.

I walked downstairs again, heading to the water pump now that I had assessed the damage. The dye was staining, but if I washed it within the next few minutes, it should come out. The packed dirt scuffed a little at the toes of my sturdy, black leather boots. My simple black shirt, which was tucked into black pants, lightly swished as I walked purposefully to the simple wooden back door that led to the village water well. I kept my head high, not looking at the worn cobblestone path passing beneath my feet, as the whispers of the village women passed me.

“Weird.”

“Unnerving.”

“Unnatural.”

“Witch.”

“Beautiful.”

I paused at the last one. Beautiful? It was always mentioned with words like “should have been born ugly,” or “disgusting.” Never by itself. Never in a positive way.

I spun around, my eyes narrowed and my thick hair swishing.

Matthis.

I curled my lip slightly in disgust. Matthis Gronde was the blacksmith's son and had pursued every girl—both willing and unwilling—in Rian. A few months ago, he had gone after Cassie. She had never been charmed by him, but he was persistent to the point of rude, cruel, and inappropriate. Luckily, Abner had realized what was going on before I could hurt him and Matthis had been quickly and efficiently dissuaded. I, however, would have loved to leave a mark or two. But now, he had apparently run out of victims and moved onto the less satisfactory one: me.

This is going to be fun.

I continued my walk to the well, aware in my peripheral vision that Matthis was following along. A few of the women cast him long-suffering and disgusted looks. No doubt they thought he was crazy for going after me. And for once, I actually agreed with them.

I reached the well, a small circle of stones in the ground that lead to a spring of water below. A quick lowering and raising of the rope revealed a bucket dripping with the clear water.

Behind me, Matthis moved closer until he was next to me. He placed a hand on my hip, pulling me closer to him. I forced myself not to flinch at his decidedly inappropriate contact.

"Hey there, honey," he said in what he obviously thought was a smooth voice. "Need any help there?"

I set the bucket on the edge, pulling back.

"Oh, you—such a strong young man—would help such a weak girl like me?" I simpered, batting my eyelashes innocently at him.

His eyes narrowed for a second at my unexpected answer before my praise flamed his ego and his pride won him over. He puffed out his chest.

"Of course," he made his voice deeper before leaning closer in so I could smell his rank breath and whispering, "It would come for a price though."

"Oh?" I leaned forward and whispered his ear, my words barely a breath. Around us, the villagers were quiet watching our interaction with bated breath.

I stepped back. "Well, then, here. Let me pay you in advance." At the last few words, I hardened my voice and smirked. A quick push and twist of the rope left the horrible boy dangling by one ankle in the well, his head at least partially submerged.

“Thank you so much for your help. You have made my day much more entertaining.” I gave him a mock salute and grabbed another bucket that was already filled. I sauntered out of the clearing and back to my adopted home where Cassie was visible in the window, shaking with silent laughter as Matthis continued to swing and splash wildly, sputtering and calling for help.

I smiled, a rare thing that I only reserved for her, and used the remaining little bit of water in the bucket to wash the dye out of my hair.

“Well, Matthis got what he deserved,” Cassie laughed in her melodic voice. “Excellent acting skills.”

“You do realize that I am naturally sarcastic and dark, right?”

“Oh, come off it, Adri. You are an angel. And a perfect best friend.”

I snorted but accepted her hug without protest.

“I really don’t deserve you,” I muttered, so quietly I thought she couldn’t hear.

“Nonsense,” she said, obviously hearing. “It is I who am so thankful.”

No, Cassie. My life would be very different without your light.

CHAPTER ONE

RETALIATION

“Adriana!”

“Yes, Lori?”

“Can you come and start dinner?”

I put down my sewing and walked through the short doorway to where Lori waited in the kitchen. The tall blonde woman closely resembled her daughter, although her angles were sharper, and she was taller. Lori, however, wasn’t as warm. That was Cassie’s own unique personality in a family who were the definition of taciturn.

Lori had not been impressed with my performance with Matthis, although I caught her trying to hide a slight smile as she reprimanded me. As punishment, I had been tasked with different chores around the house. Earlier in the day it had been sweeping out the loft, and then doing the mending, and finally now making dinner. At least this one was somewhat enjoyable.

“There’s beef over there as well as herbs and potatoes.”

“Thanks. I’ll get started.”

I walked over and started dicing potatoes as Lori walked over to the door before pausing.

“Adriana?”

“Hmm?” I tilted my head to show I was listening as I continued the steady strokes of the knives.

“I know I’m not your real mom”—I stiffened at her words but kept on cutting, only the slightest pause showing my discomfort with this topic— “but know that you feel like another daughter to me. I was—and am—happy to accept you into my family.”

“Thank you.” I didn’t say anything more and, after a few awkward moments, she left. On the outside, I reached for another potato and started chopping it, but on the inside, my thoughts whirled.

The truth was, I had never really had any parents except for Raina and Darth, who I lived with from newborn to eight-years-old. I grew up with them, and they had always been sweet

and loving, everything a child could ask for. But I had known from a young age I was different. I had known that they were not my real parents.

Chop. Chop.

To begin, I never looked anything like Raina, who was dark-skinned with lovely chocolate brown eyes and full lips, or DARTH, who was pale with blue eyes and slim features. My looks had to be unnatural. And surely it wasn't only coincidence that Rian was the closest village to the Moors, the realm of the Fae, and the only other country on the continent other than the country of Auranor, in which Rian was located.

But the real question was, if I did actually come from the Moors, where were my parents? And why did they abandon me? Was I just simply too much for them to handle? But I had been only a babe. Who would abandon their child?

Chop! Chop! Chop! The knife unconsciously came down faster as my thoughts worked themselves into a flurry.

Well, that's just too bad for them.

I was an amazing person to know. It was their fault that they were missing out on me. I didn't need them. I had Cassie and that was enough. I didn't need any *parents*.

"Adri!"

Cassie's voice startled me from my rage-induced chopping.

"What are you doing? You're chopping the board, not the potatoes!" I glanced down and saw deep grooves on the wooden plank used for cutting on. The potato sat a few inches away, cut far too many times to be useful.

Cassie joined me at the counter and placed a warm hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I think I just need to go outside for a bit." I pulled away from Cassie's hand and rushed out the door, not paying any attention to the villagers who pulled back and rushed to gossip about my run. I didn't care. I just needed the peace the hills held.

I laughed, the sound spiteful.

I was constantly beset on every side by the villagers. I had no peace. Cassie was my only rock. But it felt like my emotions were drowning me, steadily rising over the rock that had kept me anchored through so many things.

Why did I care? It's not like I ever needed parents. I was fine on my own. I was an independent woman.

I.

Didn't.

Need.

Parents.

Then why do you miss Raina and Darth so much? The little voice whispered. I sank onto a rock.

Unbidden, memories arose.

"Ree!" a beautiful, sweet voice called. I ran to the woman it came from. The woman was safety, and I needed it as I ran to her crying. Her warm brown skin enveloped me as tears ran down my little face.

"Mami! Mami! It hurts. It hurts," I cried, the scratch on my knee making sitting on her lap awkward, but I didn't care. A tall man came from the barn, the dusty smell of hay on him. He walked over to where Raina was comforting me.

"Let me see, Star," he said, leaning down beside me.

"I fell off the rock, Papi. It hurts."

"I know it does, Star, but you are stronger. You are always stronger. You are amazing."

A different memory arose, and the scenery shifted, this time to a green meadow basked in moonlight with blue-gray shadows and three figures lying in the grass.

"What are those?" I asked, my six-year-old voice high pitched and full of curiosity.

"Those, Star, are what your nickname is from," Darth said, his voice coming from where he was laying down beside me. Raina, on my other side, joined in.

"They are beautiful and amazing, always burning and always there."

"Why do you call me Star?" I asked Darth.

"Because you are like them. You are so, so beautiful, and you are always burning."

"Burning, like on fire?" I shot up with the thought and ran my hands over my body, checking for flames.

"No, honey. You are so deeply passionate. When you care, you care with your whole self. And we love you for it."

I stared up at the stars again. The millions of them twinkling in the sky. I soaked in the warmth of my parents, not knowing anything different. Not knowing what was coming.

The meadow melted away, and flames leapt up.

"Run, Star!"

“Papi!” I called from outside the burning farm. A young Cassie grabbed my hands, hauling me away from the flames.

“Raina!” Darth called. No sign of her. The flames that had erupted only moments before blazed higher, crackling, and emitting piercing heat. Without even the slightest moment of hesitation, Darth ran back into the building that was blazing in the night.

“Papi!” I cried again, my voice cracking with fear and confusion. I wrestled out of Cassie’s grip, running towards the blistering, burning house, only one thought on my mind: to find Papi and Mami.

Strong hands grabbed my upper arms. I strained and struggled, hopelessly watching as the flames leaped higher, and neither of my parents appeared. A water line formed and slowly, bucket by bucket, the flames were extinguished.

Abner let go of my arms, which were now bruised from my struggles, but the pain was nothing to the inward grief I was consumed with. My heart felt like it was being wretched out of my chest, and nothing would ease the pain. Nothing except for my parents, whose fate I now accepted with cool neutralism.

As I stared one last time at the home that had been mine for eight years, I thought I saw a tall shape in the now dying flames. A man with flowing hair and hard edges and spikes rising from his shoulders. But I blinked, and he was gone.

I sat on the rock, tears streaming down my face at the memories.

“Come on, Adriana,” I said aloud, encouraging myself. “You are stronger than this. You will always be stronger than this.”

I stood up and forcibly shoved my emotions behind a wall made of the sturdiest stone as I repeated Darth’s words. They were the only thing I would keep, and that wall would never come down again. Those memories were gone. I was a different person, and I didn’t need them anymore.

I could survive on my own.

I would survive on my own. To need others was a weakness, and I didn’t have weaknesses.

When I lost Darth and Raina, I fully accepted my personality. Every sarcastic bite, every not-so-nice thought, and all the things in between. With them, I had hidden it, trying to appear like a sweet child. And then they were gone, and I had no need to hide it anymore.

Everything back in the right order, I turned down the hill, which had an amazing view of Rian that I had not appreciated in my emotional rush up the mountain. The breeze blew cold

with the coming winter, but I had never been one to mind the frigid temperatures Auranor had.

The village below came into focus. It was breathtaking in its simplicity. From my height, I could see the low clouds that drifted over Rian. The well, which was in the center of the village, was visible through the fog. Houses spiraled out from it in a galactic pattern. Brown, thatched roofs contrasted with the bright wildflowers that grew on the side of the walk paths.

A few minutes later, I walked into the village circle. A particularly large woman, Hratha, spotted me, her pudgy face turning purple in anger. Gret, the village blacksmith and her husband, walked out the door behind her, his face paling and then returning with just as much color as his wife's.

More and more villagers gathered around. I scoffed at them and headed for Cassie's house. Sure, they usually pulled back at sight of me, but this wasn't too new. Maybe they thought I was going to toss them in the well too. The corner of my mouth curled up into a smirk at the thought. They deserved it.

"Adriana... Gothen." Hratha's voice came in angry puffs that were laced with hatred.

I spun around to face her, my eyebrow raised in what I knew was an arrogant and questioning expression. Possibly part of my problem with the villagers of Rian was that, like everyone else, I had never bothered to censure myself around them. After the fire, I had never bothered to force the nicer part of myself forward. Instead, I was only softer around Cassie, and as a service to her, her family.

"What have you done, you *witch*?" Hratha spat, her fists curled and took a step towards me.

I only raised my eyebrow higher, adding on a slight smirk, although inwardly I was startled. Witch? Where had that come from?

Hratha was now visibly shaking in anger, her husband stepping forward to join her, his fist clenched around his hammer. Around us, the villagers were silent, watching the scene play out. I saw that a few of them wore the same angry expressions, but most of them were pale with fear.

That expression was new. Disgust, hatred, and sometimes anger I was used to, but they never showed outright fear. They all knew what was going on, and they were convinced it was my fault.

Of course, my inner voice said with an eyeroll. Blame the poor, orphan girl who doesn't fit in.

"You—you cast a spell on my son," Hratha said, now only a few steps away. The door behind me opened and Cassie, Abner, Lori, and Cassie's dad Danny came out, standing behind me.

"What do you mean, Adriana cast a spell on Matthis?" Danny said calmly. He had never been one for confronting others, and Lori wasn't much better, although she did worse with anything that didn't fit the social norms.

"He is now ill, and the doctor can't understand it. The only explanation is *her*." This time Gret was accusing me, his bushy mustache twitching furiously.

Whispers of the word magic snaked in the crowd.

"I did no such thing," I said, crossing my arms. "I do not have magic and I'm certainly not a witch. Matthis got what he deserved, even more so if you can't explain it." I tilted my head with a fake frown, lacing my voice with mockery. "Or are you telling me you didn't know that your little boy is lewd and abused or tried to abuse almost every girl in the village?"

If it was even possible, Hratha's face grew even more purple while the villagers around us broke out in fervent whispers.

They're nothing but a bunch of gossips, my inner voice scoffed.

Outwardly, I turned my focus back on the furious parents in front of me.

"Are you sure he just didn't catch something from hanging in the well?"

"You cast a spell on him!" Gret yelled.

Cassie stepped up to my shoulder. "Adri did no such thing. She's as human as you and me. I'm sure he just caught something like Adri said."

"Magic."

"Witch."

"Unnatural."

The voices rose in volume. I saw the moment Gret took a step forward, his hammer raised as blind fury took him over. I raised my arm in preparation for the blow, but with horror, I saw the hammer go by my ear, heading straight for Cassie.

And then several things happened at once.

CHAPTER TWO

MAGIC

“No!” I yelled, swinging the arm that had been prepared to block the hammer towards Cassie. I felt something stir in my veins. It was sharp, cold, deep, and so, so right.

A black column twined with light purple shot out from my hand, ramming into Gret with a loud clap of thunder. He was thrown backwards against the cobblestones, unconscious. Cassie, eyes wide from where she had just seen the unsuspecting threat, leaned down as if to check on him and then froze.

For a second, everyone just stared at his limp form. A feather dropped on the floor could have been heard as clear as day in the silence. The same question ran through everyone’s minds: what had happened? And who was responsible?

Hratha broke the stupor by diving for me with a yell.

“*Witch!*” Her meaty hands, calloused and red from her days in the smithy, groped for my slender neck. I dodged her, knocking into Cassie. She grabbed my arm and tugged me into her house. Abner, Lori, and Danny followed, their faces pale, but from me or what almost happened to Cassie, I had no idea.

Outside, the villagers convened on Gret’s body, checking to make sure he was still alive before all the men walked towards our door, their cries of “witch!” coming loud and clear through the door and windowpane. A few minutes later, the women emerged from their respective houses, flaming torches and hard rolling pins in their hands.

Abner turned the lock and leaned his back against the door, ready to resist the men’s attempts to barge in. Cassie tugged me towards the main living area, her parents following. It was sparse, with only a single low table and two couches on opposite sides. In the corner, there was an empty space filled with cans of dye and skeins of drying yarn that I had helped work on only a day earlier.

“What was that?” Lori asked, her face ashen as she leaned against her husband.

“I don’t know,” I responded calmly from my perch on the couch, although I had a pretty good idea.

“Now’s not the time for games, girl! What was that?” Danny demanded, his quiet personality and careful aversion to confrontation completely gone in this new threat to the peace of his household.

“Leave her alone!” Cassie defended me. “She doesn’t know what it was. Who knows if it even came from her.”

“Whatever it was, it was from me,” I confirmed, my voice cool as I lounged further on the couch.

Cassie leaned over. “You’re not helping,” she hissed.

I shrugged. I had a pretty good idea of what was going to happen. Lori was almost physically incapable of accepting differences or abnormalities, and I was basically the definition of both of them. Only the Fae were capable of magic, and they stuck to the Moors. It was impossible for me to have magic, unless...

“She must be Fae,” Abner interrupted, pulling the words from my head. He stood in the doorway, his arms crossed as he leaned nonchalantly against the frame. Apparently, he had given up on the door and I was struck with the impression he didn’t really care much if I was captured by his fellow villagers so long as his sister was safe.

Lori and Danny slowly back up so they joined him, fear and horror on their faces. I scoffed and stood up.

“Fine,” I spat. “What are you going to do now? Let them in? Join in the hunt for me? I’m sure they’ll appreciate your help.”

Abner took charge now.

“We’ll give you five minutes, then it’s your own fault if you’re caught.”

“Abner!” Cassie cried. “Why? She’s your sister.”

“She’s not my sister. And she’s not yours either. We took her in out of pity and look how she repaid us! Now we have the whole village on our heads demanding hers, so why don’t we just hand her over?”

“Because she has lived with us for the past nine years! What has she done to hurt us since then? Nothing! Nothing whatsoever. She has helped the family with the yarn and helped you live the life you wanted of carelessness and leisure. And what do you want to do to her now? Hand her over to the angry villagers that will do who-knows-what with her!” Cassie was now livid, an expression I had never seen on her before.

I really matter to her. The thought softened my hardening heart.

“Cassie. She just used magic in front of you. It should be impossible!”

“She used magic to *save* me!”

Giving up on his sister, Abner turned to me. “As a service to my sister, you have five minutes before I let the villagers in,” he glared at me, his voice cold as ice. “Goodbye, Adriana Gothen.”

At the mention of my last name, Cassie glared at him. His use of it signified that he had no attachment to me. It was an equivalent of washing his hands of me.

He spun around and followed his parents out the door, not listening to the angry words Cassie hurled at him from beside me.

I stood up off the couch, brushing my button up black top and pants off.

Cassie turned to me, tears running down her cheeks. My heart softened. She was my best—and only—friend. And now I was leaving her. Maybe I didn’t need parents, but she was nice to have.

“I don’t want you to go, Adri.”

I wrapped my arms around her in a hug.

“I know. I’ll miss you. But I have to.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

As perceptive as always, Cassie caught the hesitation in my words.

“You’re going to the Moors, aren’t you?”

“I have to, don’t I? I’m never going to fit in here in Auranor. If I have magic, that must mean I’m Fae.”

“But you can’t be! You’re normal, just like me. Abner’s wrong.” Tear continued to stream down Cassie’s normally lively face.

“I’ve known that I’m different for a while now. I’ll miss you. Bye, Cassie.”

