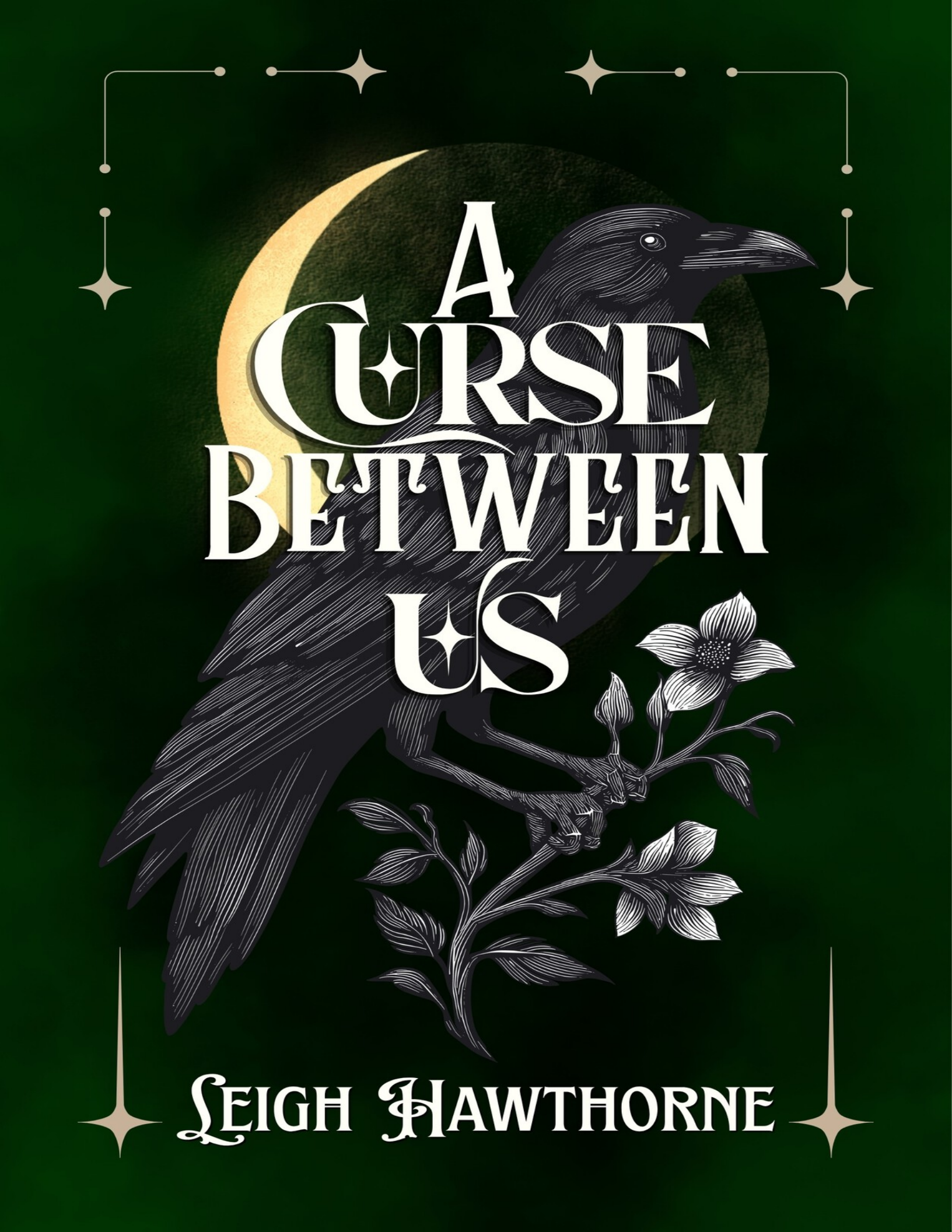

A CURSE BETWEEN US
LEIGH HAWTHORNE

A Curse Between Us

Leigh Hawthorne

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For those who found themselves lost in the dark woods.

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A Note Before Joining the Coven

This story wanders into dark places. Please take care while reading.

Death and grief

Violence and blood

Murder

Emotional, psychological, and familial abuse

Manipulation and coercive control

Passive suicidal ideation

Alcohol consumption

Sexual content

Strong language

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Chapter One



The raven cried first.

A harsh, ragged cry that cut through the still morning air. Meela startled, a gasp caught in her throat as the sound echoed off the trees. Her cheek rested against the cool glass of the carriage window, faintly fogged with her breath.

Outside, the sky hung low with gray clouds, the forest pressing close. The rhythmic clatter of the wheels over the dirt road hummed steady in her ears. She blinked against the dim light, her head throbbing, her eyes stinging. She didn't ask where they were going; she knew it would earn nothing but a sharp glare.

So, Meela thought it best to remind herself of what she did know. They were meeting her husband, her third. But who that man truly was, or where in Ronan they were headed were details, as always, not hers to concern herself with.

Across from her, Cora Diremoure sat straight-backed, every movement precise, every fold of her crimson dress exactly in place. The High Priestess never slouched, never faltered, and never had a golden hair out of place. Gold jewelry dripped from her throat and wrists, gleaming as if she captured the sunlight just for herself. Her hands sat neatly in her lap, her green eyes held sharp focus on the passing landscape as if the world beyond the window owed her something.

Her mother was beautiful. Otherworldly. Something Meela admired, and slightly feared.

“Finally awake.” Cora didn’t turn, her voice steady, free of either welcome or reproach.

“I don’t remember falling asleep.” Meela mumbled, her throat felt dry and her voice still thick from dreams she’d rather exist in.

“Speak clearly.” Her mother cocked her head, a faint smile curving her lips. “Still, I’m glad you rested. Today is important.”

Her stomach twisted.

Wonderful.

Every step of her life had been laced with significance that never felt like her own. While important wasn’t the word she would have chosen for being handed off like a relic. She wasn’t Cora, who treated every sunrise like a promise and every breath like a ceremony. She wasn’t the High Priestess, cloaked in reverence and rule, commanding a coven of witches who bent magic like it was breath itself. She was simply Meela, the powerless, disappointing shadow.

Outside, another sharp cry rang from the trees. She turned toward the sound, searching the sky. A raven flitted above the treetops, black wings cutting sharp against the pale clouds. She didn’t know why the sight comforted her, only that it did. Her mother had never liked winged creatures, but Meela had read enough witch-tales, to know ravens meant something.

Omen. Luck. Power.

And luck was something she desperately needed today.

She adjusted, folding her hands tightly into the gauzy fabric pooled around her lap. Her own dress, a soft muted shade of green hung in delicate folds from thin straps on her shoulders. It felt fragile against her skin, airy and almost transparent even in the muted light.

A dress meant to make her look ethereal, untouched. Not only to be seen, but displayed. The dress, the path, the man waiting for her today. All chosen by another.

Important.

She wanted to roll her eyes. A third marriage, a third goodbye, and a third man she knew little about waiting for her at the end of this road. A third corpse she would leave behind, and yet she knew nothing about him.

She thought to ask, the question lingering on her tongue. But, questions only led to silence. Or worse, those looks from her mother, the ones that made you feel foolish for wanting to know anything at all.

Instead, she fixed her gaze on the passing landscape. Her thumb found the scar slashed across her palm, rubbing it absently as her eyes tracked the sky. Beyond the pines, black wings cut through the gray, the raven soaring alone above the forest. She wondered what it would feel like to fly. To move through the air with no eyes watching, no hands guiding, no expectations pressing her down.

Just air, choice, and the sound of her own wings.

“You’re nervous,” her mother observed, her gaze finally settling on Meela.

“A little.” Meela admitted. She never bothered to lie to her mother. Cora always had a way of finding out anyway. The truth was, she was always a little nervous on days like this. Not ones where she had to meet a strange man, she was growing used to that. It was being alone with her mother, the rare moments carried a weight she couldn’t shake.

“There is nothing to fear,” Cora said, her voice attempting to soothe. “This man is… different. I think you’ll find him agreeable.”

Meela nodded, her chest tightening. The words were meant as reassurance, but much was left unsaid. This wasn’t the first time Cora had chosen the word agreeable to describe a man. It wasn’t the first time she wore a carefully chosen dress and followed her mother’s lead to meet a stranger.

It was, however, the first time she sensed her mother’s patience fraying.

Meela glanced at Cora. They couldn’t have been more different. Her mother was tall and thin, every movement precise, every word deliberate. Meela was short and soft around the edges, too quick to stumble over her words, too frivolous for her mother’s taste. Even her silver hair, which might have been striking on another, felt like a pale imitation of her mothers golden locks.

“Do I look alright?” Meela asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Her mothers gaze swept over, assessing. “You look fine.” Then after a moment's pause, “You’re beautiful. Always have been. You need to see yourselves the way others do.”

Her chest ached. She hoped this went well, she didn’t want to be a burden to the coven any longer. Though, those were words she could never bring herself to say aloud.

Another cry from the raven.

“Annoying bird.” Her mother noticeably tensed, narrowing her eyes as she searched out the window.

“I think it’s a good omen. Maybe it will bring me luck today.”

“No.” Cora’s reply was clipped. “Likely carrying disease. I’ll remind him I don’t want it nesting anywhere near the house. He can see that it’s dealt with.”

Meela said nothing more. The silence suited them both. She turned back to the window, letting the rolling fields blur. Lately, her thoughts kept snagging on empty spaces. Waking somewhere with no memory of lying down. Losing entire hours like she’d misplaced them. The others called it stress, or usually her own forgetfulness.

But she wasn’t sure which frightened her more: the gaps themselves, or how easily she’d slipped through them.

“I know this isn’t easy for you,” Cora said at last, leaning in to brush a finger across her cheek. “But you’ve been strong, Meela. Stronger than most. This is important for you. For *us*.”

Her mothers expression had softened, green eyes warm in a way that could make anyone forget the sharpness that usually lived behind them. It wasn’t praise, not exactly. But it felt like it, coming from her.

“If this doesn’t work out, I don’t know if I can do it again.”

Her hand paused for the briefest second. “You can,” she said. “And you won’t need to worry about a thing much longer. There is purpose in this, even if you can’t see it yet.”

Meela wanted to argue, to ask what purpose there was in being passed from one stranger to another like some whispered offering to the gods. But Cora was looking at her with such sincerity. Such pride. And Meela, starved for that type of warmth, nodded.

“Good girl.” Her mother smiled.

A low creak from the wheels signaled another turn, and a cottage came into view. It sat nestled between two hills, half-circled by tall birch trees and overgrown pines. Patches of moss covered the roof, smoke rose in a lazy curl from the stone chimney. A crooked, wooden fence lined the small garden in front, filled with wildflowers, their blooms wild and unpruned. It was nothing like she had seen before, it wasn’t ceremonial, it didn’t look sacred. It looked like a home.

She leaned forward slightly, pressing her palm to the glass as if that might make it more real.

“His name…” She sighed, trying to place it. “Al… Alvin?”

“Alden.” Cora corrected. “A kind man, quiet.”

The name settled awkward on her tongue. *Alden*. She swore she knew that.

The shimmer of enchantment in the air eased as the carriage slowed to a full stop, the wheels sighing against the gravel, her mothers obedient magic reluctant to rest. A figure came into view, a large man, older than the others. His face was handsome, but showing lines of age. He wasn’t smiling, not like a groom eager to see his bride. But still, his eyes held hers.

Meela reached for the handle, but Cora grabbed her wrist before she could move.

“Remember, let him lead… for *now*.” Cora said. “Men like to feel needed, it helps them trust.”

Meela didn’t answer, she didn’t need to. That wasn’t a suggestion, it was instruction, wrapped in the silk of love.

Cora tilted her head, her expression filled with maternal warmth. “I’ve chosen differently for you this time. He’s not like the others, you might even like him, if you allow yourself.”

Meela offered her mother a small smile, before opening the door. The air was cool and laced with pine. The earth beneath her feet felt solid. Birds stirred in nearby trees, their calls soft and scattered.

Alden was a towering man with broad shoulders. His tunic was simple, but well-made, its dark fabric hinting at strength rather than flaunting it. There was a streak of sawdust or maybe flour, on one shoulder. He didn’t seem to notice, or maybe he just didn’t care. His brown hair and beard were threaded with the first hints of gray. His expression was unreadable, which unsettled her.

Living among witches had taught Meela to read subtleties, but Alden’s face gave her nothing. Only the faint softness between his brows betrayed him. He let her look, as though allowing her to take his measure. His amber eyes met hers, and when his mouth lifted, the smile gentled the roughness of his features.

He felt familiar yet foreign, like chasing the last wisp of a dream. Meela took a hesitant step forward, trying not to dwell on what sort of man would agree to take her in. Let alone, what his intentions might be once Cora left. She had little choice. A widow twice over at twenty-five was hardly coveted in Ronan.

“Welcome. You must be Meela.” He dipped his head in a respectful nod, “It’s good to finally meet you.”

Meela swallowed, unsure of how this stranger would like her to respond. “Yes, thank you.”

His soft smile warmed. "I hope the ride wasn’t too long. Lunch is nearly ready.”

Her mother stood beside her, greeting Alden with a curt nod, glancing over to Meela with widened eyes. “Mr. Tunnely, thank you for welcoming us. The journey was fine.”

Nestled deep in the woods, the cottage seemed to have grown there, as much a part of the forest as the trees around it. Its weathered wooden walls were draped in ivy and moss, as though nature had tried to reclaim it and finally chose to let it be.

It was fascinating, so soft and delicate a home for a man so hardy. Arched windows glinted in the afternoon sun. A great wooden door bore carvings of vines and flowers. To the side, beneath the shade of a massive oak, a workshop stood with its double doors cracked open, revealing tools and half-finished projects.

Cora followed Alden through the gate, her gaze sweeping the grounds. “What a charming, rustic home. It suits you.”

“Meela, are you coming?” Alden asked.

She stepped through the gate, her fingers brushing the wood, the ache in her chest tucked beneath years of obedience. Still, she cast one last look around her new home, only to find the raven watching. Its head tilted, as if it too understood this was another beginning she was destined to curse.

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Chapter Two



Warmth wrapped around her, a jarring contrast to the imposing grandeur of her mother's halls. The scent of rosemary and firewood clung to the air, the soft hum of a kettle filling the silence.

The small foyer opened into a sitting area where a wide fireplace dominated the space, its smooth stone hearth crowned by a simple wooden mantle littered with carved figurines. Bookshelves crowded one wall, crammed with well-worn tomes and tiny carved animals, odd trinkets that seemed to whisper stories of their own. A handwoven rug sprawled across the wooden floor, and two mismatched chairs sat before the fire as if they had been waiting for someone.

To the left, a dining table beckoned, its scarred surface polished to a quiet glow by years of use.

Meela's lips curved faintly. "This is lovely."

Yet even as she spoke, the words felt fragile on her tongue, as though the house itself might hear and prove her wrong.

"Thank you. It's nothing much, but it's home."

The dining room opened directly into the kitchen where copper pots and pans hung from a rack. The countertops were cluttered but organized—a jar of wildflowers, a bowl of fresh vegetables, and a scattering of tools that hinted this craftsman never stopped creating. Alden's cottage felt lived in, not pristine, but well loved, every corner bearing signs of someone who had poured his time, effort, and heart into his space.

"Meela has always appreciated simplicity," Cora added.

Meela's brow rose at the comment, but she said nothing as they settled into their seats. She could feel her mother's gaze on her, a silent reminder to act properly. She glanced at Alden as he moved to serve them, noting the care he took in handling even this task.

The table was simply set, a loaf of crusty bread in the middle alongside fresh butter and a platter of cheese. A hearty stew simmered in a clay pot.

Meela sat, her shoulders still tense, as she cradled the bowl between her palms and let the heat anchor her. Her mother sat at the head of the table. For minutes, they ate in silence. Cora dabbed delicately at her lips, Alden chewed thoughtfully, and Meela let the quiet drown her.

She could no longer handle it.

"It's Alden, correct? Or would you also like me to refer to you as Mr. Tunnely?" Meela didn't bother to look up to see their reaction. She didn't know why she felt defiant all of a sudden and knew the sarcasm would only serve to upset her mother.

"Alden," he responded. She looked over her lashes and almost missed his eyes darting between her and Cora, a smile pulling at his lips.

"Well, *Alden*… this is wonderful," Meela said, her voice bright as she tore a piece of bread and dipped it into her bowl. "I would happily live off bread and stew."

"I'm glad you think so," his deep voice tinged with amusement. "I figured something simple would suit the occasion. Practicality is something of a specialty of mine."

"I can see that." Meela glanced around the room. "Everything here feels… purposeful. You seem to choose *everything* deliberately."

Alden chuckled, leaning back as he scratched his beard. "I don't know about that. Some things just end up where they land."

He held Meela's eyes, shattering the wall she tried to keep built. "Well, consider me impressed. If I ever find myself lost in the woods, I'll know exactly where to go."

"Enough chatter," Cora interjected, her eyes sharp as they shifted between the two. "There is much to discuss."

Meela's smile faltered, but she quickly masked it. She watched as Alden studied her mother and had to remind herself not everyone was accustomed to Cora. His eyes didn't leave hers. "Of course. You do know why you are here, Meela?"

Meela's hand tightened around her fork, the answer she wanted to give on the tip of her tongue. *To be a dutiful wife, to honor this arrangement I want no part of. To obey you and every command like my mother has been training me for.*

But she couldn't say that, so instead she nodded.

"She's here to build a future with you." Her mother's voice called everyone's attention back to her.

Alden's jaw clenched, seemingly undecided on whom he should be looking at. "And does Meela have a say in that future?"

Her mother's green eyes were piercing. "She's happy to be here, aren't you, darling?"

She nodded in agreement, her newfound confidence already failing.

"The wedding will take place at the end of the week," Cora began. "The coven will arrive soon to prepare. We will complete a ritual that *must* be performed immediately after the ceremony to ensure success and a long future, of course."

Meela frowned. "The coven will be coming here?" she asked, a small attempt at sounding casual as her heart dropped to her stomach.

"Yes," Cora said. "It's tradition. You know this, Meela."

Meela swallowed, her eyes on Alden. He had stilled, his spoon halfway to his mouth. Though he tried to keep his expression neutral, she could see the tension in his shoulders.

"It's all very festive," Meela said, trying to brush the tension away. "I hope they don't scare the neighbors."

"There are none," Cora said.

"Lucky you," Meela quipped. "No one around to complain about a bunch of women chanting."

Alden's lips twitched in a faint smile, but his amber eyes betrayed a flicker of discomfort. "It sounds… lively."

Meela tilted her head, studying him. "Are you sure you're up for all this, Mr. Tunnely?" she asked. "It's not every day you marry a stranger and host a coven in your yard."

"I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a lot to take in," he admitted. "But I believe in taking things one step at a time."

"A wise approach," Cora said, though her tone carried nothing but impatience.

“I think we should all take this time to get to know each other,” Alden said, turning his attention to Meela. “This isn’t just my decision. It isn’t a decision about today or tomorrow. This is our future. I’d like to make sure you’re comfortable with it too.”

Meela blinked, surprised by his sincerity. “That’s… considerate of you.”

“Of course it is,” Cora cut in. “Alden is a man of character. That’s why I chose him for you.”

“Right,” she said, her tone wry. “A perfect match, just like that.”

Alden chuckled, the sound low and warm. “Well, your mother spoke highly of you,” he said. “I couldn’t say no to the opportunity to meet you.”

Meela faintly smiled, her fingers tracing the edge of her bowl. “That’s very flattering. Though I do wonder what she actually said.”

“Only the truth,” Cora said, her tone leaving no room for argument.

Meela’s curiosity lingered. She wondered how much of the truth her mother had given Alden. She glanced at him again, noticing the way his eyes softened when they met hers. He seemed genuine, despite the strangeness of their situation.

Lunch passed with relative ease, though Meela was keenly aware of her mother’s sharp eyes throughout the meal. Cora took control of the rest of the conversation, her tone dominating the room as she inquired about Alden’s home, his work, and his ability to provide for her. Alden answered each question calmly, his deep voice unhurried as he explained his modest life in the countryside.

Meela found herself sneaking any glance she could at him, noting how his large hands carefully broke bread as he explained his work as a woodsmith, or how his eyes flicked to her as if checking in. There was a strange warmth to him that felt out of place in her life, a quiet patience that intrigued her despite herself. At one point, Alden turned his attention directly to her.

“You’ve travelled far. You must be tired.”

Meela hesitated to answer. “It was a long journey,” she responded carefully. “But this part of Ronan is beautiful. I’ve always loved the countryside.”

She didn’t miss that Alden’s face lit up, the first real expression she’d seen from him all afternoon. “It is. If you’re up for it, we could go for a short hike. There is a river deeper into the property and a clearing with the most stunning—”

“My daughter has had quite enough excitement for one day. She really should rest.”

“I wouldn’t tire her. It’s just a short walk,” he said respectfully. “The air may do you some good after being in a carriage for so long.”

She blinked at the exchange. She was not accustomed to anyone countering her mother, let alone so gently and effectively.

“Well,” Alden said, breaking the silence. “I hope this meal is a good start for us getting to know one another. If you’re up for that hike, it’s a beautiful area. The wildflowers are in full bloom this time of year. I think you’d really like it.”

Meela glanced at her mother, whose entire body was tense, her jaw locked. “Air does sound lovely. It was a long ride.”

Cora narrowed her eyes, lips in a hard line. “Fine. As long as she’s back by sundown. I’ve told you, my daughter is delicate and she’s not accustomed to this… *rustic life*.”

Meela looked down, biting the inside of her cheek, trying not to laugh. She looked up, finding Alden’s eyes on her, a small smile on his lips. “I promise, we will only walk the good parts.”

Despite his size and rough edges, there was nothing intimidating in his demeanor. His expression held nothing but softness, and his eyes stayed steady and patient on hers.

“Let me show you your rooms so you both can settle in.”

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Chapter Three



Alden led them upstairs, the stairs creaking beneath their steps. His presence was solid and unhurried, moving like someone who belonged in the bones of this house, comfortable in the space he had carved for himself. At the top of the landing, he gestured to the right.

“Cora, this will be your room,” he said, opening the door.

Cora swept inside without hesitation, casting a curious glance before giving a nod of approval. She did not linger, Meela expected that. Her mother made herself at home wherever she went, no matter whose roof was above her head.

Alden turned to her, a twinkle in his eyes. “And *you*,” he said. “have the best room in the house.” he gestured to the door across from Cora’s.

He stepped aside, allowing her to pass. The space was larger than she anticipated, the air thick with the scent of cedar and lavender. A double bed sat against the far wall, draped in a patchwork quilt. There was a small desk and chair, and a tall wardrobe that stood beside it. A large window stretched wide across from the door, overlooking the forest where the trees stood like sentinels, swaying in the afternoon light, their shadows shifting on the wooden floor.

“Wow,” she moved forward, “this is a beautiful view.”

She let her gaze drift, the forest was dense and there were no signs of neighbors like Cora had said, she could only see the smoke from his shop. She turned, noticing the rest of the room. The furniture, all handcrafted—sturdy and simple, like everything else Alden made. Thoughtful in details,

the kind of work that took patience. But, it wasn't just the furniture that caught her attention. In the corner, behind the door, were two wooden staves leaning against the wall. They were carved, etched with symbols she half recognized.

"Do you practice magic?"

Alden followed her gaze, then exhaled, scratching his brown hair. "Not much anymore," he admitted. "People come to me for things, here and there. Small charms, a wand or staff, nothing grand." A dry smile touched his lips, "*Adjacently* magical, you could say. I know your mother is the High Priestess, you must be very powerful yourself."

"No, actually. We've tried for years, but nothing has ever come."

"Oh."

Meela studied him, trying to gauge whether or not that disappointed him as much as it had the coven. But found nothing, aside from a weight on his shoulders.

"So, you made them yourself?"

Alden smiled. "Not those, those were made by a friend."

She hummed softly, turning back to the window. She wasn't sure why, but the thought of him crafting them, shaping and imbuing something with magic unsettled her more than it should.

Alden shifted, the floorboards creaked beneath his weight. "I'll let you get settled. But… I was planning on going for that hike soon, should you still decide you'd like to join."

Meela glanced over her shoulder.

"I don't mean to push," he added. "I'd only like to get to know you."

Without her mother standing between them. He didn't need to say it outright, she heard the meaning. The logical part of her wanted to keep her distance, even if to remind herself, this too, would be temporary. Meela thought of herself cursed, and on a path she had no real choice in.

But another part, a quieter part, wanted to understand him. Why he agreed to this in the first place. She looked at him again. Trying to see past the man she was meant to wed, but as a person, for some reason, had chosen to stand beside her in this mess.

"I'm getting a little tired, actually." She said at last, "Perhaps tomorrow morning?"

"I would love that." he turned, grabbing both staves, and was gone. Leaving her finally alone, in the quiet of her new room, staring out at the

trees beyond the glass.

Meela didn't know what to do, she wandered around. Slowly opening the drawers, unpacking the few items she had. Her fingers trailed the desk before walking back to the window. She pushed it open, letting the warm breeze drift in. The morning's gray skies had opened up, allowing the sun to peek through dappled clouds.

A flicker of movement caught her eye, and she watched as a raven perched itself on a branch directly across from her. Its head nodded to her, letting out a small noise that sounded like laughter.

"You again?" she leaned on the windowsill. The bird's glossy feathers caught the light, its dark eyes glinting. "Better watch yourself, my mother doesn't like birds…" she whispered. "Especially, *your kind.*"

The raven moved closer.

"I've heard nothing but good things. Ravens are considered good luck to women like me." Her voice stayed soft, wistful. "Would you consider being someone's lucky charm? I could use some right now."

She smiled as the raven tilted its head further, as though considering her offer.

Turning away, she drifted back to the room once more. It felt strange, to feel a sense of warmth in a place she'd never been. Here, surrounded by the forest she felt more free, like she was finally remembering to breathe. Meela moved to the adjoining washroom, splashing cool water on her face, catching her reflection in the small mirror. Her curls shimmered in the light, there was darkness pooling under her pale brown eyes that seemed to cloud the rest of her face.

A soft croak from the window caught her attention, she glanced back in the room and found the raven perched on the sill, moving closer as if it wanted a better view.

"Whether true or not, I've decided you're lucky." She smiled, approaching. "If I say it aloud it makes it real, *right*?"

She rested her shoulder against the window frame beside the raven, watching Alden stroll across the yard. He hadn't seemed disappointed when she didn't immediately agree. But now, watching him, she found herself second-guessing her hesitation.

A soft flutter of wings drew her attention. "You think I should go, don't you?" she asked, nodding toward Alden.

The raven let out a low croak, its feathers ruffling.

Meela sighed. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

A few moments later, Meela unpacked her cloak and softly ran down the stairs. “Hey!” she called out, quickening her pace.

Alden paused, turning to face her. A green cloak, similar to hers, draped over his broad shoulders, and in his hand, a tall staff. It was intricately carved with delicate swirls that twisted into a spiral with a crystal in the center, catching the sunlight and casting faint violet flecks across his face.

“Changed your mind, then?” His warm smile reached his eyes.

“It’s not everyday a girl gets invited on a hike with a magically adjacent man.” She shrugged.

Alden threw his head back with a laugh. “Wouldn’t want you to miss such a rare opportunity.”

As they fell into step, Meela found her eyes drifting to his staff. She felt it hum beneath her skin. “Is that enchanted?"

“No.” He said quickly, then paused. “Well, maybe a little.”

“A little?” Meela arched her brow, smirking.

“Magically adjacent, as I said.” he lifted the staff with a lazy twirl. “It will help ward off creatures we don’t necessarily want to come across.”

Meela’s face paled, as she looked deeper into the woods. “Are there dangerous creatures in these woods?”

She had never seen any in person, only heard stories whispered meant to fright or warn. It never occurred to her that such things could exist here, so close. She wasn’t even sure where she really was.

Alden smiled softly. “Nothing dangerous.” he assured. “I haven’t come across anything in a long while, magic is too disrupted in this area. I’ll protect you Meela, don’t worry.”

She exhaled, and without realizing, found herself closing the distance between them. As they continued, the forest began to feel more alive. The trees here were not the same as those near Nelholn—taller, their bark silver-pale, with leaves shaped like narrow blades that whispered with each breeze. Meela noticed them the way others might notice jewelry or fine clothes, attuned to every shift in the wild. The branches seemed to lean ever so slightly, as if drawn to the man leading her through their midst. Sunlight filtered in patches, their footsteps softened by leaves, and the only other sounds were the rustle of small creatures in the underbrush. It was clear Alden walked these paths often, noting the faint trails he had marked throughout.

This man seemed content in his solitude, his life tucked away in a cottage with his workshop. Perhaps Alden wasn't looking for a wife at all, but simply a companion. Maybe he was lonely, a feeling Meela knew all too well. Unlike any other men she had known, Alden had made no move to claim her. There had been no hovering, no pressing for closeness she wasn't ready to give.

"So, tell me about yourself, Meela." His voice stirred her from her thoughts.

"My mother must've told you enough." She looked up at him, lips twitching.

"I've heard her version, I'd like to know yours."

She swallowed, unsure how to answer. "I, uh…" her cheeks warmed. The truth was, she had no idea. "How about this," she offered. "You ask questions, and I'll answer."

Alden pretended to consider. "I agree to those terms. What made you decide to join me?"

Meela smiled. "I was curious about your favorite flower."

Alden chuckled. "Odd thing to wonder."

"I like odd things," She looked at him expectantly.

He sighed. "Well. If I had to choose… bluebells."

"*Bluebells?*" Meela echoed, not bothering to hide the surprise. "That's unexpectedly delicate for a man who works with hatchets all day."

"I'm a man with layers," he said teasingly. "Yours?"

"Lavender."

"Pleasant *and* practical, I like it."

"So my mother did tell you everything there is to know." She smiled, leaning in.

This time, when Alden laughed, it didn't reach his eyes. "There's more to you than that."

Meela studied him, but his face became flat and unreadable, his eyes watching the tree line ahead.

"Are you in the habit of following strangers in the woods?" He asked.

"Would you like me to consider my future husband a stranger?"

He finally looked back to her, offering her a soft smile and shook his head no.

"What is your favorite thing to create, Alden?"

He was quiet for a moment, as if no one had ever asked him before. “Chairs, maybe? There is something satisfying about shaping something someone can rest in.”

Meela gave him a sidelong glance. “So your passion is… sitting?”

He chuckled. “Comfort, actually. A well made chair is sturdy. It supports, it holds weight without breaking. People don’t think about them much, but they’d notice if one wasn’t there when looking for it.”

“That was,” she considered her words. “the most profound words anyone has ever spoken about chairs.”

Alden leaned in with a smirk. “Layers… like I said.”

“Why were you looking for a wife?” Meela finally asked the question she had wanted to ask all along.

Alden didn’t answer right away. He ran a hand over his beard, his steps slowing. “Cora came to town one day. She needed something I had, and we got to talking.” He glanced at her. “She spoke highly of you.”

Meela scoffed. “That doesn’t sound like her.”

Alden smiled. “Maybe not to you, but she made it seem like we’d get along.”

She tried to read between the lines, there was much he wasn’t saying, but she couldn’t place it. Before she could push, Alden turned the question on her. “What convinced you to go along with this?”

“I didn’t have much of a choice.” she admitted.

He hummed as if he already knew that. “Well, I’m in no rush. If you did want to take more time, I’m sure I could say something to Cora.”

Meela didn’t reply and they continued in silence. The forest stretching wide around them as a seed of doubt planted itself inside her.

“Am I not what you imagined? I know my mother and I aren’t exactly twins. If you imagined a younger Cora –”

“No.” he quickly corrected, shaking his head. “Meela, no. I didn't say this because I feel differently having met you. I just don’t want you to think I’m pushing this along so quickly.”

Meela nodded. “I don’t.”

“There is no disappointment on my end.”

Meela offered a soft smile, not knowing what else to say. She hadn’t considered that she may be unwanted now that she was here. She just didn’t understand what her mother could’ve said to make this man agree to this.

“Your home is beautiful,” she said instead. “Peaceful. Secluded.”

He hummed in agreement. “Crowmore is not far from here.”

Ah. No wonder the trees felt different. They were in the northern stretch of Ronan, far from Nelholn and the kingdom city of Solmaris. The days it had taken to cross from the east blurred together now, little more than wheels humming and her thoughts circling. She let the haze slip away and arched a brow. “Are you suggesting I run while I still can?”

He smiled. “Depends. Are you looking for an escape?”

Meela pretended to consider. Escaping him would be easy enough. Her mother was an entirely different beast. “A short one, perhaps. An afternoon of freedom.”

The trees gave way to a clearing, where wildflowers stretched in waves of blues, purple and yellows, blanketing the rolling hills. The sunlight poured freely, no longer tangled in the trees. Meela stopped short, breath catching at the sight before her.

“I thought you’d like it,” Alden said.

“It’s incredible,” Meela shook her head. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“No?” He asked, “Well, there is a river just ahead, or we stop here for a moment.”

Meela glanced at him, “Whatever you’d like.”

Alden shook his head. “I’d like to do whatever you’d like, Meela. I’m not Cora, with me there are choices.”

She stiffened. “She means well,” she crossed her arms. It wasn’t what he said, but how he said it. “I know what I said, but I do make my own choices. I wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t agreed.”

Alden hesitated, “I apologize. That was out of line, I would just like to know what makes you happy.”

Meela frowned, “It’s fine. Just… don’t talk about her like that, I’ve put her in a strange position.”

“A strange position?” he tilted his head.

“Well,” she exhaled, “I’m sure she’s told you I’ve been married before.”

“Yes.” Alden said carefully. “Though it seemed more like bad luck.”

Meela scoffed, rolling her eyes. “*Bad luck*,” she muttered. “Why did you agree to this, Alden?”

He turned to her, surprised. “Cora made it seem —”

“Yes, *a good match.* You’ve said that.” She cut him off, searching his face. “I want to know why you decided. You seem comfortable alone. Why

say yes? We could've only met, had a lovely dinner. Marriage is different."

Alden watched the forest as he leaned on his staff. "You know, you're a lot more stubborn without her around."

Meela shifted, her confidence fraying. Maybe she overstepped.

"Do you believe in fate?"

"I try not to think about it."

"Maybe you should," he looked at her. "I think people are drawn together for reasons beyond what we realize at the time."

"And you think this is fate?" Her finger pointed from her to him.

Alden turned, walking ahead. "I know it is. I knew it the moment I saw your mother."

Meela opened her mouth, then closed it. Her breath became shallow as she watched his back continue on. For a while, they only walked around the clearing. Shifting around the wildflowers. Meela could tell there was something on his mind, but she knew well what it was like to have someone push for answers they weren't ready to give, so she remained close. A familiar cry echoed through the clearing, startling them both. A mess of black feathers swept low, before perching on a high branch looking down at them.

"A friend of yours?" Meela called out. "I've seen it around the house."

"Is that so? He must like you." Alden yelled back. "Probably just making sure I'm not getting you into trouble." His eyes fixed on the bird, a slow shake of his head. "Come." he said, turning back toward the path. "Let's get you back before your mother worries."

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Chapter Four



The house was quiet when they returned, save for the soft creak of floorboards under their feet. Meela trailed behind Alden, her fingers brushing the hem of her cloak as she glanced around the cozy space. The walk had been peaceful, albeit the strange conversation. But, the air had felt nice, and talking with anyone beyond the coven felt even better.

Though, the calmness fell once she saw her mother sitting, waiting for their arrival.

Fuck.

She was upset. If Alden thought they would be getting a welcome back, he was sadly mistaken. Though, Alden had enough sense and simply stopped near the hearth, warming his hands. Turning to both of them with a gentle expression. His eyes lingered on Meela briefly before shifting to Cora.

“Well, I’ll leave you both to chat.” He offered the smallest of nods. “As I said on the walk, no rush. We take this step by step, in your time. You’re welcome here as long as you like.”

Meela’s lip curved into a small smile, surprised to hear it again in front of her mother.

“That’s kind of you,” Cora said before Meela could speak, not even glancing at Alden. Her steely gaze on Meela. “Go wash up, little moon. I’ve run you a bath and I wish to speak with Alden privately.”

Meela stalled at the door, fingers tightening around her cloak. There was no room for argument today and she looked at Alden, envious that he didn’t

shrink beneath the weight of her authority.

Cora came to place a hand on Meela’s shoulder, an unspoken demand. She lowered her gaze, nodding once before turning away. Her steps felt heavier, her mind swirling in restless unease.

The bath was dimly lit by candles, the warmth of the water greeting her, the scent faintly herbal. A large tub sat near the hearth, steam curling lazily from its surface.

The warmth was a relief against her tense muscles, soothing the lingering ache in her legs from the long journey. She sank deeper, letting the heat seep into her skin, hoping it would wash away all the unease.

Her mind, however, refused to settle.

She thought of Alden, of the ones before Alden. He was patient and had been kind to her. Perhaps too kind, which was what unsettled her the most. People were rarely this gracious without reason. Her mother treated him as if he were nothing more than a simple man, someone easily led, yet Meela wasn’t sure she believed that. There was something different about him, unmoved by her mother’s influence. The thought should’ve comforted her. Instead, it made her wary.

Her fingers skimmed absently over the water's surface. She could still hear Alden’s words. *‘Take your time, there is no rush.’* A dangerous offer. Meela pressed her lips together, and sank beneath the water's surface. She should be thinking ahead, preparing herself for what was to come. The coven's arrival, her wedding, but she couldn’t stop thinking about them.

The men that made her a widow. She wasn’t even sure if she could consider herself that. A widow gave the impression she had been with them long enough to mourn, long enough to create a life. Her first, Heath, was a handsome man. He’d been strong, all muscle and sun-warmed skin, his hands rough with the kind of callouses that came from years of work. She used to love the way they felt against her cheek. Her second husband, Alexander was gentle, with soft-spoken words and nervous hands. She liked the way he looked at her, full of longing and hope.

Stop. Don’t think about them. It’s not going to happen again.

She gripped the edge of the tub, her nails pressing into the warm copper tub. The memories of them were fading, and she knew better than to chase it. It never ended well. They were gone, and that was it. Both taken by her cursed kiss. She drew in a slow breath, pushing the thoughts away as she

reached for the soap. She worked it over her skin, focusing on the simple motion, a futile attempt at remaining present.

She lingered long enough for the water to begin cooling, her mind gradually quieting. By the time she stepped out and wrapped herself in a soft linen cloth, she felt steadier. But as she moved closer to the door, she heard them. Their voices, low beneath the floorboards. She knew she shouldn't, it was rude to listen in. Yet, she found herself softly opening the door, inching closer to the stairs.

"You've been vague about the details, Cora." Alden's tone remained carefully neutral. "And this ritual… what does that entail?"

"As I've said, nothing for you to worry about. It's a simple tradition, symbolic really. The coven has its ways, and Meela understands what's expected of her."

"I see." Alden's voice carried a note of skepticism. "I'd only feel more at ease if it seemed like she knew what she's walking into. She's unprepared, nervous."

"She's always nervous. She will be fine, Alden. I've guided her through every step of her life. Meela trusts me, and she'll trust me now. This is what is best for everyone."

"It feels rushed. Surely, it wouldn't hurt to give her more time. Let her settle in, get to know me."

Meela leaned close, straining to hear every word.

"The timing is intentional. The full moon is coming, and the coven's arrival cannot be delayed."

"Right." He grunted. "And Meela understands what's expected of her?"

"She knows enough." Cora's tone was signaling the end of this conversation, her patience growing thin. "This is not a matter of debate. You wanted a partnership, and I offered one. Meela will be your wife, and the coven will do what's necessary."

Alden let out a loud sigh. "Very well. I only wish to know my wife has a choice in this. I don't want her to feel trapped."

Cora laughed. "She's not the type to run, if that's what you're worried about. She knows her place."

Meela flinched, the words cutting deeper than she wanted to admit. She retreated to her room, wanting to hear nothing more of her mothers insults. Once inside, she found the raven perched once again, its dark eyes fixed on her, studying her.

“Hello lucky charm,” she whispered. The words felt hollow, lost amidst the rising unease that curled in her stomach.

Stay grounded. She took deep breaths, attempted to slow her breathing, focusing on the room around her, focusing on anything but their conversation. She had known better to listen in, never liking what she heard.

‘Does she know what’s expected of her?’

She thought she did. It was always simple: get married and be out of her mothers way. That’s what she had always believed. She long felt like a nuisance in Cora’s life, an obligation rather than a daughter. The pressure, the insistence, the way her mother pushed her like a tool she couldn’t sharpen. Cora only kept things that served purpose, surrounded herself with women of power, each handpicked for the usefulness of their gifts.

Meela had none.

Nothing but the weight of her mothers disappointment. She remembered each look Cora ever gave her after testing, each time she reached and found nothing. The flicker across her face—disgust, annoyance, sometimes even something crueler. Cora never bothered to hide it. And after that, when her mother had finally given up.

The men.

One after another, Meela had been sent away to foreign homes like something her mother wanted buried. It was never about her happiness, it was about her removal. Cora wanted severance from her useless daughter. But each time, Meela came back. Each time, she broke. Crying into the arms of the woman who broke her in the first place. Cora was more impatient now, more confident in her demands, as if she no longer felt the need to hide the force behind her expectations. Even Alden felt different. The way he watched her was almost as if he too were waiting for something more from her. Though, she had only just met him. He seemed different than the others who were chosen. Perhaps the kindness was a shield, something he wielded to lower her guard. She couldn’t get a good read on him, and the thought troubled her.

A tight, burning sensation formed in her throat, the kind that made her want to scream, or cry.

She would do neither. Those emotions were a waste. Nothing would change, no matter how she felt. The road she was on had one destination, the only thing left to do was navigate it. In a few days, Cora would be gone.

And then, perhaps she would find an easy rhythm with Alden. Learn how to move around another, learn how to exist in his space without drawing too much attention.

She lay in bed, staring at the ceiling while her thoughts twisted over and over until it all became an unbearable weight. The raven watched her from its perch outside the window.

What's your deal?

The bird was becoming slightly annoying in its glaring. But if she were honest, it did provide a small sense of calm.

The door opened without a knock. Meela didn't have to look to know it was Cora. "I was just checking on you," her mother said smoothly, as if her conversation with Alden hadn't happened.

"I'm fine, I was going to read before bed." Meela forced a smile, picking up the well-worn book beside her.

Cora stepped beside the bed, holding a small vial between her fingers. "I came to give this to you. In case of any headaches. Ida made a few tonics for the journey."

"That was kind of her, but I think I'm okay tonight. Thank you."

"Precautionary, then." Cora placed it on the bedside table and glanced toward the window.

Meela's stomach clenched. She followed Cora's gaze, but the raven was already gone. Still, her mother's eyes lingered on the empty stretch of night beyond the window. Without a word, Cora stepped forward and closed it, locking it with a soft click.

"Good night," she said, nodding toward the vial on the table. "Don't forget."

Of course she hadn't forgotten. Cora always knew when to offer it. A headache did pulse at the edges of her skull, but instead of reaching for the brew, Meela let the ache unfurl. At least the pain was honest. At least it was hers.

When the footsteps faded, Meela unlatched the window again and let the night air spill in. She tilted her face toward the sky until she found the moon, nearly full, steady as ever. Like the raven, it eased something tight in her chest. A quiet reassurance that while nothing beneath her felt certain, the moon above her did.

Climbing back into bed, she closed her eyes, softly rubbing her scar while she attempted sleep.

She wasn’t a runner. No matter how pathetic her mother made it seem. She wouldn’t run, she would face this, as she had everything else.

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Chapter Five



Meela stood in the middle of a clearing bathed in golden light, the air around her carrying the warmth of a perfect summer day.

And as always, he was there.

The man was a blur of movement, his features hidden in shadow. She could never see him clearly, not his eyes, his expressions, or even the shape of his face. Only the scar, vivid and sharp coming down both lips like a signature etched into her memory.

“Welcome back,” she heard herself say, her voice soft.

“I can never seem to stay away from you too long,” his voice was deep, but it was muffled like he came from a faraway place.

He stepped closer, and despite the hazy edges of his form, the warmth of his presence wrapped around her, anchoring her even in her dream. His hand came to touch her face, his palm rough but reassuring as it cupped her cheek. She found herself leaning into his touch, savoring the sensation.

This was her sanctuary. A world she wasn’t tied to obligations, she was free and she could choose to be held, to love and to trust, and it was always with him.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered, the words slipping out.

His thumb brushed her cheek, a tender gesture that sent a shiver through her body. He leaned in, his forehead pressing against hers, and though she couldn’t see his eyes. She felt them, deep and unwavering, locked on her.

“I’ve missed you too,” he said softly. His lips softly touched hers. He never demanded or rushed, his kisses made her feel alive. Her entire body

turned warm at the touch. When he pulled away, her chest ached with longing. She reached up, her fingers brushing against the scar on his bottom lip, and the motion made his blurred edges seem almost sharp, only for a second.