Cassie’s arms tightened around my stomach, but I gently pried them off. In the kitchen, the noise grew louder as the door opened and people streamed in. They were too quick. It hadn’t even been five minutes yet. Abner must have gotten tired of waiting. It didn’t surprise me that Lori and Danny had sided with him.

So much for loving me like another daughter, I thought as I randomly thrust out my arm again, hoping my magic would come. It did. Like a cool, wintery breeze, the magic filled the room with a thick, black cloud that was intertwined with the same purple streaks that brought visibility down to zero.

I sprinted to the door, my magic clearing a path for me, so I didn't trip over the table or couches like my pursuers were doing. As I walked outside, a crash and a wet sound came from inside. I winced. Someone must have run into the dye cans and spilled them. That was a lot of money and a ruined floor.

Why do I care? They are nothing to me. Nothing!

Except for Cassie, a small voice in the back of my mind whispered. *She's everything to you.*

I shoved the thought away.

Once outside, I raised another cloud, this time over the whole village. No one would be able to see where I went now.

Angry shouts emitted from the house as the villagers found their way into the street and were met with another cloud. I kept running, dirt flying from underneath my feet. Up and over the hill I had been on only an hour or so before. Down the hill and into the valley. I just kept running.

Once I had made it over the next few hills, I stopped to rest my burning lungs and aching legs. At least I had always seemed more physically fit than many of the villagers my age.

Behind me, my cloud still lingered in the sky, stretching out over the hills. Instinctively, I brought the arm I had used to summon the storm towards my chest. The cloud faded out, some of the magic coming back to brush against my hand.

It was cold and stinging, but the feeling was comforting. Its bite was so much like me. *It* was so much like me.

"Fuil mise," it seemed to whisper, *"ni draiocht, ni cailleach."*

Somehow, I was able to translate it from the language of the Fae.

"I am blood. Not magic, not witch," I said aloud, comprehension dawning on me. It was not magic, and I was not a witch. This was *fuil*—blood—and I was a Fae.



“Finally,” I breathed as the border came into sight. I had been on the run for the last day, only stopping to rest for a few hours at night in an abandoned cave I found. Then it was off again. I knew I had no pursuers, but I also was not foolish enough to think that I was safe on my own as a single female when there were riders or wild animals around. And so, I proceeded to the border with the Moors as fast as I could, only accompanied by my thoughts.

I had spared no sympathy for Abner, Lori, or Danny. They were nothing to me now. I had no need for them. I could have survived without them these past years. I was strong and I would always be stronger.

The sloping hills of Auranor stopped abruptly as dark trees sprung up. As I drew nearer, a light pink and green wall shimmered into existence. It was long and strong, tall, and broad. Impossible to cross without help, or without the correct method.

“So, this is why no one ever ventures into the Moors. I wonder just what kind of damage it does to those who cross it? Turn them into a tree and further the border? That would be ironic.” I smirked to myself as I speculated.

In response the shield, and probably my own dark thoughts, my magic—no, my Fuil—rose from where it had been flowing steadily in my veins. A little whisp of black with threads of purple rose and gently brushed against the barrier.

As the Fuil touched it, the wall peeled back, much like a waterfall when a large object is stuck into it. With a deep breath I took a step in and felt the barrier close behind me.

CHAPTER THREE

WELCOME TO THE MOORS

The trees were tall and squat, with dark purple and black leaves that ended in a sharp point. Their many branches stretched for yards in front of me. They were long and bendy, full of knots and little hollows.

I kept walking through the woods. Fuil ran through my veins, energetic and almost alive with the layer of magic resting on the trees, the ground, even the clouds. Everywhere sparkled with bits of it.

Birds sang in the abnormal trees, but they were not the birds of Auranor. Emerald-green with obsidian feathers and eyes the color of amethysts, they were in no way similar to the larks, doves, and swans of Rian. The birds' bodies were tall and skinny with green feathers. Wings, if they could be called that, arched from the bird's back in large spikes that rattled. Green scales, the same color as the feathers, filled in the wings, the ends tinged with black as though they had been dipped individually in paint. Their legs were long and covered in the same scales as the wings. Talons separated the toes, long and wicked. On their heels were also miniature wings, this time all black with none of the green.

One of the birds stared at me with its pale purple eyes, cocking its narrow head at me before hissing like a cat and flying away. Nearby, another one sang into the sky from a branch of the long trees. Or at least, what I could call a song. It was a series of screeches and whistles that combined into an eerie and oddly beautiful tune.

I stopped my staring and kept walking.

Come on Adriana. What are you? A bird watcher? You are on a mission. You have to find a place to be safe. No more distractions.

I kept walking, my feet only barely sore even though I had been walking for most of the day.

Caw. Caw. Screech. Whistle. Whistle. Screech came the song from above. *Caw. Caw. Screech. Whistle. Whistle. Screech.*

I paused my walking and tilted my head so I could hear better, my black tresses falling into my face.

Come, come, Daughter of the Moors, it seemed to say.

“I’m coming,” I said quietly. I had only been here for half a day, but I felt more at home than I ever had in Rian.

Cassie. The thought of her made my heart ache.

“Stop it,” I told myself out loud. “You don’t need her. You’ve never needed her. Sure, she was nice to have, but you don’t *need* her.”

Somehow, my convincing seemed to have little effect.



I looked up at the sky to try and judge the time. I had been walking for an interminable amount of time, my feet now starting to ache and my head pounding with weariness.

Above me, the sky was entirely unhelpful.

Dark teal clouds stretched over the purple sky. Black tinged the sky as silver—literal silver-colored—stars dusted it. Faint undertones of red showed as well, barely peeking through the dreamy haze. A large moon in an upside-down crescent with stars dripping down and off of it hung as the centerpiece.

“It’s almost as if I’ve walked into a whole other world,” I whispered.

“You have,” came a hard, dark voice from the shadows next to me. I spun around, proud of myself for not jumping, before I focused on the possible threat.

Only a shadowy figure was visible. Shoulder-length hair flapped in the breeze, blowing strands across a long angular face. He was tall and imposing with flapping robes that clung to his body.

Something about him seemed familiar...

I internally gasped. The flames. I had seen his figure in the fire that killed my first adopted parents.

“Who are you?” I asked, straightening my shoulders, and tipping my chin up. I was never one to back down when a threat appeared, and I wasn’t going to show my recognition of him.

The figure stepping into the moonlight, the features on his face and body becoming clear. He was tall, about half a head taller than me, which was saying something. Dark eyes that

glowed pure blue were surrounded by silvery pale skin and long, black wisps of hair. A long straight nose and thin lips completed the look. His clothing was imposing and full of strange items. The collar went up his neck and spikes abruptly curved from his shoulders. The blue-accented black fabric went down to his waist to where it was tucked almost seamlessly into a pair of tight black pants. He was well shaped, strong, and dangerous.

“I am Scrios,” the Fae—because he was clearly Fae—said, “and you are Adriana.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, once again reminded of the flames. “How do you know my name?”

“I know many things, Adriana Gothen. Come.” He turned away and started walking into the branches of the trees.

I stayed still, crossing my arms. “I’m not just going to follow someone I barely know, much less a Fae.” *Or Raina and DARTH’s potential murderer*, I silently added.

He turned around, his eyes narrowed before he let out a small chuckle that seemed entirely forced.

“That’s fair, but come, child. I can tell you about your heritage. I can tell you why you’ve been cast out of your village and what this mysterious magic is that flows in your veins.”

And at that, he intrigued me beyond redemption.

And it’s not like I know what I’m doing or where I’m going. I might as well get answers.

We walked for ten minutes in complete silence with only the shifting branches to relieve the monotony. Even the birds had stopped singing.

After a few more minutes we came to what appeared to be a dome of light green leaves interlocking with each other to create what seemed like an impenetrable fortress. I watched as Scrios went up to it and tapped a certain pattern out. After he had finished, a little wisp of electric blue, the same color as his eyes, rose up and dissolved into the barrier.

After what seemed like an internal struggle, the leaves unhooked and drew back to form a living space that I had not imagined a Fae like Scrios would live in.

Inside, the barrier protected a large space—about the size of two or three cottages put together. Long, thick boughs spanned the top, far above my head. Globes the size of my head ran down the bottoms of the branches, providing light. The floor was lush grass, green and purple, but seemingly healthy, not rotten as purple would usually indicate. In the middle of the space, a gigantic tree trunk rose from the ground. The trunk was wrapped around with

cords of blue that seemed to be a part of the tree itself. The cords were wide with what looked like steps carved into them, but I was too far away to tell.

Everywhere the ground consisted of the same grass as before except for a few dirt trails trailing to several different places. One led directly from the entryway to the tree. Another one wound around the tree, and another one led to a curious structure in the far-left corner.

“Welcome to Iobairt Olc,” Scrios said, spreading his arms, “This will be your new home, if you choose, and I think you will.”

I narrowed my eyes at his presumption but followed him inside. Behind us, the leaves closed with a swish, once again forming their impenetrable layer.

We walked along the dirt path up to the tree. It was a soft brown and didn’t stick to my boots, for which I was thankful. They were now the only shoes I owned.

Up close, the tree was about three times my height, give or take a few inches. There were two blue strands that shot straight up the tree that I could see, but the most perplexing thing was that each only had one platform on it.

“This is a Raiser,” Scrios informed me, moving to the blue strand on the rightmost side. “You step onto the platform and then send your Fuil into the platform. It will then move you up to the top.” To demonstrate, he stepped onto the wide, brown platform and sent veins of blue running through it. In response to his power, the platform started to move up the tree.

When I hesitated, Scrios raised an eyebrow at me. Without knowing what I was fully doing, but not wanting to show weakness, I stepped on the platform. I looked inside of myself for the magic that was flowing in my veins. Grabbing some that was flowing through my feet, I shoved it into the platform. It fled up the cord and then just as quickly back down, bucking me off.

I landed on the dirt path, the breath knocked out of my chest. I propped myself up on an elbow and glared at Scrios, whose ascent had paused.

“What was that?” I asked.

“You must have put too much power in it,” he said mildly, but he smacked his fist into the cord with an ugly expression before murmuring something and turning back to me.

“Try it again, girl.”

I gave him another glare and stood up. This time I regulated my flow and sped up the tree with no incident.

At the top, however, I paused, my breath almost wiped from my chest again, but this time in amazement.

At the top was a flat platform surrounded by branches that held the rest of the canopy up. Up here, it was much darker. A stormy black fog seemed to surround it, slithering on the floor like a living rug. There were lights, certainly, but they seemed to be covered with a film of darkness.

In the middle of the room were three black chairs, each looking like they were writhing in shadows and insubstantial matter. Directly across the platform from me were three black pods, all next to each other.

“This is Uaimh, or the Cave. Come, let’s sit.” Scrios sat down in one of the chairs, which was obviously not as formless as it looked as it held against his weight. I walked over to a chair and sat down.

Just as I did, a voice called up from below, growing louder.

“Master? Are you there?”

I leapt to my feet, barely even registering the simultaneously soft and hard surface of the chair beneath me.

Scrios stood up as well, although much slower.

“Ah. My apprentice. I’ll wait until you get up here until introductions.”

“Introductions?” came a faint question. A few seconds later, a man appeared at the top of the Raiser.

“Ren, meet Adriana Gothen. Adriana, meet Ren, my apprentice.”

CHAPTER FOUR

REN

Ren was taller than me, about Scrios' height. The most startling thing about him were his topaz green eyes. They were vividly green and slightly mournful. His rosy-white skin covered high cheekbones, a straight nose, and an angular chin. His hair was long and pure blonde with green streaks. Accenting his skin were green streaks, like little lightning bolts that ran down his forehead and from his eyes onto his cheeks.

He wore a plain white shirt with a leather vest over it and plain brown trousers, but his clothing did nothing to conceal his shape. He was lean, fit, strong, and sturdy with sculpted arms and hands that showed that he was not one to laze around.

He carried himself in a strong way as well. His whole bearing told me that he knew exactly who he was and was fully self-confident, but in a humble way.

In other words, he was confusing and far, far too attractive.

Get a grip on yourself, Adriana! You are not one of those fussy village girls who faints if a male even looks her way. You are stronger than that.

"Nice to meet you, Ren," I said, my eyes narrowed slightly.

"Likewise," he said in a deep voice, his expression neutral.

I quirked one of my eyebrows. "I'm pretty sure my name isn't Ren."

At that, he cracked a small smile.

"She has a sense of humor," Scrios commented drily from his perch on the shadow chair.

"Come, sit down and I'll explain a few things. You as well, Ren."

I took my seat again on the chair, Ren sitting in the one on my right side while Scrios was on the left.

"Now," I fixed him with a look, "explain or I'm leaving."

"I believe you are in no position to make demands." I bristled at his haughty words. "But that aside, onto full introductions. I am Scrios, formerly High Councilmember Asti Lapetha of the Moors."

“Sorry for interrupting,” I interjected, completely unrepentant of my rudeness, “but I have been living in Auranor my whole life, not knowing—as many humans do—about the Moors, so if you expect me to understand, then you will have to explain it.”

“Ah, yes. Your uncommon upbringing. We’ll get to that later. Ren? Would you like to explain how the High Council works?”

“Yes, master,” the apprentice said. “The High Council rules over all the Fae. There are five members and one of those is the High Councilmember, probably equal to something like the Auranorian King. The appointments are chosen by magic, although the Highest Councilmember is chosen by vote by the High Councilmembers. They are in their position for life, no turning back.”

“Very good,” applauded Scrios. “Now, can you explain why I am here and not in Eteula?”

Ren nodded, shifted in his seat a little, although from discomfort or excitement, I couldn’t tell.

“Scrios is here because he became a Dorcha, or dark Fae. On one night, fifteen years ago, he killed Highest Councilmember Conall and changed his name to Scrios, which means ‘destroy’ in the language of the Fae. That night, three High Councilmembers had to be replaced: Conall, Astri, and another one named Nessa who disappeared without a trace, although—”

Whatever he was about to say was cut off by a quick motion from Scrios that I saw out of the corner of my eye. I kept my gaze on Ren in a passive expression, not letting it show that I had noticed.

“Although no one knows why,” Ren recovered, his eyes shifting.

“Excellent, my student. I am a Dorcha, and Ren came here a few months ago looking to become a Dorcha himself. And I am willing to train you as well. You’ve never had any training, correct?”

“That is right,” I said, the words tasting like dirt in my mouth. A childish part of me didn’t want to tell him anything, but I forced it out anyway. “I manifested yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” Ren said, looking surprised.

I, however, was just annoyed. “Yes, Ren, yesterday. You know, the day before today? Unless I missed something about time here in the Moors, you had a ‘yesterday’ after you discovered your own Fuil.”

“Yesterday,” mused Scrios, looking thoughtful. “And you were still able to operate the Raiser?”

“What does it look like?” I scowled, mostly because Ren was looking at me with his jaw dropped.

“What?” I snapped.

His jaw clamped shut with a snap.

“It’s just... you operated the Raiser on your first attempt? It took me a month to have enough focus to do it.”

“Well,” I said, drawing out the word, “I wasn’t an idiot.”

Ren glared at me, sitting back in his chair.

“Children,” scolded Scrios before turning serious again. “Adriana, you are powerful. I would be honored to be your teacher. I will, however, inform you of your other options. You could find another teacher, but they would ask questions. Awkward questions.”

“And you won’t?”

Scrios nodded and I thought for a few seconds before letting out a deep breath.

“Well then it really isn’t a choice at all, now, is it?” I responded caustically.

After thinking for a moment, I acquiesced. “Fine. I see your point. But in return, I want answers.”

“Answers?”

“Yes. Answers. Like what exactly is Fuil?”

Ren whistled. “You know that our magic is called Fuil? I thought you had never been to the Moors before.”

“I haven’t,” I glared at him. “That’s just what it told me.”

His eyes almost popped out of his head. It would have been hilarious to see such a handsome and composed man at such a loss for words if he hadn’t annoyed me so much in the past few minutes.

Wait. Did I just call him handsome in my own head? I must be really losing it.

“It.... told... you?”

“Hmm. We’ll talk more about it tomorrow. For now, let’s get you to sleep. It’s been a long day.”

I looked up, surprised to see that the lights were already dimming, and in that moment, the day's exhaustion caught up with me, both emotional and physical. I nodded in weary agreement, leaning back in the chair before forcing myself to my weary feet.

"Where do we sleep?" I asked.

Scrios walked over to the middle pod that was directly across from the Raiser. It was different from the others. The one on the left had blue streaks while the one on the right had green. The one Scrios was now opening was just pure black.

Inside was a small space that seemed to have grown into the tree. On the opposite wall lay a hammock-bed made of green leaves that locked together like the barrier outside. Next to it was a tiny wooden bedstand and a sink in the far corner with what I assumed was a privy hidden behind a screen.

"Here is your room," Scrios said. "We can work on the personalization later, but for now, sleep."

He bowed his head and shut the door behind me as he pushed me up the two short stairs into the pod. I walked over and sat down on the bed, voices filtering through the door.

"Why does she get the middle one?" Ren was asking Scrios. "I thought you said..."

His question was cut off by Scrios. "Because she is she" came the simple reply before another pod door opened and closed. I heard Ren sigh before turning to his.

She is she. What could that mean? Did Scrios know of me beforehand?

But soon, my wonder was replaced with a bone-deep weariness.

Whatever, Adri. Just sleep. There will be time for answers tomorrow.



"Alright," I said, walking out of my pod and adjusting the cuffs on my shirt. "It's tomorrow, Scrios. I want my answers."

"Patience. You will get your information. I am not some human that breaks their promises," Scrios consoled, pouring tea in a kitchen that I did not remember seeing last night.

"Morning," Ren said, stepping out of the pod beside mine.

“Morning,” I said, my mood, which had not been that good before, instantly souring.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” he said from beside me. I looked at him, barely suppressing the childish urge to stick my tongue out at him. I don’t know what it was about Ren that just grated on my nerves. He was more annoying than a mosquito bite and I had only known him for less than an hour.

“Children,” Scrios said wearily from where he was now sitting on the same couch as before.

I walked over and sat down, finally getting a full glimpse of Ren as he sat down in the only remaining chair. I don’t know what irked me more, the way he looked like he had required to effort to look as good as he did that early in the morning or the way he was cockily smirking at me as I looked him up and down.

Deciding it was the second, I caught his gaze and looked up at him challengingly. He raised an eyebrow and in turn studied me, turning my face red, from embarrassment or anger, I didn’t know.

Scrunching up my face, I turned to Scrios. “What is Fuil?” I said, jumping straight to the point. What else were we going to do? Talk about the weather?

“Fuil is the magic of the Fae, although it generally hates to be called that. Are you familiar with human anatomy?”

I nodded my head, noticing out of the corner of my eye that Ren, casually reclining in his chair, his broad shoulders straight, looked mildly impressed. Completely unbidden, a sense of pride fluttered up. I shoved it back down. What was I doing?

“Are you aware of how the blood flows through human veins?”

“Yes,” I glared at him. Of course, I did. I had seen Cassie and Abner bleed enough. I had as well, from minor cuts and scratches. In my opinion, the red liquid should stay inside and not come out at all.

“Well, Fuil is blood. When a Fae turns seventeen, their blood is replaced with magic.”

“Magic?” I said, staring at him, highly skeptical. There was no way that *magic* was flowing through my veins instead of blood.

But the words I heard as I fled Rian came back to me.

“*Fuil mise. Ni draiocht.*”

I am blood. Not magic.

“Come,” Scrios said, rising from his chair. “I’ll show you.”

Ren and I stood up to follow him. Scrios walked over to the kitchen and picked up a knife. It was long and sharp and honestly looked like a dagger.

“Cut yourself.” He handed me the dagger, watching me with his dark eyes.

“What do you mean ‘cut yourself?’”

“Exactly that. Do it and see what comes out.”

“I could do it for you,” Ren offered, smirking.

I glared even harder at him as I took the dagger from Scrios.

“Why don’t I cut *you* and see what comes out?”

Ren took a step backwards. “Good luck with that. I’ve already been training for a while. I know more than you do.”

“You’ve been training for, what? A month?”

“Two,” he murmured, looking away.

“Mhm. Well, I have effectively used the Raiser and created several fogs, so beat that.”

“Silence!” Scrios cried, losing his patience. “I am done with your bickering. Adriana, cut yourself. Now!”

At his insistence, I turned over my left wrist and swiftly sliced it with the knife. I winced a little at the pain but kept it on the inside. I didn’t need to give Ren any fuel to make fun of me further. But the pettiness soon faded at the reaction the cut had.

Instead of spurting red blood, a black and purple liquid spilled out, surrounding it. After a few seconds, Scrios spoke.

“See? Can you feel it flowing in your veins?”

I looked inside of myself and realized that I could feel it. The sharp feeling, that was my Fuil, my blood. I really was Fae. There was no going back to the belief that I may be human. This proved it irrefutably.

I nodded before adding, “Why couldn’t you just have me do that at the start? Was the cut really necessary?”

Scrios stared at me, his eyes glittering as blue flashed around like lightning in the irises. “You, Adriana, are now a Dorcha in training. You will get hurt and you will be uncomfortable. This is not a sunshine-and-rainbows kind of adventure.”

I stuck my chin in the air. “Throw whatever you have at me.”

Scrios narrowed his eyes before sharply turning around. “Come on. Time for your first training session.” He strode to the Raiser, not bothering to check if we were following.

“Scared?” Ren asked, a smirk playing on his mouth.

“As if,” I scoffed back, shoving past him to follow my new master.

CHAPTER FIVE

TRAINING

The training area turned out to be the giant dome tucked away in the corner of Iobairt. It was still made of the interlocking leaves, but this time they were silver and arranged in a pattern that pointed spikes outwards.

Scrios walked up to it and tapped a pattern out on the leaves, allowing the leaves to fall apart to reveal an opening into the fortress. Inside was not what I was expecting. The area was oval, covering the whole space. The floor was white sand that was soft and dusty. In the corner was a table with weapons. There were swords, bows, daggers, staffs, and an open-ended instrument that I had never seen before.

Ren pushed past me to get to the weapon rack first. I took the opportunity to inconspicuously look at my wrist. To my surprise, it wasn't bleeding anymore. Instead, I could see a film over the skin and underneath it the Fuil flowed as it was supposed to. At this rate, it could be completely healed by the end of the day.

"Pick a dagger, Adriana," Scrios commanded from a seat by the entrance. "You will be facing Ren in a purely physical bout."

But.... I've never used a dagger before.

I dared not voice my protest. From what I knew of Scrios, he wouldn't care and would probably punish me for it.

You want to be a Dorcha, don't you? You want to learn your magic? Then buck up.

I walked over and grabbed a dagger that was about the size of half my forearm. The hilt was wrapped with leather and easily stayed in my grip. The blade was sharp and double sided, ending in a wicked point that I had no doubt would easily puncture skin. In Rian, I had seen some of the men and boys sparring with weapons, especially those who had hopes to join the village guard, but they always sparred with dulled blades. Apparently Scrios had no qualms about us hurting each other.

Ren stood in the center of the floor, casually spinning his dagger in his hand. His was just slightly shorter than mine, although I hadn't used a dagger enough to know if that was a good sign or a bad one.

“Start,” Scrios called boredly when I took my position in front of Ren.

Ren crouched into a position that I could only assume was a fighting stance. I tried to copy it, moving one foot back and leaning down with my dagger held in front of me, but I almost fell over.

“Ready?” Ren asked, smirking. He knew as well as I did that I had no clue what I was doing.

Without warning, he leapt forward and slashed my cheek, leaping back before I could even process that he was there. My cheek stung and Fuil came out in a streaming trail. Ren crouched back, his smirk even bigger now.

“Ready to give up?”

“Not to you,” I snarled, leaping forward, and hoping my blade would strike him, preferably in his arrogant face. He easily evaded it, swinging around and slicing my shoulder, this time only through the fabric.

“Adriana,” barked our mentor, “go on the offensive.”

Ren started zigzagging backwards across the floor. I chased after him, zig for zig and zag for zag. After a few seconds, I lunged, confident that I had mapped out where he would land, but he saw me coming and dodged, leaving my dagger only a bit of cloth to cut.

I scowled in frustration, and he danced around my enraged thrust, whipping around to slice the healing cut on my wrist. I bit my tongue to keep the howl of pain I so desperately wanted to let out. I wouldn’t let Ren have that satisfaction.

Instead, I leapt into a series of thrusts and slashes, letting out an enraged snarl. Ren, much to my chagrin, dodged them as if they were child’s play, slicing my thigh and side in the process.

I howled, and Ren paused for a second, hesitating. I took the opportunity to launch a desperate lunge at his arm. With surprise that was quickly followed by satisfaction, I felt the blade cut through his skin, leaving a gash on his muscled arm that quickly filled with green and yellow Fuil.

Ren looked at it surprised before turning around to me and narrowing his eyes and launching himself at me, his blade outstretched.

And then I figured out that he had been holding back.

He was quick—too quick for me, or maybe for anyone. I managed to block one strike aimed at my arm, but then he slashed my chest and knocked my feet from under me. I felt pain and pressure as he placed his sandy, booted foot on the cut on my chest and put the point of his dagger directly on my jugular.

I froze, my chest trying to heave with the exertion but getting no air from the weight of his boot.

Ren leaned over me, his breathing only slightly ragged, his face so close to mine I could feel it. His eyes were such a deep green and glinting with an emotion I couldn't recognize. Upon closer examination, I could see that his skin was so smooth and the markings on his face looked like they had been cuts and had the Fuil frozen in them.

Were they really cuts? If so, who gave them to him? He was so confident and capable. It was impossible to imagine someone getting the best of him like that. It made me want to find that person and cut them.

"Get off me," I wheezed before my thoughts could go any further down that dangerous path. I was in the middle of a fight, possibly for my life, considering how much control Ren had and how far Scrios would let this go on. I had no time for distractions.

"No," he responded simply, staying right where he was. "I don't think I will."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Get off," I said again, this time more forcefully.

"Nope."

"Fine then."

I swung my dagger up and swiped at the leg that was planted on my chest. He backed off in surprise, only giving me a shallow cut on my throat. I hopped up and pushed his now-bleeding leg, shoving him to the floor before I placed my own dagger on his neck.

"Well done," he panted in his rich voice. But before I could do more than narrow my eyes at him, he slapped my dagger away from his throat and swept my feet out from underneath me with a leg.

I landed on my back, the breath knocked out of me. Ren placed a boot on each of my wrists, pinning them and causing me to drop my dagger. He swiftly kicked it away before bringing his foot back to pin me again, but I had already moved it and rolled. Pushing his leg, I knocked him off balance and stood up.

Ren quickly recovered his balance and turned to face me, now panting from exertion. Too late, I noticed that he still held his dagger in his hand. He leaned forward and cut off a lock of my raven black hair at my shoulder. Enraged, I kicked the blade, sending it across the room next to mine. With a yell, I ran at him, my hair whipping around my face and my only thought was getting revenge.

He caught both the fists I swung at him and held them. We struggled, pushing against each other, furious girl against calculating boy until Scrios' voice finally rang out.

"Enough." It was a simple command, and we both instinctually stopped fighting, collapsing in on each other. The next thing I knew, I was leaning against his chest, feeling the well-developed muscles against my cheek.

With a start, I launched myself backwards, my brain finally realizing where I was and who I was leaning against. Ren was looking at me with distaste before he turned to examine the gash, I had given him on his arm. It was still bleeding.

Realizing I should probably do the same, I examined my body before giving up. I had a scratch on my cheek and too many gashes on my wrist, chest, thigh, and several other places, all of which were still leaking that purple and black fluid.

Scrios walked down to where we stood, carefully avoiding the clumps of mostly purple and black Fuil that was drying into the sand, although I was proud to see a few green and yellow ones.

"That was... enlightening. Ren, sloppy, but good job."

"Yes, master," Ren said, bowing his head.

"Adriana, we are going to be focusing on your dagger work."

I almost groaned at the thought, but instead copied Ren. "Yes, Scrios."

"Good. Now go stop bleeding all over my floor. You have the rest of the day to yourselves." And with that, he turned around, leaving us to our own devices.

CHAPTER SIX

WOUND CARE OF THE FAE

I returned to my room, trying not to drip blood. It was mostly slowing, but I was now starting to feel a little lightheaded from the loss. My reflection in the mirror stared back at me. Black hair still framed pale skin. Dark red lips still contended with pale green eyes. High cheekbones and smooth yet angular jaw shapes. The only difference was the cut that now lay on my right cheek. It seemed deep and likely to scar.

“Great,” I grumbled. “First day and I already have a scar.”

I looked in the mirror for a few seconds, looking at the cut before I realized I didn’t know how to make the wounds stop bleeding.

“I could wrap it...” But I shook my head. It would probably just bleed right through and Fuil was likely different than normal blood. But that still left me at what to do.

Swallowing my pride, I stepped out of my pod and walked to the one on the right-hand side. Green veins ran up and down it, marking its owner.

Taking a breath, I knock on the door. Ren opened it, in a new shirt with a bandage around his arm. Suddenly, I felt a little self-conscious about my own appearance. I was still in the same clothes, with a black shirt and brown trousers that were covered in Fuil, rips, and sand.

“What do you want?” He asked, his eyes narrowed as he took in my appearance.

Swallowing my pride even more, I looked him in the eyes, trying not to look defiant and said, “I don’t know how to take care of my own cuts. Can you help me?”

“You want me to *help* you?”

I nodded, looking down at my boots, which were also filthy.

Ren sighed before moving aside. “Come in before you bleed all over the floor.”

Ren’s room was almost the exact same as mine. A bed on the far wall, a sink, and a screen for the privy. His, however, also had a chair and small table that looked hand carved. Hanging over the table was a picture of a woman with the same face-shape and hair color as Ren.

Ren pointed to the chair. “Sit.”

Obediently, I sat, a little uncomfortable with the knowledge that Ren could kick me out at any moment and leave me to fend for myself.

He walked over to his sink and grabbed a cloth, running it under the water. Without turning around, he tossed it over his shoulder at me. "Use this to wash the areas."

I barely managed to catch it, resisting the urge to send a glare at his back.

He's helping you when he most certainly doesn't have to. Keep your mouth shut.

Slowly, I started dabbing at the wounds, the Fuil easily coming off onto the cloth, staining it black and purple.

By the time I finished wiping off my neck, chest, arms, legs, and face, the rag was filthy. Not knowing what to do with it, I stood up, intending to move towards the sink and rinse it out, but Ren looked up from where he was sitting on his bed, looking through a box. "Sit," he repeated. "You're dizzy from loss of Fuil."

I sat down again, hoping that would help my head stop spinning, but how he knew I was dizzy, I had no clue.

As if he could read my thoughts, he said, "You were listing to your right side and looked about ready to fall over." Ren picked up an orange and brown cylinder and walked over to me. It was about the size of my forearm and was only as thick as my finger.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a wand. You put it on the injury, and it reestablishes the Fuil vessel, so you don't bleed anymore. Don't you have these in Auranor, Black?"

"No, we don't," I said, so fascinated that I let the nickname slip.

Ren grabbed my injured wrist and flipped it, so the cut was exposed. Gently—more gently than I thought he could—he laid the wand on it, placing a hand on both ends to hold it down. It vibrated, sending tremors up and down my arm before it stopped. When he removed the wand, I looked down and saw that the Fuil was flowing in a solid vein, no more coming out.

"Wow," I said, looking at the dagger wound. "Will it stop bleeding on its own if you don't use a wand?"

"No," came the reply as he grabbed a length of bandage and started to wrap it.

"So, what happens when you don't have one and you're bleeding?"

He stopped wrapping my arm and looked into my eyes. "You don't stop bleeding and eventually die. Only the most powerful Fae can use their powers to stop bleeding."

“Oh.”

We left the conversation at that, and Ren continued to use the wand, until I couldn't keep my curiosity from bursting out, “Then why did my demonstration cut from this morning already seem to be healing?”

Ren looked away.

“Ren?” I demanded. “What did you do?”

“I put a healing spell on it.”

He—what?

Ren turned dutifully back to his work, not talking to me. The cut on my side followed my arm, and then my thigh. It was awkward. He was the one to unflinchingly cause this pain, but here he was delicately fixing them up. Throw in my undesired attraction to him and I could officially be called a mess.

Finally, there were only three left: my chest, my neck, and my face.

“Which one do you want to do next?” He asked, using a cloth to wipe off a bit of Fuil that had gotten on the wand.

“My chest,” I said, just wanting to get it over with. It was an awkward cut, starting just below my collarbone and stretching down diagonally almost to my side.

Ren looked at it for a second before placing the wand in the cut and delicately placing his hands on the sides, trying to touch as little skin as possible. I was still intensely aware of every bit of contact, however. That, along with the gentle, concentrated look on Ren's face was almost too much for me and I hastily looked away.

The tremors shook my body and then it was over, and I had an open, not-bleeding cut on my chest.

I looked down at it and then at the bandages. “How are we going to wrap it?”

“We won't.”

“We won't?” I repeated. “Just leave it open?”

“Yes, of course, we'll leave it open,” he rolled his eyes at me. “I'll have to stitch it. Same with your face. They'll probably scar.”

“Well, the face was all your fault. Actually, they both were.”

Ren looked up at my face, studying the cut. “Scars can show fierceness. And your face is too soft, too beautiful. If you are going to be a Dorcha, you need to have a ruthless edge.”

I stared at him, dumbfounded. *Did—did he just call my face lovely?*

Ren looked down before looking at my neck where the last cut that would need the wand was.

“Let’s finish this. Can you tilt your neck up?”

I did and he placed the wand on it. I felt strangely vulnerable, my neck bared to this man who could easily hurt me and constantly seemed to have it out for me.

Soon, all that was left was the stitching. Ren walked over to the box and put the wand back in. I fully expected him to come back with a needle and a thread, but instead he had a long piece of clear, shimmery fabric.

“What’s that for?” I asked as he crouched in front of me again.

He looked at me with a weird expression. “This is for your stitches. Do they not stitch where you come from?”

Unlike his previous attitudes to my heritage, he sounded genuinely curious.

“Yes, but you use a needle and thread and literally stitch together the wound.”

“You what?” Ren yelped, absolutely stunned. “You run a needle through your skin? Doesn’t that hurt?”

“It does. A lot. Isn’t that what you are going to do, though?”

“No,” he said vehemently. “You stick this in the wound and then in a few hours it brings the skin together and you take it out so it can finish healing on its own. Here, I’ll show you.”

He took a length of the fabric and cut it with a dagger before moving to my chest. Gently, he lined up one side and stuck the side down, running his hand along it to make sure it stuck. Next, he tucked in the fabric until it lined the walls on both sides and met in a “v” shape. Finally, he stuck down the other side and trimmed off the excess.

“Was that as painful as your stitching?” he asked, a bit of a smirk playing on his lips.

“Not at all,” I reassured him, my eyes wide. It had been completely painless.

“Now for your face.” He did the same thing, and I tried to watch before giving up and looking at him instead. Our faces were so close, almost as close as they were during the training battle. But he quickly finished, moving back, and giving me space to breathe.

It took me a second to orient myself and then I pushed myself to my feet.

“Thank you, Ren. I wouldn’t have been able to fix it by myself.”

He nodded. “It was partially my fault. I shouldn’t have gone quite so far.”

We stared at each other in awkward silence for a second before I started walking towards the door. Before I reached it, however, Ren called out.

“Meet me in the Circle an hour after sundown.”

“The Circle?” I asked, confused.

“The training area.”

I nodded and walked out the door to enter my own room, questions roiling through my mind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER-DARK MAGIC

It was an hour after sundown.

Scrios had spent the day who-knew-where and had only returned around sunset to tell us to get in our pods. He didn't seem happy, so I quickly made myself scarce, lying on my bed. I also used the time to take off my bandages. Fae healed so quickly, it was astonishing. Already, the cuts I had received earlier that day had already been mostly healed, enough that I could leave the bandages off.

My face and chest were a different matter, however. I didn't know how the Fae stitches worked and I was unwilling to take it out if it might hurt it more, so I left it. The skin had already mostly closed around the fabric, leaving only a little left to go.

I opened the door to my pod. It was quiet outside. No sign of Ren. Quietly, I closed the door and walked over to the Raiser, my boots making quiet thuds on the wood that were almost indecipherable. A few minutes later, I walked into the Circle, the door left conveniently open.

Inside, Ren was practicing. A dagger lay in each hand, and he used every part of his body while he fought. His feet were constantly moving, zipping him back and forth. His arms slashed and stabbed with the daggers in intricate movements. His whole body was tight with tension, but also a sense of ease. Every movement was fluid, calculated, and completely natural.