“Tell me where to find you,” her voice cracked as she asked.

Meela jolted awake the moment he began to speak, the weight of the dream lingering like mist. Her room was dark, only a faint silver glow filtering through the window. She sat up slowly and brushed her fingers to her lips. They still tingled. With a frustrated sigh, she flopped back against the mattress.

Foolish.

In her waking hours, she told herself the dreams were her mind's way of escaping. A sad invention of someone she could love, and who would love her in return. Someone who made her laugh, and felt like freedom from her own mind. Someone who made her feel like she had been set on fire with passion.

But deep down, when her own guard was down. The dreams would linger, she would find herself fantasizing about him, searching for those scars on every man she passed, hoping one day that he may find her first.



The soft morning light spilled over Meela’s face, pulling her from her restless sleep. She had more dreams throughout the night, small pieces of a life she’d rather live in. A simple cottage, like this one, basking with laughter and love. She lay still, eyes closed, lingering in the warmth of her bed. She wasn’t ready to face this day. It was an important day, she was sure. As each day was, in Cora's world.

Tomorrow, the coven would arrive and the thought alone made her groan. Not that they were terrible, not truly. Her mother was the worst of them all. The others, harmless snakes. The bites stung, but lacked any venom. They all knew where Meela stood—she was the daughter of the High Priestess. And while yes, she did not have the touch, or any gifts like they had, she was Cora’s. And that meant they kept their distance. They didn’t trust her,

they certainly did not like her. But they never touched her. They walked that same sharp-edged line she did.

But, it wouldn't matter in a few short days. She'd be free of them all. That was, assuming of course, that her curse didn't kill Alden before they even left.

She made a decision last night, one that still burned quietly behind her ribs. If Alden died, she wasn't going back. No more fear, no more collapsing in her mother's arms and pretending that would offer her safety. She would fend for herself, she would figure it out.

She was strong and capable.

She never had a proper job… lacked any practical skills… did not enjoy interacting with others… *mildly* cursed and slightly traumatized.

Oh Gods.

Meela's stomach dropped further. She exhaled through her nose, firming her jaw. "I've survived worse," she told herself. "I think."

She rubbed her hands against her face as she groaned loudly. "Alden, you better not die."

She rolled over, her gaze landing on the raven perched on the window sill. Its dark eyes met hers, before flying in and landing on the bed post, a silver chain glinting in its beak.

Meela pulled herself upright, crawling forward, cupping her hands under its beak. "For me?" she asked. The raven bobbed its head, dropping a necklace into her palms.

A crescent moon. The metal was aged, worn smooth by time but it warmed her palm, traveling up her arms like remnants of an embrace. Meela ran her thumb over the curve, a strange feeling stirred inside her as she looked back at the raven.

"It's beautiful," she beamed. "Where did you find this, friend?"

The raven took flight, disappearing into the morning light.

The door flew open. "Oh good, you're finally up."

Meela flinched, her fingers curling around the necklace as Cora stepped inside. Hands clasped, her expression poised with authority even at this hour. Her sharp eyes swept the room, before landing on Meela with something dangerously close to suspicion.

"I just woke up," she said, keeping her voice light. "I wasn't lounging in bed, I promise."

Cora’s lips pressed together. “Get dressed and come down for breakfast. It’s an important day.”

Meela barely suppressed her eye roll. “Big surprise.” she muttered under her breath.

She hadn’t meant to say it aloud, but the words slipped free before she could stop them. Cora didn’t so much as pause, already striding down the hallway.

“Do not mumble, Meela. It is unbecoming.”

Meela sat there, staring blankly at the wall, eyes unfocusing on the world around her. She didn’t know how much time had passed until the door slammed shut, only to reopen. She grit her teeth. Cora loved those little tricks. Passive, effortless ways to remind her of who her mother was.

With a scowl, Meela slipped out of bed, crossing to the adjoining washroom. Keeping her eyes averted from her reflection. The last thing she wanted to see was the girl shaped by her mothers hands. She turned her back to the mirror as she brushed her teeth and braided her unruly silver curls. Strands slipping free almost immediately, refusing to be tamed.

Meela huffed, yanking open the wardrobe, spotting the white dress she had worn twice before mocking her. She pulled out a simple tunic and her favorite green skirt, it was soft from being worn often and had been embroidered with delicate white flowers along the edge. The metal on the necklace had cooled, and her gut told her not to wear it, instead sliding it in the small pocket of her skirt.

As she made her way downstairs, the scent of warm bread curled through the air. Light conversation happening that she couldn’t focus on. Her mind was tangled in the remnants of her dream, her shadowed figure slipping away the moment she tried to grasp him. She had dreamt of him for years, and often, even before her curse. She didn’t know if he was real, or just a figment of something she wished she could have. She felt ridiculous believing he was real, and yet… she did. But whenever she pushed for something solid, anything that might guide her toward him, the dream would dissolve.

He would dissolve.

She wanted to see his face, wanted to know if he had a name. Even now, she felt him—the warmth of his touch, the way his presence wrapped around her like a blanket, steady and safe. The ghost of him made her feel cold.

And guilty.

Alden sat at the head of the table, amber eyes brightening the moment she entered, looking at her as if she were something precious. That only made it worse. He was the man she was meant to marry in a few short days. The man who had done nothing to deserve this. Someone who was showing her more kindness than she was used to while she longed for a ghost.

“Good morning, Meela.” he said warmly. “I hope you slept well.”

“I did,” she lied.

Her gaze flicked to her mother, who hadn’t looked at either of them, buttering a slice of bread with meticulous precision. “We have much to prepare for today. The coven arrives tomorrow, and there is still much to discuss.”

Alden nodded, offering Meela a gentle smile. Cora’s eyes tracked the exchange, a sour little curve tugging at her lips before Meela dropped her gaze.

“What’s wrong?” Cora asked, brows lifting.

Meela shook her head. “Nothing. I just…”

“Just?”

“Nerves, is all.”

Cora set the knife down slowly, eyes narrowing. “Meela. Enough of this curse nonsense. It makes you look foolish, and I won’t have that today. I’ve arranged everything.”

Alden inhaled as if to speak, but the sharpness in Cora’s eyes shut him down as well.

After breakfast, Meela mentioned wanting to visit Crowmore, but Cora dismissed the idea instantly. “Absolutely not. Your focus should be elsewhere, not that miserable little town.”

Meela bit back the urge to point out that her mother was the one who’d insisted today was important. “Then what would you have me do?” she asked, keeping her tone even.

Cora didn’t bother looking up from her grimoire. She flicked her fingers in a dismissive wave. “Do whatever you want. Go to the woodworker, read — I don’t care, Meela. Just don’t interrupt me.”

So it wasn’t important after all. Fine.

Meela made her way to Alden’s shop, if only to get away from her mother before she said something she’d regret. She peeked her head inside, ready to announce herself but froze.

Alden stood over his workbench, completely absorbed in the piece of wood before him. His sleeves were rolled to the elbows. Practiced hands guided a carving knife in slow strokes. A loose strand of brown hair fell across his forehead as he bent low, brushing his thumb over a fresh notch. The shop was a curated world of its own. Not just wands and staves, but delicate figurines, smooth chopping blocks, unfinished signs waiting for their inscription.

She lingered at the door, watching the play of muscle in his forearms as he held the wood steady, the tiny furrow between his brows, the way his lips pursed when a cut pleased him. The rasp of shaving wood, the certainty of his movements. It all steadied something in her.

She inhaled to greet him, but the raven hit the roof like a dropped anvil. Meela yelped; Alden nearly dropped his knife.

“Oh. Meela. I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you come in.” Alden said, setting down his knife. He nodded toward the ceiling with a wry grin. “Your little shadow is following you again.”

Meela glanced up at the bird. “I don’t know why… I’m not that interesting.”

Alden studied her with a half-smile. “Well, he finds you interesting enough.” He leaned against his workbench. “Did you have plans today?” he asked, “Cora mentioned that it was important today.”

“Important for her, I presume.” Meela said, nudging a stray wooden shaving with the tip of her shoe. “I wanted to go to Crowmore.”

“Let’s go.” Alden said without hesitation. “There are a few shops I know you’d love. A tavern… I think you’d like it there, always a lively crowd.”

Meela shook her head. “Another time, maybe.” She glanced around, eager to shift the subject. “What are you working on?”

Alden’s eyes gleamed as he turned back to the piece in his hand. “Not sure yet, they have a tendency to make themselves.”

She stepped inside, running her fingers along some of the finished pieces. Lingering on a small carving of a bird, one that bore a striking resemblance to the raven perched above. She picked it up, raising an eyebrow to him. “Fitting.” she mused.

“It's yours.” Alden nodded.

“What?” she turned, surprised.

“Keep it,” he said easily. “Trust me, the person who made it would be honored to know it’s going to a good home.”

Meela studied it. “You didn’t make this?”

“No,” he admitted. “That was made by my last apprentice. He comes by often enough, but I don’t think he has much use for it anymore.”

Meela perked up. “You had an apprentice?” The thought intrigued her, watching Alden work was already enjoyable and the thought of two in this place?

Well, that would be something.

Alden let out a low chuckle, as if he could read her thoughts. He shook his head. “I did, real thorn in my side, honestly.” His smile dimmed, his eyes darkened slightly.

“Well,” she said, running her thumb down the bird's wing. “Maybe today I could be your apprentice? Will you teach me?” she smiled up at him, tilting her head playfully.

Alden’s grin returned. “Of course,” he gestured to the chair in the corner, “Best to watch first, then we’ll start you with something small.”

The morning melted into afternoon, sunlight shifting through the open windows, wood shavings at their feet. Meela found that she liked this, they spoke often. Sharing small stories from their past. Alden demanded nothing from her, content to simply share the space. She noticed how he would squint his eyes in concentration, how his smile appeared when he was particularly pleased with a mark.

When she began carving, she chose a crescent moon. One to mirror the hidden necklace in her pocket. Alden seemed delighted by her choice, leaning in to inspect her progress, offering suggestions on how to bring her vision to life.

At some point, he disappeared into the house and returned with a plate piled high with bread, dried fruit, and cheeses both sliced and crumbled.

Meela took one bite and sighed. “Incredible,” she mumbled around the bread.

“You’re an easy woman to please,” Alden teased, amusement warming his smile.

She grinned and returned to her carving. Alden leaned forward, reaching out to take it from her lap. He turned it over in his hands, nodding with honest approval. “This is turning out great, Meela. Truly, you’re a natural.”

She brightened at the praise, tossing a braid over her shoulder with exaggerated elegance. “Why thank you,” she replied in her most queenly tone.

Alden laughed—

“Meela!”

The voice crashed into the shop, shattering the quiet like glass. Meela’s breath stuttered. Alden flinched, his hand tightening around her carving.

“No need to yell,” he said sharply, lifting his brows.

Meela sighed, “I better see what she wants before she burns the place down.”

Alden let out a half-laugh, then paused as if he remembered his company. “She can’t do that, right?”

Meela smirked as she stood, “I don’t think so, but with her… you never really know.”

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Chapter Six



Cora stood in the middle of the yard, her eyes piercing as she assessed Meela. “What were you doing with him?” she asked before turning back toward the carriage.

Meela glanced at Alden. He stood in the doorway, concern settling across his face. She offered him a small, reassuring smile, one she wasn’t sure she believed herself, before following her mother into the carriage.

The space had shifted, reshaped to suit Cora’s needs. Faint veins of silver light pulsed through the wooden walls, runes flickering and shifting like restless spirits. A dark wooden desk had appeared where there had been none before, its surface cluttered with dried herbs, vials of ink, and her mother’s grimoire, which shrouded itself in mist the moment anyone’s gaze lingered upon it. The air smelled metallic, almost like blood, Meela thought. Above them, the ceiling stretched impossibly high, draped in thick shadows that curled into a starless night. The entire space felt alive, as though the carriage itself were listening.

Meela hated coming into rooms her mother worked in. It was never alive in the way Alden’s home had felt. His space felt warm and nurturing, while Cora's felt hollow and heavy. Ready to suck the life out of you.

“Just doing what you asked, not bothering you.” Meela was busy taking it in that she had forgotten where she was.

Cora’s neutral, almost exhausted expression, darkened. The change was immediate. The tightening of her mother's jaw, the way her nostrils flared, she didn’t have time to brace herself before her mother moved.

It came.

A sharp crack across her face. White-hot pain seared her cheek. Meela's breath hitched, but she refused to flinch. Cora's chest rose and fell sharply, her fingers curling like she itched to do something worse. And then, suddenly, it was gone. The anger, her fury. It vanished in a blink. Cora reached forward, gathering Meela into a hug. The shift was so fast, so seamless, it made her stomach turn.

"Oh, little moon," Cora said quickly, stroking her hair. "Why must you be so difficult?" Cora pulled away to look at her, her green eyes searching hers. "What have I told you about that tongue?" her voice was soft, almost disappointed that Meela personally wounded her. "If you were anyone else —" She let the words hang before exhaling sharply.

The scent of her mother's perfume filled Meela's nose, but it did nothing to comfort her. She remained stiff, her arms limp at her sides. She learned long ago these were not moments of love and repentance.

Cora was the storm, and the shelter.

The strike, and the soothing hand that followed.

Meela did not hug back. Her gaze locked on the window, staring at her own reflection in the darkened glass. Hollow eyes, a red mark blooming on her cheek. Blood from her nose. Cora pulled away first, smoothing out the front of her dress like the moment never happened. She handed Meela a square of cotton, before turning around.

"I'm glad to know you two are getting along so well," she said, almost amused.

"Yes." Meela swallowed the burning in her throat.

Cora studied her nails, bored with the conversation already. "I don't think I chose well, though. He is more difficult than I expected."

A flicker of unease ran through Meela. She kept her expression neutral, but inside her thoughts screamed. *No, please don't take me back.*

Cora clicked her tongue, glaring out the window. The motion was slow, deliberate. Her hands clasped behind her back, fingers lightly tapping her wrist. "He seems to ask a lot of questions. And the birds here…" her lips curled slightly. "They watch too closely."

Meela felt her stomach tighten. Cora turned her sharp gaze back on her. "What were you two talking about for hours on end?"

"He was teaching me to whittle."

“Hm.” Her eyes roamed Meela’s face, searching for any cracks. “Has he asked anything of you? Said anything strange?”

“No.” It wasn’t a lie, not entirely. Cora hummed, considering. “He’s a good man. I like him. I believe you chose well, mother.” Meela added, testing the waters.

Her expression barely shifted, but the air in the carriage suddenly grew charged. “Yes, see, *that’s* the problem. Witches don’t typically take husbands, Meela. I’ve told you this before. We use them. Take what’s needed to ensure the coven’s future, and discard the rest.” Her voice was smooth and patient, seemingly explaining a simple truth to a child. “You wouldn’t understand this yet, but men are vile, ugly creatures. I worry that once I’m gone, this man will convince you to do things you don’t want to do. He might force himself upon you, and you’re already growing attached. He could have gotten the wrong idea.”

A chill ran through Meela. “I—I don’t understand,” she said carefully. “He is to be my husband as *you* wanted. You chose him for me…” she shook her head, trying to piece it together. “You told me to allow myself to like him, and now you don’t want me to get attached?”

Cora smiled, reaching to tuck a stray strand of Meela’s hair behind her ear. She forced herself not to flinch. “I know this may seem confusing, but it’s simply not,” Cora soothed. “I just want to make sure your loyalties remain where they should be. If the coven were ever in need, I want to know, without a doubt, that you would choose us first. That you would do whatever is necessary to protect our future.”

Meela swallowed. “Of course.”

Cora’s smile widened. “Good. They will arrive tomorrow. We will get them settled and have a feast. It will be joyful… *you* should be joyful. Let’s see that beautiful smile.”

Meela forced her lips to curve. “I apologize, I will try harder.”

“Wonderful.” Cora’s version of a dismissal.

Meela dipped her head and stepped out of the carriage. The door shut behind her with a soft click, the sound barely audible over the pounding of her heart. She kept her steps even, one foot in front of the other. Meela’s vision was tunneled, locked onto the steps leading up to the house, her body moved on instinct alone. She didn’t dare allow herself to pause. She knew if she stopped, even for a moment, she might break. The air pressed in around her, cool against the heat still lingering on her cheek. She could feel the

sting of her mother's slap fading into a dull, pulsing ache. She inhaled deeply, trying to ground herself. She saw movement, a figure shifting just at the edge of her vision.

Alden stood in the door of his workshop. He hadn’t called out to her, hadn’t stepped forward, but she felt him. The solidness of his presence, the weight of his gaze. She refused to look, instead, she began walking faster.

Through the door, up the steps, down the hall.

Her room. Safe.

She pushed inside and shut the door behind her. The silence wrapped around like a smothering blanket. Her breath came in short, uneven bursts. Her hands shook where they rested against the door. She squeezed her eyes shut, forcing herself to swallow the sob clawing at her throat.

She wouldn’t cry. She refused.

But she caught sight of herself in the reflection. The red mark on her cheek. The wide, frightened brown eyes staring back at her. The drying blood under her nose. Her chest caved in on itself. A ragged, shuddering sob broke free before she could stop it. She pressed a hand over her mouth, her shoulders shaking.

What does she want from me?

Meela silently crawled into bed. The mattress was too firm beneath her, the covers too heavy, the room too big, too empty. She curled in on herself, pressing her face into the pillow, willing her body to sink into the silence.

She could hear the faint rustles of feathers, and felt the eyes on her back. The raven wanted her attention but she didn’t have energy for it, it flew in and landed softly on the bed frame. She pushed herself deeper into the mattress, trying to shut out the world. Her mind replaying the day again and again, her thoughts circling like vultures. She had too many questions, and no idea where to begin.

Why did it feel like every time she thought she understood, the truth slipped through her fingers? Why did she feel like she was drowning, even when standing on solid ground?

She had known from the moment she was old enough to understand that her life would never be easy. But for the first time, it didn’t feel difficult. It felt *impossible*. She had spent years being told what she was and what she had to do.

She knew the coven’s views on men. The girls had never hidden their disdain. They scoffed at the weddings she didn’t want herself, whispered

behind her back. They wanted her gone, yet still relished the chance to remind her she belonged to them.

And her mother. *Gods, her mother.*

For a fleeting, foolish moment, Meela allowed herself to believe she was near the end. That once this wedding was over, she would be free. It was a lie she told herself. How could she have ever thought she would escape?

‘*We discard.’*

The words settled like a pit in her stomach. She tried not to think of Heath and Alex. It grew harder to recall them with each passing year. Sometimes their faces blurred, their voices faded, but their warmth, the possibility of love... that remained. The quiet moments. The glimpses of something close to peace before it had all been ripped away.

And her, the cursed.

The girl who gave sweet smiles to men, who were doomed to die. What was she, if not the thing that destroyed them? Her fingers curled into fists beneath the blankets, nails pressing into her palms. She tried to feel something—pain, anger, anything solid enough to ground her. But all that remained was a dull and unrelenting ache.

The sun had set. Afternoon faded into evening.

She had not moved.

“Meela.” A sigh more than a call, followed by a small knock. He didn’t open the door, and neither did she. She heard something clink against the floor, and a slow retreat of footsteps.

She wanted to get up, but she couldn’t move. Her limbs felt too heavy, her body sinking deeper into the mattress, like it might swallow her if she let it. The raven, still perched, ruffled its feathers. Bouncing from where it sat perched on her bedside table. Curiosity gnawed at her, and finally forced herself upright, dragging herself toward the door. She opened the door softly. Slowly peeking out to find a sliver of pie and the raven carving.

Something in her chest cracked. She let out a noise that was somehow both a laugh and a sob. Her lips twitched, and straightened. *What a disgusting creature.*

Two more days.

She could survive two more days. She would talk with Alden. There had to be a way they both could keep her mother at bay, keep her happy until she left. She didn’t want to listen to the part of her mind telling her the truth. That no matter what she did, no matter how much she obeyed.

She would never be free of Cora.

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Chapter Seven



Strong arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her back into the heat of his body. His hands roamed, claiming the softness of her stomach with a possessive touch. A low, satisfied hum rumbled against her shoulder, followed by the slow drag of his lips across her skin.

“I’m so glad you decided to come,” a deep voice whispered in her ear. “I needed you. Needed *this*.”

She pushed her hips back into him before turning, a gasp coming out of her as she looked into his eyes. He was no longer shrouded in shadow, not blurred at the edges of her mind.

Him.

Dark, wavy hair brushing over his brow. Deep brown eyes that burned like embers. His scar slashed across both lips, which twisted into a devastating smile that took her breath away.

He hovered over her, his fingers tracing lazy circles along her hip. The weight of him against her, the heat of skin. He had to be real.

Meela’s lips parted, but she was silenced with a slow, deep kiss.

“A few more months and I’ll be in your bed every day.” He smiled against her mouth. “It’s becoming increasingly difficult to think about anything else. You’re quite debilitating, Meela.”

Her breath hitched at her name on his lips. She wanted to beg to hear it again, beg for this to be real. This room, wherever she was, felt safe. Familiar, even. Her fingers slid up his strong back as she pulled him closer. His body pressed deeper into hers, heat pooling low in her belly.

She wanted to speak, but words wouldn’t form. She wanted to call him by his name. She should know it. It lingered at the edge of her mind, just out of reach. Frustration flickered, but it melted when his mouth found her throat, her shoulder, her breast. One hand holding her neck open while the other softly moved on her thigh. He was devouring her, worshipping her. She arched into him, gasping.

She wanted more. She needed more. But just as his lips found hers again, just as the pleasure became overwhelming.

The world cracked, and Meela woke.

Her room was dark, silent. But she found the raven still there, perched on the sill. Its head tilted as it watched. Her body still hummed, still ached. Her lips tingled from phantom kisses. Her heart thundered as she pressed a shaking hand to her chest.

He was no longer a shadow. He wasn’t doused in heavy fog. He was real, and Meela knew in her heart that she should know who that man was.



The air carried a stillness, as if the world itself was holding its breath. Meela felt it in her bones before she saw it, the telltale hum of magic threading through the late afternoon sun. Cora straightened beside her, tilting her head.

“They’re here.”

Meela swallowed, her fingers curling into the fabric of her dress. Beside her, Alden wiped his hand on a cloth, his eyes narrowing toward the treeline. He didn’t speak, but she could sense his unease in the taut set of his shoulders as he waited.

Out of the treeline, the carriage emerged, moving without horses, its wheels never touching the road. The dark wood shimmered with etched symbols, and twin purple lanterns painted shifting shadows across the dirt road. She had seen that carriage many times before. Still, her pulse quickened, her throat tightening as if it remembered before her mind did. Its arrival was the turn of fate’s wheel, the pull of a tide that always came back for her.

What would they say? What would they see?

The carriage came to a quick halt. Cora grabbed her hand, pulling her to follow. The door creaked open of its own accord. One by one, the cloaked figures emerged, their deep red robes pooling around them. Some carried themselves with grace, while others whispered in hushed voices, stretching from the long journey.

There were the yellow-eyed twins, Delphine and Maris. The eldest, Ida. Sweet, soft Lenora. Zora followed close behind. Aurora and Valina, next. But others, she did not recognize at all. Meela held in her shock that her mother would allow others to be initiated into the coven without the High Priestess present. The last to emerge was Alice.

A ripple of energy passed through the gathered witches. They all stood, waiting. Meela could feel it the moment their focus shifted toward her mother without a single word spoken. The weight Cora carried was never loud, it didn't need to be. It was an unspoken law that settled over them all. Alice dipped her head to her mother, and they both crossed the way towards one another.

"Meela!" A blur of brown curls and warmth crashed into her. Meela barely had time to brace herself before Zora's arm wrapped around her, squeezing tight. Reluctantly, she allowed herself to lean into the embrace.

When she finally pulled back, her bright blue eyes shimmered with joy. Meela hated the way it made her uncomfortable. "Let me look at you."

Meela shifted awkwardly under her gaze. "I –"

"You look…" Zora cut her off, gripping her shoulder and scanning her face. She squinted. "Hm."

"What?" Meela furrowed her brows.

"Tired, I suppose."

Meela sighed, "Thank you, Zora."

"But also… happy." Zora's fingers tightened around her shoulders. "Are you happy?"

The easy answer was yes. It would speed this up, keep Zora smiling, keep questions at bay. But her eyes lingered, uncomfortably perceptive, as if she genuinely cared. Meela wouldn't say she hated Zora. Hate was far too strong a word. She really, really did not like her. Something about the energy around Zora felt suffocating, and Meela often had to resist the urge to snap at the woman. She never understood Zora's attachment to her. They had never been close, at least not in the way Zora seemed to believe. While

the others kept their distance, she had always been too warm, too unbearable. Before she responded, Zora gasped dramatically. “Where is he?”

“Who?”

“Your future husband, obviously! Who else?” Zora’s curls bounced as she turned. When her eyes landed on Alden, she stilled.

“Oh my.”

Alden, still standing where they had left him, raised a hand.

Zora’s eyes heated, and without hesitation, strode up, looking him over. “You’re… bigger than I expected.”

Alden smiled. “And you’re smaller.”

Zora let out a delighted laugh, spinning back toward Meela. “What a lucky girl you are… those eyes.” She was glowing, as she turned back to Alden. “Cora chose well this time.”

Meela swallowed her annoyance, and nodded.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Alden inclined his head.

“It is.” Zora leaned in. “Alright, Meela. Tell me everything, show me around. I want to see how you’re settling in.”

A sharp caw split the air. A chill ran down Meela’s spine, she turned toward the treeline, her eyes searching until she found it, perched on a low-hanging branch. Its dark eyes locked onto hers, its sleek feathers ruffling as it let out another cry.

Zora followed her gaze, then let out an amused snort, raising a hand as a wave of magic hit right below the raven, causing it to fly away. “You’ll have to wait for your *scraps*, stupid bird.”

The shift in the coven was immediate. Before there had been movement, chatter, and laughter. Now there was attentiveness, stillness as everyone watched Cora.

“Meela.” Her mother held out her hand, summoning her. Cora’s eyes swept over the gathered women before landing on Alden. “I know I’ve chosen well, Zora.”

The words wrapped around Meela like chains. Alden simply met Cora’s gaze.

“I hope to prove myself worthy of your daughter.”

The coven’s presence transformed the once quiet clearing into something buzzing with purpose. Some clustered around Cora in a tight circle, their voices hushed and urgent. The air between them crackled, the way it always

had when witches spoke of things not meant to be heard. Their gazes fixed on Meela once, twice, before quickly diverting.

Others moved with practiced efficiency, unpacking their supplies with a precision honed from repetition. Their hands flicked, and where there was once only grass, their homes appeared. Tents too small of a word for what they conjured. They were more like elegant, temporary dwellings. Draped in a deep crimson fabric that shimmered in the light. These were not simple structures. They were crafted and imbued with protection. Each alive in their own way. They had done it enough times to look like soldiers on a battlefield. Each knew their role, waiting for their commander to give the first order.

Alice, Cora's ever-present second-in-command, walked at her side as they made their way toward the carriage. Meela knew they would be preparing the final pieces of the rite, the ceremony taking place beneath the peak of tomorrow's full moon.

A burst of laughter pulled her from her thoughts, turning to find Zora latched onto Alden's arm, her fingers barely able to fit around his forearms. She looked up at him, her eyes bright and lips curled into a playful smile.

"Truly, they didn't tell me how impressive you are." She squeezed his arm, testing the strength. "And this cottage… goddess, it's incredible. Thank you for taking us in, really."

Zora was all warmth and charm, ignoring Meela who stood only a few feet away. Not that Meela cared, it was simply the ease with which she did it. If Alden noticed her cloying attention, he gave no sign, only offering the same measured politeness he had given everyone else.

"I'm happy to open my home," he said. "It's not often I have so many visitors."

Meela turned her focus, watching as her mother and Alice approached the carriage. Alice had never liked Meela, though she had never been openly cruel, either. While others had made their irritation clear: snide comments, dismissive glances, a whispered joke just loud enough to be heard. Alice simply acted like Meela didn't exist.

Somehow, that was worse. Alice glanced over her shoulder, her brows furrowed slightly, a small crease forming between them. A look not of curiosity, nor hostility, but something else entirely.

What do you see when you look at me?

Alice was striking in a way that almost felt unnatural, her deep brown skin flawless under the sunlight, her cloud of white curls framing high cheekbones and a sharp, regal jaw. But it was her eyes that unsettled her the most. Violet, rich and luminous, like amethyst held to light. They saw too much, yet never revealed anything in return.

Cora surrounded herself with beauty, theoretically her mother's requirement for power, and the coven reflected that. Each woman tall, poised, ethereal in their perfection. Their presence alone made Meela feel small and awkward. A child among queens. She wondered why Alice, out of all of them, had always ignored her so completely. Perhaps indifference was her way of cruelty. Alice lingered for only a moment before leaning closer to Cora, hand settling on her mother's back as she whispered against her ear.

The night had not even begun, but Meela already felt the weight in her chest pressing heavier than before. While others settled, Zora skipped off to join the rest, laughing as she helped unpack their belongings. The yard bustled with movement, and Meela followed Alden into the house.

Alden moved with his usual steadiness, rolling up his sleeves as he began pulling out piles of food from the pantry.

“I’m assuming they’re hungry from their travels,” he said with a small shrug. “I’ll be honest, I’m not sure what I’m meant to be doing right now.”

“I know the feeling,” Meela said, stepping beside him.

They fell into an easy rhythm, working in silence as they sliced fruits and vegetables, laid out cheeses, and warmed bread over the hearth’s embers. It was a quiet dance, a pattern they had never practiced but somehow knew instinctively.

“I wasn’t sure what to expect, but they seem alright." He nodded toward the window, where the coven all shuffled around. “Zora is awfully friendly. You two seem close.”

Meela wasn’t sure if he was making an observation or asking the question. “Hm. I’d say out of them all, she’s the one who tolerates me the most.”

Alden’s knife paused mid-slice, lifting his head. “Tolerate you? You talk like you’re some cumbersome bug.”

Meela set her knife down and leaned against the counter, grinning. “A cumbersome bug is the perfect analogy for how I feel around them.” Her gaze dropped to the fruit-stained chopping block. “Maybe that’s why I don’t mind being sent off. At least I’ll be out of their hair.”

Alden didn’t argue, only offering a small shake of his head in a silent disagreement.

By the time they reached the yard with the last trays, the witches had gathered at the long wooden table. The air was thick with conversation. Meela stepped aside as they all descended upon the meal, picking through the offerings.

“Thank you, Alden,” Alice said easily. “Meela.”

Meela’s jaw nearly dropped. Alice had barely spoken to her before, let alone thank her. She forced herself to recover. “Of course, Alice. We were happy to do it.”

Alden wiped his hand on his trousers before extending one out to Alice. “Pleasure to meet you. Please, make yourself at home.”

Alice’s lips curled into something almost kind. There was a glint in her violet eyes that made her skin feel alive. “The coven appreciates your hospitality, don’t we ladies?” The coven all responded at once. “Hopefully we won’t be in your way for too long.” This time, her eyes landed on Meela and held.

“Well, enjoy,” Alden, the ever-gracious host said, “Let me know if there is anything I can do.”

Alice’s smile deepened. “Oh, trust me. Your marriage to our dear Meela is enough.”

Meela stiffened. Alden lifted his brows, but said nothing as she turned away. He glanced down at Meela with a crooked grin. “She’s not so bad.”

Meela let out a quiet snort, and smacked his arm. “She’s my mother's favorite.”

His grin lingered for only a second before fading as Cora rose to her feet. The space silenced at once.

“Welcome, sisters. Thank you for all being here.” Cora smiled, “And thank you, Alden, for opening your home to us.”

A hushed agreement ripped through them.

“Tonight, we will prepare. We will *feast.*” Cora’s eyes widened as she smiled large, lingering on Meela for just a moment. “Settle. Enjoy. Tomorrow is the day we’ve been waiting for.”

Meela exhaled, feeling the need to flee from the energy of the courtyard. She turned to Alden, resting her hand on his crossed arms. “I think I'm going to the garden. We should gather more vegetables for dinner.”

He looked around the gathered coven, before turning back to her. He pressed his lips together, wanting to protest, but in the end, nodded. “Be careful. Call if you need me.”

Meela smiled up at him, silently turning and slipping around the cottage. The mother's voice fading behind her.

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Chapter Eight



Meela reclined in the soft grass, her skirt fanned around her, the sun warming her skin. She tipped her head back, letting the sunlight bathe her face. The garden stretched out, a patchwork of wildflowers and untamed ivy climbing the stones of Alden’s cottage.

For a moment, she allowed herself to sit. A small attempt to forget what was happening. Forget the oppressive walls of her mother's home, the feeling of being trapped with little choice of her own, the looming weight of a third marriage to a man who might actually die within a week.

Just this, the sun. The hum of insects, the whisper of wind, and promises of something more. The raven landed a few feet away with a soft thud. She turned, one eye open to look, its eyes gleaming with curiosity. Meela propped herself up on her elbows, the corners of her lips lifting.

“You again?” she smiled. “Do you go anywhere else or am I truly this fascinating?”

The bird tilted its head.

“Fine, don’t answer,” she teased. She sat up fully, brushing the blades of grass from her skirt. “But it’s rude to stare like that.”

The bird hopped, turning its back to her.

Meela laughed. “The girls could learn something from you.”

The raven turned back to look at her, moving to her lap.

Her fingers drifted to the present this bird had given her, holding it up to let the silver catch the light. She glanced back down at the raven. “Do you think she’d take it from me? I’m sure she’d call it dangerous like everything

else.” She smiled slightly. “It doesn’t feel dangerous though, not that anything ever has.”

The raven tilted its head in response, its eyes moving like it was considering her every word.

Meela chuckled. “Right. Talking to a bird.” She turned the necklace over in her palm, tracing the curve of the moon. “I’m sorry Zora struck you earlier. They’d probably tell me to shoo you away as well. Could you believe that? Shoo away my only friend.”

The raven gave a small chatter of its beak, fluttering its wings as if to say you’re my friend too. It didn’t move from its spot. Meela smiled and the tension from earlier released from her chest.

“That bird… has that been happening a lot?” Alice stood at the edge of the garden, her hands clasped in front of her, watching. Meela looked back at the raven, watching as it took off in a burst of black feathers, disappearing into the forest.

Alice’s brows lifted. “It’s just odd, don’t you think?”

Meela forced herself to hold Alice’s gaze, the necklace warmed as she clutched it in her hand. “I think it’s just a bird.”

Alice only nodded once and surprisingly said nothing. Letting the silence stretch between them. Then, to further Meela’s shock, she simply turned away, her red cloak trailing behind her.

Meela blinked, unsure of what to make of it. There was no barbed comment, no further questions, just a quiet exit as quickly as she appeared.

Of course she found it odd. Lately, she’d had better conversations with a bird than anyone else.

The sanctuary of the garden felt a little less peaceful now. Meela knew she would need to steel herself for the onslaught of questions that would come later. Still, she lingered long after Alice had gone, letting her thoughts knot and unknot while she finished what she had come here to do.

Her fingers sank into the soil, the earth cool and yielding beneath her hands, as if welcoming her touch. The ground gave up its treasures easily, roots sliding free as though it, too, wished to feed her table that evening.

Alice would tell her mother. She always did. Cora knew all, because Alice made certain of it.

Even so, Meela couldn’t explain why she felt so protective of the raven, only that its presence mattered to her in some way. Cora would see danger

in it, twist the simple bird into a threat, another excuse to tighten her grip. Meela refused to hand her that satisfaction.

The sun dipped lower, smearing the sky in orange and violet. Still no footsteps came. No sharp reprimand. No probing questions. Only the garden, quiet and watchful, holding its silence as though in alliance with her.



The courtyard had been remade for tonight's feast. Beneath the sprawling oak, a long wooden table stretched wide, glowing in the last wash of sun. The air thrummed with the coven's energy, a chaotic symphony of chatter, laughter, and sly remarks. Twelve women sat cloaked in silks instead of hoods, each gown as striking as its wearer. They were radiant, commanding, and magnetic. Though to Meela, they were suffocating.

At the head of the table, Cora presided. Her blonde hair caught the lingering light, her green eyes sweeping the gathering as she leaned close to Alice at her side.

Meela slipped into a seat at the far end, opposite Alden. He looked just as out of place, his towering frame and steady presence an anchor against the whirlwind of voices. When his gaze found hers, it softened, warming her in a way the feast never could.

Cora lifted her hands, and the empty plates shimmered full. The display was needless, a flex of power, and it drew delighted giggles from a few of the women, still spellbound by their High Priestess.

Meela rolled her eyes, already reaching for the nearest drink. Wine, she decided, would be her closest ally tonight. Across the table, Alden's quiet chuckle followed, and he raised his glass in silent sympathy.

The conversations swelled and ebbed, weaving tales of journeys and days past, but always, inevitably, they circled back to Cora.

"Your herbs are wonderful as always, Cora," one of the younger women said, her voice dripping in admiration. Meela knew she was trying to find her place in the coven as she noticed a few snickering to one another.

Cora inclined her head, gracefully accepting the praise. “A small selection, but it's enough. I’ve always believed that preparation and forethought are what separate *us* from the mundane.”

Meela raised her brows, stabbing her vegetables.

“So, Meela.” *Meela.* She hated the way Delphine said her name. Dragging it out like it was a joke.

She built the courage to look at her, preparing for whatever was going to come next. Delphine smiled, her golden eyes narrowing. “How have you been spending your days? As productively as the rest of us, I’m sure.”

A deliberate taunt. The words hung in the air. Meela wished she could come up with a harsh retort, her cheeks only burned as everyone watched, waiting. But her mind went blank. The words wouldn’t come. They scattered before they could form.

“She was in the garden earlier today. Picking these very same vegetables you’ve been complimenting.” Alden's voice cut the silence. “That’s not an easy job, and she took it upon herself.”

All eyes turned to him, some curious. Most outright disapproving that he dared speak at all. No one had ever defended her, and certainly never in her mother’s presence. The coven all turned their heads to Cora. She sat, a drink to her mouth, as she smiled.

“How charming.” She took a small sip. “Though, I’m surprised a woodworker's expertise extends much to tending gardens as well.”

Their laughter was biting. Alden met Cora’s gaze without flinching, his demeanor still strong. “I don’t need to be an expert to see someone putting their care into something.” He looked down at his plate, stabbing one of the roasted carrots. “And dare I say, it speaks for itself.”

The silence stretched before one laughed about men understanding their place. The conversations shifted, but tensions lingered, a current building under the surface. Meela kept her eyes on her plate. She wasn’t sure if she should be mortified or grateful for his intervention.

As the meal continued, their personalities emerged in full force. Delphine’s sharp tongue found its mark with a few, while her twin Maris, dominated the table with her laughter and overly loud declarations about scaring off some mage in the latest town they were in.

Meela felt like a shadow among them, her voice swallowed by the sheer force of them all. Every word she had considered felt wrong and inadequate. If she spoke, she knew it would only be met with judgment.

Alden held himself with dignity, even if he too seemed out of place. He met anyone's sharp glance without flinching. When Ida made a comment about his ‘*limited perspective as a craftsman.*’ he only smiled, and said ‘*perspective is not limited by one’s craft, it's limited to one's arrogance*.’

The remark earned a few raised eyebrows and a ripple of laughter from Maris. Meela had to attempt to suppress her own smile when she saw Ida’s reaction.

The meal wound down as the sky darkened. The coven cast orbs of light above them, flickering like stars. Meela nursed her drink, head tilted back as she searched the sky for the moon. Night had always soothed her. Something about the hush between stars made it easier to breathe.

Someone had once told her she reminded them of moonlight.

The memory floated up, uninvited, softened at the edges by time. Yet no matter how she searched for it, she couldn’t place who had said it. Meela sank lower into her seat, the warmth of her drink settling pleasantly through her. Strange, that the words had stayed when the person who spoke them had not. Stranger still, that some part of her had believed them.

Cora stood, and the table fell silent.

“I trust you’ll all be ready for the ceremony.” Her voice carried over the table. “There’s no room for error, I expect perfection.”

They confirmed they would be where they are needed. Meela’s pulse quickened at the reminder of what tomorrow would bring. As everyone dispersed, their voices faded into the distance, the soirée carrying on elsewhere. Meela lingered behind, unsure whether she wanted to speak with Alden or avoid him entirely. She knew she should thank him. She simply hadn’t found the courage earlier.

He removed her internal battle, sitting down beside her. “You all right?”

Meela nodded, though she knew they both knew that was a lie. “You didn’t have to defend me. But, thank you.”

“Maybe not,” he replied, “but someone should.”

Alden clasped his hands under his chin, eyes deep in thought. The soft glow of the orbs lingered, casting shadows that danced in the breeze. Meela stayed, enjoying his silent company, her gaze flickering between the almost full moon above and the empty seats scattered around the table. She ran her fingers along the edge of the table, the intricate designs beneath her fingertips.

“This table is beautiful,” she said, “Is this your work as well?”

Alden, who still seemed lost in his own thoughts, looked at her with a bashful smile, his cheeks reddening. “It is. I made it years ago. I’m glad it’s finally getting used.”

Meela’s brows lifted. “I apologize, I should’ve said something when I noticed it earlier. You have an incredible touch, Alden.”

He waved the apology away. “Nothing to be sorry for. I like keeping my hands busy. It helps silence the mind. And it's honest work.”

Meela tilted her head. “I like that… honest work. I don’t think I've experienced much of that in my life.”

Alden raised his brows. “Not even the garden? You seemed at peace, it was nice to see. And you were a great apprentice.”

She laughed. “Maybe, when I’m left alone at least.”

“Well,” he said, leaning in a little closer. “If I ever need help in the shop, I know just the girl.”

Meela smiled fully, her brown eyes narrowing playfully. “And what would you have me do all day? Sand the wood and clean up sawdust?”

“Exactly. It’s very alluring work.” he grinned. “This was some dinner, huh?”

Meela snorted. “That’s one way to describe it.”

He nodded towards the empty seats. “You’d think they were preparing for battle, not a wedding. What was it Cora said…oh right, ‘there is no room for error’” he scoffed. “Should I prepare for morning drills?”

Meela laughed, “Oh, sweet Alden. Your first dinner with the coven. This is nothing new. My mother demands perfection even when it’s just… dinner.” A smile tugged at her lips. “If the forks aren’t straight, someone may lose their head.”

He chuckled as he stood, beginning to clear some of the empty dishes. “I suppose I should be glad I’m not in charge of table settings.”

Silence lingered between them, and Meela found herself brushing the necklace between her fingers. Thoughts she had been avoiding crossed her mind.

“Alden.” Meela said hesitantly. He glanced over, sensing the tone shift. “I know my mother told you about my past… my previous marriages.”

“Only that they ended as quickly as they began.”

Meela let out a small exhale, her eyes dropping to her lap. “I can barely remember them now. Lenora said it was due to the trauma of what happened, or possibly my own heartbreak. I can recall them: their faces and

names. Their voices feel like they're fading, but that's it." She looked up at him. "I don't even remember mourning them. I don't know if I even truly cared for them."

Meela shocked herself with the brutal honesty. It had been something she kept to herself, mostly out of shame. She continued, needing to get this out before it was too late for him.

Alden's eyes softened. "I can't imagine what that must be like. Not knowing."

"I'm getting used to it." She offered him a small smile.

"This isn't my first marriage either," he admitted, his voice quiet.

"Really?"

He nodded, his eyes distant. "I was married once before. She passed away quite some time ago. It's not something I like talking about."

"I'm so sorry."

"Loss is part of life, isn't it?" Alden replied. "We carry what we can, and let go of what we can't."

Before she could reply, footsteps approached. Meela turned to find her mother nearing the table, her sharp gaze moving between them. "Meela." Cora's tone was deliberately soft. "A word?"

Meela glanced at Alden. He offered a small nod before disappearing into the night.

Cora took his seat, and Meela straightened. Her mother's expression seemed caught somewhere between a smile and scrutiny. "You were more interested in your drink than dinner." Cora tilted her head. "I would have thought you'd be prepared for what's to come by now." She sighed. "I've done what I can for you."

"You have," Meela said. "It's not your fault this has taken so long. It's mine. I apologize for dragging the coven here."

"They will do as they are told," Cora said. "This is our time to give back. Marriage is a bond, one that cannot easily be broken. A union like this will strengthen us, solidify our connection to the land, and ensure harmony for years to come." She softened. "I know it's a lot to prepare for. This is more than a ceremony, more than the rite. It's a step forward. A new chapter for us all."

"I don't share your power, though."

"But you *are* a Diremoure. You're mine." Cora's gaze held hers. "You come from a long line of powerful women. You need not worry. I'll guide

you through it. I'll make sure everything is as it should be."

Meela nodded. "I trust you. I only want to make you proud."

The unfortunate truth slipped out before she could stop it.

Cora's expression hardened, if only slightly. "There is no room for error this time. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Good." Cora stood, moving gracefully. "Now, go get some rest."

Meela climbed the stairs, the muffled sounds of laughter and song rising from the coven outside. A gathering and moments of joy before the day ahead. She felt separate from it, watching from behind the glass window. The garden stretched wide, bathed in the silver moonlight. The leaves rustled in a rhythm too steady to be the wind, the vines hanging from the shifting trees stirred by something unseen. For a fleeting moment, she swore she felt something brush her shoulder.

Movement caught her eye. A shadow swept low across the garden, dark wings slicing the night. Her heart leapt, a rush of relief and joy rising all at once. The raven had come back. She pressed her palms to the sill, leaning forward as it skimmed the ground, waiting for it to veer toward her.

But it didn't. The bird shifted course, gliding toward the workshop.

Meela watched as the raven settled on the ledge outside, talons biting into wood, wings shivering before folding close. Alden stepped forward, smiling as though he had been expecting it, and opened the door.

The raven let out a low, throaty croak, shaped almost like words, too deep and broken to belong to a bird. Then it dropped a scrap of parchment and took flight, vanishing into the dark.

Her fingers curled tight against the sill. A cold scramble of thoughts rushed through her, desperate for a simple explanation, something that didn't threaten to crack the fragile belief she had been clinging to.

Maybe she imagined it. Maybe it meant nothing.

But then Alden stepped outside, scanning the shadows before stooping to retrieve the parchment.

Her throat tightened. Panic crept up her spine. The raven had always come for *her*. She told herself that was the truth. Believed it. Needed it. But now, it felt like a lie. One she had been all too eager to believe.

Alden said it came for me.

For a moment, she considered marching straight to him, demanding to know what the note said.

What if I’m wrong?

No. She needed a moment. She needed to clear her head. Wash up, breathe... ground herself.

Or I could look.

She had wanted to from the moment she arrived and saw those staves. She’d known then there was more to Alden than a man living quietly in the forest. Men like him didn’t simply end up in places where women like her mother did. She just hadn’t been alone long enough. At least, that was what she told herself. The truth was, somewhere along the way, she had stopped wanting to know. Whatever secrets Alden kept, she had been content to let him keep them. Afraid, perhaps, of what she might find if she looked too closely.

Now, she needed to know.

Meela moved quickly, her bare feet silent against the wooden floors. The house was still, the distant voices of the coven drifting like ghosts outside. She slipped into the hall, heart pounding as she made her way toward the rooms Alden had never shown them.

Locks had never been much of an obstacle. Cora had spent years keeping Meela out of certain spaces, and Meela had spent just as many learning how to get inside.

She started small, searching for the things someone else might overlook. A wooden symbol carved into the mantel, too similar to those she had seen in sacred spaces. A bundle of herbs hanging in the corner, bound with red string in a way that felt deliberate. A book, its spine cracked with age, its cover marked with unfamiliar sigils.

And then, as if the cottage had decided to reveal its secrets all at once, she saw them.

Blue symbols, glowing softly and shimmering like stardust in the dim light.

Her breath hitched. They weren’t decorations. She felt the pulse of life beneath them, felt them calling to her. She reached out, fingers hovering just short of the nearest mark, suddenly unsure she wanted to touch it at all.

“You shouldn’t be in here.”

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Chapter Nine



Meela spun, her pulse slamming against her ribs. Alden stood in the doorway, his eyes filled with concern. Possibly even caution, or regret.

"There was a note." She steadied herself, swallowing the rush of nerves. “The raven. I saw it.”

Alden stepped further into the room, nodding his head. “There were two.”

Her stomach tightened. “Two?”

He lifted his hand, and slowly offered her a small, folded piece of parchment. She hesitated before taking it, her fingers brushing against the rough edges. Goosebumps filled her skin. She lifted her eyes to Alden, searching for an answer.

Alden’s stare went past her, to the shelf where the blue shimmering symbols still faintly glowed. His expression darkened in a way she had never seen before. “You were snooping.”

“You locked the door.” She forced herself to hold his glare.

He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Because of them. I didn’t want anyone to get the wrong impression.”

“Wrong impression of *what*?” She crossed her arms. “That you’re hiding things?”

Alden’s eyes searched hers for a moment before exhaling through his nose. “That I have beliefs they wouldn’t approve of.” He glanced back at the symbols. “The coven follows their traditions. I follow mine.”

She thought it made sense, but it was the way he was watching her that set her further on edge. His large body stood in the door, his eyes locked on

hers. He hadn’t even seemed surprised to find her in here, yet she still felt cornered.

“Did your conversation with Cora go well?” he asked suddenly. The shift in topic was not lost on her.

Meela squinted. “Why?”

Alden’s fingers drummed against his thigh, a brief, restless movement before he stilled again. “You seemed off at dinner, and now you’re snooping around my house, looking at things you weren’t supposed to see.”

He wasn’t wrong, but she didn’t care for being called out by him. “It was fine, she believes in me more than I do.”

Alden tilted his head, as if weighing that answer. “You mean she expects things from you.”

“Is that not the same thing?”

His lips pressed into a thin line. “She hasn’t told you yet, has she?”

Meela blinked. “Told me what?”

“That things are strange here… what’s to come tomorrow.”

Meela narrowed her eyes. “Of course things are strange. I’m marrying someone I barely know, in a town I've never been to, while a flock of witches plan the ceremony.”

Alden huffed a small, dry laugh. “True.” His expression turned serious again. “But that’s not what I meant.”

His tone made her heart pound against her chest. He looked uneasy, more than she’d ever seen him. “Alden,” she said carefully. “What are you talking about?”

He ran his hand through his dark hair. For a moment, it looked like he might not answer. Then, quietly, he said, “If I ever tell you to run, Meela, run.”

She shook her head. “What?”

“I mean it,” He stepped closer, his large frame casting a shadow over her in the dimly lit room. “No questions, no second thoughts. If I tell you to go, you go.”

“You’re being dramatic.” She tried to joke, but it landed flat.

“I’m being serious,” Alden said, unwavering. She searched his face, and found no playfulness there, only a deep, quiet resolve.

Meela's throat felt dry. “You should be the one considering running,” she muttered, forcing a smile to cover the unease curling in her chest.

Alden actually laughed, shaking his head. “That’s no threat, coming from you.”

“Excuse me?”

“I know what I signed up for.” A flicker of something deep and painful crossed his face before he masked it.

“Alden… what do you mean? Why would I run?”

Before he answered, the front door creaked open. Alden moved fast. In one smooth motion, he nudged her toward the hall. “Go.”

She looked back at Alden, but he was already closing the door between them. Meela softly ran to her room, shutting the door behind her. Her hands were unsteady as she unfolded the note. There was no name, but she swore she recognized the handwriting.

I’ll find you where you still remember me.

Meela read the note again, and then another time. Her fingers curled tightly around the paper, as if she could crush the weight of those words between them. Her breath was coming in short bursts.

What was happening?

She thought if she could ignore the feeling of wrongness, it would pass. But every moment in this house, every conversation, every glance. It all felt like something was lurking beneath the surface, just out of reach. The way they watched her. The way the air felt charged, a storm waiting to break.

The coven usually checked her over when they arrived, their hands always searching, the magic tingling against her skin. They wanted to look for any signs of trauma, try to sense any new magic within her body. When she told them she couldn’t recall moments or days, they simply said it was something she needed to work through. She insisted. She fought, and she was dismissed. They barely looked at her today. She was thankful in the moment, but now.

It wasn’t normal, was it? To forget and be told to move on?

Meela sucked in a deep breath, forcing herself towards the washroom. She leaned over, dragging water over her face, desperate for anything that might help herself.

Ground yourself, Meela.

That’s what they told her to do. She had worked on it for months with Lenora.

Deep breaths, focus on the present. Ignore those thoughts, they said. They were too terrible to look back on. Her mother reminded her often, move

forward.

She had. She didn’t think of those terrible times. She let the past be the past, and didn’t look closely at things that may be strange upon further thought.

Her breath was becoming too quick, too shallow at the realization of what she’d been allowing. She rubbed her face, and paused as she caught her reflection.

She stilled, and for a moment just looked. She didn’t recognize the girl she saw. Her hair spilled over her bare shoulders, silver curls catching the candlelight. Her pale brown eyes, too large, staring back at her. She tilted her chin, running her fingers down her throat, tracing the soft curve of her collarbone.

She looked alive… more than alive, like the girl she had always been was only a shadow and this—this was what was waiting underneath.

Her body, the soft curve of her waist. The fullness of her lips, parting slightly as she exhaled. Her skin was still pale, but it glowed under the dim light and for the first time, it felt like she could finally see herself as if something inside her was beginning to wake up.

“You should rest.”

Cora stepped inside without permission, a small vial in hand. Her green eyes scanned Meela with the precision of someone who knew her too well. “You’ve had a long day.”

Meela swallowed, shaking her head. She had little doubt she looked shaken. Cora reached up, brushing a hand through Meela’s hair.

“I can see the stress is wearing on you.” She smiled softly. “This will help.” She pressed the small glass into Meela’s hand. The liquid inside shimmered faintly, dark and rich like spiced wine.

Meela forced a tight smile. “Thank you.”

Cora studied her, then leaned forward and kissed Meela’s forehead. “Get some sleep.”

The door shut softly behind her. For a moment, she stood frozen. When she was sure Cora was gone, she turned back to the tonic. Her gut screamed at her, telling her not to drink it.

Without further thought, she poured the liquid out, watching it swirl down the drain. She climbed into bed, her thoughts racing.

Alden. The raven. The symbols. The *note*.

She reached for the necklace, its metal warming beneath her touch. *Put it on. Keep it there.*

The thought came with a strange sense of urgency. Still, she hadn't dared wear it. Something about keeping it hidden felt just as important as keeping it close.

Nothing made sense. Her body ached with exhaustion, but her mind wouldn't slow. Meela lay, staring at the ceiling, listening to the creaks of the house settling. She could hear the coven outside, celebrating. But sleep refused to come. With a sigh, she sat up, looking for the raven, who surprisingly hadn't returned. Pulling a shawl around her shoulders, she slipped out of her room, careful not to make a sound. As she reached the main room, she stopped.

Alden was there, sitting before the fire, whittling something small in his hands. His wide shoulders hunched slightly, his focus on his work, the blade catching the firelight with each careful scrape. He glanced up at her entrance, his eyes warming at her approach. "Couldn't sleep?"

Meela shook her head.

Alden set down the knife, stretching his arms over his head with a low grunt. "I was about to make some tea. Would you like some?"

She nodded, sinking into the chair opposite his, pulling her knees to her chest, letting the warmth of the fire chase away the chill of this night. Alden's cottage was comforting in the way it settled around her like it had existed for a hundred years before her, and would remain long after. She had too many questions, too many to sort through alone.

Two notes… and she had gotten one. Who had written these notes? Was she truly cursed? Did Alden know more than he shared with her?

She told Alden of the ones before, that they had died, but was she clear enough? Had she really properly warned him? Regardless of the evening, he was kind to her, patient in a way she had never experienced. He didn't deserve this fate. She should be the one to urge him to run, go far enough that the coven wouldn't find him. They would be disappointed in her, but that would be nothing new. And at least Alden would be alive.

"You were lost in thought." Alden returned, handing her a cup before settling back into his chair.

Meela glanced at him, then back to the fire. "I was."

"Should I dare ask given the circumstances?"

She traced a finger along the rim of the cup, considering. “Have you ever read *The Bride's Kiss*?”

Alden huffed a quiet chuckle. “Can’t say I have. Doesn’t sound like my usual reading.”

“It’s an older novel, one of my favorites,” she mused. “About a cursed woman. Any man who kisses her dies. It’s quite tragic.”

Alden raised a brow. “Was there a happy ending at least?"

“No.” Meela gave him a grim smile. “The love of her life died after years of never being able to touch.”

“Sounds dramatic.”

“It is.” Meela smiled. “But I think that’s my fate as well.”

His amusement dropped. “Meela…”

She shook her head. “I was thinking about them again.”

Alden watched her carefully. “Will you tell me about them?”

Meela swallowed. She searched for Heath first, reaching through the scattered pieces of him that remained. Tears gathered in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. “Heath was...” She closed her eyes, trying to hold onto the shape of him. “Strong. Steady. You kind of remind me of him.” A face surfaced, blurred at first, then sharpened around the edges. “He was blonde. And he had the biggest dimples when he smiled.” A faint smile touched her lips. That, at least, she could still see. “He was a smith. Took over the family trade after his father passed.”

She paused, searching for more, but the memories slipped away whenever she reached too hard for them. “I was looking forward to our time together.” Her smile faded. “We got married, and within a week, he was gone. An accident...” Her fingers curled into her skirt. “Too gruesome for a lady to see.”

Alden watched her, letting the words settle before he prompted, “And Alexander?”

Meela took a deep breath. Alex came easier. His face still had edges, his voice a sound she could almost hear if she concentrated hard enough.

“Complete opposite of Heath. Alex was soft. Quiet.” Her mouth twitched. “He worked as a scribe in Solmaris. Always had a book in his hand.” She could see him more clearly now, stretched out somewhere with a book balanced against his chest. The memory brought an ache with it. “He used to read to me. I liked that. Being around him felt...” She searched for the word. “Familiar, I suppose.”

Alden said nothing.

“We only had two days together after the wedding.” Her breath caught. “Then he got sick. Horribly sick. It was...” She shook her head, trying to dislodge what remained of those memories. “Disturbing, honestly. And it happened so fast.”

She swallowed.

“He had very little family, but the ones he did have blamed me.” Her eyes finally lifted to Alden’s. “I blamed myself too. I ran all the way home and told my mother that, yet again, my husband was dead.”

Alden’s expression darkened. “That doesn’t sound natural.”

“No,” she whispered. “It doesn’t, does it? Heath… Alex… both gone. And I’m still here, and I can’t help but think…” she broke off, staring at the fire.

“Think what?”

She swallowed the tears. “That it’s me. That *I* did that. That I'm cursed to hurt anyone who dares love me, and I’ll always be alone just like that bride.” The words sat heavily between them. “I’m… I’m scared, Alden. Of tomorrow, I don’t want anything to—”

“It won’t, Meela.”

She let out a humorless laugh. “You don’t get to decide that.”

“You’re *not* cursed.”

She looked away. “I don’t want to disappoint anyone anymore. I don’t have power like them, or even you. If I can’t even do this one simple task, then what am I?”

Alden leaned forward, resting his hand on her knee. “Meela, you’re not __”

“You don’t understand, Alden.”

“No, you don’t understand.” His voice firmed. “You think the only thing that makes you worthy is whatever she wants from you? That the only reason you matter is because of some marriage and what you can offer them?” he shook his head. “Curses don’t work like that. And this… this isn’t how it works, Meela. Not here, not in my house.” Alden leaned back in his chair. “And I don’t scare easily if that’s what your plan was. I’m not running.”

The fire danced over the logs, the warmth pressing against her skin. Beyond it, the coven had quieted, their voices now a low murmur against the walls.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course you can.”

“The person who wrote this note… there were two, so you obviously know them.” She looked over, daring him to deny it. “Should I be afraid?”

“No.” His answer came without hesitation. “If what I understand is true, they’re the one person you’d trust the most.”

“What do you mean by that?” She frowned.

“I’m really not the one you should be asking, Meela. But trust that they only want what's best for you.”

Frustration flared in her chest. “Why don’t you ever give me a straight answer? Who are they? At least prepare me for something. I’ve prepared you for your future.”

Alden’s face softened, but he didn’t return the joke. “I think you already know who they are. And I did prepare you, as I said earlier: when I say run. You run.”

“That does not help, Alden. If anything, I have even more questions.” Meela groaned.

His lips moved into a tired smile. “Unfortunately, at some point, you’re going to have to get used to questions. You should start trusting yourself, trusting your intuition. *You*, Meela. Not them. I told you before. I’d protect you and no one is dying because of some curse. Go back up and try to get some sleep.” He offered her a hand, taking the cup from her. His gaze dropped, and she saw him notice the jewelry at her neck. He said nothing, but she swore his lips twitched with the hint of a smile.

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Chapter Ten



Meela blinked, but the room didn’t blur or fade. It was dim and cluttered, smelling of ink and old books. Maps curled on the walls. Books leaned in precarious towers. One lay open at her feet, pages splayed like it had been dropped mid-thought. Clothes were thrown carelessly over a chair. Her heart hammered. This wasn’t a dream. This was magic. It was too specific, too textured. She had no memory of stepping inside, and she narrowed her eyes trying to focus on anything in the room that might help her place where she was. Her mother's warnings rang in her mind; magi who lured witches, men who needed witch-blood to complete spells they couldn’t power on their own.

A man covered in shadows waited in the corner, leaning against the wall as though he’d been there long before she arrived.

“Meela,” he sighed.

Her breath hitched. His voice was rough, but something in the sound of it pulled at her. Without thinking, she stepped closer. Meela caught herself and stiffened.

“Where am I?” she demanded, forcing steel into her tone.

“I’ll explain,” he said quickly, urgency threading through every word. “But you need to leave that cottage. Tonight, if you can.”

“Predictable.” A hollow laugh escaped her. “First Alden, now you? Is he in on this?”

Silence. Though she couldn’t see his face, she saw his silhouette recoil slightly. Stranger still, she felt it. A flicker of hurt traveling between them

like a cord pulled taut.

“I’m not your enemy,” he whispered. “I only want to help you.”

“I’d hope not. You don’t even know me.” She shook her head hard, trying to anchor herself. “And where shall I go... to *you*? A stranger who won’t even show himself?”

He hesitated. When he spoke again, his voice was gentler. “I *do* know you. Please trust me.” He glanced down at the shadows clinging to him. “And I’m trying. I’m not as familiar with this kind of magic. They don’t always listen to me.”

“Well, I don’t know you. Why should I trust anything you say?”

His voice softened. “Just... pay attention to what you feel right now. You’re afraid,” he continued. “But are you afraid of *me*?”

He moved slowly, the shadows following like protective dogs. He tensed, stepping back, and suddenly every candle in the room flared to life at once, flooding the space with light so harsh she threw up a hand to shield her eyes. She blinked through the brightness, watching him nervously drag a hand through his dark, unruly hair.

The dim light catching on the scar slicing through his mouth, the dark eyes weighted with exhaustion and too heavy with sorrow. He stood tall, and strength radiated from him, but there was tremor beneath it all, like holding himself together took effort.

Meela’s breath caught.

“You know who I am.” His voice cracked. “*Think,* Meela. Try to remember.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t.” But the denial tasted weak.

In her dreams, she had spent almost every night tangled in this man’s arms, and had felt the hollow pit in her chest whenever she woke too soon. She knew the warmth of his lips on her skin. Had longed to hear the deep timbre of his laugh. The steadiness of his voice reading to her in fields of flowers while she lay in his lap. She had dreamt of his smile, and the dark eyes that turned molten in the sunlight.

Her pulse betrayed her. Her bones betrayed her. Every instinct screamed to close the distance and press herself into him.

She tore her gaze away, forcing herself to look anywhere else—the scrawled notes, the dark clothes, the satchel in the corner with a dagger tossed on top. She could smell ale. Woodsmoke. Her senses felt alive. This

couldn’t be real. No. No, it had to be a trick. A stress dream. Perhaps some cruel enchantment.

“This is real,” he whispered, shaking his head softly, leaning forward to see straight into her eyes.

She stumbled back a step. “Are you… reading my mind?”

A quiet, shaky laugh escaped him, softening his entire face. “I don’t need to. Your face gives you away.”

Meela’s lips parted, searching for something sharp to throw back at him.

“And you always do that,” he added gently.

Her brows pulled tight. “Do what?”

“That crease right there.” He motioned toward his own brow. “When you’re thinking too hard. I know all your tells, Meela.”

A chill curled down her spine. “Stop. This isn’t funny. This is some cruel joke.”

“It’s not meant to be.”

Meela’s pulse kicked. She needed to go. Every instinct in her begged to run. Away from this room, away from this man, away from whatever this feeling was that began to press around her heart like a closing fist. Her dreams of him had been safe and sweet. She could wake whenever the ache became too much. But here? Here, standing before him, she felt everything she had tried so hard not to feel, and she wasn’t ready. She wasn’t ready for whatever he represented, what she’d always feared. She wasn’t ready for the possibility that this was real, that *he* was real, that something in her belonged to him. It was cowardly, maybe. But safer than letting him break open whatever was trembling inside her.

“You have mistaken me for another,” she whispered. “I wish to leave. Let me go.” Her voice broke, and she hated the sound. She rubbed the scar across her palm, trying to ground herself. Hated the tears stinging her eyes even though her mind insisted she shouldn’t be crying at all.

“I refuse to believe that.” His gaze dropped to her hands. Carefully, as though afraid she might pull away, he stepped closer. His fingers trembled when they brushed hers. A spark rippled through her at the touch. Her breath caught when she saw it. A jagged scar cut across his palm, a perfect mirror of her own.

Before she could speak, his other hand lifted, fingertips grazing her chin. He tilted her face up with a tenderness that made her chest ache, his eyes drinking her in. His thumb ghosted her bottom lip.

For one suspended moment, she thought he might kiss her.

And for some reason, she was terrified he wouldn’t.

Her chest ached, cracking open under the weight of having him close.

“I’ve missed you so much.” His breath trembled, his control slipping, and in that moment she saw everything he’d been holding back. He glanced past her when the candlelight flickered in a draft. Flames hissed. The floor beneath her shuddered. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, voice breaking. “I thought I’d have more time. I thought I could hold the spell longer.”

He swallowed hard, urgency flooding in. “It took everything I had to reach you. Please trust Alden if you can't trust me. This is our only chance. When the time comes…” His hand closed around hers, desperate. “Follow the raven.”

The room shuddered at its edges. Shadows stretched and tore, the spell unraveling as light began to fracture like shattered glass.

Meela lurched forward, reaching for him. “Wait!” He caught her hand one last time, pressing it to his chest as the magic rippled through him. His outline splintered into slivers of light.

“Please find me.” His voice echoed around her. “You already know the way.”

Her fingers slipped through him like smoke.

Meela woke with a gasp, clutching the sheets, her pulse wild. The scent of woodsmoke still clung to her lungs. Her hands still burned with warmth. Her scar throbbed. For a moment, she squeezed her eyes shut, willing the spell to pull her under again. Just once more. Just long enough to see him, to feel…

Alden was right. She did know him. Somehow. In ways she couldn’t explain. She just didn’t know how or when she had met him. Or why he risked everything just to reach her. Why she felt more alive inside the fragile shell of a spell than in her waking world.

The raven.

She bolted from bed, rushing to the window, searching for the bird that would lead her to him. But her heart plummeted. The branch outside her window was bare: no glint of feathers, no knowing eyes.

Only the tree. The wind. The silence.

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Chapter Eleven



Meela stared at herself in the mirror.

This was it. Everything had led to today. Cora hadn't fetched her. Neither had Alden, nor the raven. She tried to ignore the fact that the raven's absence upset her the most.

Outside, the distant voices of the coven reached her—soft conversations, laughter, the occasional clatter of movement. Somewhere below, someone was chopping herbs, the rhythmic thunk of the knife, a steady beat against the otherwise quiet morning.

She clenched her hands against her stomach, nausea creeping in like an unwelcome guest. Maybe this was all an elaborate ruse, a cold-hearted trick played by the coven.

Since her arrival, she'd been left with more questions than answers. And for some reason, she hadn't wanted to share any of it with her mother.

It all felt too personal. Marriage was meant to be personal, yet hers never had been. She'd shared everything with Cora once, letting her mother's words shape her understanding of the world. But with each step closer to this union, the more she wanted to keep it from her.

Meela could tell Cora noticed.

Though even she seemed more distant. Preoccupied with something else. Even on the journey here, Cora had been lost in thought, her fingers absently twisting the rings on her hand. She gave Meela more space than ever before, and that, more than anything, unsettled her.

Cora had never been one to pull away without a reason.

What was she doing? What was she planning?

More questions that led to more questions, trapping Meela in a terrible loop she desperately wanted to escape.

And then, him.

She knew dreams weren't real, knew they were just figments of her imagination, but this one felt tangible.

Meela turned toward the window. A gust of wind rattled the pane, making the sheer curtains billow. The distant caw of a bird made her turn toward the glass, hope sparking before she crushed it down. Not a raven. The forest loomed today. Dark and restless, its treetops shifted beneath the morning sky, branches stirring in the wind.

Where was this bird?

If the dreams had been real, if it meant anything, shouldn't it be here?

She wrapped her arms around herself as she looked at the dress spread across the bed. The fabric shimmered in the morning light, its jewels catching the sun like fallen stars. She hated to admit it, but it was the most beautiful thing she had ever owned. Yet, she despised it. She had asked if they could get another, though it was deemed an unnecessary expense. Something so beautiful, so lovely had been tainted. The dress felt symbolic of her curse, the second step in a cycle she had no control over. She laid a hand over the fabric, tracing the embroidered patterns of silver vines. She wouldn't put it on yet, not until the moon was almost at its peak. Yesterday, she had avoided the coven at all costs. Today, she knew there would be no escape.

She heard footsteps outside her door. The muffled hum of a tune she knew too well. The door swung open with Zora stepping in, beaming bright as the sun. "Happy wedding day!"

"Good morning, Zora." Meela sighed, sitting beside her dress, fiddling with the sleeves to appear occupied.

"Cora sent me to fetch you," Zora said, making her way in front of her. "You're needed in the carriage."

"Okay."

Zora didn't move, only stood. Waiting, smiling. "So how are you? I was looking for you last night."

"It was an early night for me," Meela replied, adjusting the sleeve.

"Oh." Zora tilted her head as if contemplating. "We noticed the groom wasn't around either," she grinned, raising her brows in a way that made

Meela tense.

“We talked, but turned in early.” She stole a glance at the window, silently hoping the raven wouldn’t appear now. She still wasn’t sure if Alice had mentioned anything, but knew with certainty that Zora would.

“You know,” Zora mused, trailing a finger over the carved wooden bedpost. “You could tell me if you two were…” She raised her eyebrows. “you deserve it.”

Meela narrowed her eyes.

Zora, unbothered, made her way to the desk, pulling open a drawer. “His house is wonderful,” she said absently, eyes flitting toward the drawer. “Such a shame.”

“What’s a shame?”

Zora glanced back with a coy expression. “A shame we won’t get to stay longer.”

Meela watched Zora open the wardrobe, rifling through her folded clothing. “Are you looking for something?”

“No.” Zora acted as if that was perfectly normal. She drifted toward the washroom door, running a hand over the brass handle. “Have you noticed the locked doors? Odd, right?”

Meela stiffened, her grip tightening. “You do realize this is my room you’re snooping in, right?”

Zora waved it off, peeking into the room. “It’s not like you have anything.” She paused, stopping herself. “Oh, sorry, Meela, I didn’t mean it like that.”

Yes, you did. Meela followed her, closing the drawer she had hidden the raven carving in, briefly considering moving it somewhere else.

“Seeing as I have nothing, there's nothing to look through.” She kept her voice controlled. “Did you have anything to add, or are you just in the habit of opening doors people don’t want you in?”

Zora’s mask slipped. “As I said,” she said flatly, “Cora sent me. I didn’t know what room you were in.”

Meela hated that she felt the need to apologize, hated that she felt like she upset Zora, hated that Zora’s feelings bothered her more than her own frustration. “I see. Please tell her I’ll be down when I’m finished getting ready.”

Zora’s blue eyes went over her head to toe. “You’re not ready?”

Meela glanced down at her thin sleeping gown. “Hilarious, Zora. Did I do something to you? What’s the problem?”

“I don’t have one, Meela.” Her voice sweet, “I assumed that was what you planned to wear. It suits you.”

“Please tell my mother I’ll be down in a moment.” Meela exhaled.

Zora plopped on the bed, bouncing a few times. “I think I'll stay.”

Meela grabbed her clothes and shut herself in the washroom, instantly regretting leaving Zora alone in her room. When she opened the door, Zora was flipping through the book Meela had been reading.

“Meela,” she smirked, fanning herself with the book. “If this is what you’re reading, Alden is a very lucky man.”

“Please stop, Zora. I’m not in the mood.” Meela ripped the book from her hands. “I’m ready.”

They walked as quickly as Meela could manage, though she didn’t think Zora even noticed. She had been recounting their journey to Alden’s home. Her voice was animated as she described the towns they passed through, the markets they stopped at, people they had met. Meela only half listened. She barely remembered any of what Zora described.

The coven lingered around them, moving through the morning with a kind of quiet joy. Lenora was braiding Aurora’s hair, a few gathered around them, sharing hushed conversations and laughter.

Meela reached for the carriage door, just as it swung open. Alice stood on the threshold. Meela’s stomach dropped as she took a step back, lowering her gaze. “Good morning, Meela.” Alice smiled. “Cora is inside, she’s been waiting for you.” Her sharp eyes locked on Zora, who stood behind.

Meela forced a smile. “Thanks, Alice.”

The space was thick with the smell of something decaying. Her mother stood in the center of it all, surrounded by levitating tonics and scattered notes, her grimoire floating at her side. Cora looked up, her eyes wild, before a switch flipped and warmth spread across her face.

“Little moon! Finally.” She gestured to the seat across from her desk. “Sit.”

“They seem pleased,” she said after a moment, nodding to the coven outside.

“They are pleased,” Cora corrected. “A Diremoure woman, and a man of the land. Someone so wise and stable. This is how we give back.”

Meela lowered her gaze, her thumb grazing her scar. “Give back?”

“Of course.” Cora’s eyes remained wide. “Witches respect the balance of power. We do not only take, we give. And a wedding like this is more than a binding of two souls. It’s a promise to the old ways. The coven will weave blessings into it, ensuring harmony between us and the forces that guide us.”

“I’m not a witch.”

Cora stood, gliding her fingers through Meela’s hair. “Of course you are. You were born from one.”

“That doesn’t make me—”

“It makes you exactly that,” Cora interrupted. She let out a small, indulgent sigh. “I can’t imagine how frustrating it is to not feel what we feel. But blood does not lie.” She studied Meela’s face. “Have you sensed anything new since being here?”

Meela frowned. “No.”

“Well, maybe you will.” Her voice was gentle, full of understanding, and Meela found herself nodding despite the lingering doubt curling at the edges of her thoughts.

Before Meela could protest, before she could give voice to the unease gnawing at her, she took a deep breath. “Is there anything you expect of me today?”

“Yours and Alden’s presence.” Cora’s eyes sharpened. “Have you seen him?”

“Not yet. I was going to try to find him before Zora came.”

“Zora.” Cora spat. “Watch for that one, she couldn't stop talking about him last night.”

“I’ve noticed.” Meela rolled her eyes.

“Do not roll your eyes.”

Meela stilled. Cora exhaled through her nose, then straightened, smoothing down the fabric of her gown.

“Today, I’d like you to stay close to the coven. We barely saw you last night. It would be polite to spend time with your guests, don’t you think?”

Meela forced a nod, swallowing the reminder that she hadn’t been absent; she had been sent away.

Cora clapped her hands together, a gleam returning to her eyes. “We will begin preparations at sundown.” Her voice taking on a breathless edge. “Oh, Meela, this is going to be such a good night. Can’t you feel it?”

Meela met her mother’s wide-eyed smile. *My gods. She looked completely unhinged.*

“I can feel it,” Meela echoed, forcing a grim smile before turning away.

The coven looked at ease in one another’s company, but Meela felt none of that ease herself. She didn’t want to do this. But if today was her last with her mother, she could at least try to make her happy.

Especially when Cora seemed on the verge of fully unraveling.

She gravitated toward the easiest person to talk to, Lenora. Mostly because she didn’t talk much at all. When Lenora first arrived, she had assumed it was some personal vow of silence, but later she realized it was simply the company she kept and the gift she had that made her so quiet.

“Hi, Lenora.” Meela offered a small smile.

Lenora looked up, her green eyes calm as she gave a small nod.

“Do you mind if I sit?”

“Please.” Her voice was soft, almost lost in the chatter around them.

Meela lowered herself to the grass, plucking blades absentmindedly as they sat in silence, watching the coven work around them.

“How was the trip?” Meela finally asked.

“It was good. More eventful than yours I'm sure.”

She huffed a small laugh. “You could say that, I think I slept most of the way.”

Lenora didn’t respond, instead turning her gaze back to the coven.

“Have you seen Alden? I wanted to see him before tonight.”

Lenora shook her head. “No, sorry. Maybe check with Zora?”

Meela’s fingers stilled in the grass. *Why did everyone suspect them together?* “I was just with her, she was looking for him too, actually.”

“It’s just a guess,” Lenora said with a slight shrug. “I heard her say she was going to find him before Cora sent her to get you.”

Meela shifted her focus to the ground in front of her. Instead of dwelling on it, she lifted her gaze to the treeline, scanning for any signs of her raven. *Still gone.*

“Maybe I can do your hair tonight?” Lenora’s voice was gentle, pulling Meela from her thoughts.

Meela blinked, caught off guard by the offer. “That would be really nice, thank you.” She meant it. She usually got ready alone and no one had ever offered.

Lenora smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“Are you okay?” Meela asked. “You seem sad.”

“Just a lot of emotions today, it’s hard to focus.”

“I’d say I understand, but I can’t imagine what it must feel like for you. I’m sorry if I’m coming off strong.”

“Oh, no. You feel… good. Calm.” Lenora reached for her hand, her fingers brushing over her skin as she focused. “Unease. But mostly, hopeful. It’s actually a nice change from everyone else.”

Meela stared at her for a moment. *Hopeful.*

It felt wrong. Perhaps Lenora misread her entirely. But, there was a hint of it growing inside her. Hopeful they’d all leave, hopeful Alden’s heart would keep beating, hopeful she would get to feel happiness in a way she hadn’t ever before. It was small, hidden away somewhere safe. Meela tried often to not allow the feeling to flourish, scared it would get stomped out if she allowed it life.

“Well, I can’t read emotions, but I can read faces pretty well, and yours still seems sad.”

Lenora let out a quiet laugh, “I’m okay, really, Meela.” She gestured to the others. “There's… a lot of emotions around. Some are happy,” she nodded toward Blair and Valina, who were braiding herbs, laughing as they fell into one another. “Some, anxious.” Her gaze flicked to one of the newer members Meela didn’t recognize. She paced, staring down, wringing her hands. “Others, annoyed.” Her eyes landed on the twins, who looked as though they would rip into each other any second.

Lenora took a deep breath and Meela followed her eyes as they found another. “And some, much too happy.”

“Too happy is generous.” Meela watched as Zora practically bounced toward them, “She’s as out of it as my mother.”

Lenora stifled a laugh.

“Hello, *Zora*,” Meela said flatly.

“Hi, ladies.” Zora beamed, plopping down beside them. “Girl talk? Lenora, did you get any gossip on what Meela was up to last night?”

Lenora looked down, shaking her head.

Meela felt a light brush against her hand. Lenora’s pinky ghosted over her own, a quiet attempt at comfort.

“Happen to know where my *husband* is, Zora?” She made sure to emphasize the word.

Zora ignored it, her nose scrunching as she looked around. “No, actually. Shocking, really. How does a man that large hide so well?”

Meela clenched her jaw, swallowing the sharp remark that threatened to slip free. Instead, she stood, turning on her heel before stomping off.

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Chapter Twelve



Meela had looked most of the afternoon for Alden, but he was nowhere. She looked in the usual spots, leaving his workshop for last. Her heart dropped to her stomach when she found it empty. He told her to run away, maybe that was his strange way of projecting his own plans.

There was still no sign of that damned raven either.

She knew the man in her dreams was just that. A dream. A figment born from the small illusion of control she clung to when she had none. She had passed through sadness and landed squarely on anger.

How dare Alden string her along only to leave now?

She hadn't wanted this. He had chosen *her*. Maybe what she'd said last night had scared him. But what? Things get a little messy and he decides to run? He'd told her he didn't scare easily, yet now he couldn't even find the courage to face her.

She understood not wanting to face Cora. But *her*?

Her mother told her she was getting too close, and she was right. It was just easy with Alden. He was tenderness where her life had offered none. Meela felt so desperate for any affection that she grew close to someone she had known less than a week. Her anger drifted back to sadness. Mostly with herself. How was *this* her life?

"Meela," Lenora peeked around the corner of the cottage. "I heard Cora asking where you were… Zora said she'd find you, so I thought I might beat her to the chase."

Meela rolled her eyes.

Lenora cringed. “I’m sorry.”

She looked at Lenora, confused. Then, she realized. “No, I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for. You’re being asked to do much for us, while we appreciate it, it’s a heavy burden to carry alone.”

“I don’t know what I did to push him away.”

Lenora looked at her, startled at the admission and then laughed. Meela had never heard Lenora laugh. It was a sweet sound.

She smiled. “I’m glad this is funny to you.”

“It’s not.” She offered a bright smile. “I can read emotions, not minds. I was thinking you were sad for another reason, not because you can’t find him.” Lenora leaned on the garden wall. “He’ll turn up, don’t worry. In the meantime, let's get you ready so when he does see you, you’ll look like the moon come alive. Last time we pulled your hair out of your face, did you want to do that again?”

Meela looked at Lenora quickly. ‘*The moon come alive’* replaying in her mind.

Last time, Meela got dressed alone, she remembered *that* perfectly. She had wished someone would come sit with her, she had been terrified because of what had happened with Heath, but they all stayed away.

Lenora looked at her with wide eyes and grabbed Meela’s hand pulling her from her thoughts. “Don’t overthink this, last time you had your hair up, right?”

“Yes,” she said, still staring at Lenora.

Lenora swallowed, sadness creeping back into her green eyes. “And would you like to do that again?”

“Lenora… why did you say—”

“Meela,” She stood, pulling her arm. “Don't. Let’s go back to everyone, we can watch them all get ready as well, okay?”

Meela lagged a half-step behind Lenora, the lack of birdsong catching her attention. Her boots sounded too loud against the grass. She glanced toward the trees, noticing how dark the forest floor had become.

Laughter rose around her, too bright after the hush pressing in from the woods.

There wasn’t much she could assist with in the preparations, yet the clearing filled with expectant smiles and loud conversation. The coven seemed genuinely happy, which only made Meela feel worse for not sharing it. She tried to fake it, offering smiles when they spoke to her.

It was strange. They hadn’t been cruel before, or even indifferent. Today, they treated her like she was one of them, almost reverent. The sudden warmth unsettled her more than their coldness ever had.

The twins offered to find Alden, but Meela declined. She knew there had to be a reason for his absence today, reminding herself that much of Alden was still a mystery.

She was raised under a certain set of beliefs, and perhaps, he had his own traditions on days like today. He could’ve grown up near the kingdom. Alex had mentioned that in Solmaris it was bad luck to see the bride before the ceremony. Meela shouldn’t assume the worst. Alden was a good man. He showed it to her.

He knew how nervous she was today and chose to believe that he meant it when he said he’d always be there.

Cora, on the other hand, had no such patience for others' faiths. Her irritation was growing, and Meela knew it was only a matter of time before she sent the twins after him.

They would relish the task. She’d seen how easily Delphine and Maris carried out Cora’s wishes, how they took pride in dragging back whatever poor soul had been unfortunate enough to catch the High Priestess's attention.

They had a specialty in seeking individuals, often leaving for weeks at a time in search of whatever needed to be found. They had brought all manner of creatures before. Orcs, fae, a few mages. They were glassy-eyed and compliant, drained of whatever fight they had left. Meela hated seeing it, and she never understood the purpose. She had never been allowed to sit in with coven meetings, and only once had asked about it—just a small, curious question.

It was the first time her mother had ever hit her. It came sharp and fast, and was a lesson that lasted for weeks until Meela learned that it was rude to listen in on things that did not concern her.

Meela never asked again, but weeks later, Zora had let it slip that the twins left in search of lost witches who wished to join them. Meela knew not to question that, but she did recall most of those visitors were not female, and none ever stayed or returned.

When the coven first arrived, Meela noticed a few new faces, but now that she sat around them, she realized just how surrounded she truly was by women she did not recognize. She drifted over to Ida and Lenora, who

stood mixing elixirs, the thick liquid swirling with deep hues of violet and gold as they added more ingredients.

“What are you working on?”

Both women startled, Lenora clutching her chest. Ida reached out, pressing a cold hand to Meela’s back to guide her closer. “We’re working on tonics for the rite.”

Meela resisted at first, but allowed herself to be nudged forward, peering into the small cauldron. Their potion shimmered, its scent thick and cloying, wrapping around her senses like a tight corset. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Ida smiling, raising her brows at Lenora.

“Smells divine,” Meela said, taking a large step back. She watched them both as they returned to their work. They were complete opposites of one another, yet perfectly matched. Ida was the oldest in the coven, and Lenora was the youngest. Though Ida was the type who always seemed old, a woman whose soul had never truly been young. Her hair was silver, but not like Meela’s. Ida’s hair had been earned, a product of age rather than nature. Dark roots ran down deep beneath the shimmering strands that twisted into the intricate knot she always wore.

Lenora, by contrast, had golden, pin-straight hair. Her face was smooth, untouched by time, glowing with the effortless radiance of youth.

And yet, despite their differences, they were always together, twins of their own making.

Ida specialized in tonics and potions, and was often teaching Lenora. After Heath the headaches began. It had been Ida who brewed a special remedy for her. She had been grateful for it then. It had helped, but then they kept coming. And now, just the scent of it made her stomach turn. She turned, searching for a distraction from the smell. “There are so many new faces.”

Ida flipped through her journal, and looked up, brows furrowing. “They’ve been here for years.”

“I just saw you all a few weeks ago, I think I would’ve noticed.”

Lenora stiffened. “Forgive her, she’s losing it with all the tonics she tries.” She smiled. “Would you like me to introduce you to anyone?”

“No thanks, I was only curious,” Meela said. “I’m surprised to see my mother let this many in without completing the rite.”

“We completed the rite with Cora.”

Meela’s head snapped to Ida.

“Ida.” Lenora’s tone was sharp, enough to make Meela glance between them.

What is with everyone today?

“What do you mean, Ida? Surely, I would’ve been dragged out, and I just saw you all —”

“Years, weeks… whatever.”

Lenora’s nails dug into Ida’s arm, a quick pinch she meant to hide. Ida yelped and met Lenora’s stare before looking back at Meela. “What’s it matter now?”

Lenora forced a laugh, grabbing Meela’s arm in a firm grip. “Crazy old hag,” she muttered. “The sun is setting,” she said loudly, “Let’s go see if anyone needs help before we get you ready.”

Meela’s unease grew, but she was pulled away from Ida before she could ask further questions. She barely registered Lenora waving to Zora, who strode toward them with a smirk.

“Ida is acting like a lune,” Lenora said, her voice a little too high.

“When isn’t she?” Zora snorted, then turned to Meela. “Alden is a no-show. I’ve been searching the grounds, but nothing.”

“What do you mean nothing?” Meela asked.

“Vanished.” Zora shrugged. “Maybe he got cold feet. Can’t blame him, really.”

“Probably got a whiff of that curse,” Aurora chimed in from behind. “Scared him off.”

“I mean, it’s only wise to run at this point,” another added mockingly, causing them all to erupt with laughter.

“I wouldn’t worry,” Lenora said, the only one not laughing.

“He’ll turn up,” another voice said. “They always do, don’t they?”

“They never run too far,” Maris added.

Delphine nudged her sister. “Never get the chance.”

Meela swallowed hard, withdrawing into herself as the comments rolled over her like cold waves.

“Lenora, get our sweet lamb inside, clean her up before the show truly begins.” Aurora grinned.

“That’s not funny,” Lenora snapped.

“Oh, *come on*, it’s a little funny, Len. We’ve got a big night ahead of us, loosen up.”

Another scoffed, “I’m excited to see what she’s going to do this time. Are you gonna get the killing done quick? Stab him right in the heart this time.”

The laughter swelled. Meela kept her face neutral, hands clasped in front of her. Tomorrow, she reminded herself. Tomorrow, and she’d never see them again.

“Probably not,” Zora mused. “Probably make one of us do it again.”

“That is *enough*.”

The air shifted. Laughter died out instantly as Alice's voice snapped through the clearing, making everyone straighten.

“Meela, go clean yourself up. The rest of you, get back to work.” Her violet eyes glowed as they swept over them all. “Cora has been preoccupied, but don't let the absence fool you into thinking she won’t notice when you all have been slacking.”

“Thank you, Alice.” Cora had appeared behind her like a shadow, smooth and composed. “You’ve had all day, and *this* is what you’ve managed?” She swept an arm over the space, her voice lethal. “Straighten it up. Meela, upstairs. I’ll fetch you when it’s time.”

Meela forced her feet to move. She couldn’t be surprised their cruelty was back, but they had never been so taunting. They had laughed, whispered, but when Meela finally made it to her room, she realized it was never the ceremony that frightened her.

It was what came after.