He dropped to the ground, both blades extended, his hair in his face before he looked up and saw me. Swiftly, he stood up.

"Hello, Black."

"Ren," I nodded. We looked at each other. "Why did you ask me to come?"

"You fought viciously this morning, but you need some more work with a blade. I want to help you."

"Why?" I asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Because something about you attracts me."

"Excuse me?"

“Not like that attraction. I just meant that I want to help you.”

“I don’t know if I should be offended by that.”

“Take it as you want. Will you train with me, Black?”

“Why? You’ve been so against me since I first came.”

He shot me a look. “I’m pretty sure it was you who started the verbal sparring. Last offer. Do you want me to help you?”

I looked at him before nodding. I clearly wasn’t going to get anywhere with Scrios’ help, and this Ren was different from the one I met last night and even this morning. Something told me that this is who he really was, and I was curious to learn more, although stars knew why.

He tossed me one of the daggers and I zipped to the side before it could impale me.

“What was that for?” I yelped.

“Scared, Black?” he taunted.

I glared at him, but it was more of a friendly glare than my typical wither-on-the-spot glares. I picked up the dagger and tried to do the same crouch I did from that morning. Ren rose from his own crouch and came over to stand by me. He corrected my form before moving back to his own position, carefully to only touch lightly what was supposed to be moved.

“Ready?” he said in the same way he did that morning.

I shook my head. “Are you actually going to hurt me?”

“No,” Ren said in a hard to read tone. “This is just practice.”

“Wasn’t the other one practice?”

“It was Scrios’ definition of practice. And his way of evaluating you. I had to go through my own when I first got here.”

“Really?” I ask, straightening.

“Really, but I had to fight Scrios himself.”

“You had to face Scrios? How did you do?”

“Not much better than you did. I was bleeding from seven different cuts and a large gash to my forearm.”

He walked over and held out the arm that I didn’t injure. Sure enough, in the middle of it was a thick scar that stretched his whole forearm.

“Wow,” I said, studying his arm before shaking my head to clear it. It was as muscular as the rest of him.

“Okay,” Ren said, drawing my attention back to him. “Let’s get on with this practice.”

He had me do several drills with thrusting and slashing and then dodging attacks and attacking him myself.

“Very good, Black,” Ren praised, standing back and breathing heavily. It was now almost midnight and we had been working for hours. “I believe you have the dodging down, and that’s one of the more important parts. We can work on the thrusts and introduce feints next time.”

“And next time is?”

“Let’s do night after tomorrow, same time.”

“Night after tomorrow, hour after sundown,” I repeated, branding it into my brain, already excited. I had learned so much and it felt good. Not to mention the fact that I got to study Ren more. He was intriguing, with this whole new—more vulnerable—side of him, and I felt the need to get to know him more.

The night after tomorrow. I can wait that long. And it’s not like I’m not going to see him at all.

I shook my mind of the thoughts that felt as though they should be forbidden but also had a deep edge of curiosity to them, and pocketed the dagger I was holding.

“What are you doing?” came Ren’s accusing tone.

I glared up at him. “Taking the dagger.”

“Why?”

“You have one, don’t you?”

“Yes—”

“So?”

“Fine. Goodnight.”

He stalked away from me towards the tree, and I smiled.



“What in Siol Realta did you do?” Ren asked, looking at me with wide eyes as I exited my pod for breakfast the next morning.

I smirked and moved my head so my hair, which was now cut to shoulder-length, was even more obvious. The lock Ren had cut off the day before had driven me insane, so I finally decided just to cut it from its lower-back length.

“I cut it, you dolt.”

“I can see that,” Ren scowled into his bread.

Scrios just looked me up and down before shrugging in indifference and informing—a.k.a. commanding—us to meet him in the Circle in ten minutes.

“So that’s what you took the dagger for,” Ren said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms at me.

“Good job,” I said sarcastically. “You figured out all my motives.”

Silence filled the room as we went about our tasks, me making breakfast and him eating, before I couldn’t hold it back anymore.

“Thank you for helping me last night,” I burst, buttering up a piece of bread.

“You just insulted me and now you’re thanking me? You okay, Black?” Ren asked.

“Yes, and I’m fine, thank you very much.”

“See? You just did it again.”

“Did what?” I blinked innocently at him.

He scowled, but it was a friendlier scowl, and we ate our breakfast in silence for a few moments.

“You’re different than I thought you were, Black,” Ren said at last, looking down at his plate.

“Oh?” I said, not sure whether or not to be offended.

“You are as well,” I finally said, standing up.

“How?”

“Like I’m telling you that,” I scoffed, moving towards the Raiser. “See you in the Circle.”



“Adriana,” Scrios said from where he stood in the middle of the Circle. It had been a week since I joined Scrios and Ren in Iobairt Olc. A long week of intense battles and many more cuts, although Ren kept them small so they wouldn’t scar.

Ren’s attention was centered on Scrios. He had been pacing back and forth for the past ten minutes while forcing Ren and I stood at attention.

“Yes, Scrios?” I responded to him, staring my mentor in the eye with an unflinching stare.

“You’ve been doing well with the daggers.”

Ren gave me a little nudge with his elbow. Unlike what I had expected a week ago, this nudge was friendly and encouraging. Over the last few practice sessions, we had had I found that Ren was actually nice as well as witty, and he was definitely a good teacher. I had come far with the dagger and thank the stars he was helping because Scrios had been making us fight every morning and sometimes in the afternoon as well depending on how beaten up I got.

“Now we are going to be focusing on harnessing your Fuil.” The words startled me out of my thinking. Fuil? We hadn’t even touched on the subject since my first day, and I had been wondering when we would. It had almost been calling to me, whispering words in my ear, begging me to use it.

“How?” I asked when I realized he was looking at me.

“By practice,” Scrios said with an unimpressed look before snapping, “Get up here! You too, Ren. You can show her.”

I stepped forward until I was next to Scrios and facing Ren. Ren’s blonde hair flowed in the slight breeze against his face while his topaz eyes looked straight into mine and his mouth curved in a soft smile.

“Call your magic,” Scrios ordered Ren.

“Where to?” Ren asked.

“Your feet, obviously,” I couldn’t help but add, giving Ren a soft smirk to show that I meant no offense.

“Silence.” Scrios glared at me. “Ren, to your hands. Where she can see it.”

Ren held out a hand and instantly green Fuil intertwined with yellow streaks filtered out through his skin. Scrios started to walk around us, his hands behind his back and clothes swishing.

“The Fuil flows in your veins in place of blood, like we talked about when you first arrived, Adriana. When you summon it to use or just to hold, the Fuil rises through your skin and emerges as *Scagtha*, which means “filtered” in *Draiocht Olc*, the language of the Dorcha. *Scagtha* is the most basic form of Fuil that is able to be used. Now, you will call it into your hand like Ren.”

I placed my hand out and felt in my veins for where my magic flowed. It was sharp and cool, but in a friendly way. I grabbed it and forced it through my skin, and it rose in a substantial black mist with highlights of purple.

In my hand, it was the same feeling as it was in my veins, but stronger and more tangible.

“Good,” Scrios said, offering just about the highest praise I had received from him. “Now push it up your arms.”

Ren’s *Scagtha* travelled from his hands, up his arm to his shoulder, flaming through his shirt but not burning it, and then back down again to his hands.

Narrowing my eyes in concentration, I tried to do the same, pushing that sharp feeling up through my skin in a continuous loop all the way up to my shoulder. Once it got there, I took a breath, realizing I had stopped breathing in my concentration, and moved it in the same way back down.

I looked up to see Ren smiling at me, I gave a quick one back before turning to Scrios, who nodded, his eyes narrowed as he watched the black and purple Fuil in my hands.

“Now I want you to make a dagger with it.” Ren grabbed his *Scagtha* and started to twist it, but Scrios stuck out a hand. “No, Adriana does it by herself.”

Biting my lip, I took the *Scagtha* in both my hands and twisted and pushed it until it had a sharp point at the top, stinging edges, and a rounded area at the base for my hand. I looked up holding the now solid purple and black Fuil dagger in my hand, to see Ren looking at me with both his eyebrows raised. Apparently, he thought I wouldn’t be able to do it.

“Hmm,” Scrios said, grabbing it from my hand and turning it over. “This is called a *Lenn*. We will be working with them for the rest of the day.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

TRAINING WITH REN

“Let’s try that again.”

I leaned back and called a Lenn to my hand. It was coming easier after two whole days of practicing, and I only had to imagine the Fuil shaping the dagger until it popped into existence. The bi-colored blade shimmered in my hand as I tossed it up into the air before catching it again.

“Getting cocky, are we?” Ren asked with a smirk. It was another one of our nighttime sessions, the fourth one we’d had—not that I was counting.

“Maybe,” I agreed as I tossed it again and spun around before catching it. “I like the Lenns better. They are much easier to control.”

“You do seem to be more in tune to your Fuil than your body. Let’s try a few things.”

He called his favorite weapon, a sword, or FadaLenn as it was called when created with Fuil. He zipped toward me, his blade extended, aiming a downward cut at my head.

Instinctively, I called another Lenn to my empty left hand and crossed them above my head, so the FadaLenn got caught in the small “x” shape it made, and I twisted it away.

“See?” Ren said approvingly.

I narrowed my eyes and grinned before swinging towards him with both Lenns, one aimed at his head and the other at his other side. Startled, he used his sword to block one and ducked the other, although not quick enough as I managed to slice off a bit of his hair.

I stepped back. “And now we’re even.”

“Even?” Ren asked, running a hand through his hair, grimacing at the strand of long, blonde hair on the dirt floor of the Circle.

“Yes,” I looked at him, pleased with myself. “You snipped off a lock of my hair, forcing me to cut it like this.” I flicked my short hair to illustrate my point.

“But,” Ren started in a convincing tone, “it’s prettier like that.”

I looked at him for a second, taken aback. He thought my hair looked pretty? After the looks he had given it?

“Really?”

“Of course,” Ren responded, looking me straight in the eyes. “Just like that scar on your face.”

I brought my hand up to it, tracing the dip in my skin gently with my finger before scowling, convinced this was another one of his jokes to make fun of me.

“Haha. Very funny.”

Ren looked at me, a weird expression on his face, before shaking his head.

“Let’s continue practicing.”



“You’re on offense, I’m on defense,” Ren said as soon as I walked into the Circle. I had been at Iobairt for almost a year now, and my training had progressed significantly in both magic and physical combat. And it was all mostly thanks to Ren. We had been meeting every other night, and as a result had grown quite close. He was different than I was expecting. More solid and trustworthy versus snide and shallow.

“What’s our main focus?”

“Shielding,” Ren replied, creating a SaigheadLenn, or bow and arrow. “You won’t need any Lenns.”

I stepped back and conjured up a spade-shaped shield. For some reason, I had never been able to make it any other shapes, much to Scrios’ chagrin.

Ren calmly shot an arrow at me, and my shield held. He shot two more, aiming for the outside edges, and I moved the shield to block them.

“That’s good. Now let’s work on moving.” Ren shoved his Fuil into the ground, causing a section of the dirt to move underneath me so it continually looped around at a medium speed. I started jogging and as soon as I saw Ren shoot off an arrow, I raised my shield, filtering it through my skin and pushing it in front of me to form a glossy black and purple spade that I could still see through. Suddenly, the ground zipped me to the side, almost causing me to lose my balance. A stray arrow slipped past my shield, which flickered in my surprise, and grazed my arm. I hissed in pain, but righted myself and expanded my shield so it was taller than my head.

“Are you okay?” The handsome Fae lowered his bow, which had another green arrow of Fuil with yellow fletching nocked in it.

I nodded behind the shimmery surface and started jogging again, this time prepared for the sudden twists.

We practiced for another hour, sometimes switching who did the shields and who attacked, until the moon shone high overhead, and I dropped my shield and yawned.

“Ready to go in?”

I nodded and started walking toward the tree, Ren following me. I was startled when I felt his hand slip into mine as we exited the training area.

“Thank you again for this,” I said, looking up at the moon.

“Of course. I had the advantage of training since I was young in my family, as all Fae do.” His face darkened at the mention of his younger years, but he shook it off and continued. “Scrios had you at a great disadvantage combat-wise. But your Fuil—” he trailed off and shook his head. “Your magic is stronger than anyone I’ve ever seen. You may even be stronger than Scrios.”

“Surely not. I’ve never even seen the full strength of Scrios.”

“True, but you also only know what you feel. You’ve never had your Fuil be less or more, so what you’re feeling is completely normal for you, whereas in my opinion, it is really, really strong, especially compared to me.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but he cut me off. “I know, I know. You don’t think so. Just mull it over for a little. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He let go of my hand and stepped on the Raiser. I looked after him, emotions warring, and one that I couldn’t name eclipse all the rest. It was like how I felt about Cassie, an affection, but it was stronger and deeper and darker.

Could it be...? Surely not. I’ve never loved. And I don’t think I’ll start now, not when I’m so close to being done with my training. Plus, a true Dorcha can’t possibly love.

But another voice, sounding almost like Cassie, whispered, “What if you didn’t have to be a Dorcha?”



“Good,” Ren commended as he dodged my attack. I grinned and pushed forward, slashing at his arms, a Lenn in both hands. He blocked with a magic shield which I used as a ramp before leaping over his head and turning around to stab at his back. He whirled and blocked with his staff before aiming a slash at my head with the sharpened edge.

I jogged a few steps backward before feinting to his left and calling up two Lenns behind his back and zipping them over his shoulders, carefully controlling them so they only sliced his clothing.

“Are you trying to get me shirtless?” Ren asked with a cocky grin.

“As if,” I scoffed, creating three boulders with progressive height out of Fuil and running to the top one. Ren followed me, a wild grin on his handsome face. I collapsed the one underneath him, causing him to fall a couple feet to the floor.

“Idiot,” I said from my perch up above. Ren said something under his breath and the ground opened up underneath my black and purple pillar, causing it to sink rapidly. I jumped out of the way, barely managing to avoid falling in the crevasse.

In retribution, I raised him on a pillar of my own and collapsed it, but Ren managed to thread his Fuil underneath mine, so he had a platform to stand on. Using a boost of Fuil from my feet, I launched myself up onto the platform, simultaneously creating a wave of Lenns and FadaLenns that were aimed at Ren.

He cast a shield of his own, in the shape of a long rectangle—unlike me, he could do several shapes, such as a circle, rectangle, or triangle—that effectively blocked the sharp, magic blades.

“You’ve been getting a lot better,” Ren commented.

“Thank you,” I said, creating two long Lenns in my hands and slashing at him. He dropped his shield and called up two Lenns of his own. He slashed at my head, and I ducked, sweeping my leg across his. He toppled to the ground, and I used my Fuil to overpower him, causing the platform to collapse from underneath him.

We fell. Being prepared, I landed on my feet while Ren landed on his back, the air flying out of him in an audible *whoof*.

I jumped at him with my Lenns in my hands, but he rolled to the side, causing me to cut his shirt again. I turned to face him, but he kicked his foot into my hands, sending my Lenn flying across the Circle before pushing up off the ground and landing on his feet.

I twirled around and grabbed his arm, forcing it behind his back and securing it with a tight band of Fuil that wrapped around his chest. With my remaining Lenn, I pressed it into his back, just behind his heart and created another one that I pressed against his neck.

“Surrender?” I asked, whispering it in his ear. We both were panting from the exertion.

“Surrender,” he said, my knife cutting a little slice into his neck as he said the words. I removed the blades and collapsed all of my Fuil spells that were actively running before stepping away from him.

“Very, well done,” Scrios said from his usual perch that he had been sitting at for two years now. “You have improved greatly Adriana, and Ren, you as well. You will be receiving your final training tomorrow before you become Dorchas.”

He spun around on his heels and left, as he so often had in the past two years.

“That was amazing,” Ren said, unleashing his full smile in my direction. It was stunningly brilliant against his handsome face that had matured even more over the past two years.

“You did pretty good as well. Of course, not as well as me, but good enough.” I looked at my nails, pretending to be disinterested before looking up at him with a grin.

Our relationship had grown. We were not enemies or barely friends anymore, but something... more. What exactly, I had no clue, but we were comfortable and happy when we were together.

“Do you,” Ren started hesitantly.

“Do I... want to train more?” I guessed.

“No,” he laughed. “You’ve been training so well, I’m not sure there is anything else you can learn. I’ve almost considered asking you for lessons,” he joked before turning serious again. “I was wondering if you would like to meet me tonight. At the willow tree at the far end of Iobairt Olc.”

I almost laughed at how awkward he looked, but I just smiled. “Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, Ren. I would.”

“Okay then,” he said, looking even more awkward now. “I’ll see you later.”

He walked out the door.

“Tonight,” I said softly, smiling in anticipation.

CHAPTER NINE

THE WILLOW TREE

The willow tree.

It was a smaller tree in the corner of Iobairt Olc that was protected by the barrier, but had its own little shield of leaves, protecting its insides from view.

I had never been inside of it before, mostly sticking to the Cave, the Circle, or sometimes the grassy areas outside for when we were doing some particularly destructive training.

As I pushed through the soft fronds, my brain tuned out the smooth, light purple bark and pale green leaves of the willow and the long branches, instead focusing on the only other person in the hidden niche.

Ren.

Something about seeing him in such a calm and peaceful way, versus a training yard, made him look different. His hair was soft against his white skin and his topaz-green eyes glittered in the moonlight that seeped in through the leaves.

“Adriana,” he said softly, my name almost an exhale. “You look beautiful.”

Against my will, my cheeks turned hot. “Thank you,” I said, unsure of what else I could say. I walked over so I was closer to him. He grabbed both my hands in his, mine fitting perfectly in his large, calloused ones.

“You are so beautiful,” he repeated, looking straight into my eyes. “Like a raven in the night. Slender, gorgeous, brilliant.”

My blush deepened. No one in Rian had ever paid attention to me for good reasons, except for Matthis, and he had paid for that dearly. Although, in a way, I had as well. That incident had pushed my magic out of me and caused Abner and the rest of my foster family—besides Cassie—against me. But without that, I wouldn’t be here, right now, with this man I liked so much.

“Why did you want to meet?” I asked, my breath a little winded. “Is this because of Scrios’ announcement?”

“Yes. No. I wanted to tell you something, and I want to say it especially before tomorrow.”

He hesitated.

“Yes?” I prompted. He pulled me closer to him with his hands.