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Chapter Thirteen



That raven could show up anytime now. The moon was reaching its peak. She took a breath. Then another.

The knock came sudden and sharp, sending a jolt through her chest. Meela stared at the door, wishing she knew who stood on the other side before she was forced to open it. For a fleeting moment, she considered dropping to her knees, peering beneath the door for a glimpse of shoes. She should have listened to that man and just run last night. She didn't care about the direction, she'd follow the stream. Streams led to rivers, and rivers always led to towns.

But she knew there was no escaping this now. Meela closed her eyes, drawing in another steady breath, then letting it out slowly.

"About earlier—" Lenora began.

"I'm used to it," Meela cut in, turning back into her room.

Lenora looked down. "I'll leave if you'd prefer, but I said I'd do your hair, and I'd like to spend this time with you."

Meela studied her. Lenora had never been cruel, but she also hadn't stopped them. She knew there was nothing Lenora could have done. Somehow, she seemed as bound to the coven as Meela herself.

"I've always loved your hair in braids," Lenora said gently. "Do you mind if I do that?"

Meela offered her a small smile. "Okay."

They sat in silence as Lenora wove small braids back from her temples, guiding them into a single plait that trailed down her back. She left the rest

untouched, allowing Meela's curls to cascade freely.

"Alden's arrived." Lenora spoke softly.

"Really?" Meela's heart lifted. "When did he come back?"

"Shortly after you came up. He told Cora he thought it was best to give us space today, so he went on a hike. He was on his way up here, but Alice stopped him."

She didn't ignore the way her heart felt less heavy. As much as she tried to not believe the others, a part of her was starting to fear they were right, that he had run. She couldn't stop the deeper part of her mind that wished he had. To keep him safe, to keep him away from them.

"Do you all plan on leaving tomorrow?"

Lenora paused, fingers lingering against Meela's hair. "No one has said otherwise."

"Not that I want you to—"

"I understand," Lenora said. "We're all set."

Meela stood and crossed to the mirror, lifting a hand to touch her hair. "Thank you, Lenora. It's gorgeous."

Lenora remained behind her, watching their reflection as her eyes filled with tears. "My pleasure, Meela."

Meela turned, taking her hand. "Lenora —"

"I'm okay," she said quickly.

"You keep saying that." Meela searched her face, wishing she had Lenora's gift. To feel what she felt, to understand what she wasn't saying.

Lenora let out a soft chuckle and gently pulled away. "Stop trying to read me." She turned back toward the room. "It's getting close now. Cora will be up soon. I should rejoin the others to prepare. I was asked to complete the handfasting, and she'll step in afterward for the rite."

She hesitated, as if something pressed at the edge of her mouth. Her eyes held Meela's for a long moment. Then she turned and left.

Meela finished getting ready, her gaze dropping to the dress. It wasn't what she would have chosen for herself, but it was undeniably stunning—something her mother might have worn. The neckline sat high against her throat, the fabric spilling from it in soft, rippling folds that moved like liquid silver. Tiny gemstones were embedded in delicate, vine-like patterns, catching the light with every shift of her body.

"We are ready for you."

Cora stepped up behind her, cloaked in red, the hood draped low over her hair. A diadem rested across her forehead, a single ruby suspended between her brows.

Meela turned and followed her mother down the stairs, her heart hammering a frantic rhythm against her ribs. The cottage felt suddenly suffocating, the walls pressing in on her. Ahead, the door stood open, the night breeze slipping through, urging her forward. She stepped outside, the moon casting its pale glow over the clearing. Her gaze lifted at once, searching the treetops.

The raven had to be here. Somewhere.

It had been there every day since her arrival. And yet, no shadowed wings, no familiar cry breaking the hush that greeted her.

Meela drew in a slow breath. She knew better than to rely on a bird for a sign. She turned her eyes to the gathered coven, all dressed in the same red robes. They stood in a wide semicircle in the clearing beyond the cottage, faces illuminated by flickering torchlight. Their eyes didn’t meet hers.

Her eyes found Alden's, and relief flooded her. He stood beside Lenora. His body stilled, but his amber eyes hollowed as she approached. She wished she could read his mind, hear whatever silent warning was behind those eyes.

Lenora stood waiting by the arch, hands clasped in front of her. The rope for handfasting rested on a small stone altar. Meela’s throat seized at the sight of the red and black rope.

“Are you ready?”

No.

“Yes,” Meela whispered, stepping up in front of Alden. His warmth immediate, his eyes never leaving hers.

Lenora’s voice was steady, guiding them through the ancient ceremony. The cord wrapped around their joined hands, binding them together in a symbolic knot. Meela barely heard the words, every sound felt distant, muffled beneath the storm in her head. Lenora stepped back, signaling she was finished. Alden took a step closer, lifting their bound hands to his lips.

His kiss was warm against her knuckles, lingering long enough to stir something deep within her chest. His eyes searched hers, a silent plea passing between them. He leaned down, pressing his forehead against hers. His grip on her hand tightened ever so slightly.

“Run.”

The word sliced through her. He breathed it, so quickly she wasn't sure if she heard him right. Alden moved closer, cupping her cheek with a gentleness that sent a wave of dread through her. His lips pressed against her forehead first, lingering long enough to whisper again. "Now." Then dipped lower again, to her cheek. "The woods, Meela. Run."

Her pulse roared in her ears as he kissed her.

It was soft, fleeting, but before she could even react, chaos shattered around them. Alden moved fast, pushing her forward, as a sharp gust of wind tore through the clearing causing the torches to flicker out. Someone shouted as the sound of rushing wings split the air.

A flood of ravens—hundreds of them, seemingly materializing from the very darkness. They burst from the forest, a storm of feathers and shrieking cries.

She looked back at Alden, he tilted his head as a shift ran through him—a sound, deep and primal tore through his throat. The cord snapped, a green glow danced around Alden's feet as his body began shifting. The muscles in his arms bulged, his skin began to twist, bark crawling over his flesh. His face contorted, the gentle lines now being replaced with something unrecognizable.

His breath became ragged and guttural as his form continued to stretch, tripling in size. His skin was replaced by bark like armor, his fingers elongated into gnarled claws, his features warped into something wild and ancient. The scent of damp earth filled the air, overpowering everything else. Alden's once-human-shaped body grew taller, broader, until a massive tree-like figure towered over her.

Screams pierced the darkness. Meela stumbled back, but Cora's grip closed around her wrist like a vice. "*Meela!*"

Before the first incantation could be completed, the forest answered.

The torches flared again, then burst, sending embers flying. She looked back. The coven stumbled back, hands raised in defense, voices rising in panicked spells as wings slashed through the night, talons tearing into hair and fabric, sending the coven scattering.

The air filled with furious cries, an overwhelming symphony of rage.

Meela couldn't move. Alden's eyes glowed fiercely, unnaturally gold. His form towered over the chaos, his barked limbs shifting as if the forest itself breathed through him. He reached a hand out toward her, yelling in a voice that was layered and ancient.

“RUN.”

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Chapter Fourteen



Her feet pounded against the earth, her breath came in ragged gasps as she shoved past grasping hands. A spell cracked the ground near her, sending dirt into the air, but she didn't stop. Her body fought against every instinct telling her not to look back, but she had to.

Through the chaos, she saw it: the monster towering, its form coiled with dark vines. Magic cracked through the air as it swung a massive limb, scattering witches like fallen leaves. The coven shrieked, their spells useless against him. Cora's voice cut through the madness, commanding and furious.

And for the first time ever, fear.

Meela didn't stop running. The night howled around her. The birds moved like a force, darkening the sky as their black mass of wings blocked the moonlight. She couldn't tell which were attacking the coven and which were following her, guiding her away.

Some swarmed around her like a shield, a tide of black feathers and piercing cries. She didn't know where to run until one darted low, its wings nearly brushing her cheek.

Run.

The command echoed in her mind.

The ground was uneven, roots clawing her ankles as she finally broke the tree line, branches lashing against her arms as she tore through the forest. The clearing was disappearing behind her, but the sounds followed. A flash

of light seared her vision. A spell shot past her, close enough to singe her dress. She stumbled, her foot catching.

She pushed herself forward, lungs burning, heart slamming against her chest. The trees blurred together, the labyrinth of the forest stretching. It was too dark, too dense. She couldn't see the raven, but she kept running. She heard someone behind her, panic clawing up her throat. Another flash of light crackled against the tree beside her, bark exploding outward.

"This isn't real." The words escaped her lips.

Her eyes darted up, searching. She found it again through the storm of wings, one bird moved differently. It dove low, close enough to see the darkness in its eyes. It called sharply, veering quickly to the right, its wings pumping. Every step felt like wading through sand. The howls of the coven grew distant and lost in her ragged breath and the relentless beat of wings. Another cry as the raven circled back, weaving through the trees, urging her onward. Meela chased after it, the forest thinning ahead. The raven darted up before circling around a dark figure running through the trees toward her.

Meela didn't dare stop. She ran toward the cloaked man, his face hidden beneath a cowl, only his wide eyes visible, locked on hers.

Another bolt of light cracked through the air behind her.

She wasn't going to make it to him.

Suddenly, he was beside her. Her feet left the ground as he caught her against his chest, one arm gripping her tightly while the other stretched out around them. A translucent barrier burst to life just as the blast struck. Light splintered across its surface, illuminating the trees in a violent flash.

"Get the fuck back," he snarled.

Zora panted, her arms outstretched. "Not today, or ever, Mage."

Meela saw her fingers twitch and knew the movement instantly.

Another bolt was coming.

A streak of purple light hurtled toward them. The crystal atop his staff pulsed, blue runes flaring along the dark wood as the barrier strengthened around them. The bolt slammed into it hard enough to send a crack through the earth beneath their feet.

Two more witches appeared.

The man raised his staff again, his arm still tight around Meela's waist. A surge of energy exploded outward, blue runes blazing through the air before slamming into Zora.

The ground trembled like a rolling wave.

Zora was ripped from her feet and thrown backward. Her body struck the tree with a sickening crack, her head snapping against the trunk before she dropped heavily to the roots below.

She didn't move.

Meela stared at her crumpled body, at the thin line of blood slipping from her hairline and disappearing beneath her collar.

"Finally." Delphine smiled. "I was just saying how much I missed you."

He said nothing, only knocked his staff down once again, but he was met with equal force, magic crackling through the forest.

A third bolt shot toward them.

Alice blocked it.

The magic ricocheted back before Delphine had time to react. It struck her square in the chest. Her body jerked violently, the smile disappearing from her face as she hit the forest floor. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth, her glassy eyes staring through the canopy above.

Alice barely looked at her. She turned to the mage, jaw clenched. "Get her out, Orion."

He didn't hesitate. He grabbed Meela's hand, but she stood frozen for a moment, staring at Alice.

"Meela, *go*!" Alice yelled.

Orion pulled her into a run, grabbing two bags from where he'd left them before clicking his tongue. The raven dropped onto Meela's shoulder. He turned to her. "Hold on."

Before she could protest, he pulled her against his hard body. Two knocks of his staff, and the world shifted.

The witches, the chaos, the body lying beneath the trees.

Gone.

Meela stumbled back as they reappeared in another part of the forest. She shoved him back, her heart hammering. "What is going on?"

She finally got a good look at him. He was tall, with Meela standing only to his chest. He wore a ragged black cloak, the hood drawn low. Only his eyes, dark and piercing, were visible as he watched her.

"I promise you, Meela. I'm not here to hurt you, but you kind of have to have some blind trust in me right now. I'll tell you everything the moment we get somewhere safe."

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Not a fucking chance. I just got out of one prison, I’m not entering another.”

He took a step forward, his dark eyes holding her in place. “Then let me make this next part *very* clear. Undress.”

There was no way Meela heard him right. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” he rifled through his bag, not even bothering to look at her. “Dress. Off.”

“What is wrong with you?” She stepped back. “I am not—”

“Dammit, Meela.” His tone sharpened. “I’ll rip that fucking dress off you if I have to. They have a tracker on it,” he continued, holding out a bundle of clothing. “If you want another visit, by all means…stay in what you’re wearing. But if not…” He stepped so close, she had to tilt her head to look at him. “*Undress.*”

Meela snatched the clothing from him, he stared at her, waiting. Then, reluctantly, rolled his eyes and turned.

“Done.” She snapped. “Again. Who are you?”

“I told you, a friend.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Well, it's the one you’re getting at the moment.” He sighed. “Would you prefer a lie?” He grabbed the dress she discarded, throwing it deeper into the woods. Blue shimmered in the air as his hands raised. In a flash, the fabric erupted into flames, before quickly turning to ash.

He took her hand. “That should buy us some time.”

Two knocks of his staff. It felt as though the world folded in on itself. The forest dissolved into a whirlwind of light and shadow before the ground was solid beneath her feet again.

The air was thick with woodsmoke and ale. A stark contrast to the earthly aroma of the forest. Distant chatter echoed from below, muffled through the walls. Orion wasted no time, the moment they arrived, he released her, stepping away as the raven flew from his shoulder to a perch near the desk. She watched as he moved to the door, placing both hands against it, whispering something under his breath.

Breathless, Meela took in her surroundings. A bed with an unkept woolen blanket, a desk cluttered with books, a single window with heavy drapes drawn shut.

Blue flickered to life, catching her attention, glowing softly before dissolving into the wood like ink in water.

“Rest here.” He said, his voice muffled by his mask. “You’re safe now.”

Safe. She barely knew what that word meant. She blinked up at him. “Alden, my husband, is still back there.”

Orion’s eyes hardened. “Alden’s fine. He’s exactly where he wants to be.”

A cold wave of unease rippled through her. “What do you mean? How do you know him?”

For the first time, his voice softened. “He’s my friend. We’ve been working together.”

She stared at him. “Why?”

Orion exhaled sharply. “Are you really asking me that question? You understand what was about to happen?”

“I was getting married,” she said, but the words felt wrong even as she said them. “And then everything went to shit.”

His eyes twinkled with something between amusement and exasperation. “Tonight was ending in his death, and yours.” He leveled her a look. “You’re welcome, *by the way.*”

She scrunched her nose. “Thanks? *I guess?*”

“You guess…” Orion huffed a laugh.

The moment was too much. The adrenaline, the fear. Her body caught up to her mind all at once, her limbs going weak beneath her. She staggered, her knees buckling. Orion moved fast, catching her before she hit the floor, lowering her to the bed, his grip steady. She sat there, staring blankly at her hands, the faint tremors running through them.

Orion stood in the middle of the small room. His eyes were heavy on her. He wasn’t nervous, didn’t seem apologetic. He was just watching her.

“I know this is a lot,” he said, “but it was all very necessary.”

Meela lifted her head, her voice hoarse. “*Necessary*?”

“Yes.” he said it like a fact, like there was little room for argument.

She let out a breathless, humorless laugh. “Necessary,” she echoed. “Zora’s dead. Alden is… not Alden. And this was all just necessary?”

Orion shrugged. “I have no regrets about my choices. Good riddance to Zora.”

Something inside her snapped. She shot to her feet, closing the space between them. “Is that what this is to you? A *necessity*?” she demanded. “People died.”

He leaned down, eyes narrowing. “Yes. I would’ve liked to kill more. I don’t give a fuck about them.”

She sucked in a breath, fury and confusion twisting inside her. He inched closer, making her breath feel heavier. His eyes were dark and searing. “*You’re* the necessity, Meela.”

The weight of his words slammed into her. A shiver curled up her spine. She felt the truth of it in the way he looked at her, in the way the air between them felt charged.

Her pulse thundered against her chest. “Take off that mask.”

Orion lowered his hood, fingers ruffling through his dark, unruly hair. Still holding her gaze, he pulled down his mask.

Meela took a step back, her vision tunneled.

Those lips, that scar.

“You.”

Orion smirked. “Me.”

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Chapter Fifteen



She sat on the edge of the bed, her arms crossed tightly over her chest, trying to hold herself together. She was exhausted. Her body ached, her head throbbed, and she was here, sitting in front of the man she convinced herself was just a dream. The room was suddenly too warm. Her mind was spinning.

He was real. Breathing. Watching her with a look that made her feel seen down to the marrow. She couldn't bring herself to meet his burning gaze.

"I apologize for the intensity back in the forest," he said, his voice deep in a way that made her chest thump louder.

Meela stared straight ahead. Her hands gripped the edge of the mattress. She heard him, but her body wasn't allowing her to talk. Everything was flooding all at once. Him, Alden, her mother. She didn't know which to focus on.

"I was scared, and that's not an excuse to yell at you like I did. It was our only shot and if I lost you again, this close—"

"Who are you?" she interrupted him, her voice calm.

He softly sighed, "My name is Orion."

"I know that, *Orion*. Who are you?" Her voice wavered, frustration bubbling inside her. "You said it was your only shot. How do you know Alden?"

He took a deep breath, raking a hand through his dark hair. "Alden is a friend."

“That’s not an answer.” She narrowed her eyes. “Why were you working together? Who are you to *me*? Why did you make me dream of you each night?”

The questions began pouring out of her in rapid succession, not a single emotion she could land on.

“Well,” he began carefully. “I really only visited one of your dreams, the one last night. The others, I'm assuming, were memories.”

“Memories?” Her heart stopped.

“Yes.” He flinched, bracing for her reaction.

“No.” She shook her head. “They were… different. They weren’t like the one you came into. We—”

She forced herself to look at him, his dark eyes turned molten in the dim light. A slow, mischievous grin tugged at his lips.

“Meela.” The way he said her name made her sink into the bed further, causing her to look away. “Have you been having naughty dreams about me?”

“Don’t.” She squinted her eyes. He was clearly enjoying seeing her flustered.

He bit his lip, not bothering to keep his grin from getting larger. “I’m honored our time together was enough to break Cora’s manipulation.”

Her entire face burned. Orion moved across the room, dropping his bag onto the desk. He pulled out a chair to face her, sitting with infuriating ease. His long legs stretched out before him, arms folded over his chest. Meela stood abruptly, not wanting to be eye level with him, pacing to keep from screaming. “You’re insufferable, you know that.”

“Now I’m *insufferable*?” Orion's eyes gleamed. “I think the word you’re looking for is charming.”

She stopped. “Charming?” She snorted. “Charming is the word you’d use to describe yourself?”

He shrugged, leaning back further to watch her.

“If you only visited one of my dreams, then what was the note about?”

Orion opened his mouth, then shut it. “Okay, fine.” He sighed. “I visited the one. But you talk in your sleep.”

Meela froze. “Excuse me?”

“It made me realize I could use that to my advantage. You may have said something that triggered a memory for me.”

“You were in my room?”

“No.”

She glared at him. “Then Alden?”

He shook his head. “No.”

Her breath caught. “Oh, my gods. The bird? You spied on me with *the bird*?!”

“*The bird?*” Orion’s hand flew to his chest, mouth falling open. “Harsh. He’s very sensitive.” He angled his head toward the raven, his voice dipping into a teasing softness. “Don’t listen to her, Suzaar.” Then his eyes glinted as they found hers. “Besides, spying implies you wouldn’t have wanted me there.”

Heat rose to her cheeks. She tore her gaze away, fixing it on the raven, who sat on the desk preening with complete indifference. “Oh, sure, Orion. He looks real torn up.”

He chuckled and leaned over to offer the bird a sliver of fruit. “He’s proud of himself. Did an excellent job tonight.”

“And you can read his mind?”

“A little,” He said, his fingers brushing along the top of the raven’s head. “It’s not really reading, more… a connection.”

Suzaar looked over at her, tilting its head before bouncing in place.

“So, a familiar?”

Orion nodded. “He loves you because I love you. We’re connected.”

A sharp breath left her lungs. “Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Say things like that. Don’t act like you know me better than I do.” Her voice broke slightly before settling. “I’ve had enough of this. You’re answering all my questions. No riddles, no charming your way around them. One-word answers, got it?”

His lips twitched, delight dancing in his eyes.

“*Got it?*” she pressed, pointed a finger directly at him.

She inhaled. “You were working with Alden to get me out?”

“Yes.” He nodded, proud.

“Why?”

He opened his mouth, then paused trying to find an answer. “Friend?”

Meela groaned loudly. “We’ve been through this. Of Alden's or mine?”

He smirked, leaning in. “Both.”

“You know me, you love me, so you know me… well?”

“Gods, yes.” He moaned, eyes rolling to the back of his head.

“That was two.” She lifted her brow. “Should I know you?”

The teasing in Orion’s face fell instantly, his eyes filled with sorrow. “Yes.”

Meela swallowed, not liking how her body reacted to seeing his demeanor drop so harshly. “Is Alden okay?”

“I think so.” A sigh. “Apologies, that answer required more than one.”

She licked her lips and stared at the ground. She felt too much of a coward to look into his eyes and ask the question she desperately wished to know. The question that brought bile to her throat, and fear trembling throughout her body. “Why don’t I remember you?”

His thumb grazed over his matching scar, his voice softer now too. “Cora.”

“Why?”

He shook his head, staring at his feet like he, too, pondered over that question. “Power.”

“She has plenty.”

“Yours.”

Meela sighed. “I have none. We’ve tried, over and over. I’m quite the disappointment, actually.”

Orion shook his head, no humor left. “Wrong.”

“Wrong?” She raised her brows.

“Lots.”

“Lots of power?”

Orion’s brown eyes darkened as he nodded once.

Meela frowned. “My mother has lots of power, sure, but we’ve tried, Orion. None.”

“Wrong.”

“About?”

“Her.”

Her stomach twisted. “This is getting ridiculous. Just talk. And don’t pull an Alden. No hidden meanings in your words. I need honesty.”

Orion let out a breath, rubbing his hands down his face. “My gods, that was brutal.”

“Talk.”

His shoulders squared. “You have power, it’s just different than hers.” He waited. “And she's not your mother.”

The world paused for a moment. Sure, she felt like an outsider. But Cora unfortunately was in fact her mother. Some of her first memories were with her, she remembered watching her mother use magic, seeing her read through the grimoire and guide Meela along with her own attempts of practice.

“I probably should’ve eased into that.” Orion cringed. “I had this whole plan. But everything went to shit. Your words. I was going to see how much you recalled, maybe go downstairs for a drink, get some food…”

Meela let out a laugh. “Get some food? I just got married. My husband turned into a monster. The only family I've ever known… is apparently not my family, who secretly wants me dead? And now I’m stuck with the most annoying man I have ever—”

“Well, when you say it like that.”

Meela glared at him, taking a step closer. “How else would you like me to say it, Orion?”

Orion pushed out of the chair, peering out the window before glancing back at her. “Can we also not call Alden your husband? It’s really irritating.”

“*You're irritated?*”

He held his hands up. “Fair point, and I agree with everything you said.”

Meela crossed her arms. “I’m still waiting for the part where you make this make sense. You say we know each other, so explain.”

Orion’s smile returned as he crossed the room to approach. “We know each other… *very well*.” He leaned in, voice dropping to a slow whisper. “Intimately. Based on those naughty little dreams, I don’t feel the need to go into depth about what we are.”

“Were.”

“Are. I’ll mend that part soon enough.”

“Arrogant.”

“Are we doing the one-word thing still?” he asked, cracking his knuckles. “Because I think I prefer you yelling at me.”

“Did she take away my memories of you?” She knew the answer, but needed to hear it aloud.

“I’m sorry.” His voice softened so much it caught her off guard. He sighed. “It’s easier to control someone when all they have is you, Meela.”

“How much?” she whispered, her heart racing.

He rubbed his scar absentmindedly, his eyes heavy. “Judging this conversation… all of them. You went to her. I tried to stop you, begged, really, but you thought you could talk to her. It was the last time I saw you, and I’ve had a hell of a time getting you back.”

She couldn’t hold it in anymore. “It would've been easier to let me die. You could’ve moved on.”

The words struck him like a physical blow, he instantly moved closer. His body pressed against hers. “No. That would not have been easier.” There was no playfulness in his voice. “If you think I expect anything from you, I don’t. I’ve come to terms with the fact that if I got you back, you’d never look at me the same.” His eyes softened. “I’m not your captor, Meela. If you want to walk out that door, you’re free to do so. I’d strongly advise against it. But—”

“It felt like we loved one another in my dreams.” She cut him off, her eyes lifting to meet the rawness in his.

“Deeply,” he replied without hesitation. Dropping back into the chair, he sighed. “You’re my best friend, Meela. I couldn’t just let you fall into her arms. This isn’t how I imagined getting you back. I guess I convinced myself that once you saw me, once you had your amulet, the memories of our life would return.”

Meela watched him rub at his scar again. The man before her was heartbroken. Every instinct urged her to reach out, to console him. Instead, her fingers drifted to her own scar. At once he stilled, eyes closing as a breath shuddered from his chest. When he looked at her again, his gaze was fierce, unflinching.

“We have the same scar.”

A small, sad smile curved his mouth. “A pact between us. The day you left, you took my dagger, cut my palm, and then yours. You said it would be your reminder to come home.”

“Sounds dramatic.”

His smile turned warm. “You’ve always had a knack for dramatics.”

With anyone else, she may have found that insulting. But from him, it felt like praise. The way he looked at her, it burned. The man she had wanted for so long for was sitting here, broken and full of longing, and she didn’t know what to do. She battled her mind and body. Every inch of her wanted to go to him, run her fingers through his hair and force him to look at her. While her mind couldn’t convince her to move.

“I need a moment.”

“I understand,” he said softly. “I got you a room adjoining mine.”

The air between them was heavy, fragile. They didn’t look at each other. The shift of Orion’s body rising caused Suzaar to stir into a flutter of feathers, the sound sharp in the hush. The world rushed back to her all at once. Drunken laughter came muffled through the walls, the bite of spiced mead in the air.

“I’ll be right back. Stay here.”

Meela glanced up. “Where are you—”

Orion’s mouth tugged into a crooked smirk. “I was talking to the bird. He doesn’t like being left alone.”

Her lips parted, but no words came. Heat prickled her cheeks as she dropped her gaze, only to snap back up when the floor groaned under his step.

“Right in here.”

He pushed the door behind his chair open, holding it so she had to pass beneath his arm. The nearness of him wrapped around her, his scent flooding her senses until her breath caught.

“I’ve already warded it,” he said, voice dipping lower. “The only ones allowed in or out are us.”

“Thank you," she said. His warmth pressed close, her gaze catching on the candlelight that traced the strong lines of his forearm stretched above her, down to the hand braced against the wood.

Orion lowered his head as she stepped beneath. A shiver ran down her spine, when the warmth of his breath neared her ear. “I’ll be right in here.”

“Okay,” she whispered, then darted inside, shutting the door harder than she intended. The cool wood met her back as she pressed against it, exhaling sharp.

But she couldn’t shut him out. Through the thin wall came the scrape of his chair, the muted rustle of Suzaar’s wings.

Her room was warm, cozier than she expected. Orion had clearly offered her the better space. Instead of a single narrow bed like his, hers was larger, dressed in thick plush quilts. Golden candlelight flickered across every surface, casting soft shadows.

The only thing Meela could focus on was the ceiling.

Tiny glimmers of light moved against the dark wood, enchantments woven throughout the beams, shimmering like stars against the night sky.

The moon hung in the center, glowing faintly as if he had captured it just for her. Lavender curled through the air. She turned and saw jars of flowers, fresh beside her bed. Above the window, he had hung dried sprigs, the fragrance instantly calming her.

Meela shook her head in disbelief. She thought to turn back, to open the door and say something but, she couldn't seem to place any words. She wandered around the room, finding a small hutch with its doors open. Inside, neatly folded and hung, were dresses and skirts with delicate embroidery, exactly the kind she would've chosen for herself. Meela traced the fabric with trembling fingers.

She stood in the room, realization sinking deep. This was too much to think about, too much unraveling, but all she could focus on was him. She had questioned how much the man had cared for her, how much of it was true. But now, it was painfully obvious, and she didn't know why that made her want to cry.

She took a breath as another thought twisted into her like a splinter.

Alden, and the look in his eyes before he changed. She had read of creatures like him before, monsters hidden within men.

She wondered now: were they born, or were they made?

Tomorrow. She'd ask him tomorrow. He hadn't seemed too concerned about his friend anyway, maybe that should've comforted her. She wanted to scrub the day from her skin. Desperate for something warm but the moment she realized she'd have to ask Orion where it was, she let the thought go.

Meela turned toward the bed, jaw tight as she tried to silence the voice in her head urging her to go back. To make sure Alden was okay. She had left him standing in the wreckage they created together. He wouldn't have done that to her.

But going back now, just to see him would make everything he and Orion planned meaningless. A way to soothe her guilt instead of honoring the choice they made.

The moment she crawled beneath the covers, warmth enveloped her. It was the softest place she had ever rested. Meela replayed the day in her mind, thinking about the man who was only a few steps away, watching the stars twinkle above her.

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Chapter Sixteen



“Suzaar,” a voice hissed.

Blinking sleep away, Meela turned to the voice, finding Orion next to her bed, a steaming mug in hand. The rich scent curled toward her, pulling a smile to her lips before she fully processed where she was.

Their eyes met, and whatever peace sleep had given her shattered in an instant. She tensed, sitting up quickly, the blanket pooling around her waist.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” Orion's voice was soft and gentle, rough from sleep. “I just thought, after the night you had, you might want to wake to tea.”

He set the cup on the table beside her and straightened, no longer clad in the dark battle-worn layers he wore yesterday. Instead, he wore a loose ivory tunic and dark trousers. The neckline was open to his strong chest, the fabric soft and slightly rumpled, with a simple pendant hanging from a dark cord at his neck. Suzaar was perched on his shoulder. With a subtle tilt of his head, he sent the raven flapping into his room.

“I’ll be in there if you need me.” He added, taking a slow step back. He turned to leave, pausing at the door. “Oh, and the washroom is down the hall. It’s shared, so just let me know you need it and I’ll make sure you have privacy.”

“Good morning,” Meela said sleepily, surprising herself.

Orion perked up, running a hand through his sleep-mussed hair. “Good morning, Meela.”

She found she didn’t want him to leave yet. “Did you sleep well?”

His cheeks turned a hint of pink, and she quickly decided she liked seeing him like this. “I did,” he admitted, his thumb rubbing the scar on his palm. “Suzaar kept waking me up.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Don't be.” He shook his head. “He was just excited and kept wanting to come in here and see you.”

Meela tilted her head. “He did, or you did?”

Orion’s full lips parted before turning into a smile. “Is there a difference?”

Heat crept into his eyes as he glanced down her body, then, just as quickly, forced himself to meet her gaze again. Meela’s fingers tightened around the blanket.

“I’m up now,” She hesitated. “Did you make yourself a cup too?”

He nodded towards his room. “I did.”

A beat of silence. “Did you… did you want to drink it together?” She tried to make it sound casual, but the words landed too softly, too hushed. It was just that this moment felt familiar, like the kind of morning she had experienced in her dreams. The ones she was never ready to wake from.

Orion’s face bloomed with a smile. His dark eyes almost seemed to shine. “I’d love that. I’ll be right back.”

Meela quickly ran her fingers through her hair, hoping it would hide any signs of sleep. He returned moments later, a mug in one hand, his desk chair in the other. She blinked at the sight of his chair as he pulled it close.

She opened her mouth, then closed it.

“What?” Orion asked, clearly puzzled.

“Nothing.”

“No, tell me.” His grin widened, turning playful.

“I wasn’t expecting the chair.” She chuckled. “It just caught me off guard.”

“I…” He hesitated. “I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable.” He shrugged, suddenly looking uncertain of himself. “I realized I may have come off strong last night.”

“You don’t make me uncomfortable, Orion,” she said softly, patting the bed.

His eyes flickered to where her hand was resting. “Good,” he whispered, leaning over to sit beside her, keeping a small distance between them.

Silence stretched between them. Meela watched, noticing how he kept his eyes averted. His fingers fidgeted on his knee, his jaw tight, concentrating too hard on his mug.

“Do I make you uncomfortable?”

“What?” He chuckled. “No, not at all.”

“You.” She leaned, forcing herself into his line of sight. “Are just really avoiding eye contact.”

“Sorry,” he said, turning to look at her directly. “You’re in your nightgown, your very *thin* nightgown, and I’m trying hard to not let that be as distracting as it is.” He swallowed, his dark eyes locked on hers like it pained him to hold her gaze.

“Well, you’ve already looked once.”

“For a moment,” he admitted, with a small crooked smile, biting at his lower lip.

Meela tried desperately not to think about biting that lip herself. She had felt it in her dreams, but with him sitting so close, she knew it would be even better in reality. When he licked his lips, she quickly averted her eyes to his.

“Not so easy, is it?” Orion teased, the heat in his gaze making her heart flutter. He cleared his throat and changed the subject. “Are you hungry? I doubt Seph has started the kitchen, but we could still go down, maybe go to the market, pick something up. I don’t think we have much.”

He was rambling, and she let him.

“Wouldn’t it be dangerous to go out?” she asked. “I’m sure my mother—er, Cora has everyone looking for me.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” He chuckled. “But you forget.” As he spoke, the faint twinkling stars above them vanished in an instant. A soft stream of blue light curled back into his hands, like mist returning to the sea. “You’re with me.” He flexed his fingers, the last glow fading. “Besides, Cora and her hounds know they're not welcome here, no one in town would help her.”

Meela frowned. “She’s known here?”

Orion scoffed. “Cora’s choices have disrupted the balance of magic in the area. It’s bad enough that most Thuamara have moved closer to Solmaris. Some, like me, have reasons to stay. This is our home.”

“Thuamara?”

“Thuamara,” he repeated, looking at her. “Oh, like mage-folk.”

Meela shook her head.

“Like you and I, people who practice," he offered.

“Oh.” She shifted. “I can’t imagine the king feels too happy about that.”

“I don’t think he gives us much thought. We’re a small community, far enough away from them.” Orion said. “They sent a few guards once, one of the twins killed them, and no others have been sent.”

“Are they scared?”

“Of Cora?” Orion laughed dryly. “No. Cora’s smart, as annoying as that is. She stays in her area and knows the limits. The king doesn’t need to waste resources controlling what doesn’t need to be controlled.”

“But you said magic has been disrupted, are they not impacted?”

“No.” He sighed. “Magic is like a system, right? It’s all little streams, flowing to one ocean. Crowmore is a small stream. We all pull, and we all give. It’s a constant balance. You can’t just continue to take without offering something in return, and Cora never pulls completely, she gives back. But it's in massive waves, and not often enough. When she’s not offering back, the stream begins to dry up, making it hard for us to pull.”

Meela tilted her head, trying to understand. “So, how does one give?”

His fingers curled around his mug, and for the first time he looked at her differently. Meela placed her hand over his, anchoring him to the moment. “How does she give back? You said it comes in big waves?”

She watched as his throat bobbed. “With how much she takes, she has to offer the same amount in return.” his eyes flickered with unease, and Meela wondered if he was going to lie.

“Please, Orion.”

“Sacrifice, usually.”

She knew it would be bad. She didn’t know it would be that. “Oh.” She slid deeper into her bed, drawing the blankets up over her lap.

“She’s disrupted the witches' magic,” Orion continued. “Theirs is more closely tied with the natural flow. Most are okay. But covens have had to flee, and they’re really struggling to survive.”

“Other covens?”

He nodded.

“Cora didn’t really tell me a lot,” Meela admitted, feeling foolish. “Sorry if these are silly questions.”

“Don’t do that, Meela.”

“Do what?”

“Revert into yourself.” He sipped his tea before setting it down and shifting deeper into the bed. His warmth pressing in close. “There’s a lot of history, and it’s hard to offer it all in a few minutes. Ask me anything, and I’ll answer. Though, I’ll be honest with you now. Witches are private, always have been, and they’re certainly not going to offer their current happenings with the rest of us.”

She nodded, the weight of everything pressing down on her again. She felt Orion’s eyes on her, watching as close as Suzaar did.

“I was planning on checking on Alden today to see what’s happened.”

Meela straightened at the mention of Alden. “How is he? Is he safe?”

“I assume as safe as he can be, considering the situation. He sent me a message last night—alive. But I promised I’d check on the house, see what’s been compromised. Would you care to join?”

“Absolutely,” Meela beamed. “I should get ready first. Maybe get that breakfast you mentioned.”

“Absolutely,” he mimicked, grinning. “Let me see if the bath’s free for you.”

His fingers brushed hers as he took the empty mug, a jolt skittering up her hand and along her arm. If he noticed, he didn’t say.

The washroom was small, but not nearly as unpleasant as she’d expected for a shared space. She hadn’t seen or heard any other visitors yet, but whatever Orion had done to ensure her privacy, she appreciated it. The room was slightly damp and bare. Just a large tub, a narrow mirror, and a toilet tucked to the side. A single candle flickered in the corner, steady despite the draft slipping in through the small window.

By the time she finished washing, her skin felt fresher even if exhaustion still clung to her bones. When she stepped back into the hall, it was still quiet. A shimmer of blue glow pulsed at her door, allowing her entry. Another spell. Orion had said magic you had to give and take, she wondered what that meant for him to use all this for her protection.

The scent of lavender greeted her, the flowers he had left remained. Their petals still full and vibrant, the scent transforming this space into something peaceful. Her fingers graced the blossoms, tracing its soft edges.

Meela would be lying to herself if she said no part of her wasn’t softening towards him. She wasn’t sure what it was, whether it was a piece of the past surfacing, something long lost rekindling. Or if it was simply him.

The way Orion carried himself, the way he looked at her like she wasn’t just another piece to be used and discarded. Since realizing the dreams she thought were only fantasy were real, something had begun to settle inside her. A feeling that curled deep in her stomach, warming whenever his gaze lingered on her, whenever his hand brushed against hers.

She had spent so much of her life numb, wrapped in an illusion of control, that she had almost forgotten what it felt to want.

She wasn’t sure if that was dangerous or not. But when she lay awake last night, unable to fall asleep, she had made a decision. One she would refuse to take back. She would not allow fear to choose her feelings, and Cora would not choose her fate.

Meela had found one of the gowns Orion had left for her, the fabric was light and caught the light like river grass. She brushed her fingers along the soft linen, smelling faintly of dried herbs and pinewood smoke.

It was simple, and somehow the loveliest thing she’d ever seen. She slipped the dress on, the fabric falling in easy folds around her legs. She ran her hands down the front, her fingers tracing the vines and flowers stitched along the hem.

This was nothing like the silks and corseted bodices Cora would dress her in. They were stiff and suffocating, meant to display obedience more than beauty. Meela had never felt beautiful in them. She was only meant to look the part.

But this dress, this made her feel like she could breathe, like she could exist quietly, without apology. It felt like wearing a piece of the forest itself, stitched with care and meant for living, not parading. This dress felt like freedom.

She tied the leather belt around her waist, adjusting the drape until it sat just right. A small smile tugged at her lips before she could stop it. Orion would be ready soon. He had promised she would be safe when they left, and she chose to believe that.

As she braided her hair, she began waiting. Waiting for the weight of everything to hit, for her grief or horror to finally catch up. But it hadn’t come, and she wasn’t sure if she should feel grateful or afraid.

Probably both.

But for now, she refused to dwell on what was clearly out of her control. That was a choice she could make, at least. A small one, but hers nonetheless. Meela didn’t know what tomorrow would bring. But she knew,

without question, that she would not end up in Cora’s hands. There were so many questions left unanswered, but standing here, she was no longer sure which mattered anymore. Some, she knew Orion wouldn’t even be able to answer.

She tried to not think of the others, especially Lenora. They had never been that close, yet in those final moments, it had felt like friendship. That small betrayal stung far more than she expected.

Alden had warned her that she would need to grow accustomed to questions. Now, she understood what he meant. Looking back, it was as if every moment with him had been preparation for this one.

Cora would come for her. She had little doubt about that. But what would the coven do with him? Alden had never asked anything of her.

She needed to make sure he was okay. Alden was a friend, and she had left him behind.

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Chapter Seventeen



Meela smoothed her hands down her dress one more time. She shifted the leather belt under her fingers and took a slow, deep breath. She raised her hand, knocking to the adjoining room, the door swinging open almost immediately.

“Hi,” Orion said, a little breathless. His eyes swept over her, catching for a heartbeat before returning to her face. Something in his expression eased, unguarded in a way she wasn’t used to seeing. No teasing quip, no grin. Just that look.

Meela forgot how to speak. He stood shirtless before her, his dark hair damp, curling as it dried, droplets still clinging to the strands. He had on black trousers, and a buckled holster around his thigh. His body was lean and strong, the kind honed from years of magic and swift fights rather than brute force. His smile was slow and knowing, like he could see every dirty thought racing through her mind.

“Hi,” she said quickly. She could feel her cheeks warming.

A deep “hi” shattered the moment, making her jump. Suzaar, from his perch, tilted his head at her, utterly unimpressed.

“He talks?”

Orion chuckled, stepping back. “He mimics. Random words, noises, whatever catches his ear. There was a whole week he only said, ‘last call!’” He huffed a small laugh, and shook his head. “It was a long week.”

She smiled, stepping inside and making her way towards the raven. “Good morning, lucky charm,” she whispered. Suzaar lifted his wings and

ruffled his feathers, preening for her attention. There was a clay jar filled with berries, and when she reached for one, he let out a loud, expectant chatter. “So desperate,” she teased, picking up a small handful as she sat at the desk. He hopped closer, waiting impatiently as she fed him, his sharp beak careful against her fingers.

She couldn’t help herself from looking over her shoulder. Orion had a certain ease about him, the kind of grace that made every movement feel intentional. He moved around his space, gathering books and slipping them into a worn leather satchel. Orion hadn’t looked over at her, but she did notice a small smile forming on his lips. She deliberately glanced around the space, noticing all the details she hadn’t taken in last night. There wasn’t a lot, mostly old books thrown everywhere, a tunic left on the floor. Suzaar had moved closer, picking up her braid to get her attention. He seemed different here. At Alden’s, the raven felt like a silent, looming presence. He was watchful, almost predatory. But here, he was relaxed, playful even.

“You know I chose Suzaar for that reason.”

Meela turned toward Orion’s voice. He sat on the edge of his bed, bent over his boots, dark hair falling across his brow.

“I read a poem once,” he said softly. “Before I went into the academy. It claimed ravens aren’t unlucky. It's only said they are because they see too much. Maybe even into other worlds. They notice what we can’t or *won’t*, so we call them omens. But really, they are the reminders of things we’d rather ignore.” His gaze flicked to Suzaar on the perch. The raven tilted his head, listening. “The poem called them gifts. Messengers from a world we’ve forgotten how to hear. A sign there’s more around us than we realize.” His eyes lingered on her. “When you called him your lucky charm… it reminded me why I chose him.”

Silence stretched. He tugged at his boots, thumb brushing his scar. “I… don’t know if you want to talk about what happened at Alden’s,” he murmured. “But if you do, I’m here.”

“Not really.” Meela swallowed, standing and walking around his room.

“Okay,” He said simply. No push, no judgement. He moved to a drawer and pulled a black tunic over his head, his muscles flexing from the movement.

She averted her eyes quickly, suddenly fascinated by the books sprawled open on his bed.

“Don’t look away for my sake.” He chuckled.

“Pretty avid reader,” she mused, ignoring his comment.

“How do you think I got all this magic?” Orion quipped.

Meela must’ve given him a skeptical look because he grinned and pointed to himself. “Mages, such as myself. Don’t come with the equipment like others.” He pointed at her. “We learn it, seek it out. I was always interested, one thing led to another, and I became obsessed.”

“You taught yourself?”

“Mostly. But I worked with masters at Rimehold,” he grabbed his satchel, tossing it over his shoulder. “Alden,” He leaned in slightly. “Met a girl who had a few tricks.”

“Must’ve been some trick.”

“Full of them,” his voice dipped, his eyes dropped to her lips before returning to her eyes.

Meela swallowed, she couldn’t stop her body from reacting, shaking off the shiver that ran down her spine. “You’re quite the flirt,” she pushed back, needing to reclaim some ground.

He tilted his head, grinning. “I like seeing you nervous.”

“I don’t think many people would say that’s a good thing.”

“Hm.” He took a slow step forward. “Well, lucky for me you’re not some people.”

Meela’s back met the wall with a soft thud, and Orion followed, close enough that she felt the heat of him everywhere at once. His arm braced above her head, his body just shy of touching hers, trapping her in a cage of his warmth.

“There’s only ever been one opinion I’ve cared about,” he murmured, the rough edge of his voice dragging down her spine. “And I know you, Meela. I know the difference between when you’re afraid…” His gaze dropped to her mouth for a heartbeat. “…and when you want something you’re too stubborn to say aloud.”

He leaned in, slow, deliberate, until his nose brushed hers, until his breath mingled with hers and she swore he could hear her heart stutter. “Tell me,” he whispered, his lips a breath from hers. “Are you scared?”

Her lungs barely remembered how to work. “No.”

“Good.” A ghost of a smile curved his mouth. “Am I making you nervous?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

His hand dropped from the wall, fingertip skimming her waist. It was the briefest contact, gone as quickly as it had come, but her whole body tightened in response. He stepped back slightly, enough for her to regain space but not enough to break the charged air between them.