“I care for you, Adriana. I—I think I might love you.” Still looking in my eyes, he let go of my hands and wrapped them around my lower back.

“I love you too, Ren,” I whispered into the night, and suddenly, we were even closer.

Our lips met in the middle, and my Fuil exploded in my veins, leaking through my skin unbidden and forming a cloud around us. His did the same, and I felt more than watched as it came together, intertwining in a dance. Gold against black. Purple against green. My sharpness met his buttery softness, completely cancelling each other out.

And the kiss itself.

I lost track of time and sense of Fuil. He was everything I had imagined and something completely foreign at the same time. His lips were soft and warm, his hands were strong against my back and neck as he pulled me closer, his hands exploring the tips of my hair. I reached my hands up to his neck, feeling the smooth skin and silky hair, reveling in this closeness and perfect combination.

It might have been a minute or a century, but eventually we broke away, panting for air.

“That was—” Ren said, trailing off.

“Amazing? Beautiful? Perfection itself?” I suggested. Around us, our Fuil was still entwined, glimmering as the light passed through the mist.

I looked at it in wonder and then back to the man I loved. “What did our Fuil do?”

“I think it combined. I had only ever heard about it in the most extreme cases, with powerful Fae.”

“It’s beautiful,” I breathed, taking in the wonder of it again.

“Just like you,” he smiled, his eyes on me instead of the magic.

I reached my hands up and cupped his face, my body still pressed against his. Gently, I ran my thumbs over his lips and nose and cheeks until I got up to green bolts on his face. He closed his eyes at my touch but opened them when I spoke.

“What are these from? What are they?”

He stepped back, cold air rushing in to replace his warmth, and grabbed my hand, leading me behind the tree to where a rock covered in moss sat. He jumped up and pulled me up after

him. I leaned my head onto his shoulder as he wrapped an arm around my side, pulling me close.

“That,” he started, “is a long story, and I think I should start at the beginning. It includes why I came here. Do you want to hear it?”

I nodded looking at the swaying leaves, such a pretty green, as Ren shared with me his past.

“I grew up in the capital of the Moors, Eteula, with my mother, father, and three younger sisters. When I turned six, my parents were in an accident. My mother miraculously survived but she was bedridden and unable to provide for me and my siblings, since my father died. So, we moved in with my Uncle Festen. He was a hard man who had never married, and for good reason. He was cruel to my sisters, but he never physically harmed them, thank Siol Realta. Instead, he took it out on me.”

I moved my head from his shoulder to look up at him, horrified. “He—” I started before he put a finger to my lips, silencing me and moving my head back onto his shoulder.

“Every time something from work angered him or my sisters did something wrong, he would grab me and throw me in the attic with only the mice and spiders for company. Sometimes it was hours, occasionally it was days. On the roughest times though, he would come in with a blade. I was only six to barely seventeen years old and had no magic yet, so I was unable to defend myself. Yes, I had gone to school, and they teach basic combat, but that was all with blades, and I had none to my name.”

He paused and took a deep breath before continuing.

“He would come in with the knife and forcibly hold me to the wall with his magic, and while I was powerless to stop him, he would approach with the knife and cut me, laughing as the Fuil dripped down my face onto the floor and I cried out in pain.”

Ren’s arms tightened around me as he related this horrible part of his past and his voice wavered, but he still continued talking.

“He only did it five times though. The first was when he lost his job as a weaver. The second was when he was rejected by his ‘love-interest.’ That one was almost the worst.” He removed his arm from around me and traced it down the longest one that trailed from his temple to far down his cheek.

“The third was when my sisters accidentally broke a vase. After I came out of the attic, they never did it again for fear that Uncle would cut me on their faults. The fourth was just because he was mad at the world. And the fifth... the fifth time was when I had run to my mother. He said that I ‘needed to be a man’ and ‘it wasn’t right for me to go running to mommy.’”

“Oh, Ren,” I breathed softly, knowing no words could ever heal the pain and mental anguish he had been in. “But why didn’t they heal? Didn’t you have a wand?”

“We did, but I wasn’t allowed to use it, and if I’m being honest, I didn’t want to have to admit I did need it. Instead, I would go to my mother, who had powerful Fuil and could work basic healings, but they left the scars. What it did was just freeze the Fuil inside, hence why it is green colored. And that is what the fifth time was about. Uncle caught me in my mother’s room after I had just been punished for the fourth time and she was healing me. He bound me in magic in front of her and forcibly moved me to the attic. He did a lot more than just cut me, but cut me he did, and he was furious at the time, going all the way from my hairline to my nose in jagged slashes. But then my Fuil manifested and I was able to break his hold, acting purely on instinct, and escaped with my family. Uncle turned the whole guard out looking for me, so I deposited my sisters and mother with a friend and escaped into the forest, where I met Scrios. As soon as I did, I knew being a Dorcha would enable me to get revenge for me and my family.”

I turned so I faced Ren. His eyes shone with haunted look and his whole bearing drooped as he remembered those horrible years.

“Ren,” I called softly, trying to bring him out of his dark place. “Ren, I am here, and I see you. I see how strong you are. Strength comes from the inside and from the heart. Your heart is strong and it’s still beating, isn’t it? You faced those challenges, and you are stronger as a result. You, Ren, are amazing, and I love you.”

I grabbed his face and pulled it down for a gentle, sweet kiss, reminding him just how much I loved him, for I knew it really was love now.

“Thank you, Black,” he said, the nickname sounding endearing on his lips and in his deep voice. “Tell me about your childhood, since I’ve shared about mine.”

And so, I did, and we talked long into the night, sharing stories and sweet kisses, and reveling in the fact that the other person loved them so much when they were so undeserving of it.

CHAPTER TEN

THE FINAL MISSION

I walked out of my pod to see Ren waiting with a rose. “Good morning,” he said, giving the yellow colored rose to me. Its scent was like lemons, refreshing and vitalizing.

“Thank you,” I said, taking the hand he offered and walking down the two steps to the floor of the tree. He leaned in as if to kiss me, but I put a finger to his lips to stop him. “Not with Scrios watching,” I warned. He nodded and kissed the pad of my finger instead.

“Ren,” I giggled.

“I love it when you say my name, Black.”

I glared at him. “Come on. One night and you’re already acting crazy. Let’s go get some breakfast.” I grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the kitchen. He went along willingly and together we managed to whip up a batch of pancakes.

A few minutes later, Scrios walked out of his pod, as impeccable as ever. He raised a dark eyebrow at our activities.

“You are doing this... why?” he asked.

I shuffled around in my mind for a few moments, trying to come up with a believable reason that had nothing to do with Ren or me.

“Because we wanted to celebrate almost completing our training,” Ren said fluidly, covering my lapse.

“Ah, well then. I will see you in the Circle in fifteen minutes.”

“Does he ever eat?” I asked as soon as he stepped on the Raiser.

“I don’t think so,” Ren said. Adding in a conspiratorial voice, he whispered, “Maybe he just survives off of negative emotions and dark Fuil.”

“Honestly? Anything is possible with him,” I murmured as I sat down with my plate. Ren sat down across from me, a smile playing on his lips. My mind raced back to last night and the feeling of his lips on mine.

“Last night was amazing,” I said. We had stayed up long past our usual times, but it was worth the little extra bit of tiredness. Last night truly had been magical.

We ate in comfortable silence until we finished.

“Ready to go become Dorchas?” I asked as we stepped down onto the Raiser. Ren stepped onto the one behind me. And we threaded our power together to operate it. On the way down, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me so my back was against his chest. It was a really sweet and intimate moment, unfortunately broken by the stopping of the Raiser, but I stayed in the same position for a few more moments until Ren finally chuckled in my ear.

“Black?”

“Hmm?”

“We should probably go. It’s almost been fifteen minutes and we don’t want to anger Scrios.”

“Oh, yeah. Okay.” I snuggled closer.

“Black,” he laughed, gently pushing me forward.

“Fine,” I said, drawing the word out. “Let’s go.”



Scrios awaited us in the Circle.

“You’re a minute late,” he started, glaring at us before straightening his shoulders and clasping his hands behind his back and glowering down at us.

“Ren, you have been training for two and a half years. Adriana, you have been training for two years and four months, but you are at—if not past—the same level as Ren. That is why you both will be graduating into full Dorchas. You have practiced your combat and your magic as well as studied our history. You are ready.”

I grabbed Ren’s hand in mine, not really caring that Scrios would be able to see. We were finally going to be Dorchas. Ren could finally avenge all his pain and I—I could survive on my own and control my magic. I didn’t want anything else. Besides Ren. I wanted to be with Ren forever.

“But, to prove it, you will have one final test. One final mission. And then you will receive your horns.”

Ren straightened at the mention of horns, but I looked at Scrios, confused. “Horns?”

“Right. Your upbringing. I told them...” He cut off the rest of his sentence with a scowl. “When a Fae becomes a full Dorch, they receive a pair of horns or some artifact like that that amplifies their power.” He gestured to the spikes that rose out of his shoulders. “These are my horns.”

“What is the final mission?” Ren asked in a calm voice, but knowing him as well as I did, I sensed the underlying excitement that seemed to buzz under his skin.

“First, I want you to fight me, both of you against me, then, once you have proved yourself worthy, I will tell you the final mission. You have thirty seconds to strategize.”

He turned his back and walked over to the weapons rack.

“What should we do?” I asked Ren in a whisper.

“Your Fuil is stronger, so you take the magic side. I’ll keep him engaged with physical combat—”

We strategized until we had an outline and then took up our positions against Scrios.

In his hands, he held two swords, long and wickedly sharp. Ren and I took up our positions against him. I called up a cloud of Fuil around Ren and I, carefully making it so Ren could see through it, but Scrios couldn’t see us.

“Begin,” Scrios called as he launched into my mist. I instantly raised a shield and felt triumph as he rammed into it, but it was short-lived as he dashed around the edges before I could move it and the clang of blades sounded as Scrios found Ren.

“Black!” Ren called, and I responded by raising him on a pillar of Fuil, keeping the mist around me. Scrios, now visible, turned around and spotted me before leaping at me. Stumbling backward, I created a shield with one hand and threw him up on another pillar.

Scrios scowled down at me before taking a gigantic leap to Ren’s platform. I expanded it, giving Ren space to move around high above me while I mentally scanned through possible attacks.

I suddenly cut off the Fuil flowing to the platform, causing both the men to fall. I caught Ren with a hardened layer of Fuil, but left Scrios to fend for himself. To my surprise, during the whole fall, Ren kept his sword in his hands and a concentrated look on his face, never once stumbling as he fell. It warmed my heart with the trust he placed in me.

Scrios landed on his feet, Ren landing at the same time and they leapt into battle again. Locating an area near the edge of the oval that fit my purposes, I readied my spells underneath the ground, near the surface, but carefully not on top of the mused dirt.

I was about to send a shimmer of Fuil to the spot in a signal that Ren and I had worked out when planning, when I paused. Wouldn't Scrios recognize that we were trying to get him over there?

Instead, I grew walls over the whole Circle, creating a maze around us. I placed myself at the top of one of the boulders so I could watch their progress. Ren was pushing Scrios down one of the openings I had created. I built a wall behind them so Scrios couldn't push Ren back the way they had come. They continued fighting down the maze I had created, and I kept myself busy cautiously steering them in the right direction and placing walls to guide them to my trap and occasionally intervening with a shield to protect Ren from one of Scrios' more vicious blows. By this time, Ren had quite a few cuts, but was still going strong and even Scrios had some nicks from Ren's blade.

Finally, after several more turns, Ren pushed Scrios into my trap. Dropping all the walls around them besides the one I was standing on, I pushed my trap up while sending a force of wind to push Ren back from the protruding walls. From my vantage point I could see it had worked well. Four massive walls shot up around Scrios, boxing him in tight. Embedded in the walls were Lenns of all shapes and sizes, most of them slicing up as the walls made their ascent. I grew eight more Lenns from the walls, four of the surrounding his neck and four of them around his heart, digging their points in to draw pinpricks of Fuil.

"Surrender?" I called, keeping a calm look on my face even as I felt him trying to overpower me. I pushed the Lenns into his skin just a little further, carefully avoiding any big veins or arteries.

"Surrender," he called calmly, and I let all my Fuil drop, walking over to Ren. I hugged him, thankful for our victory and not caring about the Fuil that got on my clothing.

"We won," I said into his shoulder.

"We did. Great job, Black."

"Well, I couldn't have faced off Scrios with a sword for more than two seconds, much less ten minutes."

Ren opened his mouth to reply, but he was cut off by Scrios and we sprang apart, although we kept our hands clasped.

“That was very well done. Ren, excellent moves with the blade. Adriana, I would have preferred you to use your combat, but seeing that your Fuil is stronger, I agree with your tactics.”

“Did we pass?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, and I released a breath I didn’t even know I was holding. Ren squeezed my hand.

“What’s the mission?” he asked calmly, but his eyes burned in anticipation.

“When I say this, you must tell me the first person that comes to your mind.” He paused while we nodded. “Who is the person, besides the people in this room”—he looked at our intertwined hands with disgust— “that you care about the most?”

My mind went to one person and one person only.

“Cassie,” I said immediately.

“Mother,” Ren answered.

Scrios’ black eyes glittered.

“Then in order to become Dorchas, you will go to your childhood homes, and you will murder that person you just told me. You leave tomorrow at dawn.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BACK TO RIAN

Dawn.

Of course, it was a pretty dawn, with greens and purples and pinks in the sky that was the exact opposite of my black, grieving heart.

Cassie. I had to go back to Rian and kill Cassie. I had to murder her so I could become a true Dorcha.

I was walking in the direction I had come from two years earlier. How long ago that had seemed. I had grown in more ways than one since then. I now knew my heritage—fine, not all of it, but I knew I was Fae—and I could operate my magic and wield blades. Not only had I changed in that way, but I had also grown taller and lither, my face filling out and my frame taking on muscle.

I wondered how Cassie had grown. Were her eyes still blue like the calm ocean? Or her hair still the soft blonde framing her heart-shaped face? Did she still remember me and care for me? Would she—

I cut off my thoughts. I shouldn't be focusing on Cassie, but on the mission. Focus only on the mission. My mind replayed the morning only a few hours ago.

"Remember," Scrios told us, "you must kill them in cold blood in front of one other witness. Once you do so, take their blood and you can take your rightful place among the great Dorchas."

He had turned around, leaving Ren and I alone.

"Are you okay?" Ren asked me, concern in his eyes. He knew Cassie was so important to me, not just because she was the one I had named, but because I had talked about her so much last night underneath the willow. She had been in almost every one of my childhood stories and had been there for the biggest milestones in my life.

And she'll be there for this one.

I quickly walked up to a tree and banged that thought out of my head.

No, I told myself, *just no*.

I forcibly brought myself back to this morning.

“I’ll be fine,” I had said to Ren, determination in every line of my body. “I have to become a Dorcha. So I can be with you.” My gaze softened and I ran my hand down the scar in the middle of his forehead. Like he had said the night before, it was jagged and bigger than any of the other ones.

“Will you be okay, Ren?”

“Yes,” He breathed, leaning his head into my palm. “I have to be. I have to get my revenge on Uncle and so I can protect my sisters. And then I can be with you.”

My heart ached for him. I was naturally callous and sharp, but Ren—Ren was soft and charming and not made to kill at all.

“You can do this,” I whispered before pressing a quick kiss to his lips and turning around to walk out of the barrier.

A sharp whistle followed by a caw and screech caused me to leave my reminiscing behind and look up into the long, dark trees. It was a Whistlesharp, as I had learned from Scrios. They were my favorite of the Fae creatures. Sharp, beautiful, and dangerous, just like me.

Ahead of me, the barrier shimmered into existence. Ren had to go to Eteula, the capital of the Moors, but I had to cross the barrier and the hills over into Auranor.

“Ready?” I asked myself, before shaking my head. Of course, I was ready. I was going to become a Dorcha and be with Ren, in fact, I should be running over the barrier.

I put my hand up to the barrier. “I am Adriana Gothen, Daughter of the Fae, wielder of the Fuil. Let me through as it is my birthright.”

At the words Scrios had taught me, the barrier opened. Apparently, it had only opened before because my Fuil had forced its way through, a fact that made Scrios examine me in a different, slightly more uncomfortable, way.

And then it was just the hills of Auranor between me and Rian.

“You *will* become a Dorcha,” I told myself. “And you *will* come back with your horns and birthright. You are powerful and will always be stronger than this.”

And I took the first step towards Cassie and my future.



Rian was just as I remembered it.

Smoke rose from the smokestacks in the early hours of the morning. The dawn light illuminated the twenty-three houses that lined the main road and branched out. Even at this hour, I could see people out and about. Mrs. Smith was watering her flowers. Hratha was gathering firewood for the forge while her husband went about getting it lit. The baker's daughter was kneading dough inside her mother's shop—and then I saw her.

Cassie was walking along the path to the well, the bucket—the same bucket I had used two years ago—swung at her side as she skipped down the road. Her blonde hair bounced behind her, a beacon in the morning light.

Seeing her, my heart ached. Did I really have to kill her? Was this really the only path?

I slammed those words back, locking them off behind multiple walls and pits in my mind. I felt my face close as a blank and lethal look overtook it.

“No Adriana,” I said aloud. “No, you are not allowed to think those thoughts. You *will* do this and then you will return, with your horns, so that you can be a Dorcha and be with Ren.

As I started down the hill, taking the same path I had that fateful—no, glorious—day, I forced thoughts of Ren into my mind.

His sweet manner that was the perfect contrast to my sharp edges.

His adorable smile that lit up his face.

The training sessions we had under the cover of night.

The kiss in the willow leaves that had left no room for thought.

The magic of our Fuil entwining.

Ren's past and how hard he's fought to overcome it.

How it had only been two days since we parted, and I missed him so much already.

By the time I finished, I had reached the city limits. I called my Fuil, and it rose along my arms. To my surprise, it wasn't just black and purple, but had streaks of pale green entwined. I hadn't even noticed it during the final bout with Scrios. The new accent was the color of my eyes—and the color of Ren's magic.

He's with me even here.

Gathering the Scagtha, I formed it so it flowed over my body. Over my head and hair, the loose black shirt I wore and the flexible black pants and boots. Within the span of a few minutes, I was completely concealed. I smirked as I walked into the village, sticking to the

shadows, and the villagers who went around their morning routine, completely unaware of the “witch” in their midst.