Meela tried to collect herself. Orion's eyes were all over her, a slow smile pulling at his lips as he bit the corner of one in amusement.

"This is going to be so much fun."

She cleared her throat. "What is?"

"This," he motioned between them, "You want to fuck me, and I'm excited to see how long you deny yourself."

Her pulse roared under her chest. "You're excited for that?"

"Unlike you, I know it'll be worth the wait." he let out a quiet laugh. "And I like earning it."

Meela took a deep breath. She wasn't sure if she wanted to push him away, or pull him closer. She smoothed down her dress, grasping for composure. "I'm ready when you are." She winced. "To go, I mean. For breakfast. I'm ready to go for breakfast."

Orion's smile widened. "Okay." He turned to the door. "I checked, Seph's a little… preoccupied, so I'll start the kitchen for us."

He held out his hand to her. She hesitated, looking down at it.

He dropped it just as quickly. "Fair enough."

Orion led the way down the hall, completely unbothered by her refusal.

But Meela wasn't. Regret tugged at her almost immediately. She didn't know why she denied herself even the smallest touch. It was instinct to pull back, to retreat, even when she wanted to reach for him. Her footsteps were quieter than usual, shadowing his stride, when Orion suddenly shifted, blocking her path.

"Meela."

"What?" She kept her gaze fixed ahead, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Don't overthink this." His voice was gentle, steady. "I meant what I said last night. I expect nothing from you. Does it mean I'm not going to try? Not a chance. But this is yours to dictate."

She nodded once.

"Look at me."

Her head lifted before she could think.

His lips curved, and something flickered in his eyes. Surprise, maybe, that she'd listened. "I'll take whatever I can get. So, please, for both our

sakes, you be Meela and I'll be Orion. We'll go have breakfast, and this won't be strange… okay?"

If only her mind weren't constantly at war. For years she'd wanted this. Him beside her, close enough to reach for. She felt it now, bone-deep. But a stubborn whisper in her heart wouldn't let her forget she wasn't the girl he remembered. In her dreams, in those soft, borrowed memories, that version of her was lighter, freer. Of course a man like Orion would fall for her. But she wasn't her, not anymore. And what if she let herself lean into this, and he realized that too?

"Rimehold?"

"Ah, yes. The prestigious northern academy for all the bright, power-hungry young Thuamaras of Ronan. Where egos go to grow, and humility dies." A crooked smile tugged at his lips. "A magical experience."

A muffled thud echoed from somewhere ahead. Then another. Orion slowed, brows raised, glancing down at Meela.

She tilted her head, listening. The rhythmic thumping continued, punctuated by the unmistakable creak of a bed. Her brows knit together. Then it clicked. A grin spread across her face. "Preoccupied?"

Bang.

They both flinched.

The thuds grew erratic, followed by a long, unmistakable moan. They froze, eyes locked, their expressions a perfect mirror of horrified delight.

The candle sconces rattled. One gave a pitiful little clink.

Orion slapped a hand over his mouth, his shoulders already shaking with suppressed laughter. He staggered back against the wall.

Another moan echoed down the hall. Louder this time. The bed knocked against the wall with increasing force.

Then one final *THUD.*

Silence.

Orion bolted.

Meela barely had time to register him sprinting down the hall before she tore after him, both of them choking back helpless laughter as they fled like guilty children escaping the scene of a crime.

They stumbled down the stairs and into the kitchen, breathless with laughter. Orion was shaking his head, still chuckling as he moved to the pantry. "Not much to work with," he said. "We haven't gone to the market

square in a few days. He was meant to be doing that this morning. But I guess I can't blame the man."

Meela shook her head, smiling as she took in the space. Stone walls warm from the heat of the brick hearth, copper pots glinting faintly in the golden firelight. "Where are we?"

"Seph's," Orion said. "A tavern here in Crowmore."

"Do you work here?" she asked.

"Most nights. I'm able to come and go when I please. Decent money, good tips, free room."

"So, you live here?"

He hesitated, rolling his sleeves as he crossed to the stove. "No. We have a place, a few miles out of town, but I stay here often."

Meela stilled. "We… meaning?"

Orion looked at her, a small smile curling his lips. "You and I," he said, voice soft. "It's small but perfect for us."

"Oh." A memory flickered in her mind. A dream of a cozy firelit space where she had felt safe, warm, and loved. "I think I remember it."

His face lit up. "Yeah? I'm glad," he admitted, "You put a lot of love into it."

Meela watched as he coaxed a flame to life with a flick of his fingers. The warmth spread through the kitchen, firelight dancing over the stone floor and catching on the copper mugs hanging from their hooks. He moved with easy confidence, placing a cast-iron skillet over the flame.

"Sit," He nodded toward the worn wooden table.

She sat, listening to the quiet hum of the tavern beyond the wall—the muffled footsteps upstairs, the creak of a floorboard, the muted murmur of morning voices.

With one hand, Orion cracked eggs into the pan and the sizzle filled the silence between them. Meela tried not to watch him too closely as he moved, but her gaze kept drifting back.

"There's a site not far from where Suzaar and I can check on Alden," he said, flipping the eggs. "Wards are stronger there, so we should be safe to linger for a bit."

Meela shifted in her chair, running her finger along a jar. "Should I be doing anything?"

Orion glanced over his shoulder, brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"You keep doing things," she said, "I feel like I should be useful."

He smirked, sliding the skillet a little closer to the flame. “If you insist, you can slice those apples. Or just sit there and keep looking at me like that, that’s also useful.”

Meela blinked. “Like what?”

“Like you’re trying very hard not to,” he teased. “It’s good for my morale.”

She threw an apple at him. He caught it without looking, flicked his wrist, and sent it straight into the small firebox below the stove.

Orion huffed, placing a plate in front of her. “Alright. Eventually, we should probably discuss you tapping into your magic. But for now, your grand task? Eat.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but he gave her a look, daring her to argue before turning back to the fire to cook his own. The door to the back steps creaked open. Meela glanced up just as a woman stepped through, adjusting her corset with a satisfied sigh.

She was fae, obvious from the shimmer to her bronze skin and pointed ears peeking through her short blonde curls that bounced with each step as if they had a life of their own. She wore a teal skirt that brushed the floor with each step, paired with a cream blouse that sat off her shoulders. A dark corset cinched at her waist, accentuating her plush curves. She was soft in all the ways Meela had been warned to never let herself be, with a gap between her teeth that made her sweet smile seem a bit more playful.

“Morning, love,” she purred, reaching out to trail a hand over his shoulder. “Sometimes I forget how handsome you are in the daylight.”

Meela’s grip on her fork tightened.

Orion didn’t react beyond an exasperated shake of his head. “Liri.”

Behind her, a heavy groan echoed from the steps. Seph, she assumed, stumbled into view, his sandy blonde hair sticking up at all angles, his dark shirt wrinkled. He squinted at Liri, rubbing a hand down his scruffy face.

“For fuck's sake, Lir, stop doin’ that.”

She turned in mock surprise, pressing a hand over her generous chest. “Doin’ what?”

“You know what.”

“Do I?” she hummed, a wicked sparkle in her eye. She turned back to Orion, resting a cheek on his back. “Can’t help it, doll. He’s too pretty.”

Seph groaned louder as he slumped into the chair across from Meela. “I swear woman, you’re gonna put me in an early grave.”

Orion chuckled, moving to set his own plate down next to her. Seph tracked Orion's movement, and his eyes finally landed on Meela, causing his entire body to lock up. Liri turned to see what had stolen his attention, and the moment her eyes met hers, her smile vanished.

Meela frowned. *Do I know them?*

Seph turned to Orion, wide-eyed. "You… you brought her *here*?!"

Orion was completely unfazed, a mouth full of food. "Where else would we go?"

Seph looked at Liri, his mouth dropped open. He turned to Meela again, his eyes scanning her like he was seeing a ghost. "Oh, I don't know Orion, maybe *your* house?"

Liri shook her head slowly, her curls gleaming as she stared at him. "I can't believe it," she breathed. "You actually got her back."

Orion's smile widened as he glanced at Meela. "I told you I would."

Seph groaned. "Gods, this is going to be a disaster."

Liri stepped behind him and gave his shoulder a patronizing pat. "So dramatic. I thought you liked a little danger."

"There's danger," Seph muttered, swatting her hand away. "And then there's this, Liri."

"I am sitting right here, you know." Meela crossed her arms.

Orion leaned back, draping his arm along the back of Meela's chair. His gaze lingered on her for a heartbeat, before he gestured toward the others. "Seph, Liri… this is Meela Diremoure," he said, voice low, threaded with quiet pride. His fingers brushed the chair as he added, "Seph owns the place, and Liri runs it."

"It's nice to meet you, Meela." Liri's smile was bright, but her eyes slid back to Orion. "Well, you certainly commit, Orion. I'll give you that. I was thinking about getting out of town anyway."

"Doubtful," he said with a short laugh. "Seph would cry."

Seph scoffed. "I would not… *love*."

Liri patted his cheek. "Of course not, doll."

Seph recovered, shaking his head as if to clear it before flashing Meela a crooked grin. "Ah, hell. Should've known you'd be pretty."

Liri elbowed him. "Be polite."

"What? That was a compliment!" Seph said, rubbing at his ribs. "Orion never brings women here, I was startin' to think he didn't have it in him."

"Right." Orion rolled his eyes. "Because I live to impress you."

“Damn right, you do.” Seph winked. “And what about you little witch, you always this quiet?”

“Only when I don't have anything nice to say.”

Seph howled with laughter.

“I can see why you like her.” Liri smirked.

“Me too,” Seph smiled. “Shame, really, here I thought I was the only one who had a chance at Orion’s heart.”

“Liri might be miles ahead of you.” Meela deadpanned.

“Don’t say that,” Seph grumbled. “It encourages her.”

Liri smiled, leaning down to get close to Orion. “Oh, please. I don’t need any encouragement.”

Meela clenched her jaw. Orion chuckled but she could feel his fingertips grazing her back. She shouldn’t be jealous, she had denied him at every turn, but seeing another woman that close to him made her breath a little shallow.

Seph grinned, watching her. “Well, tell me, you two just flipped the whole game on its head. What's your plan? And it better not involve my place. I don’t want to see those crazy ass yellow-eyed ones burning the whole town lookin’ for you.”

“Still working it out.” Orion shrugged.

“Oh, great gods,” Seph leaned back, rubbing his head. “There is no plan.”

“Don’t worry about the twins,” Orion said smoothly. “Only one left now and I’ll take care of her.”

Seph scoffed. “Well, little witch,” then pointedly looked at Orion, “and *you*, I am very interested in seeing you both get yourselves out of this mess. But I mean it, Scarrow. Don’t drag anyone else back here. This ain’t a place for all that.”

Orion let out a loud snort. “I have to clean up a fight almost every night. Don’t act like this is some sacred refuge.”

“It’s exactly that,” Seph pointed at him, a grin tugging at his lips. “It’s a sacred place for lost souls to come drink, fight, and fuck.” He was laughing at himself before he could even finish.

Liri rolled her eyes and sank into the seat across from Meela. “Don’t let that grump get to you. You’re Orion’s girl, which makes you *ours*. And we don’t let ours get snatched by that greedy coven.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that,” Meela said softly. Her gaze flicked to Orion, searching for any hint of worry, but he only lifted his mug of tea, completely at ease.

Liri stood again. “Let’s go, doll. Give ‘em some privacy, we need to go shopping anyhow. You need anything?”

Orion shook his head. “We’ll be heading soon and be back later. I’ll leave some coin for you at the bar. I might not be able to help out at nights as much, but I'll contribute.”

Seph waved him off. “Keep those girls outta here, and we’re settled.”

Liri tugged Seph toward the door, but paused before leaving. She leaned in, her voice dropping low. “Just so you know, love, it’s all in good fun. You’ve got nothing to fear from us.” Her eyes softened as she gave Meela a quick wink and sauntered off.

The door shut behind them, and the room settled into a heavy silence. Orion drummed his fingers against the table, the soft rhythm filling the space they didn’t.

“You alright?” he asked after a moment. “Sorry if they were a lot.”

Meela forced a small smile. “They were great.”

Orion exhaled through his nose, leaning back in his chair. They finished their breakfast in silence, the air between them humming with unspoken things.

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Chapter Eighteen



The market bustled around them, the streets alive with chatter as vendors called out their wares, the distant clang of a blacksmith's hammer and a steady stream of carts rolling over cobblestone. Flower stalls filled with vibrant petals, their scents mingling with the rich aroma of baked bread and sizzling meats. Everywhere Meela turned there was something that caught her eye. It was overwhelming in the best way.

She and Orion walked side by side along the uneven path, their footsteps echoing softly in the quiet morning, as he gestured toward the distant hills and the small clusters of homes along the way. He had begun pointing out the changes since she'd last been here. Many had fled to safer lands, their magic too disrupted by Cora's pull to remain.

"Mostly humans, fae, and orcs now," Orion said. "The fae are stronger, too rooted in the old ways to be shaken. Their magic runs in the very bones of the land. And orcs…" His mouth curved wryly. "I think they're just too stubborn. They've been forced to move so much over the years they refuse to be uprooted now."

She listened intently, though her eyes couldn't help but drift to him. He wore dark layers, practical and well-fitted, a cowl draped loosely around his neck, half-obscuring the sharp line of his jaw. A dagger rested against his thigh, the hilt wrapped in worn leather. But it was the moonstone crystal set into the pommel that caught her attention.

"I know you said we should focus on the magic, but…" Meela hesitated, a strange self-consciousness creeping in. "I'd really like to try to get my

memories back."

Orion slowed his steps, and she watched him carefully.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said too quickly. "I've been looking into it. It's possible… but complicated. Without knowing exactly what Cora did, or how deep she went…" He shook his head, frustration flickering in his eyes. "It had to have been a spell. Even she has limits. But undoing it could do more harm than good. And finding the exact spell has been damn near impossible."

"Witches and their secrets," Meela muttered.

"Witches and those damn secrets," Orion agreed, flashing her a smile.

"Thank you," she said softly. "For even trying."

"I'm not saying it's impossible," Orion said, gentler than before. "It just feels like every answer leads me to more questions. And I've pissed off enough people that no one really wants to help me."

She nodded, already expecting that answer. If Orion could have restored her memories, he likely would have done so by now. They walked further, weaving through the market.

"You don't make a lot of friends, do you?" Meela asked.

"I have friends," he said, though it sounded half-hearted.

"Liri and Seph?" she asked.

He nodded. "I'd consider them my friends, whether they consider me one. You'd have to ask them."

She smiled. "I'm not judging. I don't make friends easily either."

"That's not new, you've always been like that." A wistful smile passed over him. "Choosing to watch the world unfold around you rather than surround yourself with chatter. It's one of the reasons I liked you."

She wished she could remember what it was like to meet him for the first time, before all of this. Orion moved through the bustling street like he belonged there, nodding toward familiar faces as they passed. The town was small, but warm and full of life. A river wound through the market, pools of clear water reflecting the towering trees. Banners of rich color swayed between the buildings, their vibrant hues standing out against the earth-toned stone and wood. Suzaar flew above them, pausing on rooftops as if leading the way.

A rich, mouthwatering scent curled through the air, making Meela's stomach growl. She glanced around, trying to pinpoint the source.

Orion's amused voice broke her search. "Want one?"

Before she could answer, a deep voice boomed across the street. “You there! Try something fresh!”

Her feet were moving before she realized it, drawn by the aroma. Behind her, she could hear Orion’s laugh.

The orc behind the stall grinned as she approached, arms as thick as tree trunks folding over his dark green chest. “I see you like what I have.” He smiled, his tusks catching the sunlight. “Quite the compliment, miss. What’ll it be?”

She studied the skewers of thinly sliced meats, unsure of where to start. “What’s your favorite?”

He hummed in thought, looking her over. “For you. Try this. My mate's seasoning.”

Orion moved beside her, reaching into his pocket. “How much?”

“For her?” The orc shook his head. “Free.” Then he turned to Orion with a scowl. “You pay. And you should, Orion. You still owe me.”

Meela’s gaze flicked between them, curious. “Oh no.” She smiled, leaning in. “What’d he do?”

The orc jabbed a thick finger toward Orion. “He’s *trouble*. You watch him and that raven.” His eyes lifted to the rooftops, scanning the sky like Suzaar might swoop down at any second.

“Oh, come on, Gujek,” Orion said, leaning lazily against the stall. “It was ages ago.”

“And look where I am now!” Gujek roared, throwing his arms up. “Back here like some common scum!”

“Do not put that on me,” Orion laughed, completely unbothered. “You did that to yourself when you fought Umog.”

“You’re getting the blame,” Gujek declared, grinning like he enjoyed the argument. He turned back to Meela, his voice softening as he handed her the skewer. “Here. Go on, tell me what you think.”

She took a bite, and the world narrowed to heat and flavor. “Oh my gods,” she breathed, her eyes fluttering shut. “This is incredible. Spicy… and then sweet, how do you do that?”

Gujek's chest puffed up proudly. “Family recipe.”

“Alright, alright.” Orion shook his head, tugging her away. “We’ve got places to be.”

She sighed dramatically. “Want some?”

Orion took it with a soft smile, taking a small bite before handing it back. “His stand has always been my favorite.”

“So,” she drawled out, “what’d you do?”

“Don’t listen to him.” Orion smiled.

She looked back over her shoulder, watching Gujek follow Suzaar’s flight pattern. “He seemed very passionate about his accusations.”

Orion sighed, “Fine. Maybe Suzaar stole from him. *Maybe*.”

Meela’s eyes narrowed, a smirk creeping across her face. “Maybe?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” he said, raising his hands. “I didn’t see it happen. But… someone filed a complaint about sanitation.” He leaned closer. “And the person who sent it in just happened to be his competitor across the street, Umog.”

“Convenient.”

“Very,” Orion agreed. “Orcs are passionate people. They got into a little fight over it because Gujek said he had seen Umog feeding Suzaar plenty of times. But, Umog won and his stall got shut down for a month. He lost his market spot and moved down here.”

Meela tilted her head. “Not fully your fault, then.”

“Thank you!” Orion said, a spark of mischief in his eyes. “And can you blame him for having excellent taste?”

She looked up, finding the raven circling overhead. “Suzaar!”

At the sound of his name, the raven swooped down, landing neatly on Orion’s shoulder. Meela grinned, stepping closer. “Want some, you little troublemaker?”

“I don’t think you’ve realized what you just started.”

They passed the last row of stalls, leaving behind the liveliness of the market. Beyond the town’s edge, sunlight dappled through the branches, shifting across the stone path. The air grew cooler, carrying the scent of damp earth and pine, and the weight of magic hummed faintly beneath the ground.

Suzaar’s dark wings blended into the thickening canopy, his silhouette vanishing and reappearing with each gap in the leaves. Orion didn’t seem concerned, his stride sure as they followed the moss-softened trail.

“Where exactly are we going?” she finally asked, glancing around the woods,

“Back into the forest,” Orion responded, “near the spot where we dropped your dress. I’m really hoping no one’s made camp there. But don’t worry, I

can handle it."

"Hm."

"What?" Orion asked, glancing over. "You think I can't handle it? We got out last night, didn't we?"

"Yeah," she snorted, "because of Alice."

Orion narrowed his eyes. "I'll pretend I'm not insulted."

"It's not an insult. Just… an observation." She poked him with a sweet smile.

He nudged her shoulder in return. "I'm feeling less and less insulted, thanks."

Meela grinned. "I'm assuming Alice is working with you guys too?"

Orion's smile faded. "Not at all. I was actually waiting to ask you about it, when you were ready to talk."

She shrugged. "I guess some things I'm too interested in to ignore."

He studied her for a moment before nodding. "Understandable. Last I knew, Cora had Alice tight under her wing, and her bed."

Meela's head snapped toward him. "What?"

Orion leaned back, eyebrows lifting. "You didn't know?"

"I mean, there was a quick moment at Alden's." She shook her head, "But no. Honestly, I feel like there was a whole world happening around me that I just didn't know about."

Orion continued walking, his gaze on the trail in front of them. Meela saw the tension in his shoulders, the way his jaw tightened. "Yeah, I think that was on purpose."

Meela tried to temper her growing agitation. "Even right now, I feel like there is more than you're letting on." She stared ahead, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Meela, I promised you I'd tell you everything, but right now…" He grabbed her arm, forcing her to look at him, his eyes deep and serious. "And please trust me when I say this, it isn't the time."

Meela held his stare. "Fine, not like it matters."

"It does matter." he said, "There are no secrets between us. But right now, we need to have clear heads. We need to check on Alden, and do that safely we both need to be on guard."

Meela swallowed, forcing herself to not pull away. "I trust you."

Orion nodded, then let go. "Good." He smiled softly. "We are headed somewhere pretty heavily warded by yours truly." He dug into his satchel.

"And this baby will get us there."

Meela watched as he drew his staff from the bag strapped across his chest. It was taller than him, carved with runes she couldn't decipher, and for a heartbeat she thought she imagined it.

Orion laughed as she grabbed the satchel closer, sinking her arm inside. "How in the world," she mumbled, her hand disappearing into nothingness.

His body jerked with the motion. "Careful, little witch," he said, flashing a smug look. "It's enchanted. I need a lot of… things, and there are only so many pockets. Carrying the staff openly draws too much attention."

Meela tilted her head, still staring up at him.

"Don't look at me like that," Orion said, smiling.

"Give and take, right?" She crossed her arms.

"Yes…" He frowned slightly, "Where are you going with this?"

"You seem to take a lot."

He huffed, amusement flickering in his dark eyes. "My stream is a little larger than most people's, I'll admit. But not without reason or work. Small stuff like that?" He nodded toward the bag. "Barely a drop. The big things like teleporting, especially with passengers, drain me. A night's rest usually fixes it."

"Suzaar," he called. The raven softly landed on his shoulder. "We are close enough now. You ready?" He held out his hand.

Meela laced their scarred hands together. A jolt surged through her body, rippling under her skin like a current of lightning. Orion's grip tightened, his dark eyes locked on hers as the air between them hummed. She didn't let go, and neither did he.

Orion dropped the staff once, his eyes locked on hers. Twice.

And the world around them shifted.

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Chapter Nineteen



Meela didn’t know if she’d ever get used to the sensation of being pulled through space. Her senses screamed in protest as they landed in the forest, the air humming with residual magic. Orion still held on to her hand, and Meela hadn’t found the will to let go. He said they would land near the area they were last night, but nothing about this place seemed familiar. The forest here was ancient, alive in a way that made the trees seem to breathe, their branches shifting as if whispering their warnings of the newcomers.

Orion said nothing as his gaze swept the treeline, unblinking. A hand rested on the hilt of his dagger. The man she was getting used to had vanished. In his place stood a hardened mage. All tension and readiness, someone who looked like he wouldn’t hesitate to kill. She’d nearly forgotten about the danger. The coven could be anywhere.

They could already be watching.

Even knowing Orion’s strength, one man was no match for a coven. She swallowed, stepping closer, drawn to him like a tether in a storm. He extended his arm for her to walk ahead. “We’ll have to hike a little,” Orion said at last, his voice low. “I need to take you somewhere safe before I do this.”

“We aren’t meeting Alden?”

“No.” He tilted his head toward Suzaar, whose sharp eyes tracked every shift in the forest. “He is.”

Meela hesitated, glancing back. “How will—”

Orion silenced her with a light pressure to her hand, bringing their joined fingers to his lips. A single finger lifted in quiet warning. The touch was brief, instinctive, yet it warmed her. A flicker of comfort amid the anxiety.

They moved deeper into the forest, the energy here wild but not unkind. The stream they followed widened, its voice rising to a roar, growing louder with every step. Through the trees, she caught sight of an impossibly tall waterfall, towering above the canopy itself. Mist curled in the air, catching the sunlight in iridescent waves. Birds danced in the sky, their wings flashing bright against the endless blue.

“It’s gorgeous.”

“It is,” he whispered. “We’re almost there.”

She barely breathed, wrapped in the quiet pull of the falls. When she looked back, Orion’s gaze found hers in the misty light. He smiled softly, looking at her like he didn’t dare break the moment for her. Orion pulled her forward, his arm secure around her waist.

Two sharp knocks against the rock.

The air trembled as the roar of water swelled. She gasped, laughing as she reached out, her fingers pressing into the curtain of water. It was heavy and alive, the pressure pushing back against her palm. They slipped into the hollow tucked behind the cascade—stone at their backs, water veiling the world beyond. Suzaar dropped onto the slick rock beside them, ruffling his feathers. Orion finally released her and set down his belongings, leaning his staff against the damp wall.

“Remember how you accused me of spying on you through my *bird*?”

“I stand by my accusations.” She smiled, crossing her arms.

He chuckled. “And you understand Suzaar and I are familiars. We’re connected.”

“Obviously.”

“Well,” Orion muttered, lowering himself against the rock as Suzaar fluttered onto his lap. “It’s called bonded vision. Fair warning, when I’m seeing through him, I’ll be about as useful to you as these stones.”

“So I’m lookout.”

“That’s what the falls are for.” He motioned around them. “I’ve warded it. No one should find you.” His gaze held hers, stripped of humor. “Please don’t leave.”

She felt the weight of it, heavier than he meant to show. So she softened her voice, offering a smile. “I’ll be here.”

Still, he studied her as though trying to memorize the promise. Orion and Suzaar's gazes locked as the raven stepped onto his bent knee. Orion's breathing slowed, deeper, steadier—until, without warning, his body sagged. Meela lurched forward, catching him before his skull struck stone. His head fell against her thighs. Warmth seeped through the fabric of her dress, anchoring him there. Suzaar tilted his head, then gave a sharp double knock with his beak. The sound startled her into laughter.

That felt like the raven she had known at Alden's.

"Go," she whispered, steadying herself. "I'll be here."

As the raven vanished into the sky, Meela eased down beside Orion, his head still heavy in her lap. It was strange, holding him like this. Strange, but not wrong. The closeness felt… right, as though some part of her had been waiting for it. She wished she could see what secrets he was unraveling at this very moment. He stirred faintly, lips twitching. Meela studied his softened face, and with a hesitant hand, she pushed back the hood of his cloak, revealing the dark waves of his hair. In the filtered light, it looked softer, almost inviting. She let her fingers slip through, smoothing the strands from his forehead. Up close, she noticed scars she'd missed before. Faint lines along his cheekbones and jaw, easy to overlook beside the deeper cuts through his lips. He was rough, but not like Alden, whose grit was loud and unmissable. Orion's was quieter, hidden in sharp angles and a presence that told you to look away.

She had thought him handsome. But with his face unguarded, she realized how striking he truly was. A beauty meant to be discovered, not announced.

Her fingers absently combed through his thick hair as her mind wandered. She thought she had a decent understanding of the coven. But then Alice helped her, and Lenora betrayed her. Alice had fought for her, killed for her. But Alice and Cora were together.

Meela had never seen Cora with a man. She assumed that was just… Cora. The idea of her and Alice as lovers changed things. It made Alice all the more confusing.

Why had she helped Orion?

Meela heard Cora's scream for someone to get her, but when given the opportunity, she pushed her to go. The contradictions spiraled, questions stacking on top of questions.

Meela took a deep breath, her head resting against the rock.

Cora wasn’t her mother. Cora had stolen her memories. Cora wanted her dead. *But why?* She groaned. *This is pointless.* She was sitting here, doing nothing, while everyone else was risking their lives. Orion said she had magic, but she had tried and tried, and nothing.

The sound of the falls rumbled in her ears, filling the space between her thoughts. She listened for birds, for any signs of their return. She twirled the crescent moon at her neck, restless. She had no idea how long they’d be gone, and she realized she probably should’ve asked.

After what felt like forever, a loud call pulled her from her misery. She sat up, seeing them glide to her. Suzaar landed on her ankle, his eyes fixed on hers.

She exhaled, relief loosening her chest. “You came back,” she said softly.

“Always.” Suzaar spoke, the words uncanny, carrying Orion’s timbre as if half-spoken through him. The raven nudged at Orion’s hair until he stirred, stretching his neck as he blinked back into himself. Suzaar lingered close, feathers brushing him with strange tenderness, unwilling to leave his friend's side. Orion looked around, blinking a few times as if adjusting to his own eyes again. His gaze found her, and he offered her a soft smile. “Alden’s okay.”

Meela hadn’t realized how much tension she was carrying until it released all at once. “Good. And you?”

Orion’s eyes lingered on her a beat longer than expected. Then he nodded. “I’m okay.”

She exhaled, words tumbling out. “Good. And the cottage? Are they still there? Is Alden still… that tree thing?”

A tired sigh escaped him. “The cottage is fine. No trace of the coven. Cora’s long gone. She never stays in one place for long.” His glance softened when it fell on her. “Alden’s staying low in the forest until it’s safe.”

“I feel bad,” she admitted. “Does he need a place to stay? There must be room at Seph's.”

Orion gave her a puzzled look, almost amused. “I doubt he’d want that. He seems to be enjoying the stretch. It’s been a while, I imagine it feels good.”

Her stomach dropped. “So… he’s been like that before? Before me?”

“I mean, I’d hope so,” Orion said with a quiet chuckle. “He *is* a gnarling. Suppose it’d be rather odd if he’d never taken that form before.”

“A gnarling?” Meela echoed. Her thoughts reeled, bracing herself for the confirmation she feared. “Who made him like that?”

Orion let out a soft breath and shrugged. “The same who made us, I suppose. The gods. The old ones. The mother. Whatever name you prefer.”

“I…I didn’t do that? I didn’t curse him?”

“*Curse* him?” Orion let out a laugh before it quickly dropped and his demeanor shifted. “Meela, no. You didn’t curse him, you’re not cursed. I’m sorry… he mentioned that and I should’ve remembered.” He shook his head, scolding himself.

“He did?”

“Yeah, the day of your… wedding.” His expression turned sour, like it pained him to say the word. “We were together to settle plans and to give me an idea of what was happening… what they were doing to you.”

She wasn’t sure why she suddenly felt embarrassed. “And what did he say?”

“He was in awe of how strong you were for surviving them because he could barely stand a few days. He told me that you felt cursed, that you felt like you had cursed those men. That it was your fate to be alone.” He shook his head, his voice barely above a whisper. “You’re not cursed, Meela. You never were.”

Meela let out a breath, looking away. She wasn’t ready for this conversation.

“I know you don’t want to talk about it,” Orion said gently. “But at some point, you should. It’s going to eat you alive if you don’t.”

She knew he was right. It already had been. Meela was soon to drive herself mad with everything going on inside her mind. She let out a breath, shaking her head, trying to regain any composure.

“Heath and Alex. What happened then?” Her voice cracked.

Orion’s eyes turned unbearably sad.

A sharp inhale. “Was I the reason they died?”

“It’s not your fault, Meela.”

She pushed away from him, a scoff escaping her lips. “So I am cursed.”

“No, you’re not.” Orion leaned in, grabbing her hand, his voice urgent. “They forced your hand. I saw it, Meela. You didn’t want to, you screamed and fought, and Cora…” he swallowed. “She did exactly what I just did to Suzaar. She took control. She forced you.”

“No.” Meela shook her head, “No, I remember Heath’s accident… everyone in town was a mess over it.”

“You remember what Cora wanted you to remember.”

She shook her head harder, her mind scrambling for any footing. “No. She wasn’t even there. She opened her home back up to me… I remember her holding me while I cried. She was good to me.”

Orion’s brows furrowed. “She manipulates memories, Meela. She twisted them, reshaping the bad into something good.”

She yanked her hand away. “No.”

His voice softened, but not less intense. “I watched it happen, Meela.”

“Then why didn’t you do *something?*” It tore from her throat before she could stop it. “You just stood there and watched?”

He flinched, his face twisted in pain as he closed his eyes. “I tried,” he whispered. “Do you think I didn’t rage against every god I could name to get you back? You didn’t know me, Meela. I was nothing to you. Cora dug herself in so deep.” He blinked rapidly, his fist curling. “I wasn’t strong enough. And I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Meela.”

Meela watched as Orion's eyes became glassy. He swallowed hard. “She always knew. She'd erased me the second you might have seen me. If she thought I was close, she would take you and run.” His voice was raw. “I was so lost. I didn’t even understand why she wanted you so bad, but she fought me. She fought anyone who helped me.” A bitter breath escaped him. “Everyone we knew vanished, one by one, and the next time I saw you it was *years* later.”

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears. “Years?”

“Years.” He shook his head. “I thought you were dead. I was ready to die myself, and then one day, I was working at Seph’s and I finally felt you again.” He touched the scar across his palm. “Two years you were gone, then suddenly, I felt it. I don’t know what you did, but every time you touch your scar, I can feel you in mine.” His eyes burned into hers. “Do it.”

Orion closed his eyes. Her fingers trembled as she opened her palm. She stared at it, then him. Slowly, she ran her fingertips over the ridges. Orion shuddered at the contact. His eyes fluttered, and when he opened them, they bore into her.

“It was the only way I knew you were still with me.”

Meela swallowed, staring at her hands like they suddenly didn’t belong to her. “I took their lives.” Her voice was hollow. “With my own hands, and I

don’t even remember it.”

Being cursed and accidentally killing those men was something Meela could handle. It was passive. She never meant to do it. She didn’t want it to happen. But this—

“Against your will,” Orion reminded her. “She drugged you, forced your hand. I kept searching for you, and every time I got closer, she got more desperate. And then, finally. I heard her talking with the coven about searching for the third. Needing *him* for your death.”

Orion let out a slow breath. “She knew me. I was out of the question. Then, Alden offered himself up for her—to *this*.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. They have history, that’s all he’d say. He came into the tavern, after doing some work down the way, we got to talking. He brought it up, started asking about you, said he heard whispers that the coven was sniffing around. I told him what I heard, and he said he’d do it. He’d be whatever she needed him to be. He swore to me he’d keep you safe and help me get you out. In return, I swore to him that when the time came, I wouldn’t let you get in his way. She knew the risks coming this close to Crowmore. But she was getting sloppy, impatient.”

“Why would I get in Alden’s way?”

Orion looked away for a moment, taking a deep breath. “Because, Meela. You loved her. She was a mother to you. I saw the way you looked at her.” His voice softened. “No matter how poorly she treated you, you care for her. It’s why I didn’t come the second you got to Alden’s.” He looked down at Suzaar. “Obviously, I couldn’t help myself. But Alden told me to stay. Said he’d handle it.”

Meela’s stomach lurched. “I don’t remember seeing you other than in my dreams. I looked for you.”

Orion brushed a thumb over her palm, grounding her. “We saw each other a few times. But with Alex, it happened too quickly. By the time I figured out where you were, you were gone and then I couldn’t find you again.”

“I was at Cora’s.” She shrugged, like that would explain everything. As if that erased the truth unraveling before her.

“You weren’t, Meela. I looked everywhere. I paid witches, hired women to infiltrate her circle. But no one ever saw you. So I followed Cora. Every day for over a year, I watched her every move. Alden and I planned, and eventually, I got him into a position where he could meet her.”

He paused. “Then it happened fast. She met Alden, and within days, she was off to Solmaris. I almost ignored it, but Alice and the older one were with her. They went into some kind of vault. They took a cauldron in,” Orion said, his eyes distant. “An hour later, they came out with you.”

His gaze returned to hers.

“You were in a coffin, Meela. I watched them dress you, shove you into her carriage, and take you straight to Alden’s.”

A coldness washed over Meela. A coffin. Her breath caught in her throat, her body trembling as she stared at Orion. She couldn’t make sense of it, she couldn’t imagine seeing herself like that.

“I realized the reason I didn’t feel you, couldn’t find you for years, was because she put you to sleep. She wiped you clean, woke you up with fresh new memories, and I imagine let you fill in the rest. I followed you with Suzaar. Cora had a three-day journey and she made one stop. With an hour left in the journey, she retrieved you from the back and put you in the chair across from her. And after all those years, I finally saw you again.” Orion's eyes were full of unshed tears. “And then you woke up, and you looked out of the window right at me. And I couldn’t stop myself, I screamed. I knew she would recognize Suzaar. I knew it was stupid, I was exposing myself. But I didn’t care. For the first time in years, you were right there.”

Meela swallowed the lump in her throat, pressing her palm to his cheek. Orion leaned into the touch. “She wasn’t going to kill Alden? I was.”

Orion nodded grimly. “Not willingly.”

“And he knew that?”

He shook his head.

Silence stretched between them. Orion held her hand, his eyes on hers, watching for any cracks.

“I hoped that by being somewhere familiar, it would trigger something,” Orion admitted. “But Alden said you didn’t know him. So I gave you your grandmother's amulet, and still nothing.” His lips pressed into a tight line. “At that point, I was desperate. But you talked to *me*. I got to hear your voice again. You told me about your day and…” he shook his head. “I couldn’t stop visiting. I never stopped loving you, Meela. But I think I forced myself to forget how much I missed you. Everything… your rambling, your humor, you braiding your hair while you’re lost in thought. I just missed being around you.”

Meela's breath shuddered out of her, and she didn’t bother to hide the tears falling down her face.

“I decided then and there.” Orion’s voice became steadier. “I was going to take you. Run. Even if you hated me, even if you fought. I didn’t care.”

“Orion.” It was the only thing she could manage to get out. It was too much, too much time lost. Too many truths. Too much weight pressing down on her chest, making it impossible to breathe.

“I know,” he said. “I know this is a lot.”

She nodded slowly, still trying to piece everything together.

“I know you’ll need time to process this. If you want me to leave, I’ll take you somewhere private. Somewhere safe.”

“No.” The words left her before she could even think. She’d been alone so long, she didn’t want that now. “Please, don’t leave me.”

“Never.”

She exhaled, pressing her palms against her knees. “I think… I just… I just want to sit here for a while.”

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Chapter Twenty



They sat in heavy silence. Orion answered all the questions she could bring herself to ask, but the larger ones remained unanswered.

Why? Why her? Why did this happen? Why then? Why?

And why now, after all this time, did Cora want her dead?

Orion sighed, running a hand down his face. “I wish I had answers. I’ve searched for years. The witches—they know what I'm after, the second I get near, they run. They’re terrified of her, of what she’s willing to do. They want nothing to do with it.”

Meela frowned. “I never told you anything? I was convinced I could stop her… there was nothing?”

“You told me very little,” he said. “You hated talking about it. The more I pressed, the more you shut down. Eventually, you locked me out completely when it came to your past.” He shook his head. “The only thing you offered was that Cora was the death of your coven and your mother.”

The air in her lungs turned to stone.

“You were young,” Orion continued. “You said you knew she was coming, so you and your mother would run, go into hiding. But when she found you, your mother hid you away, and Cora killed her in revenge. You ran until you ended up here.”

“You own a flower stand. That’s where we met.” He smiled. “We had a few years together while I was still at the academy, about a year after I finished, Cora found you.” He took a deep breath. “She tore through the town, killing anyone who stood in her way. No one knew what was

happening. One day, you looked at me and said you would find a way to fix this and find your way back to me."

The words were a promise to him. One she made long ago, one she had been made to forget.

"How long was I with her?"

"Five years and four months."

Five years.

He held her hands, rubbing small calming circles across them. No one words were spoken. There was nothing left to say. Meela lost track of how long they sat there. Nothing could be heard but the waterfall around them, the small chattering of birds. She wrapped her arms around herself, staring at the blanket of water in front of her. It was too much, the weight of it all. And she didn't know what to do with any of it. She wanted to drift away.

The sun was beginning to set. She felt cold, but didn't want to move. Orion wrapped his arms around her, warming her, but still, she couldn't bring herself to speak, or even look at him.

She was tired. Tired of this existence. Of her life.

"No more," Orion declared, standing abruptly. "I know you need to process, and if you could, you'd sit here all night. But we're reaching dangerous territory. The place where you just go completely numb."

She hated that he was right, hated that he could see her so clearly. She wanted to go numb, she wanted to let it ease inside of her and take all the pain away.

"I mean it, Meela. Up. If we sit in this misery any longer, I might cry, and I'd hate to ruin my mysterious image."

A small huff of laughter escaped her. "I think it's already ruined."

Orion's lips moved into a smile as he pulled her up, not just to her feet, but right to him. He took both her hands and wrapped them around himself, stepping closer and enveloping her in his arms. His chin rested atop her head, and his warmth made her press in closer.

"I want all my memories back, Orion," she admitted, her voice muffled against his chest.

"Tomorrow." He took a deep breath, his hand gently rubbing her back. "I know someone who can help us. With you here, it'll be easier."

She tilted her head up, searching his face. "Thank you."

He nodded as he cupped the back of her head. Pressing a soft kiss to her forehead, his lips lingering. Her heart fluttered, and she clung to him,

refusing to let him pull away. Here, surrounded by the soothing rush of the falls, it was easier—easier to not deny herself the warmth, the safety, and the undeniable pull she felt towards him. It felt like a piece of her was coming back into place. She wanted him close, and he made it easy to admit that to herself.

As he pulled back just enough to look at her, his eyes softened. His hand tightened on the back of her head, and she reacted instinctively, pulsing her fingers in return. A silent plea asking for something she was too afraid to put into words.

A small smile warmed his face, his gaze dropped to her lips. He kissed her forehead again, trailing down gently. His lips brushed softly against her cheek, and then the other side. He pulled back slightly before kissing her lips.

A gentle question at first. A soft exploration of the tension that had been building between them. When Meela melted into him, Orion deepened the kiss. His body stepped in, flush against hers, his hands cupped her face, drawing her in even more.

Her heart raced, her pulse quickened. Her body eagerly responded, her hands moving up his arms, feeling the solid muscle beneath her fingertips. Orion kissed her with slow passion, his scarred lips tracing hers, his tongue grazing her bottom lip before slipping inside. Meela’s breath became quicker with every passing second. She could feel his heart beating against hers, and for a moment, it felt like the world melted away, leaving only them lost in one another.

He pulled back slightly, just enough to rest his forehead on hers. Both breathing heavily, lips swollen from their kiss. Orion’s hands remained at the back of her neck, his thumb stroking her skin as if he didn’t want to pull away yet either.

“I’m terrified I'm going to wake up and realize this was another dream.”

He kissed her forehead once more. His lips lingered there for a long moment. “This is real, Meela.”

Real. The word pierced through her, both blessing and curse. Because real things could be lost.

She pulled him back to her lips, and the kiss that had been soft turned molten. It was a tangle of need, devotion, and all the words they hadn’t said. Orion’s strength, the rough edges of his scars, the way he held her like she was the only thing in the world. She felt wanted in a way that rooted her to

him completely. She belonged here. Gods, she knew she did. And yet a part of her whispered that belonging this fierce could never last.

When the kiss broke, her chest heaved, her pulse racing, and yet she couldn't stop the smile tugging at her lips. She felt lit from within.

Orion smiled back, a low laugh slipping out as he caught her hand. "Thank you."

"For the kiss?"

"For finding your way back to me."

Her heart softened. "Thank you for leading me."

His smile returned, the one that made her melt and want to kiss him all over again. In that moment, she knew she'd do anything to keep him looking at her like that.

"I think I need wine," she blurted, laughter bubbling up. "Gallons of it."

Orion arched a brow. "I thought you wanted your memories back. Now you want them gone?"

"Right now? Absolutely."

His laugh rumbled low and warm. "Lucky for you, I know just the place."

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Chapter Twenty-One



Seph's was warm and lively, a welcome contrast to the cool night air outside. The scent of spiced ale clung in the air, mingling with the smoky haze of the fire in the hearth. Seph had poured way too many drinks for Meela to keep track, but the warmth in her veins and lightness in her head told her was the perfect amount. All around them, voices rose in drunken joy, booming laughter, clicking mugs and the occasional off-key burst of song. Meela and Orion sat in the corner, half-hidden in the dim glow of lanternlight, watching the night unravel before them.

Beside her, Orion was deep in conversation with a burly redheaded man who looked like he had either lived a hundred lives or simply knew how to spin a good story. Judging by Orion’s delighted expression, he didn’t care which.

“So, there I was,” the man was saying, slamming his mug on the table for emphasis, a bit of ale sloshing over the side. “Halfway through climbing the mountain, barely hangin’ onto a crumbling ledge with frostbite fingers, when outta nowhere, a massive beast drops from the sky. Wings wider than this room. Eyes like molten gold.” He leaned in, his own eyes large. “A dragon.”

“A *dragon*?” Orion leaned forward, his brown eyes gleaming with amusement. “And what did you do?”

The man smiled. “First thing I did? Screamed like a newborn babe. Then I threw my boot at it. Which, as it turns out, just pisses ‘em off.”

Orion threw his head back with laughter. The man continued. “Dragon rears back, roars in my face. Breath reeking of burnin’ fish and lets out a jet of fire that nearly singed my beard off, used to be down here if you could believe it.” He leaned back, motioning to his stomach.

Meela snorted into her drink, trying not to spill her wine all over her.