The smells were almost the same as well. The slight scent of manure and hay drifted on the air, but it was overpowered by the sweet smell of flowers and bread. Clanging came from the forge as Grog started on his day’s orders and chopping came from the butcher.

The squeak of the well accompanied my arrival in the small square. Cassie lifted her bucket off the hook, some of the water sloshing over the edge, and hefted it into the air, carrying it back to her house. I walked behind her, noticing the differences.

She was taller now, with a limber but strong frame. She still wore her light blue summer dress that reached down to her knees and swished as she walked back and forth. Her face was still soft and rounded with heart-shaped cheeks and sea-blue eyes. She had changed so much and yet not at all.

“Cassie!” Abner called from inside the house, and my mood soured—not that it was particularly overjoyed to begin with.

“Coming,” Cassie responded as she opened the wooden door with her back, some of the water sloshing onto her dress. “Oh, stars,” she said, placing the bucket down on the counter and examining her dress. It wasn’t a big spot and would dry in an hour or two.

Abner walked into the room, and I was reminded very forcefully of his words and hard face the last time I was in this house. In the depth of my cold heart, I admitted to myself that his words had cut me. He had been my only brother, but apparently not.

But now, his face was smiling as he looked at his sister—his *true* sister. “You got to be more careful, Cassandra.”

“That’s Cassie to you,” she responded, sticking her tongue out at him.

Abner walked over and peered into the bucket. “Wow, we might have to send you back to the well since most of this water is on your dress.”

Cassie squawked. “It is not! You can still see the rim of water in the bucket from here.”

“Fine,” he said, messing with her hair.

“Cassie,” Lori called from the living room. “Have you fetched the water?” She walked into the kitchen, and I could feel the scowl deepen on my face. It had not escaped me that one moment she was calling me her daughter and a few hours later didn’t care if I lived or died. Maybe I’d make her my witness. I wanted to hurt her and hurt her deeply.

While I was seething, Lori grabbed the bucket from Cassie and told her to go and change her dress. As I followed her into the living room, I saw with satisfaction that in the corner, there was indeed still a blue dye stain from my escape two years ago. It was just the thing that would get on Lori's perfectionist nerves, and I hoped that every time she looked at that spot she remembered what she had done to me.

Cassie walked up the stairs and changed out of her blue dress into a light pink shirt and khaki pants. She paused by the mirror and looked over into the corner to where my bed used to sit. Now, it was long gone with only a slightly darker color in the wood from the lack of sunlight during the nine years I had slept there. Cassie pressed her forehead into the mirror.

"I miss you, Adriana," she whispered. "I wonder where you are. What you are doing. If you miss me."

I do miss you, and I'm right here. But you're never going to know that.

She looked up and pointed her eyes in the mirror directly to where I was standing. I could see myself in the mirror, my dark hair, pale skin, blood-red lips, and pale green eyes a stark contrast to her sunny hair, rosy skin, pink lips, and blue eyes. We were opposites. Light and dark.

But no, she can't see me. Cassie sighed, as if thinking the same thing before turning back to go down the stairs. I stood to the side and let her pass, lingering in the loft for a few more minutes.

"Tonight," I breathed. "Tonight, I will finish this business and be with Ren. I will fulfill my magic and my heart. Tonight."

CHAPTER TWELVE

MURDER AND MYSTERY

Night fell and the new moon rose with it.

I was jumpy with nerves and adrenaline. *Tonight. Tonight. Tonight*, pounded my head. I would do it tonight. I had to. For me, for my master, for Ren.

I had laid on Cassie's bed all day, listening to the sounds of my previous, adopted family downstairs and planned out exactly what I was going to do.

Scrios had mentioned that we needed a witness and after careful debate, I had chosen one. I suspected that instead of just a simple witness, it needed to be someone who was emotionally invested in the person, and there was only one person who I wanted to witness it. One person who had hurt me with his words, who had rejected me, when deep down, I really had considered him a brother.

The plan was as good as I was going to get. I knew Cassie. She had a schedule, and she had stuck to it every day that I knew her in the past. Hopefully it hadn't changed in the last two years.

If I was correct, then an hour past sundown, Cassie would excuse herself and walk up the stairs to get ready for bed. Ten minutes later, Lori, Danny, and Abner would come up and they would talk over the day. Then Lori, Danny, and Abner would go to bed themselves. There was one exception. Every new, half, and full moon, Abner would stay for a few extra minutes and Cassie would try to pry the latest girl drama of the past few days. They called it their "sibling bonding time." I had once been a part of it. Seeing Abner blush as Cassie taunted him about Annabele or Kathrine had been hilarious, but tonight, there would be a whole other sort of drama.

I heard the creak of furniture as someone rose. Cassie's voice filtered up to the loft. She was telling them that she was going to get ready for bed.

Quietly, I moved to the corner, double-checking that the Fuil was still hiding me. Cassie's blonde head appeared at the top of the ladder. Her face was bright as she looked in the mirror and smiled at herself, taking a seat on the bench.

Watching her take pins out of her hair and run a comb through it, completely at ease and relaxed, caused a flicker of grief to rise up. Was this really the right thing to do? She was my best friend and the only person who truly understood me. She knew my past and my favorite color and how I hated lettuce.

I ruthlessly shoved the thoughts down and placed wall after wall after wall around my heart. My face was closed and lethal. There was one other person now who knew all of that. My mind conjured the image of Ren in the willow, his blonde hair whipping around his face, his tall build well-muscled and full of strength.

“Come on, Adriana,” I whispered under my breath, needing the physical sound. “You can do this. You *better* do this. It’s almost time.”

Lori and Danny were now climbing the ladder, Abner behind them. As they started their nightly discussion, I stared at them, not really seeing. Internally, I was building a wall around my heart. Brick on top of brick on top of brick. Finally, once that was done, I filled the ten-foot-deep hole with water, drowning all my feelings.

“Goodnight, darling,” Lori called, giving her a hug, and heading down the ladder.

“See you in the morning,” Danny called, landing a quick kiss on the top of her head.

“Yep, night Cassie,” Abner said, turning around. She reached out and grabbed his arm, pulling him onto the bed beside her.

“Ah-ah-ah. Not you,” she said, trying to give him a stern look before collapsing backward in a fit of giggles. She had never been able to hold a serious face. The only time I had ever seen it was when I had last been in the house and she was standing up to her family in defense of me.

“It was worth a try,” Abner said, shrugging his shoulders before laying back beside her.

Taking a breath and schooling my face, I took a step forward, calling Fuil to my hands. I weaved it around the loft until we were surrounded in a bubble of black smoke intertwined with purple and pale green streaks.

Abner shot up as soon as I weaved it over their heads, blocking the view of the stars. “What is that?” he asked, looking around. Cassie followed him, looking around in confusion.

Briefly closing my eyes, knowing that there was no return from this, I stepped forward into the light, dropping my invisibility as I did so.

Abner and Cassie stared at me in surprise, taking in my new, older appearance with the shoulder length hair, scar on my cheek, and lean, muscled body from the long nights of working with Ren. Cassie stood up first, shock written all over her usually sunny face.

“A-Adri?” she asked.

A ripple echoed through the well in my heart. I had forgotten what my nickname sounded like on her lips.

On the outside, though, I kept a cold, blank face. “Hello, Cassie.”

“What are you doing here, *witch*,” Abner spat, pushing Cassie behind him.

“Abner,” Cassie hissed, “she’s not a witch.”

“Then how do you explain this?” He waved a hand at the swirling mass of Fuil around them.

“Technically, I’m a Fae,” I said, my voice frosty. “Not a witch. And careful, the Fuil can get irritated if you call it magic.” I held up a palmful of sparking Fuil to prove my point.

Cassie pushed past Abner and walked over to me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. Up close, I could see that I was still taller than her. She had to stand on her tiptoes just to be able to hug me properly.

I forced my body to stay rigid and cold underneath the heat from Cassie that threatened to melt me. She pulled back and looked at me, confusion and hurt written all over her face. Her eyes rested on the scar on my cheek, and she inhaled sharply. Reaching up a shaking hand, she ran her finger over it. Her gentle touch caressed the skin from underneath my eye to the side of my face, but I kept my face still and my eyes on hers. Another ripple shook the well.

“What happened to you?” she whispered. “Where have you been, Adri? I’ve missed you so much every day.”

“And what are you doing here?” Abner demanded, walking forward, and tugging Cassie away from me while glaring.

“I’ve been training,” I said simply. “And as for why I’m here—” I trailed off, my eyes flicking to Cassie and away again.

Abner narrowed his eyes at me, before yelling, “Mom! Dad! Come upstairs. Now! The witch is back.”

He paused for a second before yelling again.

“Mom! Dad!”

I allowed a small smirk to cross my face. “They can’t hear you. The barrier of Fuil blocks sound from reaching inside and outside.”

His eyes widened and he turned to Cassie, whispering something in her ear before turning to me, taking a threatening step forward. “I’m going to ask you one more time. What are you doing here?”

“Funny how you think that you have the power here.”

I took a step towards them. Abner shoved Cassie towards the bed and pulled a dagger from his boot.

“Abner, no!” Cassie called struggling to sit up. I flicked strips of Fuil that I had prepared at him. They pulled him to the wall, curving around his wrists, ankles, neck, and waist to hold him fast. His dagger dropped to the floor as he tried to struggle out of the bonds.

I walked over to Cassie, my inner well trembling, but I filled it with even more water, trying to drown the feelings. I had to do this. For me. For Ren. For our future together.

She was still lying on the bed, trying to struggle out of the blanket that had gotten tangled over her. She stopped struggling as I leaned over her so I could whisper in her ear. Her heart was beating rapidly, and her breath came in short gasps.

“I love you, Cassie. I’m so, so sorry, but I have to do this. For me and for Ren.”

Before I could overthink it, I formed a Lenn in my hand and plunged it into her heart.

Cassie gasped in shock before whispering weakly, “Ren? You found love? I’m so... happy.” Blood splattered on her lips on the last words, and she breathed at one last breath before going still.

“NO!” Abner cried, struggling against the bonds even harder.

With a blank mind, I reached my hand into the blood that was welling out of her chest until it came out covered in red. A second later I had a small vial filled with the blood. Turning, I crossed through my barrier easily, leaving Abner crying out in grief and sending ugly words my way. I brushed them off. I had accomplished my purpose.

Once I was outside the house, flicked my wrist and a thud sounded as Abner dropped to the floor. He yelled and shocked cries rose from the household, eventually spilling into the rest of the village.

I collapsed against the outer wall of the house and the well around my heart shattered, gallons of water and feelings pouring out. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I mourned the

loss of my best friend and my innocence. I allowed myself to break for only a few minutes before I slammed the wall back around my heart.

Taking a breath, I took the hand coated in Cassie's blood and pressed it onto my face, pulling it away as soon as I felt the warm, sticky substance cling to my skin. As I did so, I felt a change take place in my body. It was sharp and pricked like a thousand needles and knife edges, but I embraced it. Let the pain come. I was Dorcha. I was pain.

I walked out of the village, not bothering to hide myself with Fuil. Let them know what I did. Let them see my handiwork.



The hills passed underneath my feet as I felt the blood dry on my face and my power grow. A couple villagers had tried to come after me with pitchforks and torches, but I easily confused them in a haze of Fuil.

As I reached the Moors, the barrier opened in front of me without any words or actions on my part. I smirked at it. I was the all-powerful being here. I was the one in charge. It bowed to *me*, not the other way around.

"Adriana Gothen," a deep male voice sounded from the shadows next to me.

I turned to see two Fae, a man, and a woman, facing me.

"And you are?" I asked coldly. I didn't feel like small talk.

"We are part of the High Council, and we need to talk to you."

"Why?"

They stepped into the light. I could see that they were much older than me, around Scrios' age. They wore long, flowy, white robes with three stars and some dots around them.

As they came closer, the female sucked in a breath. "Marcas, is that—? But no—surely not."

The man—Marcas—placed a comforting hand on the female's shoulder before turning to me.

"Where have you been, Adriana Gothen?" he asked.

"How do you know my name?" I countered.

“Just answer the question, girl,” Marcos said.

“Fine, I’ve been in the Moors. Happy?”

“We don’t have time for your sass,” he said impatiently.

“Why do you have a blood mark on your face?” the woman asked with a quivering voice.

“Because I just killed my best friend. Can I go now?”

“You what?” Bree shrieked, causing a couple of birds to fly into the sky.

“Calm down, Bree. It will be okay.”

“No, Marcos. No, it won’t. She’s the Prophesied! She can’t go around killing humans.”

I was about to walk off when I heard the word “prophesied.” Spinning on my heels, I turned to face them.

“Prophesied? What do you mean?”

“We’ll tell you if you answer this one thing first,” Marcos said. “Who have you been training with?”

“Scrios,” I said. “Now tell me about this prophesy.”

Bree fainted.

“You’ve been training with Astri?” Marcos said in disbelief. “Then it’s all gone as we feared,” he mumbled to himself.

“Marcas,” I snapped. “I’ve just murdered someone I care about, and I want to go home. Tell me what in the stars this prophesy is.”

His voice took on a deeper, less human tone.

“Born of the Seed. Sacred to the Kind. Power freed, protect or destroy, she shall find. Siol Realta you shall heed.”

He paused and his eyes were taken over by a sparkly white film.

“World beware, if light is less than vigilant, then the time has come, for the Maleficent.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE HORNS

“W—What was that,” Bree asked, propping herself up on the floor from where Marcos had laid her.

“I don’t know,” Marcos said, his voice was a little dazed and he shook his head as if to clear it. The film over his eyes disappeared.

“It almost sounded like a second verse to the Prophecy,” she muttered to herself before turning her big brown eyes on me. “You must come with us, Adriana.”

“I don’t think so,” I said, starting to walk away.

I felt a *woosh* of air fly a foot away from my face. A Lenn with obviously dull edges slid down a tree trunk about three feet from where I was standing.

I slowly spun back to face the High Councilmembers. Bree was lunging forward with one arm out from throwing the projectile. I slowly raised one eyebrow.

“You can consider that a warning,” Marcos said in an authoritative tone.

I just raised my eyebrow higher.

“You think that was a *warning*? This is a warning.”

I whipped two Lenns to my hands and threw them at Bree and Marcos. They landed an inch away from their necks in the tree behind them. Bree started shaking in her boots.

“Regardless,” she trembled, “you need to come with us. It’s essential. Please. For your people?”

I scoffed. “My people? Seriously? Where are we standing now? On the border, that’s where. I was raised in Auranor because *someone* didn’t want me here. The Fae are not my people.” I paused before adding. “And I’m done with this. I’m going home. *These* shots are not warning ones.”

I flicked my hands at them as I turned around, ignoring the cries of pain as a Lenn embedded itself in Bree’s shoulder and Marcos’ thigh. They would survive, unless they were too idiotic to get back to Eteula. Which, honestly, I wouldn’t put it past them. Warning shot indeed.



The familiar, massive tree felt like home. I walked up to it and tapped the pattern on the leaves. *Left. Left. Right. Right. Down. Down. Down. Right. Up. Left.*

The leaves stayed still.

I frowned at it. That was the correct pattern. I had been doing it for the past two years, and I didn't believe that Scrios would change it, especially when Ren and I were both away on this mission.

I tried it again. *Left. Left. Right. Right. Down. Down. Down. Right. Up. Left.*

This time, the leaves shivered under my touch, and I recognized that I used the hand covered in Cassie's blood for the passcode.

That shouldn't matter to a tree though. It's a tree, not a person.

This time however, the leaves opened, and I saw my home. Iobairt looked exactly like it always did. The Circle in one corner, the willow in another, the purple grass, and, finally, the great tree in the middle.

I strode down the paths, walking briskly and launched myself up the Raiser. It barely took any thought now versus the troubles I had when I first entered this realm two years ago.

How much I had changed since then. How much I had changed since I had even left Rian the day before.

For one, when I left, Cassie was still alive. Now she was gone, and I was returning from murdering her.

But you did it for you and Ren. She even said at the end that she understood. Sort of.

At the top of the Raiser, Scrios was waiting for me.

As he saw the bloody handprint on my face, I could have sworn he smiled. *Actually* smiled.

"Your mission was successful," he said, leaving no room for questions on the matter.

"Yes, master." I drew the vial of blood from the small pouch at my side.

His smile grew even wider.

"Come, tell me your story while I prepare."

He walked towards the Raiser and sent his power through the tree, speeding down it. I followed, surprised when he was walked around the tree. I had assumed there was nothing behind there, but sure enough, there was another dome like the Circle.

Inside, smoke billowed from a long, hallowed out plant stem over a purple fire. Instruments like scalpels and pliers hung on the wall while all sorts of jars and boxes filled shelves underneath, some shaking and hissing.

Scrios walked over to a bench on the left side of the door and motioned for me to sit down, while he went over to the plant stem.

“I walked to Rian,” I started, assuming that is what he had wanted. “I observed Cassie for the day until I plotted out when and where I would do it. Then I killed her and took her blood.”

“And your witness?”

“Her brother, Abner Strong.”

“Very good.”

After a few more minutes, he grabbed a pair of tongs and lifted the plant stem and carried it over to the table. I stood and wandered over to the end where he was.

Carefully, he poured half of it onto the table. It spread in a shimmering, silvery pattern before making a symbol with two spikes and a curved line through them.

“Now add the blood.”

At Scrios’ command, I took the blood vial and dumped it into the curve of the symbol. The silver mixed with the blood, drawing its attention to the stark contrasts.

Following Scrios’ orders, I dipped both my hands in the mixture. It was cold and sharp and felt like a thousand needles stabbing every nerve. I smiled through the pain. It was another form of magic, and my body pulled it into itself. The table was a lot deeper than it appeared, and I cupped my hands to bring the liquid up.

Scrios and I walked outside, the mixture still in my hands.

Looking straight up at the branches, I raised my hands above my head and let the substance fall from my hands.

Ice ran down my back.

Electric shocks sizzled on my head.

My Fuil responded, rushing around me. It grew in power and strength, as if a wall had been removed and my power was flooding out to encompass me. It continued to gush out. Soon, the whole willow space was foggy with black, green, and purple. But Fuil still poured from me.

The liquid ran down my face, over my eyes, down the bridge of my nose and across my lips. I tasted pure power and the metallic hint of blood.

The substance formed together, solidifying to form something on top of my head. My power slowed to a trickle. The Fuil was so thick I couldn't see my hand in front of my face, much less Scrios.

Something tickled my mind, and I spoke one word. "Come."

The Fuil rushed in on me, pricking my skin as it flowed back into my bloodstream. I flexed my hands with the pain and rolled my neck. Pain was power in this new world. Suffering and torment brought more power to those who were strong enough to face the pain.

As the fog cleared, the figure of Scrios was revealed. He was on his knees in front of me, his mouth opened in awe.

"Born of the Seed. Sacred to the Kind. Power Freed. It's true."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I heard that earlier today. What exactly does that prophecy mean?"

Scrios was instantly alert and on his feet.

"Who told you that?"

"High Councilmembers Bree and Marcos."

"They found you?"

"As I was crossing the border back into the Moors."

"Did they follow you?"

I glared at him. "Did you really just ask that? Of course not. Bree tried to send a 'warning' shot at me as I tried to leave, but she quickly discovered that my shots aren't warning ones that go a foot wide."

"Good." He stared off behind me.

"What does the prophecy mean?" I snapped. Apparently, he was going to take some prodding.

“What all did you hear?”

“Born of the Seed. Sacred to the Kind. Power freed, protect or destroy, she shall find. Siol Realta you shall heed. World beware if light is less than vigilant, then the time has come, for the Maleficent.”

I said, not very patiently.

“Th—there’s a second part?” Scrios stuttered, looking at me in shock. He was completely different from the cold, hidden Scrios I knew beforehand. Apparently that role now fell to me.

“Yes,” I said coldly. “Now, explain.”

“Then I must be doing something right,” he muttered before looking up at me. “That is the Prophecy of the Moors. It came to us the last night I was a High Councilmember. It foretold of a girl with raven black hair who would come to us from *Siol Realta*, the Starseed. The Starseed dictates our lives and controls our destinies. This girl had the power to protect or destroy, depending on where she ended up. Councilmembers Bree, Marcas, and Nessa wanted you to go to Auranor, but I was convinced that you needed to stay in the Moors and be trained in our ways.

“When Highest Councilmember Conall expressed his agreement with the rest of the High Council, I killed him, but before I could find you, Nessa had already given you to Raina. I did get my revenge on her in the end. But my greatest revenge was having you stumble into my arms, sharp, but unrefined. I trained you, and now having you become dark—it’s the greatest, most twisted outcome.”

“How do you know my adoptive mother’s name was Raina?”

Scrios looked at me, his eyes cold and hard.

“Because I killed them.”

My heart skipped a beat in my chest. I knew it. The first time I saw him in the Moors, his shadowy figure reminded me of the person in the flames.

“What did you do to Nessa?” I asked, latching onto another question.

“Technically she did this to herself.” He waved at the tree. “When I confronted her after she had given you away, she turned herself irreversibly into a sapling. A sapling that has grown to be your home.”

I looked at the tree again. That could explain why she had been so against me when I first arrived and then again when I tried to come in with Cassie’s blood on my hands.

I walked over to the trunk and lightly ran my fingertips over the bark before leaning in. “I’m glad you can see what good your sacrifice did.” I conjured a Lenn into my hand and slashed the bark at it. The leaves rippled almost painfully in response, and I smiled.

“Now we just need Ren,” Scrios said. “I will go and prepare more Siol Leacht.”

I turned and walked up the stairs to my pod. Inside, it was exactly the same. It was me who had changed.

In the mirror, my face was a garish mix of blood, Siol Leacht, and pale skin. The red handprint covered almost my whole face, striking against my pale skin tone. It was streaked with lines of silver. My pale green eyes shone against all the red and the silver and added a sophisticated look. My ruby-red lips were dripping with dark blood and shimmering silver.

On my head, however, was the most change. Black horns rose into the air, curving in and then out. All of my hair was pulled into the solid structure, and the emptiness highlighted the sharp lines of my face. Power thrummed from inside of them, and I could feel the Fuil multiplying inside of it.

“You are now a Dorcha, Adriana,” I told myself. “There’s no going back.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

REN'S RETURN

Two days passed without any sign of Ren.

I knew that it could take him a while since he had much further than I had to travel since Eteula was all the way at the other end of the Moors, but I was still worried.

What if something had gone wrong?

What if he had been caught?

I shook the thoughts out of my head and focused back on my practice. The horns amplified my already extensive power so much, some part of it was always flowing around me.

I used my Fuil to bring several dozen boulders into the air, dropping the power source once they were head-level. In the same instant, I created dozens of Lenns and threw them in a storm of sharp edges at the falling boulders.

As the deafening thud of the rocks being crushed sounded, I launched myself into the air in a back flip and twisted so I landed on a platform I had created only a second before. I yelled as I ran off the platform, flipping before I hit the ground, and slashed at an imaginary figure.

Next, I spun and ran towards the wall, creating FadaLenns and thrusting them into the wall at regular intervals. I ran up them, ascending towards the top, while shooting with a SaigheadLenn at the ground.

Once I reached the top, I leapt off, landing in the circle of arrows. I set them on fire and used wind to raise the flames high above my head. Using the circle as a pen, I created a man of Fuil and struck all of the vital points. Raising my arms above my head, I pulled downward, bringing rain that doused the flames.

I ran towards the middle of the Circle and started again. Sweat dripped from my brow as I slashed, spun, and created full shields of Fuil that I attacked.

Finally, after a couple hours, I finally sat down on the torn-up ground. Rock pieces littered the floor while there were massive faults in the dirt from where I had literally ripped up the ground and scorch marks from the fires.

I panted, resting my head on one leg while my other one was extended in front of me. My shirt was plastered to my chest, damp with sweat, while my pants were also glued to my skin. My horns glistened on my head, still multiplying my Fuil.

I looked up and looked around. I might be physically tired, but I felt so much better mentally. Using Fuil was almost effortless now and I could do multiple things at once.

I can't wait to show Ren—whenever he decides to get here.

It couldn't be too much longer. It had taken me two days for my own adventure, the time he would need to travel the whole way to Eteula, and then if it took him one day to complete his task and two days to travel back, that would leave him at arriving today.

With a sigh, I stood up.

I was used to seeing him multiple times every day. This new separation felt wrong. I just wanted to be in his arms again. It was the only thing I wanted. Ever since I had killed Cassie, I felt empty and darker. I had basically stopped caring about everything; I was a shell, except for when it came to Ren. Ren was my light. He would save me from the darkness that was festering and growing inside of me.

I walked out of the Circle, leaving my mess behind me. Scrios never trained from what I could see, and if he wanted to, he could clean up the mess himself.

I was almost to the tree when I decided that I just didn't want to walk anymore. Using the Fuil flowing around me, I placed it under my feet, so it carried me. Not even bothering with the Raiser, I just floated right up the side of the massive tree that I now knew was Nessa.

I continued my path to my pod. I stayed in it for the rest of the day. There was no sign of Ren, and I just laid on my bed, replaying my practice and correcting what I could do.

Several hours later, Scrios' pod door closed with a slam. Not knowing what else to do, but wanting to get out of my pod, I opened my door and walked over to the edge of the tree. Catching sight of the willow, I decided to go there. I had been missing Ren all day, why not go there and relive that sweet night we had only a few moons ago?

I had already taken a step towards the Raiser when a thought struck my head. I turned around and ran off the edge of the tree.

Wind rushed around my ears, catching on my horns. I didn't struggle at all but instead enjoyed the peace of almost dying. When I was less than ten feet above the ground, I send Fuil underneath me to create a platform that I landed on with a hard "oof."

I laughed up at the branches through the pain. That felt so good. Why had I never done it before?

Wanting just a little bit more, I collapsed the cushion and fell onto the hard, stone-strewn dirt. Rocks dug into my neck, arm, hip, and side, but I didn't care.

I stood up and made my way over to the willow. It was beautiful in the crescent moon. It was mostly shrouded in darkness except for a few iridescent glimmers off of the pale green leaves.

Inside, it was just as gloomy. The tree trunk was barely visible, but some moonlight shown through, illuminating just enough for me to see. I moved so I could run my fingers over the bark. It was sharp and caused tiny pricks in my fingers, but this is where I had been with Ren, and nothing could taint that.

As I leaned my head against the bark, hands reached out of the dark and grabbed my waist.

As quick as lightning and without a sound, I spun around and placed two Lenns at my attacker's throat and heart. One tiny move and I would slice both open.

To my surprise, a deep rumble sounded from the unknown person's chest.

"Easy, Black," said an all-familiar voice as he gently knocked away my hands.

"Ren?" I asked before launching myself at him. I hugged him tightly around the neck, squeezing as tightly as I could and soaking in his warmth and scent and his whole being. It was like coming home to a warm bath after a hard, cold day of working in the fields.

I pulled back to look at him, but I couldn't see clearly in the dark. I did see enough, however, to determine that it really was the man I loved.

"How was it?" I asked. "Did you succeed in your mission? I can't see your handprint from here. How did you get in here without Scrios or me noticing?"

"Woah, there," he laughed. "I'll tell you that in just one second. There's something I wanted to do."

"Oh?"

He moved his hands back to my hips and pulled me close. I wrapped my arms around his neck, looking up into his beautiful face. He brought his down to mine and kissed me on both cheeks before pulling back.

"Ren!" I cried.

“See?” he said in a completely innocent tone. “That’s just what I wanted.”

“Get over here,” I growled.

He laughed and grabbed my hips again, this time bringing his mouth down directly on mine. Just as before, our Fuil exploded. But if that first kiss was exploding, then mine was now erupting. It flooded out wave after wave after wave until the air was thick of it. Black swirled with green and purple with some dashes of yellow. My Fuil had completely overtaken his.

He pulled back, looking around in amazement before his eyes latched onto my horns. Gently, he ran one hand over the rightmost one.

“You did it,” he said softly.

“I did it for you. For us.”

“So we can be together,” he finished.

I looked up at him, unable to read the tone in his voice before I decided I didn’t care and brought his mouth down on mine again. His lips were strong and soft. His hands had moved from my waist up my back to my shoulders, so my body was completely pressed into his.

It fit perfectly.

We were made for each other, I was sure of that. No one else could understand the nuances of my sarcasm, the thoughts in my brain, the way my body moved. No one else could counteract this darkness that existed in me. Already, I could feel it fleeing.

When we finally broke off the kiss, we were both gasping for air. Our Fuil had now escaped even the confines of the willow and was leaking into the courtyard.

“Come,” I whispered to the mist, and it flowed back through me. Ren gasped, and I knew that it must be flowing back into him. If it was his Fuil or mine though, I had no clue.

“That was amazing,” Ren whispered, looking at me awe-struck.

“The horns amplify so much. And they will for you, too. Come on, let’s go tell Scrios you’re back and you can get yours.”

“About that—” Ren hesitated, but before he could explain further or I could ask questions, a voice interrupted us from outside the barrier of leaves.

“I take it that my missing apprentice is back, Adriana?” Scrios asked.

“Yes, master,” Ren responded.

“Well then, get outside.”

We walked out into the moonlight. Ren tried to drop our hands, but I refused to. I had been without him for too long.

Once outside, the moonlight shone some light on the situation.

Unlike the glee that Scrios had expressed for me, his eyes narrowed as Ren stepped into the light.

I looked up as well and barely managed to stop a gasp from escaping my still-tingling lips. Ren had no handprint on his face. The handprint was essential to the final mission. It showed publicly what you did, and it bound the blood of the victim to your skin. Scrios had stated very, very plainly that if we missed that step, it was all in vain.

“Where is your handprint?” Scrios asked in a cold voice.

“I—I,” Ren stuttered before hanging his head and mumbling something the ground. Ice trickled down my back.

“You what?” Scrios demanded.

“I failed the mission, master,” Ren admitted.

“What?” Scrios erupted. He sent a wave of black and blue power at Ren that knocked him back against the impenetrable barrier. His body hit it with a crack, and he slumped down onto the ground.

I could only watch, still in shock.

“How. *Dare*. You. Fail.” Scrios hissed, sending a wave of Fuil that sliced into each of Ren’s limbs and held him against the wall.

“I couldn’t do it!” Ren cried. “She is too full of life, and she is my *mother*! I shouldn’t have to kill her.”

“Then your life is forfeit for hers.”

“NO!” I shouted as Scrios did a complicated pattern with his hands, turning his normally black and blue Fuil into a sickly green.

I rushed in front of Ren right as Scrios released it.

“Black, no!” Ren yelled as the same time Scrios warned “Get back!”

The green ball of sizzling, crackling, fatal power headed straight for me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RAVEN

All I could see was green death hurtling towards me.

Without thinking, I set a shield in front of me. Power rushed out and the orb bounced off of it, hurling back in the direction of its creator.

Scrios' eyes were wide with horror and shock.

Reaching for the Fuil running in my veins, I wrapped the orb in a shield of my own power. It fizzed and tried to burn through, but I was stronger and kept it contained.

"Good," Scrios said, dropping a mask on his face over the fear. He looked over my shoulder at Ren. "Now to finish this business. Release it toward him."

"No," I said, inflicting all of my cold, icy rage into the one word. "You will never, *ever*, hurt him again."

"Oh, don't tell me you *love* him," Scrios asked bitterly, spitting out the word.

"So what if I do? There is nothing you can do to stop me. We both know that I am infinitely more powerful than you now. You are not going to hurt him. Ever."

Scrios narrowed his eyes at me but didn't have time to say anything as I released my shield on the green orb of death and sent it flying in his direction. He didn't have my reflexes and was unable to throw up a shield as I had done.

I watched with something akin to satisfaction as the orb collided with a sickening crunch and crack of thunder before exploding around the man who had trained me to be his undoing. The smell of burning flesh flooded my senses and Scrios screamed, high pitched and full of pain, but I just slowly smirked.

This man had trained me relentlessly and had not refrained from physically hurting me on more than one occasion, and while I was thankful for learning to use my power, I did not care as the man who had done it died in front of me.

Slowly the green fire burned down to an ember, leaving nothing behind. I turned back to Ren, who had collapsed on the ground, rubbing his wrists, which were dripping the liquid form of Fuil. As soon as the orb of death had hit Scrios, the bands holding Ren had been released.

“Are you okay?” I asked, running, grabbing his elbow to stabilize him.

“Yes,” he said, wincing as he stood up. He opened his mouth to say something before his eyes grew wide.

“Adriana!” he called as shoved me behind him, and something exploded in our faces.



Green light danced on my eyelids and my head spun as I forced myself to open them. Around me was utter destruction.

I laid sprawled out in a twelve-foot crater next to the willow—or what was left of the willow. It was completely demolished with branches and twigs and leaves every-which-way. The only thing left standing was the rock that Ren and I had sat on and poured our pasts out to each other. The barrier was completely destroyed behind me, and the ground was turned to dirt with green magic running through it.

The main thing that captured my attention, however, was the terrifyingly still form of Ren.

He laid half collapsed on me, his cheek resting on my thigh. Burns and black Fuil covered the back of his back, and his face was a mess of burnt flesh, blonde hair, and Fuil.

“Ren?” I cried, flipping him over. “Ren, are you okay?”

He didn’t respond.

Frantically, I placed my fingers on his neck, checking for a heartbeat. I almost collapsed in relief as I felt one—although it was far too faint to hold him for long.

Seizing my Fuil, I thrust it into his body. I didn’t have time to run upstairs and grab the wand typically used for injuries, so my power was the best I could use. And those with the most powerful Fuil could heal wounds without the wand. If I wasn’t one of the most powerful, then no one was.

I felt it as every tendril filled each inch of Ren’s skin and almost gagged at the feeling. There was so much damage, internally and externally. There was no way he could survive on his own.

Tears running down my face in hopelessness, I sent my power even further, looking for a solution. Surely there was one. There had to be one.

Tears were blinding me while the lump in my throat was blocking all the air. My heart thudded in my ears: hard, fast, and desperate.

As I was pushing through his head, a line of green and gold Fuil appeared in my senses. Cautiously, I poked it. It responded by surging slightly.

Should I take it? What if it killed him instead of helped him?

Through my power spread through his body, I could feel his heart stutter to a stop before restarting a second later. I didn't have much time before I truly lost him—but still I hesitated.

A beam of light shot down in front of me. When it faded, it revealed a woman with a crooked and wizened stature, but young, beautiful face. Long waves of jet-black hair glimmering with blue swirls cascaded down her back while stars dusted her forehead, cheeks, and nose.

"Who are you?" I asked, attempting for once to hold back my sarcasm. Something about this woman made me feel uncomfortable.

"I am Siol Realta," the figure said in a voice that seemed to shimmer softly as she spoke.

"Siol Realta—as the 'all powerful' Starseed figure everyone keeps harping about?"

The figure nodded her head and the stars in her hair shimmered. "Yes."

"Why are you here?" I asked before answering myself. "The Prophecy."

"Yes, child. Your destiny is not set in stone yet. You still have a choice. Even though you are now a Dorcha, I'm offering you a way to become a light for the Fae. To save them. All you have to do is leave him behind." She gestured to Ren's still form that was growing paler by the minute.

"I love him. How could I ever leave him? He is everything." I drew back in horror at the thought. Couldn't she see that this was all for him? He was my light.

"Child," she breathed softly. "You will move on. Come with me and see who you can really be."

"No," I said fiercely, standing up. "I will not leave him just to save the *Fae*. What do they matter to me? What have they done for me? Ren is my light."

"But I will become your light. Come, let us go." She held out her hand imploringly.

"I said no." My voice was as cold as steel. "Now go, or I will make you."

"Surely you wouldn't hurt the leader of your people?" She pressed a wizened hand to her chest.

"Don't try me. And they are *not* my people."

"Fine," she sighed before looking straight into my eyes. Hers were the most striking combination of royal blue and white I had ever seen. "I will always be watching. Your destiny is in your hands."

She shimmered away.

Beside me, Ren's body convulsed, and I knew I really didn't have enough time to debate it more.

"It's now or never," I whispered, wrapping my Fuil around the mysterious strand and pulling it.

Light erupted from every pore on Ren's body. Blinding green, yellow, and white assaulted my senses and I had to close my eyes and shield my face.

When I opened my eyes again, Ren's body was gone.

"Ren! Where are you?" I gasped, looking around in fear and disbelief and confusion.

A peck landed on my hand.

"Ouch," I said, drawing my hand back and shaking it before letting it hang limply at my side as I took in the creature in front of me.