“I roll off the ledge—roll, mind you, not fall—land on my back in a patch of frozen moss, and that’s when I see it circlin’ again. I knew I had one chance. I waited ‘til it got low, and I jumped on it.”

“You jumped on a dragon?!” Meela yelled, looking over at a wide-eyed Orion, who was eating this tale right up.

“Aye. Right off the ridge like a lunatic. Somehow, don’t ask me how, I landed on its neck. Thing thrashes, tryin’ to shake me off. I’m hangin’ on with one hand, whippin’ it with a rope I found on a tree branch, like that was gonna do *anything*. But I had momentum, and fear. A whole lotta fear.”

Orion was leaning into Meela, laughing, his head nearing the table as his shoulders shook.

“It starts divin’. Droppin’ like a stone toward this frozen lake. I start bangin’ on its scales with my flask, ’cause my sword’s gone at this point, rope’s long gone.” He shook his head. “I swear, the beast looks back at me mid-dive like it cannot believe what I’m doin’.”

“The flask worked?” Orion asked.

“Of course not, Orion! It bounced off and nearly hit me in the face. I thought that was it, I was a goner. My last thought was I should’ve kissed that barmaid back in Hollowmere. And then I did the only thing left, the only thing *any* self-respecting hunter might do. I *bit* the bastard.”

“You bit it?” Meela leaned in.

Orion burst into laughter, nearly falling out of his chair.

“Aye! Right on the wing! Damn thing was so surprised, it let go of me, howlin’ like a kettle having a nervous fit, and I slid down the cliff, right into a pile of snow.” He stood, moving in a circle. “Walked away without a scratch.”

From the back of the tavern, someone bellowed, “That’s not how it happened, Eamon!” He turned toward the voice and shouted back, “Shut it, Alaric! You were asleep the whole time, what do you know?”

Before Orion could push further into his story, a familiar voice chimed in. “Well, isn’t this cozy?” Liri looked around the table, a fistful of more

drinks. “Leave you two alone all day, and now you’re drunk, talkin’ to trouble.” She winked at Eamon, who raised his mug in greeting.

“I’ll have another, Liri,” Eamon shouted. “I was just about to tell them __”

“Oh, I bet you were, Eamon.” Liri cut him off. “Somethin’ grand, I’m sure.”

“We’re not even drunk, Lir,” Orion protested, but the rosy cheeks and slightly slurred words betrayed him.

Meela giggled, her arms outstretched. “We’re relaxing, letting things *be*.”

“Relaxing?” Liri repeated. “Is that what you’re callin’ it? 'Cause where I’m standin’ it looks like Orion here was about to sign up for a dragon hunt.”

“Man makes an excellent case!” Orion's arms went out to Eamon, who turned again in a circle.

“Hopeless. All of you.” Liri shook her head before moving toward the next table where a group of rowdy men were clamoring for her attention.

The music shifted, the fiddles picked up speed and the drums pounded louder and in an instant, the entire tavern came alive with rhythm. Cheers erupted as people clapped to the beat, boots stomping against the wooden floorboards. Mugs were lifted high, voices rose in an inharmonious song. Meela felt the shift of energy, the pulse of it thrumming in her bones, and when she looked over at Orion, his face was bright with a smile, his eyes already watching her.

“Oh, no,” She said, shaking her head.

“Yes.” He laughed, standing and offering his hand.

“I’m a terrible dancer!” she protested, sinking into her chair.

“How would you even know?”

“Sounds like she's scared,” Eamon called out, grinning over his mug.

Meela narrowed her eyes. “I hate you both.”

But her body was light, her head even lighter, and the infectious energy in the room was impossible to resist. Against her better judgment, she grabbed his hand. Before she could fully process the moment, he twirled her into the open space, laughter spilling from her lips as she nearly lost her balance.

Orion caught her, his grip steady, his brown eyes gleaming. “You’re doing great, little witch.”

“Liar.”

She let him lead, let the music carry them. Around them, other dancers spun and swayed, the room full of clapping hands and laughter. The instruments wailed, voices roared along to the melody, and for the first time, in a very long time.

Meela felt alive.

She was breathless, dancing with Orion. Nothing else existed. The tavern, the music, it all blurred into the background, into nothingness.

It was only his eyes, his smile, and laughter.

Her chest ached from laughing too much, her hair damp at her temples. By the time she realized how long they'd been dancing, the room seemed to have doubled in size, tables pushed back to make space for the crush of bodies. As the night stretched on, more patrons crowded in, and the tavern turned outright chaotic. Drinks were poured faster, the music grew louder, and her body burned as she and Orion danced through song after song.

Orion wrapped an arm securely around her as they made their way back to the table.

"You're a terrible dancer," he murmured in her ear, his breath warm against her skin, sending a shiver down her spine.

"I'm an incredible dancer," she countered, leaning her head against his shoulder. "You're a terrible dancing partner, you nearly dropped me twice."

"Once," he said, his hand squeezing her waist as he helped her to her seat. "The second time was your fault."

"My fault?" She gasped, holding a hand to her chest.

"You heard what I said." He laughed. "You can't throw yourself at me, and expect me to catch you every time, love."

"Oh, I think I absolutely can," she shot back, her chin lifted.

His fingers caught her chin as he leaned in close, his lips grazing hers. "Are you testing me now?"

"Your patience, maybe." Her hand rested on his forearm, lightly moving up and down. Meela wasn't sure why she wanted to tease him, but she liked how warm his skin was and how his eyes darkened as she traced idle patterns.

He leaned back, letting her continue as he took a sip of drink. "Careful, Meela. I bite."

She smiled, locking eyes with him as she took a sip of her own. "Promises, promises."

Meela shuddered out a breath when Orion's thumb began tracing circles on her hip. He hadn't given her an inch of space since getting back to their table, his thigh firmly against hers. She tilted her head to his. A slow, lazy smirk curled at the corner of his lips, like he knew exactly what he was doing to her.

"You're staring," he whispered.

"So are you."

His grip on her hip tightened just enough to pull a small, involuntary sound from her throat. His eyes turned molten, the expression of a man who had just made a thrilling discovery.

"I was wondering what I'd have to do to make you blush." His fingers skimmed under the loose hem of her sleeve, the lightest graze of calloused skin on hers.

Heat bloomed across her skin, and she hid it by lifting her mug again, lips curving against the rim. "You're awfully full of yourself."

Orion leaned closer, sliding her hair over her shoulder. His lips brushed her neck, then hovered at her ear.

"Not full of myself," he breathed, teeth grazing her skin. "I just know how to make you beg. I know every reaction, every subtle shift, every shiver you try to hide. I know your nipples are hard right now, begging for my mouth. And if I opened those soft, perfect thighs…" his teeth grazed her ear, "I'd find you soaking for me."

She was, damn him.

Before Meela could find words that weren't a desperate plea for him to take her upstairs and prove just how well he knew her body, Liri plopped into the chair across from them.

"Alright, you two. What's goin' on over here?" She drawled, eyes bouncing between them.

"Nothing," Meela said too fast.

"Nothing," Orion echoed, though his smug smile said everything, and the slow path his fingers traced along Meela's thigh said even more.

Liri snorted. "Sure. And I'm the queen of Ronan." She stole a sip from Orion's drink, then grinned. "Just try not to set the place on fire with all that heat, yeah?"

"Can't make that promise, Liri," Orion mused, kissing Meela's shoulder, his gaze never leaving hers.

The night carried on, blurring into a haze of laughter and stolen touches. Meela wasn't sure if it was the drinks, the dancing, or the way Orion looked at her that made the heat pool low in her belly. But when men across the tavern called his name, waving him over as he groaned in protest, she realized she didn't want him to leave.

"Stay."

It wasn't a request, which made her pulse quicken. "Bossy."

"Don't pretend you don't crave it," he whispered as he stood, his fingers sliding through her hair before giving a gentle tug.

The moment Orion walked away, the spell broke. She sighed, stretching her arms above her head. The room swayed, her body flushed and warm. Orion wasn't even halfway across the room before someone slid into his seat with ease.

"You're much too beautiful to be left alone." A deep voice purred. She turned to find a man with long brown locks and green eyes watching her. His confidence hanging off him like a well-worn coat.

"Alone? Hardly. Look at all my friends." She gestured to the bustling tavern around them.

"Ah, but I imagine no friends like me." His eyes twinkled with intention.

Meela snorted. "You imagine wrong."

The man licked his lips. "Sharp tongue. I don't think I've seen you here before?"

She found him entertaining, in a harmless sort of way. Before she could think of a witty retort to politely dismiss him, a shadow fell over the table.

"Up." Orion's voice was low, possessive.

The man looked up, smiling like he didn't sense the danger. "Relax, friend. Just a friendly chat."

"That's funny, *friend*," Orion said, his jaw flexing. "I doubt she invited you in for a chat."

Meela's breath caught as Orion loomed over her chair. She tilted her head back, her pulse fluttering at the hard line of his jaw, the heat in his gaze daring the man to push his luck.

A beat passed before the man raised his hands in surrender. "Alright, alright. No need to start anything."

It was wrong, but she couldn't stop the thrill curling low in her stomach.

"Jealous?" she teased.

He scoffed as he sat. "Of that? No."

“Mm. Right. That’s why you looked two seconds away from breaking his nose.”

Orion leaned down, his face so close she could feel the heat of his breath. “I don’t like people touching what’s mine.”

He was jealous. And Gods, that felt good. The words sank into her like a brand. She should’ve bristled, should’ve reminded him she wasn’t anyone’s. But instead her pulse jumped, hot and insistent, every beat thudding against the closeness of his body. A thrill curled low, spreading through her like wildfire. Reckless. Claiming. And she wanted to bask in it.

“Come upstairs with me.” She rose, her fingers sliding around his wrist, savoring the steady thrum of his pulse beneath her touch.

The moment they reached the dimly lit hall, his hands were on her. She gasped as her back met the wall, his body pressing close, the fire between them flaring into something she could no longer contain.

His mouth found hers and Meela gave in, pulling him closer with her fingers buried in his hair. He groaned against her lips, his grip tightening on her hip as he moved against her, each shift sending sparks racing through her.

His hand slid higher, wrapping lightly around her throat to tip her chin and deepen the kiss. A soft sound broke from her, her nails digging into the muscles of his back, clinging to him as if he were the only solid thing left in the world.

His lips trailed along her jaw, down the line of her throat. His breath came rough and uneven, his voice strained with the effort it took to say, “Tell me to stop.”

She tugged him closer, kissing him harder, rolling her hips against him. Pouring every unspoken thought, every unshaped feeling into him.

Orion swept her off the floor, and Meela gasped, her laugh breaking into a breathless sound as her legs locked around his waist. Her lips found his neck, teasing and tasting. Her teeth dragged along the shell of his ear before sinking into the soft spot just beneath it. He groaned, his hands clutching the curve of her body, dragging her tighter against him.

He carried her down the hall in long strides, one hand gripping her firmly, the other sliding up to the back of her neck. He yanked her in for a deep, hungry kiss, tongue tangling with hers, his teeth catching her bottom lip in a sharp bite that made her moan into his mouth.

The door creaked as he shoved it open, kicking it shut behind them without breaking the kiss. Suzaar shrieked from his perch, wings beating the air in excitement. Meela laughed against Orion's mouth, her head falling to his shoulder as he kicked open the adjoining door.

"Everyone's so damn nosy," he growled against her throat before catching the skin between his teeth.

"He's just—" Her words broke into a soft gasp as he nipped her again. "Enthusiastic… likes to be involved."

A rough chuckle rumbled from him as he lowered her onto the mattress, his body pressing her down, heat and weight pinning her in place. "He can keep out of this one."

His hands slowly roamed under her dress, mapping her curves. Meela felt worshipped, every touch sending sparks across her skin. He began to kiss her, moving lower, his hair trailing and sending shivers up her body from the soft contact. Gods, she loved this, loved him like this.

Her hands tugged at every article of clothing, desperate for the warmth of his body. He moaned, pressing closer. She felt the undeniable evidence of his desire against her thigh. She arched into him, moaning his name, ready to chase this to its end.

Until the damned raven screeched.

Meela yelped, Orion flinched, and they both burst into laughter as the bird flew into the room, flapping its wings, offended by the turn of events.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Orion yelled, his forehead resting on her stomach as she continued to dissolve into breathless laughter beneath him.

Meela caught her breath, pulling his hair so he would look at her. She traced her fingers along his jaw, still drunk on the moment, on him. "Don't stop."

Orion's pupils were dilated, his eyes hungry. He moved closer, brushing his thumb along her bottom lip before he shook his head.

"I want this." He swallowed. "But not here, not when you're full of wine."

She pouted, wiggling her body. "I'm fine."

He smiled, kissing her stomach. "I want you under me when you know you want me, when you're in our bed, and you can remember every second of it."

She sighed dramatically. "That's a compelling argument."

“Full of those.” He kissed up her arms, then her throat, moving to her cheeks, forehead, trailing back down to her lips. Then he sat back on his knees, his hand sliding to grasp her calf.

Meela pushed herself up against the headboard. "At least don’t make me sleep alone tonight.”

He crawled over her, pulling off his shirt. The firelight carved his chest into shadows and hard planes, all strength and temptation. He settled beside her at last, his lips brushing her shoulder, his heat sinking into her skin.

“Your turn.”

Meela's nerves suddenly prickled at her skin. She had been bare before him countless times in her dreams, but undressing under his gaze was intimate in a way she couldn’t remember experiencing.

“Oh, don’t be shy now.” Orion teased. “Up.”

She slid from the bed, steadying herself. If she were to do this, she would do it right. Slowly, deliberately, she locked eyes with him while she untied her dress, letting it loosen inch by inch before slipping it off one shoulder, then the next. The fabric pooling at her feet.

Orion’s gaze raked over her. His lips parted, his chest rose too fast. His hand moved, as he gripped himself through his pants, stroking along the hard line of his length.

“*Fuck*.”

A breath, a curse, a prayer.

A rush of confidence filled her as she undid her hair, letting the silver waves tumble over her bare skin. She stood there, drinking in the way he looked at her.

She didn’t climb into bed right away. Instead, she crossed the room to him. Her fingers skimmed along his jaw, down his throat, tracing the strong lines of his chest before curling into the waistband of his pants. He shuddered under her touch, his head tipping back as though he might break apart from that alone.

“Meela,” he rasped, her name like gravel. “I am barely hanging on to my own restraint right now.”

“Mm.” She savored the way his breath faltered with every inch she closed. When she straddled his lap, his own need pressed against her bare core. Heat seared into her, a shiver running through her spine. She rolled her hips slowly, teasing him. The friction became maddening, and his hand clamped on her thigh with a desperate groan. The ache between her legs

deepened. She circled her hips again, watching his jaw tighten, his eyes darken until they burned.

“Goodnight, Orion,” she whispered against his lips. Then, with a sly smile, she slipped from his lap and lay down beside him.

“You’re a menace.” Orion breathed, dragging her close anyway, his arms locking around her as if to keep her from slipping away again.

Meela only laughed softly, pleased at how easily she could undo him. She closed her eyes, a smile lingering as the firelight dimmed to embers.

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Chapter Twenty-Two



She woke to the weight of Orion tangled around her, his arm draped warm and heavy across her stomach. The sun peeked through her window, and she could hear chatter outside as she wondered how early it actually was. The events of the night before lingered in her mind.

Meela gazed around the room and found Suzaar perched on the wooden headboard, looking down at her, his dark eyes watching as he tilted his head.

"Morning," he said.

"Good morning," she whispered, stretching out her arm. The raven hopped onto her forearm, his talons pressing against her skin as she brought him to the bed, where he immediately abandoned her for Orion, plucking at his hair like he was preening his feathers.

"Orion," Suzaar mimicked, sounding almost exactly like her voice.

Orion stirred, cracking one eye open before groaning and sinking further into her shoulder. "Good gods, I'm getting old." He lifted his head to look at her, a question in his eyes, but he just dropped his head back to the pillow without voicing it.

No, there are no regrets about last night.

Instead, he let out a sigh, tugging her closer as Suzaar hopped along the bed, repeating his name. "I need water. Food and possibly a new body."

Meela propped herself up on one elbow. "I can get you all three if you wake up."

He rolled over, looking at her. “Here I thought you’d be the one hungover this morning, not me.”

She shrugged. “I’ve felt worse.”

This morning's ache was eerily similar to the headaches she’d lived with for as long as she could remember. She’d grown so used to the pain that this was nothing in comparison.

“I’ll go get us something.” Ruffling his already messy hair, she started to push out of bed, getting nowhere before Orion's arm came around her waist, yanking her back down. “Not yet.”

Her back pressed against his chest, his arm tight around her. His body was warm and dangerously comfortable. She wiggled her hips, unable to resist teasing him more.

“Why do you enjoy torturing me?” he mumbled into her hair.

She slipped her finger into his palm, tracing the familiar scar along his skin. “Did you feel that yesterday? When we held hands?”

He took a deep breath. “I feel something whenever you touch me.”

Meela snorted. “No, this was different. Like this huge ripple of energy surged through me.”

Orion was silent for a moment before propping himself to lean over her. “Do it again.”

Meela placed her scarred hand in his, aligning their palms. The moment their skin touched, a surge of energy rushed through her veins like lightning. The room blurred at the edges, colors bleeding. And for a moment, she swore she saw Orion.

“Tell me you felt that,” she whispered.

He shook his head, brows knitting. “Nothing. What did you feel?”

“The same… but I saw you. It was like you were standing right in front of me, only younger.”

He peered over her shoulder, trying to get a glimpse at what she had done. “Don’t let go this time.”

She grabbed his hand again. The buzz felt like thousands of wings beating beneath her flesh. Light split her vision, pulling her apart thread by thread. When the light dimmed, Meela stood in a sun-drenched market.

Golden light spilled across the cobblestones, catching the fluttering banners overhead. The air smelled like fresh bread and crushed herbs. Laughter drifted from stall to stall, the hum of morning trade. She wanted to

move, to speak, but she was nothing more than a soul tucked behind her own eyes. She watched herself adjusting flowers, creating small bouquets.

"It's going to be so busy today," she heard her own voice say, holding a softness she barely recognized.

A flicker of pink darted across her vision, wings shimmering in the light. The tiny pixie hovered beside her, her hair a cascade of rose-gold curls, translucent wings fluttering like glass petals. She plucked a few dry leaves from a bouquet, tutting under her breath. Meri turned, her eyes wide.

"He's back, Lala!"

Meela felt her body freeze. Her shoulders squared, her anticipation building. "Is he coming over?"

The pixie squealed. "Yes. Oh goddess, he's walking right this way."

"Act natural, Meri."

Meri turned quickly, giving Meela a wide side-eyed glance as a deep voice sank into her bones.

"Are you open?"

The world narrowed to that voice. Meela felt her stomach flip. Her heart raced. She slowly turned, and Orion stood before her. He wore a deep blue robe, its edges trimmed in gold. The unmistakable uniform of Rimehold. The morning light lit his brown eyes from within. The sun cast a glow across his face, making him look ethereal.

She didn't answer. She felt her own mind stuttering for words as she stared.

"We're open!" Meri piped up.

Orion smiled, shifting his weight. He looked down at his boots, giving her the tiniest space to breathe. "No rush," he said. "Take your time, I know I'm a little early."

Take her time? Impossible. Her heart was sprinting laps. Her fingers dug into the bouquet like a lifeline. "Same as yesterday?" she blurted. "Lavender?"

He nodded. "Please."

"Oh. Good. Those are my favorite." *Why did I say that? He didn't ask.*

"Are they?" His voice had gone low, curious.

"Yes. Well. Yes." Her mouth was moving faster than her brain. "Most people dry them, but I never… I mean, I get why. Tea and tinctures and stuff. And pouches. For wardrobes. You have to use a pouch or it gets everywhere. Lavender all over your clothes. Not that that's bad. Smells

nice. Might itch. I don't know. I wouldn't mind. Have you had lavender tea? With lemon? You should. It's great." *Please stop talking. You sound ridiculous.*

Her hands moved on their own, fumbling through the sprigs. She risked a glance. His smirk was there, but it was the heat in his eyes that rattled her—an unyielding focus, like he was memorizing the shape and sound of her.

Her chest went tight. She snapped her eyes down. "If you want it to last, drying is better. But, yeah…" She thrust the bundle toward him before she could ramble herself into another grave. "Nothing like fresh lavender," she added, then winced. *Why? Why did I say that?*

A slow smile broke across his face, his teeth grazing his bottom lip, and her entire body forgot how to function. "Nothing like fresh lavender," he repeated softly. "Thank you…"

"Lala… um, Meela."

"Thank you, Meela." He dipped his head. "I'm Orion."

She took his outstretched hand, and neither of them seemed in a hurry to let go.

"This is Meri." Meela nodded toward the pink pixie, who wasn't bothering to hide her grin or her delight at Meela's slow descent into madness.

Orion's mouth curved into a crooked smile. "Meri, my apologies. I seem to have no manners."

Meri fluttered to eye level, giving him an exaggerated curtsy before landing on Meela's shoulder with a knowing, wide-eyed look.

"You study at Rimehold?" Meela asked.

"I do." He ran his hand through his short dark hair. "I've been working closely with Phaio."

"Oh, wow. A legend."

Orion nodded. "He is. It's been… incredible. I'm lucky. Do you— ?"

"Witch." Meela flicked her wrist. The lavender in his hand dried, then quivered back to life, its stems twisting as buds pulsed in and out of bloom.

Orion's gaze snapped to hers, the lavender forgotten in his palm. "You're incredible, Meela," he whispered, reverent. "I've read of your coven. The Wyrdwood witches whose magic responds like it's alive. I thought you were all gone, the magic bled from the world."

Bile rose sharp in her throat, but she forced it down and gave a small shrug, as if the truth weren't clawing at her.

“Protectors of the earth,” Orion murmured. “It’s a gift. Truly.”

The market vanished like smoke as his voice faded out. The scent of flowers, the laughter, the buzz of Meri’s wings—gone.

She blinked, looking around the room, Orion’s hand still firm in hers. His chest rose and fell like he had been holding his breath. He looked at their joined hands, then back to her.

“You saw that?” she asked.

He nodded fast.

“Real? That happened, right?”

“Real.” He cleared his throat. “Second time we met.” A breathless, bewildered laugh escaped him. He lifted his hand, looking at his palm before pressing his lips to it. He looked back at her, his eyes alive with wonder.

“Let’s do it again.”

Orion reached for her hand like he’d been waiting a lifetime, and together, they let the past take them once more.

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Chapter Twenty-Three



They had spent their day with hands clasped, fragments of their life together returning in waves. Only pausing for food and to entertain a restless Suzaar. Meela's room was slightly cramped with two bodies and a large raven, but cozy. The window overlooked the bustling main road. And yet, despite the warmth of Orion beside her, she couldn't ignore the gnawing feeling in her chest.

She had hoped for more.

The memories blooming were rich with love and laughter but they were incomplete. She wanted more than just the feel of a life shared with Orion. She wanted all of it back. She wanted to see her mother, her coven. Of Meri, the little pixie, had been more than a friend. Meela felt that with certainty. Meri was family. A sister, a part of her heart she hadn't known was missing until she was forced to feel the hollowness of her absence.

As the afternoon wore on, disappointment settled deeper inside her. She didn't need to speak it aloud for Orion to take notice. He didn't press, but she saw the question in his eyes before she looked away. The memories she had recovered painted a life she'd once only dreamed of.

The days after their second meeting were wild and soft. Walks through untouched woods, the way she had shown him the true depths of the Wyrdwood power. Not only flowers, or vines, but the trees bending to her presence. The forest itself recognizing her. The memory alone left her with a hunger, an itch beneath her skin. But none of them answered her greatest question of all.

Why had Cora stolen this beautiful life from her? Why had she erased Orion. Meri. The life she had built. Her magic had no benefit to Cora. Not in any way Meela could make sense of. If this was about power or control, then why her?

Orion had been honest. He asked often about her past, trying to piece together the life Meela had lived before him. And she had felt her own frustrations when he did. It wasn't his fault. He wanted to understand the woman he had fallen in love with.

She recalled their nights together, the days spent exploring towns, the times he disappeared for weeks to train at the academy. His books had always been a constant companion, his hunger for knowledge insatiable. Meela had loved it, had loved him.

She had helped where she could, teasing him for how he bit his lips in concentration, but proud all the same. She and Meri had often visited him at Rimehold, meeting his friends, his professors. She had met his family, and it hurt to remember how much time was gone. How much she had missed.

Meela let out a slow breath, staring at her hands, flexing her fingers like she could summon her power back through sheer will alone. The thought of Cora going this far, just for control, had made her stomach sour. It had to have meant Meela was important to her.

But the memories of Cora, the love Meela had believed she felt, the moments from her childhood she still clung to, revealed themselves as something else entirely. Layer upon layer of manipulation, stacked so carefully she didn't know where one ended and the next began. She knew the coven, she knew Cora. And soon, Orion's wards wouldn't be enough to keep her hidden. The sanctuary of Crowmore, of this tavern, was temporary. Meela had to leave.

And judging by the tension in Orion's shoulders as he gazed out the window, he had known she reached that conclusion.

"How are you feeling?" Orion asked, settling back into the chair. His legs stretched out before him, giving her space to process.

"I'm okay," Meela said softly. She sat cross-legged on the bed, tossing a rock Suzaar had taken a liking to.

"Liar."

She took a deep breath. "I have no idea how I'm feeling. I don't want you to think that I'm not happy to have the time we spent together back. I am." She looked, trying to gauge his reaction.

“I don’t think that,” he said, his eyes softening.

“I don’t know where to start.” She rubbed her palm. “I keep coming back to the same question, why?”

“Why?”

“Yeah. Why me? I thought by getting my memories back, it would lead me in a direction. I would just have the answer. But Orion, every time you asked about my past, I could feel it in my body. It would just… my fear of her was *real* and it ran deep. I just don’t get the why of it all…”

Orion nodded, taking in every word she said. “Why the ritual? Why the men? What does she need from you?” He shook his head. “I’ve been asking myself that for years.”

She tossed the rock to Orion, and Suzaar caught it mid-flight before dropping it in Orion's lap.

“For Cora to go this far, there had to have been a reason,” she said. “I need all the memories, not just these.”

“Was there anything at the coven? She carries that book everywhere, did you ever see anything?”

“Never. It shrouds itself when anyone but her looks.”

“So what we need is definitely in it.” Orion sighed, leaning the chair on two legs. “Lovely.”

She watched him as his eyes weighed the risks, already forming a plan.

“I’m not going near her,” she said, cutting him off before he convinced himself. “And neither of you are. Memories, first. I know I have the answers. I felt it, but it was hidden like I forced myself not to even think about it.”

“Well, if she's out, Rimehold is our next best bet.” Orion slapped his knees, matter settled. “Phaio is still teaching at the academy. It’s a few days' hike and unfortunately it's warded. So no teleportation on or near the grounds.” He began pacing. “We’ll have to walk, which is risky. I’m sure they’re scrying for you.” He turned, a wicked grin. “Which leads us to your first grand task, little witch.”

Meela let out a nervous laugh. “That sounds… ominous.”

Orion put his knee on the bed, leaning over her, arms braced on both sides. “You.”

“*Me*?”

“Yes. *You*.” He smiled and nodded. “You need to work on your magic. Without Cora’s interference, you should have access to it, which leads me

to believe it's you."

"Me?" She repeated, more confused than ever.

"Why are you scared of it?"

She scoffed, shaking her head and leaning away. "I'm not."

"You are." he straightened. "Magic is all around us, Meela. It's available to anyone who is brave enough to reach for it." A swirl of blue energy flickered to life in his palm, growing until it hovered to a large glowing orb that pulsated with energy. He tossed it over his head as Suzaar dove through it, scattering into a glittering rain of light.

"But you?" Orion continued, watching as the sparks drifted down. "You were born with it, it's in your blood. It comes to you as naturally as breathing."

"I'm not scared," she insisted. "I can feel it, like it's trying to push itself out of me."

"When we went to the falls, did anything feel different?"

She shrugged, uncertain. "Maybe? But the forests around here already feel so alive, it's hard to tell what's different and what's just normal."

Orion let out a soft laugh. "Meela, the forest has never once felt alive to me. Beautiful? Yes. Ancient? Sure. But *never* alive."

Her mouth went dry. *He didn't feel it?* The pulse in the roots. The whispering leaves. The hush of the air that carried something older than sound. The world wasn't still. It breathed and listened and watched.

Cora did. Meela remembered hours in the garden, fingers buried in the dirt, whispering to petals that leaned toward them like eavesdroppers. Cora had smiled told her the garden listened. The world moved for those who listened back. Orion must have felt it. Alden did, she could see it in the way he moved around… *the trees.* Alden is a gnarling, of course he felt just as at home in the forest as she did. He was meant to feel it. Her heart pounded as the truth unfolded, cold and obvious.

Of course she could feel it.

Of course Alden could.

And so did Cora. She had known what Meela was, had known the world itself called to her, and she had still convinced Meela she was powerless.

Orion's mouth twitched. "We have a busy few days ahead of us. Let's eat and plan our move. And first thing tomorrow morning…" His smile turned smug. "It's my turn to train you."

"You seem excited about that." She raised a brow.

“I like feeling needed.”

She snorted, shaking her head. “You and him are too alike,” she said, scratching Suzaar’s head as the raven nestled himself comfortably in her lap.

“Lucky you, then.”

That night while mapping their route to Rimehold, Meela couldn’t stop asking questions. The memories were trickling in, some soft and golden, others sharp enough to hurt. People she’d forgotten. Some had left, others vanished.

Two lingered at the forefront of her mind: her mother and Meri.

Of all the faces returning to her, Meri’s was the clearest. Her voice, laughter, the stubborn tilt to her chin.

“Does she live nearby?” Meela asked, already bracing for an answer she didn’t want. “We should visit before we go.”

Orion's hesitation made her heart drop. “I’m so sorry, Meela.”

She shook her head, as if that could reverse time and put the words back into his mouth.

“Her death is what pushed you over, it was the reason you finally went to Cora.”

Meri.

Small hands, quick wit. A firecracker in a tiny little body. They had built something together. They had fought, laughed and cried with one another. Meela couldn’t even remember all the details but she knew. And still, it felt like something had been torn from her chest. Her vision blurred, and the tears came. Relentless and deserved, she didn’t even try to stop them. Orion crossed the space and wrapped his arms around her, holding her like he could stop the upcoming flood.

“I should've remembered her,” Meela whispered through her tears. “She was family, and I just *forgot*.”

“You loved her.” Orion ran his hand down her back. “And she really loved you. You remember that part that matters Meela. The connection. The bond.”

“I can’t even remember everything, just looks and small moments.” Meela wiped her face with her sleeve. “I didn’t think losing someone I can’t fully place would hurt this much.”

“Of course it would,” Orion said. “Somewhere deep down, you never really forgot her.”

She sniffed. “And nothing about my mother?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head. “Only that you were always on the run.”

She let out a bitter laugh. “Gods, why was I so secretive?"

“I asked myself that a lot over the years.” Orion turned back to his satchel, offering her a small smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

Meela sat in the middle of the bed, slowly coming to accept these new realities. Her mother was a mystery. Meri was gone. And now, she needed to face the harsh truth she had desperately been trying to run from. Meela allowed herself to find some comfort, some small acceptance of a choice she couldn’t make sense of before. She sought justice for her sister. She was manipulated by grief, and in that, at least, she could find some sense. Meela refused to let Cora take another from her world for whatever quest the woman had desired.

She had already packed her belongings and sat on Orion's bed watching him cram nearly everything he owned into multiple bags. “Why not use the enchanted satchel?”

“Amateur mistake, little witch.” His grin was fleeting. “Ironically enough, I’ve got a terrible memory. If I don’t see it, I forget it exists. Can’t tell you how many times I’ve bought the same map. I’ve got at least three of Solmaris alone.” He shook his head, muttering curses as he wrestled stubborn books into place and shoved at wayward tunics.

After a beat, his voice gentled. “You were only trying to protect us.” He glanced around the room as if searching for something he’d left behind. “Knowing what I do now. I can’t blame you. If the roles were reversed, I’d have done the same. Tried to keep you far away from it.” His tone thinned to a rough whisper. “I only wish that I’d made you see you didn’t have to face it alone.”

Meela blinked at him, startled by the softness in his voice.

“I feel like I failed you,” he admitted, eyes still on the clutter in front of him. “As your partner. As a friend. You didn’t get all the memories back, and maybe that’s for the best. There were hard times, too. I was in love with you… gods, I still am. But I was young. Stubborn. Impatient. I didn’t always make it easy.”

“Orion—”

He shook his head, stopping her. “I’m not fishing for forgiveness, Meela. I’ve had a lot of time for reflection. If I had been more patient, maybe you

would’ve trusted me with the burden you carried, I regret that. I regret a lot of things.”

“I don’t think I would have.”

That stopped him.

“No matter how patient or wonderful you were. I would’ve kept it from you. Not because I didn’t trust you, but because I couldn’t stand the weight of it myself… saying it aloud would’ve made it real.”

He studied her for a moment. “That’s fair.”

“You were exactly what I needed.” Meela offered him a small, weary smile.

“Well,” he said, forcing a laugh. “We can’t go back now, can we?”

“No,” she agreed. “And let’s not dwell on it.” She crawled forward and tugged his hand, pulling him closer to the edge of the bed. Rising on her knees, she wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’m really glad I’m here now.”

He relaxed under the embrace, pressing a small kiss to her temple. “You have no idea how glad I am about that too.”

She took a deep breath, resting her head on his chest. “How did Seph and Liri take us leaving?”

He shrugged. “They knew it was coming. Can’t stay here forever.”

“How long have you been staying here?”

“On and off for years. But I moved my stuff when Cora and Alden made the deal. Twins rolled in the very next morning, sniffing around for me.” He glanced down at her, smirking. “Cora knew we lived here and I didn’t want them to find me in the one place you’ve ever felt safe.”

That little house. Its quiet corners, the wildflowers she had planted under the windows.

“I wish I could see it again.”

Orion's head tilted. “We can, if you want.”

“Wouldn’t that be risky? What if someone is following us?”

“Considering how reckless everything else we’re about to do is, I’d say that risk barely ranks.”

Meela huffed a laugh, falling back on the bed. “Gods, what are we even doing?”

Orion held up a hand, ticking off items on his fingers. “One, Meela taps into those powers. Two, Phaio taps into that memory. Three, check the academy for anything that may help. Four, Cora. Five, happily ever after?”

“You make it sound easy.”

“Oh, it’s going to be fucking awful.” he laughed. “Most likely a nightmare. Prepare for that now, but all will be fine, you have me.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” she muttered into the pillow.

“I heard that.”

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Chapter Twenty-Four



Liri and Seph were already waiting, chatting and idly stirring their tea. Liri's face lit up the moment she spotted them. "Mornin', dolls." she greeted, her grin warm but her eyes sad. "Figured we'd send you off with full bellies before you go chasin' around death."

"We're not chasing death," Orion grumbled.

"Nope," Seph said casually, pouring tea into the empty mugs at the table. "You're walkin' to it, willingly, which is a little worse."

Liri swatted his arm as Meela settled beside her. Despite the grim words, she appreciated them both. Neither had treated her like she was fragile, even when it was clear she was unraveling. Liri wrapped her arm around her in a quick squeeze before gesturing to the table in front of them.

"Eat," She said. "It's a long trek ahead."

The meal was warm, filling. The conversation stayed light, a silent agreement not to linger on what lay ahead. Neither had pressed them for details. They knew enough. And more importantly, they understood there was no stopping them. When the plates were empty and the tea had gone cold, Liri leaned back with a sigh. "Alright," she said, reaching under the table. "Now for your parting gift."

She pulled out a small leather bag, similar in make to the one Orion carried.

"Now, it's not bottomless," Liri said, "But it should do you some good. I've filled it with a few items you might like."

She set it in Meela's hand, then reached for something else. It was wrapped in cloth, which Liri unwrapped before revealing a dagger. Its hilt wrapped in worn leather, the blade clean and well-kept.

“When I left Goldrun, my mother gave me this,” Liri said, her voice quieter, eyes glassy. “And I’ll tell you the same thing she told me. *A lady always needs her own protection.* I hope you don’t need it, but if you do.”

Meela took it, running her fingers over the leather grip. It was small, practical, and meant to be hidden easily. “Thank you, Liri,” she said, more sincere than she could ever express.

Liri smiled. “Don’t lose it,” she warned. “I will be offended.”

Seph stood, clapping Orion on the back. “We’ll be here when you get back. First rounds on us.” He glanced at Meela, his usual easygoing mask slipping into something softer before he turned back to Orion. “Just… be careful, alright? Both of you.”

“We will,” Orion said, steady as ever. “If all goes well, we’ll be back in a week.”

Warmth spread through Meela’s chest as they stepped outside. She had lost so much, yet here she was, finding a reason to return. She pulled Liri into a hug, sinking into her arms. The faint scent of honey clung to her, sweet and steadying. “I’ll be thinkin’ of you, sweets,” Liri whispered, brushing her thumb along Meela’s cheek. “Trust your gut, okay?”

Meela nodded, her throat tight.

Seph’s solid embrace came next, as if he wished to shoulder a part of the weight. “Take care, little witch,” he murmured.

For a moment, she let herself stay there, held by the two of them, before the morning urged her onward. The air was sharp against her cheeks, the horizon painted in lavender and gold as the sun climbed. Mist curled along the streets, softening the wooden beams and tiled roofs.

Orion adjusted his hood, glancing down at her. “Ready?”

“Ready.” Meela smiled.

She pulled her cloak tighter around her, feeling the comforting weight of the dagger now strapped at her hip. She had never carried a weapon before, at least not one meant for her own defense. It was a strange feeling, one that settled somewhere between security and the uneasy realization it might be used. Suzaar gave a sharp cry from above, his dark wings slicing through the sky as he circled lazily.

Orion nudged her shoulder. “We have one stop to make first.”

“A stop?”

“It’s a surprise.” He leaned in, smiling.

Meela glanced back once, catching sight of Liri and Seph standing at the tavern door, watching them go. Liri lifted her hand in a final wave, her eyes shadowed with worry but her smile bright. She lifted her hand in return, promising herself that this was not a goodbye.

They walked down the winding cobblestones, the world around them softened into something untouched by time. The air smelled of earth and wildflowers, the scent carried by the gentle breeze. Suzaar soared high above, his dark feathers gleaming beneath the morning sun. He seemed eager, his wings tilting as he followed their path, as if he too anticipated the moment the three of them would finally leave Crowmore.

After a while, Orion finally spoke. “You don’t have to do this, you know. I can ask Phaio to come here.”

She exhaled, watching the plume of her breath disappear in the air. “I’ve spent my whole life running from things I don’t understand. If I don’t go now…I’ll never stop running.”

Orion said nothing, only offering his hand.

Rolling hills stretched endlessly, their peaks dusting with clusters of wildflowers. The stones beneath their feet gave way to packed dirt. Meela smiled, remembering a time she and Meri had visited this exact spot. The river wove alongside their path, its water catching the light as it tumbled over scattered boulders, forming small rushing falls.

“Where are we going?” Meela asked for the third time, though she already knew Orion would only tease her with his answer.

He glanced over his shoulder, amusement in his eyes. “Well, my sweet little witch,” he mused. “It felt wrong to embark on this journey without doing the one thing you’ve asked for. And last night, I realized I needed to drop some items off, and there might be things here we’ll need for what’s to come.”

Meela’s heart clenched as a familiar tree came into view. They followed a narrow path, her pulse quickening with every step. Then the cottage appeared, nestled in a sunlit clearing where the trees parted, surrounded by a sprawl of wild gardens and soft green hills. Recognition hit her like a wave.

Their cottage. Her home.

Orion grinned at her stunned silence. Meela shook her head, tears stinging her eyes. “We weighed the options… this was too much of a risk.”

Orion only shrugged and pulled her closer. The land seemed to breathe as they neared, as though the very structure recognized her too, waiting for its long-lost keeper. It wasn’t merely a home. It was alive, woven into the land itself. The walls, smooth and white, bore intricate engravings along the doorways and windows. Old magic, protection runes, blessings from a timing she had forgotten. Vines, thick with pale blue flowers, circled around the eaves, while lanterns floated in the air, unlit but waiting.

The garden was a wild sanctuary. Towering flowers stretched toward the sky. Herbs grew in tangled clusters. Soft glowing mushrooms nestled beneath berry bushes, their light pulsing like a heartbeat. She could hear the river from here, the water flowing just beyond the garden, its song grounding everything in place. Orion pushed open the small wooden gate. The house exhaled a shimmering blue as it welcomed them home.

Inside, the cottage smelled like aged parchment, herbs, and the faintest trace of woodsmoke—it smelled like Orion.

The hearth flared to life the second they stepped inside. Books filled every corner, stacked in uneven piles and spilling from shelves that climbed the walls. A few hovered lazily above the floor, shifting this way and that as though deciding where they belonged. The kitchen was tucked against one wall, half-swallowed by greenery. Vines dangled from the rafters and wound through the wooden beams overhead. Beneath the largest window sat a small table, positioned to overlook the river.

A giant oak tree stood in the very center of it all, its trunk twisting up through the ceiling, its branches adorned with softly glowing orbs, bathing the space in gold.

Tiny crystals hung in every window, scattering soft rainbows that danced across the wooden floors. Meela’s gaze followed the spiraling staircase, its railing and steps formed from living branches extending from the oak, leading to the open loft above.

She turned to find Orion watching her, his bags now resting on a chair pulled close to the stone hearth. Her feet carried her up the staircase, drawn to the familiar space. In the center of the loft sat a large bed layered with hand-stitched quilts. Wardrobes flanked either side, their carved doors etched with symbols she almost recognized, stirring something in her memory.

“I tried to keep up with it,” Orion called from below. “But your magic is its heart. You’ve embedded yourself into this place. Took me a while to craft spells that could mimic it while you were gone.”

A rush of wings drew her eyes upward as Suzaar glided in, talons clicking lightly against the beams before claiming his high perch. There, a small collection of trinkets he’d gathered over the years still waited for him. The raven’s sharp eyes swept the cottage, as if confirming nothing had changed. Orion lifted his hand, and above them, a hidden wooden panel slid open. With a single beat of his wings, Suzaar soared out into the sky, his cry echoing over the hills. A declaration to the forest that he had returned home.

Meela pressed a trembling hand to her lips. The house hadn’t changed, it remained exactly as it was in her memories. “If you were trying to convince me to stay, it’s working.” Meela chuckled, turning in circles, trying to take in every inch of the space.

Orion had climbed the stairs, leaning against the banister, watching her with a smile. “Is it?” His voice soft, “Just say the word.”

She shook her head, struggling to find the right words. Her memories did not do it justice. It wasn’t simply a home. It was theirs. Every corner hummed with magic, with them.

Orion stepped closer, wrapping his arms around her. “Now that I see you here,” he whispered, lips grazing the shell of her ear, “it’s making it rather difficult to let you go.”

She leaned back against him, melting into the embrace. “We have to. So, let’s make it quick so we can get back.”

His laugh reverberated against her. Orion's fingers skimmed down her arms before settling at her waist, pulling her flush against him. She gasped as he nuzzled the crook of her neck, his lips brushing along her jaw, trailing to her shoulder, the touch igniting something inside her.

“Did you bring me here to seduce me?” she teased, her voice a breathy whisper.

Orion hummed in response, his hands mapping familiar paths along her body, tightening at her hips in the way he knew drove her mad. “This stop serves multiple purposes.”

Her breath deepened when she turned, finding his smoldering eyes locked on hers. She looked at his lips, and a groan escaped him before he leaned down, capturing hers. The kiss started slowly, but his hunger was undeniable. His hand slid up her neck, gripping just enough to send a sharp

pleasure through her. “You’re quite the tease, Meela,” Orion whispered against her throat, his lips never settling in one place.

She ground herself against him, feeling his bulge pressing against his trousers. He spun her around so quickly she barely had time to laugh before his mouth claimed hers again. Whatever patience he had been pretending to possess disappeared entirely. The hand at her throat guided her head back as he devoured her deeper, pulling her lips between his teeth. He pushed her against the bed, her breath quickening as he peeled her dress over her head, his rough palms searing trails down her body.

“So beautiful,” he whispered.

Meela couldn't stop herself. She felt desperate to feel him. She needed him, needed to see him and feel him. She crawled to the edge of the bed, her fingers working at the laces on his pants. His grip came to the back of her head, watching with his own desperate eyes. She reached the base of his shaft, licking her lips, but before her mouth could touch him, he grabbed her chin. “You’ll end me too fast if you do that.”

Before she could even think to pout, his hands found her thighs, lifting her as she wrapped around him, clutching at his shoulders as he lowered her onto the bed. “How do you want me, Meela?” Orion whispered against her breast. “Do you want it nice and sweet, or are you still my filthy girl?”