A raven with feathers as black as my hair hopped on the ground in front of me. He was bigger than most birds with long black wings, powerful talons, and a sharp beak. And its eyes— its eyes were the most horrifyingly captivating part.

The raven had topaz green eyes.

Ren's eyes.



"Ren?" I whispered in disbelief.

The bird nodded his head.

"Is that really you? Do you understand me?"

The raven cawed and then bowed—literally bowed—before jumping onto my lap and bending his head.

Slowly, I reached out my hand and smoothed down the feathers. The raven—Ren—leaned into my touch.

Tears dripped down my face.

“Can you turn back?” I whispered.

The bird looked at me, his eyes sorrowful and shook his head, letting out a dejected caw.

“Oh, Ren,” I said, cuddling him close to my chest. “What am I going to do? Cassie is dead. Scrios is dead—not that I care for him. And you”—my voice broke— “You are stuck as a bird.”

Ren cawed again and rubbed his head into my chest. I ran my fingers over his warm, sleek, feathers.

Cassie was dead, murdered by my own hand. The friend who had always seen the good in me. Who had taken me in after losing my parents. Who defended me in defiance of her whole family.

Ren was a raven. The brilliant, shining, witty man who knew me inside and out—who ignited such a burning blaze of warmth in me—was cursed to be a bird dark as midnight forever, unable to return my love.

It was all for nothing. Cassie’s death was for Ren. Scrios’ murder was to protect Ren. And now Ren himself was lost to me.

I let out a pure howl of outrage and my Fui rose from my skin, burning and tearing through it. I didn’t care.

I didn’t care as the sun rose, casting light on this horrible outcome.

I didn’t care as my stomach growled for food.

I didn’t care as cold whipped through my thin layers.

I didn’t care as rain pelted my skin and poured down my face.

I didn’t care as I sat in the cold, hard, blood-soaked earth.

I was numb on the inside.

I was frozen in time, only able to think about how my love could never be returned, never be fulfilled.

Around me, Fuil whipped and unfurled, fueled by my fury. The wind howled and black edged in green and purple spun, completely blocking everything around me.

Suddenly, it stopped.

I stood up, holding Ren on my arm.

I looked around with cold eyes.

Iobairt Olc was a mess. The tree was windblown and everything up top was knocked over and strewn about, even the pods. A couple branches laid on the floor, struck as if by lightning. Another blast had landed on the Circle, completely destroying it. The barrier had been torn down in some areas, completely destroyed.

I looked down at Ren.

“Never again will this happen,” I told him in the voice of a rock. “Never again will I lose those I love and never again will someone grow close to me. You are all that is left, and you too are gone.”

I looked up at the sky and declared, “I am no longer Adriana Gothen. I am Maleficent. Fear me world, for here I come, and there is nothing you can do to stop me. I will not stop until you are as ripped as I am. I will never quit until you feel the loss you have torn from me.” And with that grim promise, I walked through the fallen barrier with Ren at my side.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

RIAN'S FATE

"What did you see, my precious?" I asked my loyal raven as he flew back to me. His coat of feathers was barely discernible against the dying sunset. It was blue and orange with hints of pink at the edges, far too pretty for what was going to occur this night.

Tonight was for revenge, to soothe this pain in my heart.

Ren landed on my shoulder.

He cawed before shaking his head.

"Nothing?"

The bird nodded.

"Perfect."

I strode forward out of the cave I had been relaxing in. Ren hadn't seemed to show any of the signs of a normal, wild crow so far. He was stuck to the form and the language, and could now fly, but I was convinced he still had his humanity. He *had* to still possess his humanity.

Below me, Rian glittered in the dusk sun.

I smirked. Perfect.

I started down the path, calling my Fuil as I did so. I sent it spiraling off my shoulders to form a long, shadowy, unnatural cape. I also moved it down my black clothes, changing it into a swarming dress that glided on the ground. My horns arched high above my head, stark against my pale green eyes and red lips. The past few days, my face had become sharper, my eyes deeper by the dark bruises underneath. I looked older and more mature, and perhaps I was. How many other seventeen-year-olds had lost their love, killed their best friend, and grown into a prophecy made about them long before they were born?

Screams accompanied my arrival on the threshold of the village. Girls who had whispered about me ran. Women who had lashed their tongues in my direction fled. Men who had spit at my feet as I passed by backed away. Boys who had avoided me like the plague ran now at the sight of me.

They all ran. And I just smiled.

I walked to the well, running my hand alongside it, remembering the scene that started this whole mess. The shadows on my cape seethed and swelled, striking the ground with little bolts of purple and green. Ren landed on my shoulder and cawed, drawing my attention back.

“Ah yes, my pet,” I soothed, looking around. Villagers hid in the alleyways, fearful, but curious.

“Everyone, get in the square, now!” I shouted, jumping to the top of the well. People streamed out, trembling in fear. A cruel smile fell on my lips. “And don’t think about hiding. I know each and every one of you.”

A shiver rippled through the crowd and several doors—including Hratha’s—opened and more people came out. My smile grew to a grin. Now they knew what it felt like to be the fearful one.

“W—wh—what do you w—want?” trembled a man named Otto, who was the official head of the village.

“I want retribution,” I said simply, crossing my arms.

“W—who are you?” Hratha asked.

“Oh, don’t you know, Hratha? I am your worst nightmare. But I’ll be nice this once and also tell you my other name.”

I turned to address the crowd.

“You knew me as an orphan, as an unnatural, as Adriana Gothen.” The crowd sucked in a breath and one voice cried in fear.

“But I am no longer Adriana. You have seen me as a human, but I am a Fae. I am a Dorcha, and I am Maleficent!” I declared.

“You killed Cassie!” came Abner’s outraged yell. He was in front of his house, both of his parents holding him back. An empty space stood beside them where Cassie should have been.

No, Adriana. If Cassie was still here none of this would have happened. I turned my focus onto Abner.

“Yes,” I said icily, fulling accepting it.

“Murderer!” he cried.

My gaze stayed fixed on him, and he shivered.

“Yes, I am a murderer. Yes, I killed Cassie. But you made me this way. You made me question myself and you did not accept me for who I truly was. Instead, you mocked and hurled your insults at me. This is not all my fault. It’s also yours.”

“We didn’t accept you because you are truly a monster!” Abner screamed. “Raina and Darth were right to have been reporting you to the king.”

The silence was deafening.

Uncrossing my arms, I leaped off the well, using my Fuil to float me onto the ground right in front of Abner, my cape streaming behind me like the cloak of death. The crowd shrunk back, cowering. Abner went still and Lori and Danny drew back. Fear controlled their eyes, but Abner’s sparked with defiance.

“Excuse me,” I breathed, my breath coming out in a frost. “What did you just say?”

He tilted his chin.

“Did you really not know?” He laughed, a gleam in his eye. “Then allow me to elaborate for you.” He gave a mock bow.

“Raina and Darth were spies for the crown. They suspected you might be something *other* and were constantly making reports to the king on your actions and what you said. He was most interested when they mentioned a possible Fae living in his land.”

“Abner,” Danny tried to interrupt, but I sent a band of Fuil at him that clamped his mouth shut without ever looking away from where my gaze was fixed on Abner, who was still standing strong in defiance to my growing anger.

“They were ordered to act like your parents and to love you like you were their child, but they knew you were a monster—a freak—and they never truly did. Your whole childhood was a *lie*. We only took you in because of Cassie. She never saw the evil in you, even when you *murdered* her.” He spat at my feet.

I set my face into a mask as I looked at him. Inwardly though, my thoughts were spinning. The two people I thought had loved me more than anything, who had always stuck to my side as a child, it had all been a lie. A command by the king. Cassie had loved me, and I killed her. Ren loved me and he was stuck to my side as a stupid fowl forever. Everything I had ever known was gone.

Something in me snapped.

I yelled in outrage and sent a wave of pure, deadly Scagtha in front of me. Abner was thrown back with a sickening thud and Lori and Danny collapsed to the floor.

Around me, the villagers screamed and scrambled to get away, but I rose high above the masses, not even having to concentrate to keep myself up. Shoving wind in all directions I pushed all the villagers together and held them with ropes of Fuil.

I raised rock after rock around the village, towering as high as mountains. I raised Rian up as well, in the center of the new mountain range. The sun was now blocked, and my power laced the ground, crackling and spitting.

Gone were the cozy cottages and simple pathways. Set in rock was one room with a throne in the middle. Stairs crept off down, down, down to the base of the mountain where there were other rooms. A large open space was below the throne with more stairs that led down. Everything was black obsidian with purple and green streaks.

I turned my attention to the villagers. They were still tied up in the middle of the open space I had created. Looking at them, I released the Fuil and swirled it around them, adding more and more to the growing hurricane.

“Imigh mo naimhde anois is tusa mo sheanmhuintir,” I boomed in the language of the Dorcha. The Fuil faded away, leaving fifty or so creatures in their wake. They were short and squat with pale, olive-green skin, and jutting jaws. Cow horns rose from their heads, and they had claws on their hands.

They were beautiful.

“Listen to me!” I yelled. “You will obey my orders and follow my commands. Today begins a new era in the kingdom of Auranor. I have been ripped and lost, torn and broken, but those are human emotions. Those emotions belong to Adriana Gothen, and Adriana Gothen is no more. I am Fae and I will have my revenge from this kingdom and from the Moors. I was prophesied to have great power, and now I have it. They have taken what matters most to me, and they will pay. Today begins the reign of the Maleficent!”

My henchmen cheered and I sat back on my throne, watching as they celebrated.

Beware, those who have hurt me. There is nothing you can do to stop Maleficent.

EPILOGUE

SHE SHALL PRICK HER FINGER AND DIE

I swept down my mountain. The range had been called the Forbidden Mountains by the fearful villagers in the rest of Auranor and no one had dared to enter. I reveled in the fear the kingdom had of me.

It had only been three years since I first created my fortress and won over my goblin goons. Only three years since I killed Cassie and Scrios and then turned Ren into a raven to save his life.

Life had been calm and full of planning. I still practiced my fighting in a cave deep down. Often, Ren flew around, cawing instructions at me as he used to as I worked out my frustrations and pain and anger while honing my skills. With all the practice, my anger and pain grew, making me even more powerful by the day.

My henchmen had been invaluable, although their mental capacities were severely lacking. They typically went running into nearby villages and stole treasure and gold for my home. They had also spread word of me, and I was now the most feared person in both Auranor and the Moors.

High Councilmembers Bree and Marcas had tried to visit me a week after my reign began. I was satisfied to see that Marcas walked with a limp and Bree had a pink scar marring the silky skin on her shoulder.

Somehow, they had managed to get past my sentries and up to the gate of my fortress, but I allowed them no further. At the sight of me, they had paled, but still tried to convince me to renounce my “evil and repulsive” ways and go back to their vision of the Prophecy. I had laughed in their face and thrown two Lenns, finally ending their miserable existences. The Prophecy was now gone, and it looked like the Moors would need to elect a whole new council soon once they realized that those two weren’t coming back.

The ground smoothed under my feet as I reached the base of my home. Ren flew down from the skies to land on my shoulder. Absentmindedly, I sank my fingers gently into his neck feathers and scratched them in the way I knew he liked. He was the only thing left from my own life, the only thing that hadn’t changed, although even that was a lie. I

mourned the loss of my future with him, but now was the start of a new future. Today, my revenge would begin.

With that thought in mind, I created a transportation gateway and stepped through it.



Jubilate reflected its name. The capital city was in a state of great ecstasy, for the christening of the crown princess was just around the turn of the clock. After a long and difficult birth, the Queen had finally given life to the future heir to the crown, and the kingdom rejoiced with the new parents.

In the streets, parades of nobles and guards on horses cried out health and wealth and glory to the princess. In the castles, trumpets bugled, and voices were raised in happiness.

Happiness I was about to ruin.

I hid myself in the shadows, using Fuil to cloak me as I did in Rian that night when I killed Cassie. That was one death in such a long line. And I was about to add one more.

As I neared the castle, the parading slowed to a trickle as the celebration truly started inside the throne room. I slipped in, hiding in the far back corner, as the gates swung shut.

I watched in amusement as the prince of the neighboring kingdom gazed at his young betrothed, completely unsure and a little disgusted.

I rolled my eyes as three Fae entered the room, using a very simple, but dazzling, transportation spell that trickled in from the ceiling.

I scowled as the first two Fae gifted their gifts, weaving elaborate spells above the princess to materialize their gifts before casting them on the princess.

And then it was my turn.

The final Fae, a very small and wide woman dolled up in periwinkle blue walked to the cradle. But before she could say anything, I let my Fuil loose. It might have been smarter to wait until she was finished with her gift, but by then it might have been too late, and I was already growing bored and impatient.

Following my direction, wind blasted open the doors, sending the hundreds of flags on the ceiling fluttering and falling. Hats fell off noblewomen's heads and the three puny Fae

huddled close together by the cradle while the Queen and King gazed at the open doors in shock.

Calling down lightning from the sky, I struck a spot in the middle of the room. Nobles drew back as I set the spot on fire, green flames licking eagerly to the ceiling. I moved from my shadows to the fire, fading them so my figure was revealed.

I extended my arms and my staff, which I had recently collected as another power enhancer, banged on the ground in a large crack as I set it down again.

The Fae looked shocked and horrified, the blue one going as far as insulting me. I sneered at her, and we exchanged “pleasantries” until I finally could bear it no more.

“I will now bestow a gift on the young princess!” I announced. The three Fae backed against the cradle in horror, trying to cover it with their tiny bodies. As if that could stop *me*.

“Listen, all of you!” I boomed into the silent room. “All of the gifts given to her will indeed come to pass, but”—the king and queen looked at each other— “before the sun sets on her sixteenth year, on a spinning wheel, she shall prick her finger and your beloved princess with be no more!”

“No!” the Queen cried, rushing to her child, and picking her up. But I knew it was too late. The curse was set, and my part was done. Cassie had been honored in the spinning wheel part and now my revenge had begun.

I disappeared in a ball of flames, leaving the devastated royals behind. I knew that the last Fae would try to counteract it, but my magic was too strong. No one could defeat me. Not even a Dorchas as strong as Scarios.

“Finally!” I called as I materialized in my throne room and sank down onto my throne. Ren flew in through the window, flying a loop around the room before landing on my arm.

“Our revenge has been started, Ren!” He cawed loudly, headbutting his head into my shoulder affectionately. “Soon, in sixteen years, we will have our full revenge. We can wait, can’t we, my love?”

Ren cawed and took off again, flying laps around the room.

Finally, I thought again as I watched him, smiling—a true smile this time. *King Stefan and his queen took away my family, so I’ll take away theirs. They will feel my pain.*



SIXTEEN YEARS LATER

Flames roared around me. The prince was backed on the ledge. He was the key to undoing my curse—this was all that stupid blue Fae’s fault. She was much stronger, or maybe smarter, than I originally estimated—and now I needed to kill the pesky prince. What was one more death out of the many I had already caused? And this was for my revenge, so I could finally live in some semblance of peace.

I coiled my long neck back, preparing the flames in my throat. I had done the only thing that I thought possible at the time: I triggered my shift. Just as Nessa had become a tree and Ren had become a raven, I became a twenty-foot dragon with black and purple scales and the hottest green fire imaginable.

I blasted a stream right at the handsome prince—although he was ugly compared to my Ren. He blocked it with his shield, but to my delight, it went flying off the ledge into the green flames raging below us.

I laughed, but quickly cut it off with a curse when I belatedly realized that the three Fae, the same ones who were at the christening and had been protecting Princess Aurora all these years, had flown up to the sword and blessed it with their Fuil.

I reared up, preparing to strike, but the prince threw his sword at me.

Intense pain flooded my mind, as hot as my fire, as the sword sank up to its hilt in my scaly, unprotected underbelly.

Roaring in pain, I reared up further before crashing down, snapping my jaws. The prince jumped to the side and rolled over my snout.

Underneath me, the rock crumpled, and my multi-ton form fell over the side.

Flames leapt up, obscuring my view of the prince. A black form flew down to land by my side.

In unimaginable pain, I reached for my Fuil, yanking on it as hard as I could, trying to heal myself.

To my surprise, I felt my body shift. My talons grew into hands and feet and my wings and scales retreated back inside. I was human again.

“Black,” came a voice from beside me; a voice I never thought I’d hear again.

“Ren?” I whispered, my voice weak.

“I’m here,” said the unmistakable form of Ren beside me. His topaz eyes glowed. He looked just the same as he had before the spell that ended Scrios almost blew him up. With blonde hair blowing in his face and soft mouth curved in a smile, he was still my Ren, whole and perfect. “I’ve always been here. I love you, Black.”

I coughed, surprised to feel blood coat my mouth. I looked down. The wretched prince’s sword still stuck from my chest, directly on my heart. I didn’t have much time left.

Weakly, I raised my hand to cup Ren’s face. “How are you here?”

“Your Fuil transformed both of us. I didn’t even know that was possible.” He shook his head before looking at me, love in his eyes.

“Come on,” he said, gently picking me up. Taking a deep breath, I wrenched the sword out and grabbed his hands, pulling myself up and stabbing the sword back in the ground.

As Ren whisked us away with a transportation gateway, I saw the flames die down around an indentation that was vaguely my shape and size with a sword right where the heart would be.

The scene melted to reveal the cave I had been using as my bedroom. A bed of rock lined with layers of furs rested in the back of the room. Still carrying me, Ren walked over and laid me down on the bed.

“I don’t have much time left,” I gasped weakly, surprised I was still alive.

“I know,” Ren said simply, lying down beside me and wrapping me in his arms. He pressed a kiss to my lips, and I eagerly responded, using all my energy. It was a kiss of longing and love and promises that he would always be there with me.

As before, our magic twined together, this time more powerful than ever, fueled by our desperation and love and pain at never having a future.

The ground shook and rocks started tumbling down. The last thing I remember was lying beside the man I loved, him holding me in his arms, and the mountain falling down around us.

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Thank you so much for reading and I hope you enjoyed this book! It was supposed to be the first book in a series called *The Other Side of the Story*, but unfortunately it didn't work out. But at least Raven came from it!

It was so fun to write Adriana and Ren's story, and I knew when I was talking with Grace, Akaycia, and Callie about the plan for the collaboration, I wanted to do Maleficent's backstory. She has always been my favorite Disney villain and now I have a backstory of my own creation to go with the story already written in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*!

I hope you enjoyed reading it just as much as I enjoyed writing it.

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