Orion pulled back to look at her, kneeling above her, his fingers softly moving against her entrance. Meela bit her lip, fighting a smile and refusing to answer the question he already knew the answer to.

His eyes flared.

“You have no idea.” His hands mapped her body, grabbing at her stomach, trailing up to squeeze her breasts. “I’ve thought about you every night since you left.” He leaned down, his tongue blazing a path down her body, teeth scraping, sucking at places that made her cry out. “I’ve craved every inch of you. Dreamt about tasting you. Waking up buried inside of you.”

His hand slid lower, teasing before sinking inside of her. Both fingers worked into her slowly. His thumb rested at her core. Orion watched her before pulling them free and bringing them into his mouth, sucking with a filthy, appreciative moan. “*So fucking sweet,*” he groaned. “When I get you back here, I plan to spend an entire day between these soft thighs.” Orion lowered his head, licking her before nibbling her inner thigh in a playful

bite that made her moan louder. “Right now, I desperately need you wrapped around my cock.”

He braced his hand beside her head, locked eyes with her and thrust deep inside. They both cried out, the shock of connection sending sparks down her body, stretching her wide, filling every aching, empty space within her.

“Orion,” she panted, clawing at his shoulders.

Orion moved slow and steady, giving her time to adjust. His rhythm deepened with each roll of his hips, every thrust coaxing more moans from her lips, feeding the fire they’d both carried for too long. His pace stayed measured, as though he meant to savor every second, but the tight set of his jaw and the tremor in his arms told Meela he was hanging on by a thread.

“You’re mine, Meela.” He nipped at her jaw hard enough to leave a mark. “*Say it.*”

“Yours,” she gasped, arching into him. “Always yours.”

A raw, broken sound ripped through his throat. In one swift movement, he caught her wrists, pinning them above her head. “So perfect,” he rasped, grinding his hips down. She whimpered beneath him, loving how undone he was, how rough he had become. “Five years of needing you. Never. Fucking. Enough.” Each word landed with a thrust.

She moaned a string of curses as he released her wrists, just long enough to grab her thighs, yanking her legs over his shoulders, driving deeper as her body arched from the bed. “That’s it, Meela,” he panted. “Come for me. Let me hear you.”

Her body clamped around him, pleasure crashing over her in waves. She cried out his name, her back almost off the bed as she broke apart. Orion lost it then, slamming into her, burying himself deeper until he found his own release with a desperate moan.

He held her, pressing soft kisses along her throat and jaw. His hands smoothing down her sides. Orion shifted, immediately gathering her close, wrapping her in his arms. His hand traced lazy circles over her hip, his lips brushing the shell of her ear. "When you're ready, little witch. I have years to make up for."

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Chapter Twenty-Five



"Please tell me why we can't just *pop* over to the academy?" Meela sighed. They were half a day into day one of the journey and she had already come to the conclusion she was not a woman of expedition. She was more of a meanderer. A lover of nature who enjoyed the freedom of stopping, admiring a flower that danced in the sun, or a mushroom that was perfectly placed amongst the hollow of a tree. Maybe lay, take a nap, wake and have a nice picnic.

This, however, was none of those things.

Orion laughed, glancing up into the canopy in search of Suzaar. "Well, we could, but I can't jump all the way there. I could get us close, but Rimehold is heavily warded. The second they catch a whiff of that sort of magic, they'll send the beasts out."

"Beasts?" Meela was a little afraid of what that meant. "Like, cute and furry or rip your head off?"

Orion flashed her a smile. "Rip your head off."

Meela cringed. "Wonderful."

"I quite like your head," he added. "And prefer mine attached, so we walk. Which gives us the perfect opportunity to work on some magic." He tapped the tip of her nose.

"Adds to the danger as well." Meela mumbled under her breath.

"That's the fun part." Orion winked.

She rolled her eyes, walking ahead of him to crest the hill. Meela could feel Orion's eyes on her, and could hear him chuckling.

“Oh, come on! Where is your sense of adventure?” he called after her.

She heard him click his tongue and watched as Suzaar glided down, landing gracefully on a low limb. Orion handed the raven a small piece of parchment. “Take this to Alden, and meet us back here.”

Meela reached the top and turned to watch as Suzaar launched into the sky, an onyx blur against the sky. “He’ll know where to find us?”

Orion scanned the horizon until Suzaar was only a dot in the sky. “He’ll find us.” He made his way beside her, before looking around the forest. “We’ll stop soon. Tomorrow, we enter the Old Forest and I’d rather be well rested for whatever comes with that.”

Meela peered into the thickening woods ahead. The deeper they traveled, the wilder and taller the trees had become. It felt like they were watching — it wasn’t menacing, only patient. Now that she understood what the feeling was, it was impossible to ignore. The magic stirring inside her stretched toward the trees like an animal longing to be set free.

Orion leaned in close, his hand resting on her hip, his voice barely a whisper. “Reach out.”

“To what?” She took a deep breath, exhaling slowly.

“The forest,” he suggested. “Close your eyes.”

“Orion…” she huffed.

“Meela, do it,” He urged. “Now, envision it.” he instructed. “Think of the moss, the stones, the heartbeat of the trees. Feel the roots under our feet.”

“Trees don’t have heartbeats.”

“That’s not what I’ve heard.” She felt his smile. “Ask them, then. Ask them to come.”

The moment she did, she felt it. A spark of movement beneath her boots. The air seemed to swell around them, the scent of blooming flowers and damp earth overwhelming her. The magic stirred all around them, coiling up from the roots.

“Hello.” She wasn’t sure if she said it aloud, or in her mind.

A quiver ran through the trees. A breeze that wasn’t a breeze lifted the edges of her cloak. Orion was silent behind her. Meela opened her eyes, feeling foolish. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“No?” Orion asked.

“No. This feels silly. I don’t know how to just *make* magic happen.”

“You don’t *make* it happen, Meela.” Orion stepped back, looking at his feet. “You invite it.”

Meela followed his gaze and gasped. A circle of wildflowers had bloomed in a perfect circle around them. Their delicate petals unfolded in the light as if they were saying hello back.

“Do it again,” Orion said. “You said before you felt like it was watching you. I want you to watch it back. Keep your eyes open.”

“What’s it like for you? Doing magic?”

He watched her, a small smile tugging at the corner of his scarred lips. “Like sunlight hitting the crystals we have hanging at home. That glimmering sheen is what I reach for. It’s different for everyone.”

She sighed. Turning back into the forest, the feeling hadn’t gone away. So instead of ignoring the eyes she thought she felt, she looked for them. A shimmer waved in the air, faint like heat rising from a stone. The second she noticed it, the world tilted. Her eyes rang. It seemed like every tree turned to face her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw it. Younger than the others, its branch twisting toward her, slowly like the way Suzaar cocks his head when studying her. She stepped forward, drawn to it. She had the urge to know it, to feel its bark beneath her hand.

A snap echoed in the air before she could react, roots slithered from the earth, curling around her waist. “Orion!”

It pulled her closer, firm so as to not drop her. She could feel it, like curious hands reaching out to greet her. She had been pulled to that tree, dangling in the air, close enough to touch.

“Meela,” he laughed, making no move to intervene. “Breathe.”

She struggled against the roots, trying to pull herself out of its grip. “This isn’t funny,” she snapped, the roots pulling tighter. She panted, her pulse drumming against her chest.

Ground yourself, Meela.

As soon as she did, the moment she reminded herself, willing it to settle, the roots loosened, slithering back into the earth. She dropped from mid-air, falling into Orion's arms. He caught her easily, a smug grin on his face.

“Wipe that look off your face,” she shoved out of his arms and began wiping dirt from her skirt.

“What, I’m impressed!”

“Impressed?” She threw her hands up. “Did you see how little control I had just then?”

“What I saw…” Orion’s eyes gleamed. “…was a Wyrdwood who hadn’t used her powers in five years, whose power had dwindled to near drops.

Control? Yes, a little rough. I'll admit." He chuckled. "But Meela, think about what you just did. A fucking tree reached for you. That was incredible. How did you do that?"

She blinked, still dazed. "I don't know. It looked at me… and I thought about its bark, and then..."

"And it helped you, it did what you asked of it. It was—"

"Incredible." She swallowed.

"Incredible."

A branch snapped in the distance. Both their heads snapped toward the sound. Orion shifted in front of her, easing her behind. They both stood still, listening and looking for any movement.

"Stay close," Orion whispered.

She didn't argue as they moved forward, keeping close to his body, the shadows stretching long around them as the forest, too, kept watch. They walked in silence. Orion remained tense, looking around every few steps.

"You should keep working at it, Meela," Orion said, smiling and glancing down at her. "And maybe not think about tree bark."

A sharp cry split the air. Suzaar circled above them, plunging down and dropping onto Orion's shoulder. There was no note, and a pang of worry curled in her stomach. Though writing would be difficult if Alden was not in his human form. Orion grabbed the twig in Suzaar's beak, rubbing his thumb over the rough surface before offering it to her. "He'll meet up with us soon, he saw someone a day ago."

Meela turned the twig over, noting the carefully carved notches in deliberate patterns. "You have your own language?"

"No, I was bored one night and learned how Gnarlings used to communicate during the war."

"War?"

"A long time ago. Before the kings, before Ronan was even… Ronan."

Meela's brows furrowed. "How old is Alden?"

"I asked once, he said he lost count after six hundred."

Gods, six hundred?!

"Doesn't look a day over forty," Meela muttered. "And you learned this code just for fun?"

Orion snorted, smiling wide. "So surprised, little witch?"

"I mean, yeah?" She grinned. "Learning some ancient war code for fun seems surprising."

He shrugged. “At the time, I needed to keep my mind busy. And… I don’t know.” he continued, flustered. “Alden’s my friend. I thought maybe it would be nice for him to communicate in his old ways.”

Meela’s smile softened. “Aw, that’s really sweet.”

“Oh, shush.” He rolled his eyes, nudging her with his elbow.

“I mean it, Orion,” she gushed. “Was he surprised?”

“Yeah, he was. I left him a little note at the shop.” Orion’s lips curled at the memory. “He laughed, hard. Which for me is the ultimate compliment.”

“What did it say?”

“Um…” He suddenly looked shy. “Nothing really. A stupid joke.”

“You can’t just say you made Alden laugh and then not share what the joke was.”

Orion sighed, shaking his head.

Meela poked his arm. “Tell me!”

“Fine. It said *‘no naked ass in the shop.’*”

“No naked asses?” Meela burst out laughing. “Oh, you *have* to explain now.”

He groaned, but smiled. “When I was at the shop, you would stop in sometimes and apparently, watching me work, really… did it for you." He grinned, refusing to look at her.

Meela’s laughter died. “What?”

Orion chuckled. “Alden may have caught us a few times.”

She covered her mouth, eyes wide.

“Alden has always been… well. *Alden*. And one day, I went in and he just grabbed me by the shoulder, his finger right in my face and said, ‘Orion, no naked asses in my shop.’” He shook his head. “It had caught me so off guard, I just laughed in his face.”

“Oh, my gods,” she said, still reeling. “I didn’t know you worked with Alden.”

“I apprenticed under him for quite a few years, actually. I got really good at it, and I learned a lot.” He exhaled, humor fading from his face. “But everything happened, and it just became hard to focus. I stopped showing up for weeks at a time, and eventually told him I needed a break.”

It hit her like a punch to the chest. They had known each other well. They had been friends. Alden wasn’t just someone who signed up for this, he was her friend. They both were a rich part of her life. And Cora had taken that from her, from him.

Something inside her raged. The world around her felt unsteady, like the very trees now mourned and raged alongside her. The moment she realized it, the magic pulsed in her blood. The wind shifted suddenly, sending a ripple through the branches, and for a moment, she swore she felt something ancient stir beneath her feet. Her heart clenched, grief and fury intertwining so tightly it was hard to breathe.

“Hey.” Orion gently grabbed her hand.

“Yeah?” She tried to keep her voice light, her eyes unfocused on the world around her.

“You’re squeezing that twig like it owes you money.”

She glanced down at the carved message in her hands. Her knuckles turned white. “Right. Sorry.”

Orion watched carefully, but didn’t press. Instead, he nodded towards the trees. “There is a clearing up ahead. We’ll stop soon.”

“You carved a raven, didn’t you?”

Orion glanced down, caught off guard. “I did. Gods, it was like one of the first things Alden had me work on. He still had it?”

“I found it one day. He gave it to me and said the person who carved it wouldn’t mind.”

Orion's eyes softened, though the moment short-lived, as his smirk returned. “Oh, yeah… the day you were in his shop. You were eating him right up.”

Meela's mouth fell open. “No, I wasn’t!”

“Oh yes, you were!” he shot back, his grin widening. “I saw it, Meela. You cannot handle yourself around a working man. If I hadn't come in, you would’ve been climbing in his lap.”

She gasped. “I would not have!”

“Lie to yourself, little witch, do not lie to me.” He only laughed harder. “I know what it looks like when you’re hot and bothered, you look at me like that.”

“You’re shameless,” Meela muttered.

The trees began thinning, revealing the small clearing. Orion snorted as he dug inside his satchel, pulling out his staff, then fabric. With a simple motion, the fabric began twisting and stretching, securing itself into place. Meela felt her stomach turn. The movement was too familiar.

“Why don’t you and Suzaar gather some firewood?”

Meela nodded, grateful for the moment to breathe. She lifted her arm, and Suzaar flew over, hopping up to her shoulder. As she stepped away, she could hear Orion chuckling to himself, mocking her under his breath. *‘No, I wasn't!’*

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Chapter Twenty-Six



Every rustle in the underbrush made her flinch. The crack of a twig, the flutter of wings and the distant call of a bird sent her nerves humming. She stared out past the glow of the fire, eyes straining against the dark. They hadn't entered the Old Forest, but they felt close enough. The air felt heavier here, laced with moss and something ancient. *What if something came slithering out from the shadows? Some half-forgotten creature that fed on witches who wandered too close?* She couldn't stop the spiral of thoughts as the fire popped, throwing sparks skyward like tiny spells. The steady scrape of Orion's knife against wood was the only other sound around.

"Are you doing okay over there, little witch?" Orion's teasing voice broke the silence.

"Talk to me, Orion," Meela urged.

He chuckled softly, a sound that made her chest loosen. He leaned back onto the mossy ground, sighing like it was just another night. His hand brushed her back, and with a gentle tug, she fell beside him, lying in the crook of his arm.

"Is there anything in particular you want to talk about?"

"Anything," she replied quickly, "I need a distraction, my mind is going wild with everything that could be watching us right now."

"I've cast wards about the clearing," he whispered. "If someone looks over here, they will see nothing but trees. Nothing will even get close without me knowing."

Of course he had.

“Oh.” She let out a breath. “That helps, thank you.”

“Always.” His voice dropped even softer.

His warm hands ran down her back. She watched the flames as they danced. Her hand found his, her fingers curling into his palm.

“Orion,” she whispered.

“Yeah?” he whispered back.

“Tell me about you.”

His head lifted from the ground. Firelight painted his face, his eyes glowing with a reddish hue, uncertainty flickering within them.

“It's been five years since we’ve seen each other,” she added quickly. “I know you, but also… I feel like I missed so much.”

He settled back down. “I get it, I just don’t really know what to say. Not much has changed. I'm the same guy who followed you around the markets.”

Meela wasn’t sure that was true, because everything had changed. “Seph and Liri… the tavern, that’s new.”

“Yeah…” Orion’s voice was distant. “I’ve traveled a lot. I guess I can thank Cora for that.” A bitter edge curled around her name. “Been places I never would’ve gone on my own.”

“Did you meet anyone on your travels?”

The question slipped out before she could stop it, it wasn’t the first time she’d thought to ask. But she always stopped herself, convincing herself that it wouldn’t matter. The darkness, perhaps, made it easier. She wouldn’t have to see his face, or her own in his eyes. Her heart thudded in her ears, and she was grateful for the darkness that cloaked the anticipation of his answer.

“No.”

“No one?” Meela pressed. “You’ve traveled far, and five years is a long time.”

“No one, Meela.” He swallowed. “Five years is a long time, but I've been… preoccupied, and it never felt right.”

“I won’t be mad, Orion,” she said, trying to sound casual. She offered a weak shrug. “I can’t be. I've been married three times since.” She tried to laugh, but it came out as a huff of air that was more mocking than anything.

He flinched. “Please don’t joke about that.”

“Don’t change the subject,” she teased, nudging his side. “You’re a handsome guy, traveling all over Ronan. The opportunity had to have come up.”

“No one, as I said. I may have been nothing to you, but you were still very real to me. I—” he stopped himself, “I couldn’t. And I try desperately not to think about the marriages, so can we please not joke about that?”

“They weren’t real.” Meela shifted, sitting upright.

A pulse of wind stirred through the clearing, and the fire flickered unnaturally high for a moment. Orion looked at her then, his expression torn between longing and sorrow.

“Real enough.” He swallowed.

The fire hissed, sparks flaring like startled birds. Suzaar ruffled his feathers in response. The wards around the clearing pulsed with the raw emotion. “Three times,” he breathed. “And I haven’t even had *one* chance at being yours.”

Orion’s mouth opened, then closed like he didn’t expect the words to escape him. “I wanted those moments,” he said quieter. “I wanted to see you in that dress… looking at me the way you looked at them. Instead, I stood invisible in the shadows as I watched the love of my life give them something I wanted so desperately. I wanted it, and now it’s ruined.”

Ruined?

She nodded, standing. “I understand.”

“Do you?” he asked, his eyes searching hers.

“You wanted it, and it’s ruined.”

“Meela.” He dragged a hand through his hair. “I feel like you’re taking this the wrong way.”

“I’m not.” She folded her arms across her chest. “I get it, it's different now. And that's fine, Orion. Truly.”

“It’s not fine.” he pushed. “That urge, it hasn’t gone anywhere. I still want it, and I’m terrified to bring it up. Because, well, for one, you’re asking if I was with any others…” He scoffed. “I didn’t sleep for months after you left. My whole chest felt like it was caving in the second I closed my eyes.”

“And two,” he continued. “It’s different for you now.”

“It’s not different,” she said. “Not at all. It was nothing to me. It was always you, and if I had my way, it would’ve been you every single time.”

“Would it?”

“Obviously!” She threw her hands up. “Not that you ever asked.”

“I was going to,” he said quietly.

“Going to and actually doing it are different, Orion,” she snapped.

“It was planned. I even have my mother’s ring,” he said. “I was going to take you to that grove you love near Alden’s. I planned a picnic. Alden even taught me how to bake bread. I was going to bring wine, and maybe those honeycakes. And right at the perfect moment, I would’ve told you all these pretty words.”

Orion moved closer, and Meela wasn’t sure she was breathing. “I was going to tell you how much I love you. How my entire existence has been wrapped around yours since the moment I saw you, and I can’t imagine another by my side.”

His hand lifted, brushing her cheek with a touch so tender it made her chest ache. “I was going to ask. *Beg*, really, for the honor.” His voice thickened, “Because I don’t think I could go another second without tying myself to you in every possible way.”

“I would’ve said yes,” she whispered. “Probably screamed it, actually. I would’ve said that there has never been anyone else for me. That every day I wake, my heart is searching for you. I’ve always been yours.”

“I’ve waited a very long time to hear that.”

He softly kissed her. But when she melted into him, her hands curling into his shirt, it deepened, fierce and aching. It was every promise, every vow they had never been able to speak, finally set free.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven



Waking up in the forest made Meela realize how foolish she had been last night. Nothing about the forest screamed danger or omen. Still, as she wandered from the camp to relieve herself and find water to brush her teeth, she continued glancing over her shoulder at every noise. Orion was packing their belongings when she returned. He lowered himself into a patch of sunlight and sprawled out on his back, arms folded behind his head.

"So," he called lazily. "The only thing you're curious about after all our time apart is whether or not I had other relations?"

Meela paused, caught off guard. "No," she said quickly. "I was also curious about… your mom? Is she okay?"

Orion let out a single, loud laugh. "My mother?" He raised a brow, seeing right through her.

"Yes, is that so odd?"

"No, I suppose not," he said, still grinning. "She passed."

Meela's expression softened. She looked down at him, his eyes closed basking in the sunlight like he hadn't said something devastating.

"I'm so sorry," she said gently. "When?"

He cracked open an eye. "It's okay. It was peaceful. The letter came about two years ago, I went home, helped my brother with the family affairs… and that was that." He said it simply, but she heard the grief behind the calm. Orion and his mother had never been close. She'd had grand plans for her children and never let them forget how much more they could be, if

only they tried harder. Still. Loss was loss and she knew that quiet, lonely feeling all too well.

“Alright,” Orion stood and clapped his hands together. “If I don’t eat something soon, I may pass out and you’ll have to drag me to Rimehold.”

“The horror.” Meela smiled. “Should I begin fashioning a wagon from tree bark?”

“Please.” He smiled. “And if I don’t make it, be sure to honor my memory with that sass of yours. It’s what I would've wanted.”

They fell into step, the morning sun warming their backs as they walked and enjoyed the breakfast of dried meat and fruits. The forest around them was already beginning to shift. Trees grew thicker, dark in color, their bark slick with something that shimmered like oil. Even the scurrying of animals had vanished, like the whole woods held its breath. Meela drifted closer to Orion, who seemed happy to have her near.

“We’re close.”

Meela’s entire body thrummed as they stepped into the Old Forest. The air seemed to know her, curling close, thick with whispers that tangled through the canopy like threads of memory. The magic here was old—older than stone, older than names—and it pressed against her skin, sinking into her blood as if testing her claim. Heat shimmered through her veins, a resonance she couldn’t ignore. This was no forest, but a vast, waking spirit, and she felt it watching her in return. Measuring and deciding if she belonged.

She could feel her breath becoming shallow. Even Suzaar had abandoned his aerial games, staying rooted to Orion’s shoulder, both their eyes sharp and tracking any movement.

They had reached a part of the world where no one dared to settle. The forest here was older than any kingdom, the birthplace of all magic in Ronan, the wellspring from which the first spells had been drawn. Long ago, the fae had come, seeking to weave their spirits into the land and claim it as their own. For centuries they thrived, until the forest cast them out.

Stories lingered. Some claimed the forest, which held both light and darkness in its roots, rejected the fae for their radiance, upsetting the balance it guarded. Others, like Orion, believed the truth was simpler: the forest had never wanted anyone here. It had tolerated the fae long enough, but when greed crept in and they hungered for more, the forest retaliated by severing their bonds and driving them away.

Then came the orcs, a wandering people displaced by the restless fae, seeking refuge among the trees. They, too, were repelled.

The pixies lasted the longest. The druidic magic was different from the others. They never sought to reshape the land, only to live within it. They neither built nor burned, they were simply happy to share the forest alongside the towering trees, whispering to the land, singing in the canopy. And yet, even they had left. Not by force, but choice. Cities had risen, empires sprawled under the open skies.

“Meri told me that they left because they missed the sun.” Orion elaborated. “The forest was always too dense, and light barely made it to the ground.”

There were many versions of what happened in these woods, many stories passed through lips that no longer breathed. Meela could feel it all, the lingering echoes of long-lost voices, the imprint of lives, the weight of old blood seeping through the roots. The magic under her boots was deep, and unspent, swirling in unseen pools just below its surface, waiting.

She tried to ignore the feeling, she tried to tell herself it was anxiety, but it was spiraling deeper within her. A cold, crawling sensation rooted itself in her spine and threaded outwards. She felt it, like a step on her back, a fluttering feeling against her arm, a hushed whisper vanishing whenever she strained to hear it.

She inhaled deeply, trying to steady herself. “Something feels wrong,” she whispered. “I feel like someone is touching me, and I can't shake the sensation of being watched.”

Orion remained casual, but she saw the way his jaw tensed, the slight shift in how he held his staff. “I don’t want to alarm you,” he cautioned. “But we *are* being followed.”

She willed her feet to keep moving, fighting the overwhelming urge to run. “Human or creature?”

He snorted. “Human, if you want to call her that.” His voice remained calm. “Red cloak. She’s been shadowing us for a mile or so now. I wasn’t certain at first, but I caught a glimpse of her a little while ago.”

A cold dread settled in Meela’s gut. “Orion—”

His hand found hers, thumb tracing slow, grounding circles over her skin. “Before we react, I need to be sure she’s alone. We can jump if you’d prefer, but she may track us again.”

Meela swallowed, forcing air into her lungs.

“The only option I see is handling it now,” he continued. “But only if you agree.”

Every instinct told her to flee. She had known that this journey would demand blood no matter how much she wished otherwise, and she could not outrun this, not forever.

“Agreed.” She kept her voice steady.

His eyes met hers, dark and unwavering as they took her in. “Nothing happens to you, little witch. You’re my priority. You’re everything. So let’s handle this, then we can continue and get home.”

She exhaled, feeling the witch’s cloak ruffle against a tree. “She’s getting closer.”

Suzaar shifted on Orion’s shoulder, talons flexing, eyes locked onto the shadows behind her. Orion’s eyes flicked past hers quickly. “She’s holding back for now.”

Meela felt the ghostly pressure slither over her skin, brushing against her nape like breath. Her body reacted, a shudder rippling through her. “I think I can feel her,” she whispered.

Orion’s eyes snapped back to hers. “Your connection to nature is deeper here, so I’m sure your magic is more on edge.”

They kept walking, pretending nothing was wrong until a sharp snap shattered the silence. Meela barely took a single breath before Orion shoved her down as a barreling purple light tore through the space they had been standing.

“Meela, *go*!”

Suzaar shot to the sky, dodging a blast as Orion flung out his hand. A pulse of shimmering light crackled to life, surging forward like waves. It slammed into the witch, sending her flying into the air. She rose to her feet, eyes burning with rage. She moved faster than they both expected, drawing a curved dagger from beneath her cloak. It pulsed with dark magic, the blade dripped with a sickly green substance.

Orion advanced, energy crackling in his palms. He threw another blast, but she deflected with a flick of her wrist, the magic scattering against the trees, making Meela’s body flush with heat.

Meela scrambled backward as the fight escalated. Orion swung his staff, blue light rising through the wood, floating into the air while she countered with rapid strikes. Sparks of clashing magic illuminated the dark forest. She heard Suzaar’s low, screeching call as he began diving down. Meela turned

just in time to see another witch stepping from the shadows, her eyes locked on her.

The witch looked up, raising her hands. Power coiled between her fingers, aimed directly at the raven. Suzaar dodged left and right, the witch adjusting her hands, trying to find her target.

Meela's heart was hammering. *No. Please gods, no.*

A deep, guttural groan rolled through the forest.

Gnarled roots unfurled like grasping fingers, snapping up from the earth. The witch had no time to react before thick roots twisted around her arms, yanking them down. More branches coiled around her like serpents, encasing her body in an unrelenting grip. Only her face remained visible, contorted in shock as she shrieked, her limbs trapped in nature's grip.

The world was spinning, her ears ringing. Meela hadn't meant to do anything. She didn't even know how she had done it. She had barely thought *it*. She had only feared for Suzaar's life, and the forest answered.

A gasp tore through the air, and Meela looked for Orion just as he drove the other witch backward into a tree, his staff slamming across her throat. Her skull struck the trunk with a sickening crack, but Orion didn't let up. He pushed harder, holding her there as her boots scraped desperately against the earth and her fingers dug into his sleeve. Blue light crawled along the staff between them, illuminating the panic in her eyes as his free hand dropped to his thigh.

The blade flashed once before he drove it into her throat.

Blood sprayed across his cheek and mouth, spattering the black of his cloak as the witch made a wet, choking sound. Her hands flew to her throat when he pulled the blade free, blood pouring between her fingers. Orion stepped back and let her fall, her knees buckling as she slid down the tree, leaving a dark streak across the bark before collapsing at his feet. He barely looked at her.

Meela staggered back, her wide eyes returning to the witch still tangled within the roots. The branches had tightened while she wasn't looking, bark groaning beneath the strain as the woman thrashed against them.

He was in front of Meela in an instant, his hands gripping her shoulders. Blood streaked his cheek and mouth, but the coldness she'd seen moments ago was gone, his eyes searching hers with an entirely different urgency. "Are you okay?"

Meela couldn't answer.

“Meela, breathe.” His deep voice steadied her as his grip tightened. “Breathe.”

Her chest heaved as she dragged in a breath.

His eyes flicked toward the tangled witch. “You’re going to snap her in half if you keep going,” he said, turning back to her. “We should probably talk to her first.”

Suzaar landed on the branch that encased the witch's head. His talon’s tight, his eyes watching Meela as if he understood what happened better than she had. Meela had never felt power like that before. The forest answered a whim, a thought barely spoken, and it was terrifying.

The witch struggled against the roots as Orion approached. The more she fought, the tighter it constricted. Meela could feel it all, every movement, every breath. It was like touching the woman herself.

“Any others, or just you two?” Orion asked.

The witch slowly moved her gaze to Orion, and spat.

“That’s just gross.” Orion shook his head, wiping it off with the back of his hand. “Just a few questions. First, why Meela?”

The woman only snarled. Meela didn’t recognize her, and for some reason that filled her with relief. Suzaar let out a dark strangled noise, dropping lower, his sharp beak moving closer. The witch recoiled, thrashing as the roots held firm.

“What does Cora need from her?” Orion asked, voice patient as he leaned against the cocoon of living wood. Suzaar crept closer, snapping his beak inches from the woman’s face.

Meela could feel the roots shift, responding to her growing agitation. The forest no longer felt like it was watching. It was listening, waiting for her command. The realization sent a thrill through her. Whatever she asked for, the forest obliged. The roots began pushing the woman’s head forward, moving closer to the raven's beak.

Orion glanced back, approval gleaming in his eyes.

Meela fixed her gaze on the witch. She didn’t like how the woman was looking at them, like Meela was nothing but something to use and discard. She needed to know. *Why her?*

“Answer him,” Meela snapped.

The witch smiled, lips curling despite the strain in her voice. “Finally grown some teeth?” Her laugh was thin, nasal.

Meela froze. She knew that laugh. She'd heard it on her wedding day. That mocking, careless sound, while the coven stripped her down to nothing. Rage surged hot in her chest, and the roots answered without hesitation, coiling tighter until the witch's breath came in ragged gasps.

"Are you planning on answering?" Orion whispered, leaning closer, voice a low threat. "It's fine if you don't. You're dying anyway. The only choice you have left is how quickly it happens."

The witch's lips moved, but no sound emerged. Meela held her there a heartbeat longer, then loosened her grip just enough for a desperate breath to escape.

"Prophecy," the witch rasped.

"What does it say?" Orion crouched low, his voice sharp as he met the witch's eyes.

"I don't know," she gasped. "Only that she's needed to fulfill it."

Orion glanced back at Meela, watching the puzzle snap together in his mind. He turned slowly back to the witch. "Why?"

The woman's eyes darkened, sliding to Meela. "To restore us to glory."

"Are there any others nearby?"

Her breathing slowed, and a grin curled across her face. "We are everywhere."

The laugh that followed was cold and taunting. Meela didn't think before fury struck like a blade. With a sharp, sickening crack, the witch's neck twisted. Orion drew in a breath, slow, heavy. His eyes widened, then softened with something like awe. A dangerous smile curled across his mouth.

"Gods…" he whispered, almost to himself. Then, with a low laugh, "*Brutal*, little witch."

Her heart roared in her ears. She realized what she'd done only when her fingers cramped, stiff from the force. She flexed them, steadying her breath. "Sorry if you wanted to talk more," she said, her voice rough. "I just couldn't stand that laugh."

"Don't you dare apologize." His voice was dark silk. "That was exquisite."

He reached for her, turning her away from the body just as Suzaar landed on her shoulder with a sharp click of his beak. Orion knocked his staff twice against the forest floor, and the world shifted around them.

The forest disappeared, but Meela clung to one fragile hope.

That Cora would find those women. That she would understand exactly what had happened here.

She hoped Cora had loved them. She hoped she would mourn them. And if Cora believed, for even a heartbeat, that Meela would come quietly when she tried again, she was wrong.

This time, Meela would not go easily.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight



They stopped when they reached a shallow stream winding between the trees. Orion crouched at the bank and dipped his hands beneath the water, scrubbing the blood from his face. Red clouded around his fingers before the current carried it away, disappearing between the stones. Meela watched from where she sat against a moss-covered trunk, her knees pulled loosely toward her chest. There was still a faint streak of red beneath Orion's jaw. He seemed unaffected by it all, rinsing his blade in the stream before wiping it against his trousers and slipping it back against his thigh.

"Meela, you need to eat." Orion nodded towards the dried fruit again. "We've been walking a lot today. You need to keep your energy up."

She stared ahead, watching Suzaar hop along the opposite bank, stabbing his beak between the stones. It was easier than looking at Orion. Easier than acknowledging the bile burning in her throat or the remorse settling inside her, something she wasn't even sure she had the right to feel. She could still hear the branches tightening. Still see the woman's face between them.

"*Meela.*"

She barely registered his voice before Orion was crouching in front of her, his fingers catching her jaw. His grip was firm, his thumb resting lightly against her chin as he turned her toward him. Sunlight shifted through the canopy above, catching in his eyes until they looked almost golden. Somehow, he still looked beautiful. Untouched by the weight of today.

Or maybe he was just better at carrying it.

“Talk to me, please.” His voice softened, the plea in it almost undoing her.

She tried to pull away, but he didn’t let her. “There’s nothing to say.”

“Not good enough.”

“I’m a monster.” The words escaped before she could stop them.

Orion stilled.

His eyes searched hers, and for one horrible moment, she waited for something to change. For disgust to settle across his face. For him to finally see what everyone else had seen all along. Finally, he would see her for what she was. “You’re not a monster, Meela.”

“I am.” She let out a hollow laugh. “I’ve killed so many now, I don’t even know how you can stand beside me.”

Her throat burned, but no tears fell. Meela had spent too long choking them down, burying them deep where they couldn’t touch her. She had been torn apart, ripped from one life and forced into another. Forced to play a role she hadn’t chosen, forced to play her part in whatever Cora had deluded herself to believe. But what haunted her the most wasn’t even the deaths. It was how easy it had been, how natural it felt to take a life.

His hand fell, but he didn’t move away. “Nothing you do will scare me away.”

She forced herself to meet his gaze. “I don’t even feel guilty. I feel… nothing. It should scare me.” Her voice turned into a whisper. “But it doesn’t. And that should scare *you*.”

“Do you think I feel guilty about that one back there?” he asked. “I don’t. Do you think of me as a monster?”

“No.” It came without thought. Orion was many things, but never that. Even the terrible things he’d done, the ones that would look damning written in a stranger’s hand, came from a decent place.

“I’ve killed dozens more than you.” He studied her. “And I don’t feel that bad about any of them, honestly. They were in my way, so I killed them. It took nothing from me. Quite monstrous, don’t you think?”

“You’re not,” she said. “You're too good to be one.”

Orion huffed a short laugh and turned back to the path, brushing a low limb aside for her even as he dismissed her praise. “No, Meela. I’m not good at all. You love me. You care about me. You’ve softened the edges and called it truth. And I let you keep that version of me, because I love you. I care about you.” His voice dipped low. “I do not allow those parts to come

out around you. But if you asked others? I doubt they'd have much kindness to offer. Does that matter to you?"

She shook her head.

"Good." His scarred lips curved into a slow, wicked smile. "And I don't care if people have pretty words about you either. In all honesty, I'd much prefer them keep your name out of their mouths."

He leaned in, his voice lowering into something intimate. "I care what you think of me. But I care even more about what you think of yourself. You're *not* a monster, Meela. Monsters don't mourn." His fingers brushed hers. "You made a choice. A brutal one. You saved Suzaar. Which, in turn, saved me. Frankly, we should both be kissing your feet."

"It's not just her, though."

She didn't need to say the rest. He knew. The weight of what she'd done wasn't what hollowed her out. It was the dissonance of living in a life that no longer fit. Time had twisted strangely since everything shattered, her memories returning in fragments she hardly recognized. A word from Suzaar. The cadence of Orion's voice when he said her name. Little threads tugging her toward a version of herself that still felt like a stranger. A woman who had laughed easily and loved without fear.

Some days, Meela felt like she was wearing another woman's skin.

Orion noticed. He always noticed. Every time she pulled away from his touch or went quiet beneath his affection, she saw it in his eyes. He never said anything, never pushed, but she could feel him watching her now like she was something fragile, something he was afraid might break if he held on too tightly.

"Meela, stop counting Heath and Alex," Orion said. "You didn't make that choice, it was forced upon you."

"It doesn't feel that way."

"It doesn't have to." He shifted closer. "That doesn't make it less true."

"You're allowed to change your mind about me, Orion," she mumbled. "I'm not the same woman you fell in love with. You used to look at me—"

Orion didn't let her finish. "I'm not the same man. Don't compare us at eighteen and now. This has changed us both. My heart hasn't changed about you, little witch."

He turned to face her fully. "I like the woman standing in front of me. I like that your spark has turned into fire. You've grown, Meela. You speak your mind now, without hiding, without fear of being seen. The woman

beside me has lived through horrors I wish you'd never faced. And yet, after all of it, you're still the same Meela I fell for all those years ago. Still kind, resilient. Still funny. Only now… you understand the world in a way we never did back then. You see the gray between good and evil."

Something deep inside her cracked at his words.

"The younger you would hate the man I am now. But I like what we have. It's real, it's honest. Yeah, maybe a little fucked up. But it's us," he admitted quietly. "I loved you then. I love you now. And I'm going to keep falling in love with the woman you're still becoming."

The air shifted. Meela felt it before she saw it, a deep hum of magic pulsing beneath her feet, different from the wild, ancient heartbeat of the forest. Her breath caught. Orion's eyes softened beside her, telling her he felt it too.

"We're here," he said.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine



The entrance to Rimehold rose before them, an ancient oak, its bark layered and spiraled as though grown from a thousand careful enchantments. Every groove shimmered faintly, woven through with the memory of centuries-old spells. At its heart glowed a soft, cerulean light, pulsing like a heartbeat. Orion had warned her she would feel a hum beneath her skin, a quiet buzzing that tested the soul, weighing whether she was worthy to step inside. His fingers tightened around hers, a wordless reassurance, before he drew her forward.

Stepping inside was like stepping into another world. Sunlight poured over the grounds, illuminating students draped in deep blue robes as they moved in clusters. Magic crackled in the air, taking shapes in dazzling bursts, fire and water from hands, familiars darting between their masters. A deep, rumbling roar echoed across the academy, the source unseen but powerful enough to make her breath catch.

The academy itself was circular, rising in tiered levels that grew smaller the higher they went, each level opening to grass where more students gathered. It reminded Meela of the cake she and Meri had baked for Orion's graduation, which now made perfect sense.

Scattered throughout the grounds older stone buildings stood, their weathered walls shimmered with protective runes. Meela's gaze followed the swirling blue symbols faintly on the ground.

"I would avoid stepping in those."

A warning sharp enough to make her cautious of her next steps, whatever they did, she had no desire to find out firsthand. Suzaar had stayed close, though Meela could feel his desire to take to the sky. The magic in the air was tempting for even him.

Just as she began to steady herself against the flood of sensation, three figures approached at a brisk pace. Orion slowed, and she almost collided with his back before his hand reached for hers again, whether to comfort her or himself, she couldn't tell.

"Orion. What a pleasant surprise." A petite woman, who was about their age, led the trio. Her voice was void of any warmth. "I'm sure you're here to return what was stolen."

There was something familiar about her, but Meela couldn't place her. She didn't need an introduction to know this woman was in charge. Authority clung to her as sharply as the long, fitted blue coat she wore. A crisp white shirt and a brown vest hugged her small waist, every line precise. Her dark, sleek hair was bound neatly back, and her ice-blue eyes hadn't so much as flicked in Meela's direction.

"Headmaster," Orion drawled as he pulled down his hood and let the fabric drop from his mouth, a smirk planted on his face. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Don't insult me, Scarrow." Her expression didn't move. "The texts you removed from the archives a month ago. You, out of everyone, know those books cannot leave school grounds."

Before he could respond, the headmaster raised a hand. The two men flanking yanked the satchel from Orion.

"Nothing was taken without permission, Carmen. Phaio gave them to me."

"They aren't the professor's to give." Her brow furrowed as the men rifled through the empty bag. Her lips pressed together, and for a moment, it almost looked like she might smile. "You'll get it back. Why are you here then?"

"To see me, of course." A new voice interjected. It was rich, and filled with amusement. Meela turned as an older man strode across the grass across from them, his pace quick despite his age. Bald, with a long, well-groomed, braided beard. At his side, an unusual mutt—or something close to it, its form flickered between solid and spectral. The man was dressed in a similar blue coat, his fastened with rubies. He put his hand on Orion's

shoulder, looking at Meela with a smile before turning to the headmaster. “Apologies, Carmen. I should have warned you of his arrival.”

“You should be apologizing for allowing a former student to steal from the academy, Phaio.”

Phaio hummed, amused. “Well, stealing implies he took them without permission.” With a flick of his hand, a large book floated from Orion’s bag, hovering in front of her. “See? No thievery here.”

The headmaster didn’t answer, only stared at Orion, her eyes narrowing as if dissecting him. At last, her gaze flicked to Meela. “Meela.”

“Oh—hello.” Meela dipped her head instinctively, uncertain how to behave beneath that piercing gaze.

A faint smirk curved the headmaster’s lips as she looked back at Orion. Whatever thought passed through her mind, she left unspoken.

Phaio’s laugh cracked through the silence like a whip. “No memories back, then?” His tone turned sharp as he looked towards Orion. “Why haven’t you surfaced them?”

Orion’s grip on Meela’s hand tightened. “Some have. That’s why we are here, I’m hoping you can help.” He hesitated, before looking at the headmaster. “I don’t trust myself to do more harm than good.”

Meela leaned in closer, and Suzaar shifted to the nearer shoulder, nudging his head against hers. She glanced up and smiled, and the raven chattered her name in reply.

“You have the night,” the headmaster said curtly. She snatched the bag from the men who had taken it and shoved it into Orion’s arms before striding away.

“That’s all we need, Carmen. Thank you,” Orion called after her.

“Headmaster,” she corrected, without so much as a glance back.

Phaio chuckled, clapping his hands together. “Well, let’s not waste precious time. I suppose you don’t remember me either, Meela. We had quite the rapport once.” He clasped her shoulders with a grin. Without waiting for her response, Phaio steered her forward. “Come along, Orion.”

“Go on, Suzaar,” Orion whispered, his fingers brushing over the raven’s head. The bird gave a sharp click of its beak before launching into the air.

As they moved through the halls, students flowed past them like a river. Many nodded in Phaio’s direction—some with greetings, others with quiet admiration reserved for a professor who had earned both love and respect.

Meela found herself gazing into the classrooms as they passed, unable to restrain her curiosity. Some were filled with students hunched over their desks, quills against parchment as professors droned on in measured tones. Others pulsed with life, laughter spilling out of the open doorways. Her magic was stirring, whispering its own language inside her. She could feel it before she saw it. They passed a grand space, its ceiling a dome of glass, allowing the sunlight to pour in like gold. Greenery thrived in every direction, vines creeping with every shift of energy. Students stood at long earthen tables, their hands caked with soil as they nurtured budding plants and whispered spells.

At the center of it all stood an older woman with a wild crown of red hair, bent over a frustrated student. Her voice held a gentle patience. Freckles brightened her face, and the tiny creases at the corners of her vivid green eyes deepened when her gaze swept the hall and landed on Meela. She gave a single, knowing nod before turning back to her class.

“Herbalism,” Orion whispered behind her. “My least favorite class.”

“Which is surprising,” Phaio said, his brows lifting as he glanced at Meela. “Given your… natural gravitation.”

Heat bloomed in her cheeks, and she quickly faced forward to follow the two men.

“Managed to be top of the class, though,” Orion added, winking as his fingers brushed hers, then laced through them.

“Ah, yes.” Phaio nodded toward a passing student, a sly smile curling his mouth. “And he truly began to soar once he met a certain silver-haired witch. I’m sure those two events were entirely unrelated.”

“I would never,” Orion said, grinning.

Meela bumped her shoulder against his arm. “And just how much did I help, exactly?”

“Help?” Phaio let out a laugh. “Meela, you practically taught the class yourself.”

“Top of my class,” Orion repeated smugly. “Professor Ottalie never said a word, I think she was so impressed with you she didn’t want to interrupt the show.”

As they continued down the corridors, the dog padded ahead, leading through turn after turn until Phaio finally stopped before a heavy oak door. The classroom was grand. Rows of tables cascading toward a raised platform where a large desk sat. A great circular disk hovered from the

ceiling, shifting in slow, lazy spirals. She followed them toward another door off to the side. Here, the magic was quieter, but no less present. For a man so composed, so enigmatic, she might have expected his office to be pristine—rows of neatly bound books, candlelight flickering over meticulously organized notes. Instead, his office was cluttered with age-old tomes left open, like he paused mid-reading and chose another.

At the far end of the room, a large floor-to-ceiling window opened to the grounds above.

The mutt trotted in behind them, making a beeline for the large, cushioned bed tucked behind the desk. With a loud sigh, he flopped down.

Orion left her side and moved immediately toward the window, staring out with his hands in his pockets. The afternoon sun made his dark silhouette seem pained in light, yet the tension in his shoulders was noticeable. Phaio motioned for Meela to sit before settling into his own.

“Well, the plan was successful.” He smiled. “How are things, my friend?"

“As well as they can be,” Orion replied, without turning from the window.

Phaio exhaled softly before shifting his gaze to her. “And you, Meela? You’re back home, that must provide some sense of relief?”

“I’m fine. And yes, it has. Though, circumstances are a bit grim.”

He gave her a slow, thoughtful nod as his eyes unfocused, absorbing something unseen in their words.

“We still have to handle… *that*.” Orion offered, finally stepping away from the window and sitting beside Meela. “But without all her memories, it’s difficult to know where to begin.”

“Ah.” Phaio folded his hands together. “Well, memories or not, what is meant to happen will happen.”

Meela shifted in her chair, the weight of the conversation settling heavily on her. Phaio turned his attention to her, watching her carefully. “You’d like your memories. Why?”

She blinked, caught off guard. “Um… well, they’re mine. For one. And I need to know why Cora has done all this, what she wants from me.”

Phaio tilted his head. “Does it matter?” His tone was neither dismissive nor cruel. “I’ll help, of course,” he went on. “But sometimes a fresh perspective is all you need.”

Orion reached for her hand, leaning back in his chair. “We had the pleasure of meeting two witches on our way here,” he said, swallowing

hard. “They claimed she is needed for a prophecy.”

Phaio leaned in, resting his fingers beneath his chin. “We knew that.”

Meela’s head snapped toward Orion.

“We assumed that,” Orion corrected. “There was never confirmation.”

Phaio gave a quiet laugh and shook his head. “You had a theory, and you didn’t want to listen when I told you that was all it was.”

“Well, we know now.” Orion sighed, dragging his hands down his face. “And it helps us very little. We don’t know the prophecy, we don’t know why Meela is involved, and nothing about what happens if she follows through.”

“What do we know, Orion?” Phaio pressed.

“They’re unreliable,” Orion said after a slow breath.

“Exactly. Subject to interpretation. That is the true danger of them, Meela. The three of us could read the same passage and each walk away with a different meaning. Yet only one version is acted upon. There is only one truth.”

A slow breath slipped past Meela’s lips. It was clear they had been unraveling this in her absence, a puzzle Orion had dissected piece by piece.

Orion’s eyes darkened. He leaned back, his hand settling on her knee. “I’m sorry, Meela.” His voice softened. “Phaio knows as much as I do. We’ve spent years trying to piece this together, and the one thing we keep coming back to is that Cora must have heard or read something, *maybe* a prophecy, that would offer her something she doesn’t have.”

“Now that we know, we at least have a starting point.” Phaio rose and crossed to his bookshelf. “Let’s go over what we do know, and then we’ll work on those memories.”

Meela recounted what little she recalled, piecing together fragments of the last five years, most clouded in uncertainty.

The nights of her weddings lingered in half-formed memories. The days she had spent with Heath and Alex were a blur, slipping in and out distorted by Cora’s influence. But Alden was different. Cora had not had the opportunity to twist the truth, making her time with him the clearest among the fog.

Both men listened intently, Orion reaching for her whenever he sensed her faltering, offering silent reassurance. Phaio guided her with careful questions, never rushing her thoughts.

In turn, Orion shared what he knew. How, whenever he tried to listen in on private conversations, her words became distorted. How selective she was in those she confided in. How he found out that Meela had been put into a deep sleep, discarded like an object whenever Cora deemed her unnecessary.

“The men…” Phaio considered. "They’re not random, they must have had something you needed, Meela. You've confirmed they weren't Thuamara?”

“Neither.” Orion shook his head. “There was no common thread. They were all so different from one another.”

Phaio and Meela both waited, watching him carefully. Orion ran a hand through his hair, fingers tightening as though it might help drag the memories up with them. “The twins were always searching for men, but every time it was different. First, they only sought out craftsmen. Then, they moved on to fighters and fishermen. And then, exact opposite. Bakers, stablehands, scribes.”

Meela’s stomach twisted, as the truth of what Delphine and Maris were truly doing settled in her chest. They had never once been looking for sisters. They were simply hunting for the men Meela would kill. Phaio listened, rising occasionally to retrieve books, stacking them high on his desk.

Orion’s voice became low, his eyes focusing on the tiled floor. "Then I saw the ritual, the…” he trailed off, unwilling to put it to words. “I barely got away when I did. I was so distracted I didn’t even notice the group of them closing in on me. I had to get out once Suzaar got hurt.”

“And then, Alden. And this.” Phaio finished for his friend. He stood behind, resting a hand on Meela’s shoulder. “You were brave, running when you did. Trusting your instinct."

Meela said little. What could she say? She was caught between two versions of her life. One just out of reach and one filled with buried truth.

Phaio nudged the stack of books toward them. “Some light reading,” he offered, trying to lighten the air. “Best to stay on school grounds while you read. Unless you enjoy provoking the Headmaster.” He paused. “Not that she needs another excuse to be irritated with us.”

“Well I, for one, did nothing to her.” Meela frowned.

Neither of them responded.

“I didn’t,” She repeated, firmer this time.

Phaio exchanged a look with Orion, who refused to meet her gaze. “Memories are a funny thing.” Phaio smiled. “I have class soon. I’ll need time to prepare. See me this evening, and we’ll get them back.”

Orion nodded, gathering the books into his bags. He extended a hand toward Meela, leading them out of the classroom.

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Chapter Thirty



They stood in a field near the island's upper tier, where the wind carried the smell of the sea. Above them, the sky burned gold, its light striking the spires that crowned the academy. The whole place felt set apart from the world. She had never seen it marked on any map of Ronan, and with the weight of magic in the air and the wards etched into the stone, she doubted it ever was. Suzaar swept overhead, wings stretched wide as he circled, a lone shadow against the glowing sky.

"So, the headmaster?" Meela asked, finally away from prying ears.

Orion grinned, settling beneath the wide trunk of a willow. "What about her?"

She narrowed her eyes, watching him flip open one of the texts. "Something you want to share before all my memories flood back tonight?"

He gave a long sigh, tilting his head back against the bark. "Nothing to share. Carmen and I grew up together. We studied here, ran with the same friends."

Meela dropped onto the grass across from him, rummaging through her bag. "You're saying the gorgeous, accomplished headmaster just happened to dislike me for no reason?"

"I didn't say that." He rubbed the back of his neck. "We were close. She may have had feelings for me, but I told her I wanted to focus on the academy."

"And then?" Meela pushed.

“Then we took a trip to Crowmore during break. Boring week here, so a group of us went out. That’s when I saw you.”

Her hands stilled.

“I must’ve walked past your stand a dozen times,” he said, his voice softening. “Trying to come up with a reason to talk to you. I kept buying flowers I didn’t need. Anything to keep you looking my way.”

Meela raised an eyebrow. “Carmen noticed.”

He slowly shook his head. “Yeah. She didn’t say anything, not at first. But one of our friends teased me about it, and it sort of... spiraled. I’d come back to our rooms with all these flowers, and she may have thought they were for her."

Meela winced.

“Yeah.” His grim smile faltered. “It escalated when a certain pink pixie flew up while Carmen and I were walking the markets, telling me to meet you at a tavern that night. That’s when she finally put it together, where the flowers were coming from and why I had them.”

“Oh gods, Meri…” she muttered.

“I was excited,” he admitted softly, a fleeting smile tugging at his mouth. “I didn’t hide it. In fact, I think I talked about you all day. She accused me of leading her on, though I hadn’t meant to. And when it became clear you and I were together, it just… unraveled. She called it ironic, how all my studies suddenly mattered so little when it came to you.” His gaze dropped, the weight of memory pulling at him. “After that, we didn’t speak for a while. I was young, and I should’ve been more careful. I knew how she felt about me. And she was hurt. I just… gave to you everything she’d once wished I’d give to her.”

“Did you two ever patch things up? Did she and I ever talk?”

“Yeah, I mean, we shared friends… I’ve known her since I was a boy, but it was never the same. We graduated. I left. She stayed. Eventually became a professor, and when the old headmaster retired, she petitioned for the role. Which is incredible, honestly. She’s always been brilliant.”

“I cannot read another word,” Meela groaned, shutting another book with a heavy thump. “Absolutely nothing. It just goes on and on about different prophecies, *none* of which help us in any way.”

“Mm,” Orion said, his brows furrowed as his finger trailed a line of text.

She leaned back in her seat, rubbing her temples. They had moved onto the archives after exhausting the books Phaio had offered them, yet instead of answers, all she had gained was a headache and a deeper sense of helplessness. The archives were unlike anything Meela had ever seen. Towering shelves stretching high, seemingly endless. Their spines reflected the soft glow of hovering lanterns that drifted lazily through the air. Books whispered as they shifted on their own, rearranging themselves in a constant, silent shuffle.

Orion looked completely at home, lost within a fortress of books. Four lay open around him, his dark eyes moving with quiet precision from one to the next. His hair was rumpled from his own restless hands, a dried quill forgotten behind his ear. Every so often, his teeth caught on his lower lip, a fleeting habit that was driving her mad. He looked frustratingly good, enough to make her want to climb into his lap and steal his attention for herself.

Those strong ink-stained hands moved across the parchment with infuriating ease, veins flexing beneath his skin as he cross-referenced without pause. Meela had tried speaking, complaining, really, but he only gave a distracted hum, unwilling to surface from the world he’d buried himself in. Still, she couldn’t help watching him, tracing every movement, memorizing him in this unguarded focus.

As if he felt the pull of her gaze, his quill stilled. His eyes lifted, finding hers, and for a heartbeat he simply looked at her. A faint curve touched his mouth before he turned back to the page. He said nothing, but the silence was charged enough to make her reach for another book.

This one was filled with intricate diagrams, circles within circles, symbols she didn’t recognize. The text was equally frustrating, it seemed like it was shifting itself as she read, like this book refused to be understood by anyone deemed unworthy. She flicked a finger in irritation, the ink retreated like a startled creature before settling back into place. *Prophecies were fickle things*, Phaio had warned.

She hadn’t realized how fickle. And as the day continued on, she was really starting to hate that word.

The more they read on, the more it became clear that there would be no answer written inside these tomes. If this had been foretold to Cora alone, as she suspected, there would be no amount of reading that would steer her to the answers she sought. She was spinning out of control again, being led by where Cora wanted her. She had no idea if this prophecy was left to interpretation, or if it was rigid. Worse, she had no idea if the choices she was making were guiding her toward salvation or sealing her fate.

Her only hope now was unraveling the truth hidden within her past.

"I'll be back," Meela muttered, standing suddenly, her nerves fraying with every passing moment. She wove through the endless shelves, her fingers grazing the spines as she passed. The texts were bound in materials she didn't recognize—some smooth as glass, others pulsing with fur. She swore one hissed at her when she reached for it.

Meela adjusted around tables where students huddled in conversation, scratching across parchment, careful not to disturb their focus. A small smile tugged at her lips as she imagined Orion in those same robes, his expression determined and serious, soaking up the knowledge with the same intensity he did now. She wondered what a student like him might be doing if she hadn't loved him, if she hadn't dragged him into the storm with her.

She turned down another row, nearly stumbling into a pair of students, lost in one another, their mouths locked in fervent embrace. Meela quickly turned around, biting back her smile. Her feet carried her further, up a spiral staircase. The deeper she wandered, the more the air changed. She paused at a dusty plaque that sat above a shadowed row.

The Marginalia Collection

Meela took a deep breath as she stepped inside, the silence swallowing her whole. The shelves were packed with tomes bound in dark leather, their titles etched in ancient tongues. She trailed her fingers along the binding, scanning the names until she stopped.

A crescent moon entwined with ferns.

The symbol was unmistakable. She had seen this hundreds of times before, it was etched on Cora's grimoire. Her fingers hovered over the symbol, her thumb tracing the embossed edges of the silver lettering: *Legacies and Losses.*

The pages told of covens that had thrived, others that had fallen, their legacies reduced to whispers in the margins of history. Each passage wove

tales of betrayals, wars, and alliances. Magic wielded as both shield and sword. Centuries ago, a war raged that was so devastating, entire covens had been dragged into the conflict, forced to wield their powers in service of a mortal king. The king, desperate for victory, had gathered women for his court, demanding that their magic tip the scales in his favor. But in doing so, they had unknowingly shattered a delicate balance. The natural and unnatural. Magic ran rampant, it was uncontrollable and unchecked.

The earth itself began to recoil. Forests withered, rivers dried, and the sky remained an unmoving slate of gray, causing crops to fail and cities to starve.

The kingdom, once thriving, began to wither alongside the never-ending war.

Desperate, one coven pleaded. Not to any king, but to the stars.

It was the moon that answered.

The celestial force offered aid, but at a price. The coven, once free to dance and commune beneath the moonlight, could no longer be trusted to govern themselves. Not after what they had allowed. From that moment forward, their fate would no longer be in mortal hands. The stars would choose the leaders. Not by blood, nor will, nor desire. The moon, the goddess herself, would decide who held the coven’s power.

The women, desperate to restore balance, agreed.

The passage ended abruptly. Meela frowned, flipping through the remaining pages, but the story's conclusion was missing, just faint mentions of the coven in other scattered records.

“Finding everything you need?”

Meela snapped the book shut, looking up toward the voice that startled her. The headmaster leaned against a shelf, watching her with a guarded expression. “Not really,” she admitted, letting out a bitter laugh. “Same circle as always.”

“I see.” Carmen hesitated. She seemed at war with herself, her eyes focused on a spot on the floor.

Meela tapped her finger against the book, restless and unsure herself. She tried not to imagine her with Orion, tried to recall any moments with her in them. “Orion and I will be leaving tomorrow, we’re just waiting for Phaio to finish his class.”

Carmen nodded, a small, almost nostalgic smile tugged at her lips. “His lectures always ran longer than scheduled. I should probably bring that up.”

She huffed a laugh. “I hated his class, don’t tell him that.”

Meela smiled, despite herself. “What does he teach?”

“History.”

“Oh.” She glanced at the endless shelves around them, filled to the brim with knowledge of their past. “Yeah, I can see how that might be a little… dry.”

“Orion loved it. He used to stay late just to get a moment to talk to him.”

Meela’s eyes softened, easily imagining that.

“I used to think he’d be the one here.” Carmen went on. “He could’ve been Headmaster one day. He’s caring, driven, adored. Then he met you, and suddenly he was gone at the first excuse.”

There it was. The weight, the blame. Like Meela had stolen some brighter version of him that belonged here. And worse, some part of her feared Carmen wasn’t wrong.

“I’ll be sure to pass on your disappointment,” Meela said. “It will keep him sleepless.”

Carmen seemed surprised at her response and shook her head. “I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry. Which is what I came to say.”

“Some apology,” Meela muttered, crossing her arms and leaning back in her chair.

Carmen swallowed, and slowly approached. “I was jealous of you. I worked myself to the bone. If I did everything right, if I could keep up with his mind, *maybe* I’d get his attention.” She let out a small breathy laugh. “And then he met you, a girl who worked at a flower stand. And suddenly, Orion Scarrow was completely smitten.”

“Is this an apology?” Meela asked. “Because it’s sounding like you're just finding new ways to insult me.”

“I was awful to you,” She admitted. “I wanted you to feel as empty as I did when I saw you together. He would show you off, and it felt like he did it on purpose. I thought he had lied to me, that he strung me along and let me go when he found you.”

Meela’s throat felt tight. “Is there a but?”

“But then I met my husband.”

Oh.

For the first time, Carmen truly smiled. It was small, but real. “I finally understood what Orion had tried telling me years ago. What love was. That he didn’t know why it was you, just that he knew it was. How it happens

and suddenly your entire world shifts. I wanted to be far from here." She chuckled. "Travel the continents, see everything there was to see. And then I met Khol, and that plan meant nothing. It was almost laughable at the thought of leaving."

Carmen finally met her eyes. Meela sat there, unsure of what to say. "Over the years, I'd see Orion coming here, to talk to Phaio, endlessly searching for answers. For you. And it was so easy to envision myself doing that for Khol. It made me realize what if one day I never saw you again. What if I never got the chance to apologize. Meela, I'm sorry."

Meela glanced down at the book in her hand, feeling a rush of emotion. "You're forgiven… I think?" Meela shrugged, a small laugh escaping.

Carmen laughed with her, breaking the tension. "It's really nice to see you again. It's nice to see some light in my friend's eyes again, to see his smile."

"Khol. He works here too?"

"He's head of the Department of Creature Care. Most of the beasts are sick or injured, but we give them sanctuary. Through their healing, it allows us and the students to understand them better."

Meela could hear the love in her voice, how proud she was of him. A softness that only came out when speaking of someone you adored.

"That's incredible," Meela said, suddenly aware of how much life this place held beyond the ink-stained pages. "I heard a loud roar when we first arrived."

Carmen chuckled. "That was Lightlok, our dragon. Khol had found her and managed to get her back here."

"I've never seen one up close." Meela's breath hitched, excitement curling in her chest.

Carmen tilted her head, amusement filling her expression. "Few have. It's been amazing to watch her, she's temperamental but trusts him. Before you leave tomorrow, I'll take you to meet her."

The idea filled her with childlike wonder. She could already imagine it. The massive creature resting within the grounds, scales gleaming, eyes tracking. "I'd love that."

Carmen studied her, then dipped her head. "Well, I won't keep you. Tell Orion. He'll know where to find us."

"Where are we going?" Orion approached, looking between them.

Carmen gave him a smile, patting his shoulder as she walked away.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” Orion raked a hand through his hair.

Meela laughed, taking in his wide-eyed panic. “I told you I was going for a walk.”

“Oh…” He glanced down. “I apologize, I got invested in that book.”

She approached, pressing her hands against his chest. “It’s okay,” she said, leaning up to kiss him. “Don’t let it happen again, though.”

“Yes ma’am.” Orion smiled, lifting her chin for another kiss. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah… we have a date to see a dragon tomorrow.”

Orion pulled back slightly, his brows knitting together. “Okay…” he said slowly, waiting for the punchline.

“Carmen invited us.”

His face went from confusion to disbelief. “Carmen, now? What the fuck happened in the ten minutes you were gone?”

“We had a chat,” Meela said, enjoying the way that deepened his confusion.

“Gods, and?”

“She apologized. For what, I don’t know.”

“Are we sure that was Carmen? I’ve known her my whole life, and I have never once heard an apology come out of her.”

“Well, if you were here, you would’ve heard it,” she said, smirking.

Orion only stared at her like she had told him the moon was made of cheese. Meela pulled away at the thought and made her way back to the small chair in the corner, picking up the book she had read. “I found something.”

Orion leaned lazily against the shelf across from her, arms folded. “This has been a very productive time for you.” A slow smile spread across his face, his brown eyes gleaming. “Alright, little witch. Let’s hear it.”

“I was browsing, and I found this.” She held up the book, allowing Orion to read the title. “I recognized the symbol, but one story… it just pulled me in. It feels important.”

“All ears, my love.”

“A coven who made a deal with the moon.”

“The moon?” He pointed up.

“*I know!*” She threw her hands up. “I thought the same, but yes, *the* moon.”

She recounted the details as best she could, tracing the words with her fingers as she spoke. The coven had relinquished their fates to the skies, allowing the moon goddess to decide their course. When finished, Orion leaned closer, reading over her shoulder.

“And you think this connects somehow?”

“I don’t know,” Meela admitted, closing the book with a soft thud. Her eyes drifted to the insignia on the cover. “But I do know I’ve seen this symbol before. A thousand times, in my memories, in Cora’s house.”

“Can I see it?” Orion held out a hand.

As soon as she passed it to him, he ripped the pages straight from the book.

“Orion,” Meela gasped.

“Oops.” He shrugged, utterly unrepentant, as he folded the pages neatly and tucked them into his pocket.

“That book is hundreds of years old,” she scolded.

“Possibly thousands,” He corrected, unconcerned. “But your friend Carmen has students following me, and we need this more than a bunch of horny Thuamaras.”

Meela crossed her arms, glaring as he held out his hand.

“I’ll bring it back, and heal the pages, I promise. Right now, we should probably head over to Phaio's. His class should’ve ended by now.”

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Chapter Thirty-One



The class wasn’t over. They sat outside the door, and she couldn’t stop glancing at Orion. Without the black cloak, dagger and ever-present wariness on his shoulder, she could picture it. Him moving through these halls. This being his life, surrounded by teaching and endless knowledge.

“It’s nice seeing you here,” she said softly. “This place suits you.”

Orion huffed, shaking his head. But Meela caught it, the way his lips twitched, the faintest hint of a smile. “Been talking too much to Carmen. I hate coming here.”

Meela turned back to the books lying in her lap, her fingers absently tracing the edges. The waiting gnawed at her. For days now, she had fought this feeling. This urgency to get this over with, to have the answers laid bare. And yet, with each passing second, dread settled deeper in her bones.

It was an unusual thing, to want something so badly and to fear it just as much. She took a breath, her thoughts circling back to Phaio's warning, he’d been careful with his words but the meaning was clear.

Once you know the truth, you can’t unlearn it.

She told herself that she wouldn’t willingly walk back to Cora. That now, away from her reach, she could see through the lies and could resist the pull. But some part of her, a part she hated, whispered its doubts. *What if returning to Cora really was the only answer?*

And worse, what was happening in her absence? She had spent years convincing herself that the coven’s wrath was measured. That Cora was in

full control, but what if she wasn't? What if, right this second, Maris was getting her revenge.

Her stomach twisted, the image of flames licking the wooden beams, smoke choking the air as people inside the tavern screamed. Gujek and his tusked smile, now contorted in pain as the coven tore through him, punishing him for nothing more than a simple act of generosity. What if she had left a trail of destruction in her wake, and she didn’t know it yet. She needed to believe that running had been right, but the uncertainty was a wound that wouldn’t stop bleeding.

“I can hear you thinking, Meela.”

She exhaled, shaking her head as if she could physically rid herself of the thoughts.

“Talk to me.” His hand found her knee, grounding her.

“Nerves.”

His finger brushed her thigh gently. “Of how this will feel, or what you’ll find out?”

She let out a quiet laugh. “Can I say both?”

“Fair enough.”

She rested her head against his shoulder, letting his warmth settle into her. “Carmen apologized and said she had been cruel. I keep thinking… what if that’s not even the worst part? I’m trying not to be completely terrified, but it’s hard.”

Orion hummed, considering his words. “I’ll be here, every step of the way, Meela.” His hand slipped into hers, fingers threading together. “I haven’t been with you your entire life, and there is much even I don’t know. But there was so much good, and I can’t wait for you to remember it.” She felt his smile against her cheek.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” His fingers brushed against her knuckles before tightening his grip. “You’ll get to remember people that mattered to you. You love Professor Ottalie. And Alden. And all the days and nights you spent with Meri.” His voice grew wistful. “The first time you used magic, your mother.”

Meela’s breath caught. “Yeah, that’ll be good.”

“But?” he asked, hearing the shift in her voice.

“I just hope the bad isn’t so bad that the choices I made before start to make sense.”

Orion went still, his hand closed more firmly. He leaned in, his voice low and steady. “This time, you don’t get to talk about sacrificing yourself. The moment you try, I’ll lock you in a room and toss the fucking key.”

She gave a quiet laugh, but he didn’t. He wasn’t trying to ease the moment.

“And if that’s the only option?”

His expression didn’t change. His voice turned colder. “Then fuck them all. I look forward to seeing Cora burn it all down with you at my side.”

Students passed around them, voices rising and fading. Meela stayed locked in his gaze.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

Orion stood, his hand out for hers as he pulled her inside. Phaio waited for them. When they reached his office door, he held out a hand, stopping Orion.

“Just us.”

“Not a chance.” Orion pushed forward, tension rolling off him. “I made her a promise.”

He did. Every moment since the night of the wedding, they had been at each other’s side. And now, when they were finally at the edge of what would change everything, she would walk into it alone.

Phaio didn’t budge. “Just us, for now. I wish to speak with Meela.”

“Phaio.”

“Orion.”

Meela stepped forward. “I’ll be okay.” She turned to Phaio, her voice losing the softness and warmth. “You’ll let him in after, right?” It wasn’t a question.

Phaio met her glare, with a single nod. “Of course.”

Orion’s hands clenched at his side. “The second you’re finished, you call me in.” His body was taut with resistance. Finally, he turned to Meela, cupping her cheek. His palm was rough and warm. “I'll be right behind his door, okay?”

Phaio closed the door. The sound of it clicking shut sent a jolt through her. The moment Orion was gone, the illusion of safety went with him. Suddenly, a fresh wave of doubt slammed into her. Meela took a slow breath, forcing the nerves away. Orion trusted him. That meant something. Phaio moved with measured strides, the hem of his robe whispering against

the floor. Ornate gold embroidery caught the light with every step. “Did you find anything interesting today?”

Meela shifted her weight. “Nothing that seemed to point us in any direction.”

If Orion wanted to share the full story of the coven, he could. This man probably knew most of it already.

Phaio studied her from his chair. “I can sense your fear, Meela.”

She straightened, rubbing the scar across her palm. His gaze followed the movement.

“Orion told me you gave him that same scar.” He nodded towards her hand. “That when you touch yours, he can feel you in his.” The smallest of smiles curved his lips. “Clever.” He gestured to the seat across from him. “Sit, Meela. We have a long night ahead of us and no doubt Orion will grow impatient and barge through that door within a few minutes.”

She perched at the end of the chair, her fingers drifting over the clutter on his desk. Stacks of parchment, pages filled with intricate symbols and handwritten notes. She smiled faintly, recognizing the same barely contained chaos Orion surrounded himself with.

“I feel I shouldn’t do this without reminding you once more of what’s to come. You want your memories, which is understandable. Anyone in your position would.” His finger tapped once against the armrest. “But before we begin, I’d like you to consider something.”

“Consider?”

“Ask yourself, Meela. Does it matter?”

“Does getting my memory back matter…” she said slowly. “Yes.”

Phaio remained thoughtful, watching her every move. “Why?”

She stared at him, thrown by the question. “I—”

“You’re here now,” he continued. “You and Orion have fallen into the same ways as before… perhaps even closer. You know what Cora wants. *You*. Does the rest truly matter?”

Meela felt her stomach twist. “Of course it matters,” she said, more uncertain than she hoped. “If we know more, it could get us closer to figuring out how to stop her.”

“You stop her the same way you handle any monster: by killing it.”

She stiffened.

“Don’t look so surprised, Miss Diremoure,” He went on, standing. “You knew this would end with her or you. And from what I can tell, you seem

like you want to live."

"I mean, yes. But—"

"But what?" He turned slightly, giving her a sidelong glance. "You think that by understanding her perspective, you could convince her of another way? That by knowing what she knows, even if she did misinterpret something, you could lead her to a higher path?" He exhaled sharply. "Haven't you already tried that?"

"I want them back," Meela said, looking everywhere but him.

"I promised you I'd help, and I will," Phaio said. "But I must say, this has changed you. You were different before all of this," He said. "So quiet. So quick to run from things that scared you, always watching the nearest exit. You couldn't even look at Orion without turning red, and yet even if he was doomed from the start." He smiled. "Maybe Orion saw it before we all did. You've grown into a woman I barely recognize, and I hope that once you know everything you won't throw yourself back into the same place."

Meela tensed. She couldn't be upset at him. He was voicing fears she already felt.

"You may not like what you find," Phaio said. "You may start considering things that, sitting here now, you wouldn't entertain. You left a home, friendships, love… because she convinced you it was the only path. Maybe not directly, but her actions certainly did. At the time, the choice made sense."

Silence settled between them as he sat back down.

"It's not uncommon," he said, "to feel that the world rests on your shoulders. That if you don't stand, no one will. I'm telling you this because I care, Meela." He exhaled, watching the candlelight dance. "But sadly, whether you sacrifice yourself or not, the world keeps moving. I've advised kings and queens, watched wars and gods rise and fall. It's easy to believe you're right. Yet there is no pure good and rarely pure evil. Things simply *are*. Good people can make poor choices, bad people can make decent ones. Who are we to judge when in their place we might have done the same?"

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "Maybe this is nothing more than someone seeing something they wanted and finding someone convenient to blame for why they can't have it."

"Anyway." Phaio broke the moment and leaned back. "Enough from me."

She was quiet for a moment. "Thank you, Phaio. I know I may not like what I uncover. But there's a life, people, love, friendships, you included,

that I need to remember.”

“Of course. You’re not alone. Remember that as we continue.” He sighed as he rose. “You’d think after everything I’ve seen, nothing could surprise me. But Orion’s managed to keep himself out of this room the entire time. I can practically feel him pacing out there like a caged beast.” A smile tugged at his mouth. “We should probably rescue him before he wears a hole in my floor.”

Meela turned in her seat as Phaio opened the door. Sure enough, Orion was there, pacing the floor, running a hand through his hair. He turned sharply at the sound, his brown eyes locking onto hers.

“I’m ready.”

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Chapter Thirty-Two



"So, what exactly is going to happen?" Meela asked, her voice softer than she meant, the edge of nerves still there.

Phaio hummed while sorting through his belongings, his attention only half on her. "A tingling at first, then sleep. Your body will need time to adjust. You'll wake with a headache, nothing more."

Her grip tightened on the desk, but Orion's hand was already there, wrapping around hers. He held on as if the strength could pass from him into her.

"Why are you so nervous?" she asked, brushing her thumb over his knuckles.

Orion let out a low laugh, though it came uneven. He shook his head, resting his forehead lightly against her knee. "I really don't know."

A smile curved her mouth as she slipped her fingers through his hair, grounding them both. "I'll be okay," she whispered.

He caught her hand before it could drift away, pressing slow kisses across her knuckles, sealing her words into something unspoken but certain.

"Of course she will." Phaio's voice was gentle, reassuring. "Shall we continue?"

Meela drew in a steadying breath, sitting taller. When she nodded, it was not only agreement but acceptance. "Let's do it."

Phaio stepped closer, raising a slender wand to her temple, the tip hovering just above her skin. Sharp ringing filled her ears, distant but

growing louder. It was like being submerged underwater, the world above muffled yet alive, hundreds of voices overlapping.

Every nerve in her body burned. She clung to the warmth of Orion's hand, the only steady thing anchoring her. Then, cold. A deep, bone-chilling cold that spread through her limbs like frost creeping over glass. Her body shook, breath stuttering. Orion's grip tightened. Someone called her name.

Then, nothing.

No sound.

No light.

No feeling.

She drifted in a void, weightless and unmoored, as though a starless sky had swallowed her whole.

Then came the flashes. Splintering through the darkness, fragments of life glimmering around her, waiting for her hand to reach.

And when she did…

She knew everything.

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Chapter Thirty-Three



The Lost Days

A vast field of lavender stretched before her. Her tiny hand reached toward it as she watched it grow, purple blooms spilling across the earth until they swayed in the breeze like a violet sea.

“That’s incredible, little moon!”

Meela heard her mother's voice calling from the doorway of their new home, pride shining in her green eyes. She stood framed in sunlight, a faded kerchief covering her long silver curls.

“Try this next.” She lifted her hand. A hand that always coaxed life from earth like it was second nature, twirling her fingers in the air with easy grace. From the earth, a mighty willow tree surged upward, its branches stretching toward the sky, leaves rustling like it was thanking her for life.

“Wow,” she said, her small voice filled with awe.

Her mother smiled as she crossed the field, the basket at her hip bumping with each step. She knelt beside Meela, her skirt pooling around her. “Go ahead, Meela,” she said, giving her a gentle nudge.

The smile lingered. The field blurred at the edges, darkening until Meela felt weightless.

Meela cried, her small hands balling into fists as she watched her mother tear through their small cottage, shoving their belongings into a worn leather bag. “But I like this house! I made a friend! I don’t want to go!”

“I know, sweetheart.” Her mother’s voice broke as she pulled the large grimoire from the shelf and stuffed it into the bag. “I’m so sorry, baby. But

Meela—” she crouched in front of her, hands trembling as she cupped her face. “Please, go get what you need. This next house will be even better, I promise.” She stood, spinning to run into their shared room. “You wanted to live by the water, right?” she yelled. “We will live *right* next to the sea.”

Meela’s chin wobbled as she stood frozen, tears spilling down her cheeks. “Mom. I don’t want to go.”

Her mother sucked in a sharp breath, blinking rapidly. “Baby, please.”

“Why do we have to go again?” Meela sobbed, gripping her mother’s sleeve. “Let’s stay here.”

“I’ll explain it all in time, Meela.”

She ripped open the drawer, snatching the silver pendant. She bent as she slid it over her head. “Stop taking this off, Meela. Don’t *ever* take it off.”

“Come.” She reached for Meela’s hand, gripping it tightly as they stepped outside. It was the middle of the night, but the moon was full and bright.

Meela barely had time to look back before a deafening crack split the air. Her mother’s hand raised. Meela flinched as the trees surrounding the cottage collapsed, crashing down in a tangled heap of wood and leaves.

Her mother did not look back. She squeezed Meela’s hand and pulled her up and off the ground and into her arms. “That necklace will keep you hidden. We can’t let her have you, little moon.”

Little moon.

The words lingered after her mother’s mouth stopped moving, stretching and warping. Her arms loosened around Meela, but there was nowhere to fall. The forest softened, bleeding into shadow. Her mother’s face slipped away and, for a moment, there was nothing. No ground. No body to call her own. Only the fading warmth of her mother’s hand.

Then—

“I can’t let Cora have her.” Her mother's voice frayed at the edge. “Alice, I *can’t*.”

The doorframe was cold against her cheek. Meela pressed herself into the narrow crack, peeking through. Her mother sat on the porch. Aunt Alice beside her. It had been so long since she’d seen her, when she woke to her voice she wanted to run out. Her mother’s shoulders were shaking, her face buried in Aunt Alice’s shoulder.

“It’s going to be okay.” Alice smoothed a hand over her hair, rocking her gently.

“It’s too much,” her mother's sob tore from her throat. “Talk to her, please. You’re the only one who can get through to her.”

“I’m trying, Iz. I swear. But you know how she is. Once her mind is set, it’s hard to steer her.”

“Just promise me.” Her mother pulled back. “Swear that if something happens to me—”

“Cora would never go that far,” Alice said, her eyes glassy. “She just needs time to process.”

“Promise me.” Her mother's voice became stern, gripping Alice’s arm. “Please, don’t let her take Meela.”

“I promise.”

Alice’s voice broke. Her mother's reddened eyes found hers through the narrow gap.

“Meela,”

Her lips moved, but nothing came. Hands closed around Meela’s shoulders.

“I love you so much.”

Her mother was behind her now. The door was gone. Alice was gone. They were in another home, far beyond the Wyrdwood’s reach.

“*Go*. I’m just going to give you some time, sweetheart. I’ll be there soon.”

The front door burst open, her mother’s face twisted with fear as she shoved Meela toward the back. Her bare feet hit damp earth as she stumbled into the night, the trees whispered their concerns, the branches urging her forward. She didn’t stop running until she reached an old willow, her tiny hands pressing against its rough bark. “She will be right behind me,” she told the tree.

A crash split the air. Meela flinched, peering through the swaying branches.

“Cora, let’s talk,” her mother's voice rang out, cracking with desperation. “I don’t even want it. You can have it. We can talk this out. There *has* to be another way.”

Three crimson robes surrounded the house as her mother let out a blood-curdling scream. A sharp crack echoed through the woods. The forest around them shuddered and swayed. Meela clamped a hand over her mouth, holding in her sob as the willow branches curled around her, pulling her deeper into its embrace.

Meela stepped back onto a twig that rang out through the quiet. The witches froze.

“She’s out there,” one whispered.

Their heads turned in unison. She scrambled upward, gripping the willow's branches as they lifted her higher into the safety of the canopy. She pressed her back against the trunk, her pulse hammering as she watched from above.

Cora stepped outside. “Find her.”

Meela didn’t move, didn’t breathe. She watched as the search intensified, as the deep night became pale dawn. More had come, their red robes moving like streaks of fire against the forest. They spread wide, their voices cutting through the trees like jagged knives.

Aunt Alice arrived. Meela’s heart ached at the sight of her. The soft glow of morning on her white curls as she moved. She was upset at Cora, talking in hushed tones, her sharp features locked in cold determination.

“A child cannot go this far,” one scoffed, kicking at the underbrush. “What is she, five?”

“Eight,” Alice corrected, her violet eyes scanning the treeline. Not with the detachment of the others, but with fear.

Meela pressed herself against the bark, silent tears running down her cheeks. She already knew what they hadn’t said. Her mother was gone.

“Over here!”

Meela’s head snapped up, her breath catching. They had found the safe house. The one her mother had dug beneath the roots of an old tree, hidden beneath layers of earth and magic. Meela watched as they pried it open.

A beat of silence. “Nothing.”

A violent scream tore from Cora’s throat. The air trembled as the ground quaked in her rage. Cora threw her hands out, and three ancient trees splintered and collapsed like twigs. The sound of her destruction echoed, sending the birds shrieking into the sky.

“Check the surrounding area and any towns. *Burn* them to the ground, if you must.”

“Cora,” Alice said, her voice firm, but Cora hadn’t stopped. “You lied to me tonight,” Alice’s voice cracked. “Izzy is gone. She's *dead*, Cora. Because of this. Because of *you*.”

Something shifted in Cora’s eyes, but it was gone before she allowed it to take root. “She made her choice. I’ve made mine.”

“This isn’t you.” Alice grabbed her hand.

Cora stepped in, raising a hand to Alice’s cheek to bring their foreheads together. “Oh, darling,” she whispered. “You’ve lost your way. We dreamt of this, restoring the coven to glory. You may not have the guts to do it, so I’ll do it for us.”

“*This* is glory?” Alice shook her head. “She’s a child, Cora. Your blood. Izzy is *your* sister.”

“Was.”

Alice’s breath shuddered out of her, her entire body recoiling from her in shock. Cora didn’t look back as she walked towards the house. She wanted to reach out to Aunt Alice, to call her name. The willow stopped her, its will stronger than her own. Meela moved her hand slightly, allowing a single branch to reach out, brushing against Alice’s arm. Alice flinched. She looked around, then up. Her violet eyes went wide, heartbreak flowing through them. She barely moved, only the slightest shake of her head, a desperate plea.

Stay.

Meela bit down her cries as she watched Alice turn, shoulders shaking, and walk away. Just before she vanished, Alice’s wrist twitched. Something slipped from her fingers, falling into the ground.

Meela didn’t move. Not for another full day and night. Not until the willow loosened its grasp and let her go. She crept over to the small pouch filled with coins and a note. A single word.

Crowmore.

Through aching feet. An empty stomach. Nights curled beneath trees that bent their branches around her when danger crept too close.

Crowmore.

The small city was alive in a way Meela had never experienced. The scent of spiced meats and honeyed pastries drew her in. Bodies pressed past her from every direction, the streets overflowing with people wrapped in their own lives, unaware of the girl who had wandered from the forest with nothing but grief and a handful of flowers.

“I was wondering if I’d ever see you again, little moon.”

Meela froze. The words slithered down her spine, wrapping around her ribs, pressing the air from her lungs. She turned, breath coming in short bursts as her eyes locked onto the figure before her.

An older woman, crouched at her level, her expression soft despite the sharp intensity of her violet eyes. White hair cascaded down her back in long braids, woven with tiny crystals that caught the light. Her skin was deep brown, and she was dressed in layered robes—she looked like someone who belonged to both the land and the stars.

“You look like Aunt Alice,” Meela stammered, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Alice looks like me,” the woman corrected, a warm smile playing on her lips. “And you look just like your mother.” Her voice softened. “My name is Circe. I’m not here to hurt you, little moon.”

Meela couldn’t move. The moment stretched between them. Circe’s expression shifted, and a flash of sorrow crossed her face so harsh it almost hurt to witness.

“If you’re here alone,” Circe said, her voice thick with regret, “That must mean what I think it does. Meela, I am *so* sorry.”

The lump in her throat grew too thick to swallow. She didn’t want to hear it, didn’t want sympathy.

She wanted her mother.

Circe stood slowly, the crystals in her braids catching the light as she moved. Her fingers were adorned with rings. “Come now, let’s get you home and into a bath. You’re beautiful, sweetheart, but you reek.” A chuckle rumbled in her chest, rich and genuine despite the grief woven through her words. Meela hesitated, only a moment, before taking her hand. Circe’s grip was firm, warm in a way she hadn’t realized she missed. As Circe led her through the streets, she greeted others as they passed, her long robe brushing the ground, her staff tapping softly against the stones. She nodded to merchants, exchanging pleasantries as if she hadn’t just pulled a lost little girl from the edge of despair. Meela kept close, listening as Circe spoke of her lost coven, of the years that had passed since she last saw Alice.

“My Alice’s heart is still pure if she led you here,” Circe said, mostly to herself.

Meela bathed until her fingers wrinkled. Circe brushed her hair and fed her until the ache in her belly dulled, though the ache in her chest remained. Circe held tight as she cried in her arms. And later, they sat in front of the fire. Circe turned to her with a softness she wasn’t used to. “This could be your home, if you’d like.”

Time had found Circe.

“A flower stand, huh?” Circe mused, leaning back in her chair. “I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

Meela grinned, excitement bubbling in her chest. “Yeah?”

“Oh, goddess, yes. You were made for it, little moon.”

A strange sort of pride moved through her chest. It had been so long since she wanted something.

“We’ll have to get you a proper stand, of course,” Circe continued, “but other than that, well… you could create your own product. The markets will never know what’s coming next.”

“Exactly!” Meela sat up straighter. “And there’s that spot, down by the river. Every time I pass, I think about how much more the flowers could be. The colors, the scents… if I could mix it just right, it would be perfect.”

Circe laughed, shaking her head. “You sound just like Izzy.”

Meela’s smile flattened. She didn’t like to think about it, but she recovered quickly, nodding. Neither of them spoke about it. About her mother, or… *her*.

Circe clapped her hands together, breaking the spell. “Well, we have work to do. If you want a flower stand, we will get you just that.”

“Your flowers are my favorite,” said a small, sweet voice.

Sunlight warmed Meela’s face.

She turned behind the flower stand, a smile already forming. “Oh, thank you! They’re picked—”

“Over here!” the voice chirped.

Meela’s gaze dropped.

She blinked, scanning the market in confusion. Turning in a slow circle, her gaze landed on a tiny winged figure hovering just above the petals—a pixie with soft pink hair and bright, curious eyes.

“Oh, gosh, hello!” Meela laughed. “As I was saying, they’re picked daily.”

“I can tell. The other stand’s flowers looked dull. Yours are glowing, and they smell so lovely.”

“I don’t think we’ve met. Are you new here?” Meela asked.

“Meri,” the pixie said. “Just moved here a few days ago.”

“Meela,” she replied with an easy smile. “Welcome to Crowmore. I’d avoid going much further,” she added, nodding toward the end of the

market. “They’re dealing with a lot of wommables today, and they’ve been swatting at anything that flies.”

“Yeah… unfortunately, I know.” Meri grimaced. “I had to yell at some orcs.”

Meela laughed in surprise. “I would’ve loved to see that.”

Meri puffed up with pride. “Not so scary when they’re jumping around afraid.” She tilted her head. “Need any help?”

“Oh, no. I’m—”

Before Meela could finish, Meri zipped through the flowers, plucking away the dead petals. “My gods, woman, you’re quick!” She laughed, watching the streak of pink dart between blooms.

“We used to make a game of it back home,” Meri said, spinning in the air. “Let’s just say I’m very competitive.”

Meela grinned. “Well, tell your friends to come here. I’ve got a job for them.”

Meri gasped, pressing her tiny hands to her chest. “Meela. Are you hiring?”

“I mean…” Meela chuckled, amused by the excitement radiating off her. “If you’re willing.”

“Yes!” Meri squealed, zooming closer until she hovered right in Meela’s face.

“I’m usually up early to head to the fields, but if you want to meet me here just after sunrise.”

“I’ll be here!” Meri spun in joyful circles, her wings fluttering so fast they blurred.

Meela couldn’t help smiling. The little pixie was so full of life and love it was impossible not to let some of that joy in. She offered her hand, and Meri clasped her fingertip in both palms, shaking with surprising strength.

“See you in the morning, Meela! I won’t let you down!” She squealed before darting away, zipping between two men mid-haggle and startling them to a halt.

But the soft hum of her wings remained. Growing louder as a breeze stirred Meela’s hair.

“What do you think, too much?” Meela stepped back, tilting her head as she studied the ivy creeping along the kitchen ceiling. She lifted a hand, coaxing the vines to curl.

“No, it’s perfect,” Meri chirped from her shoulder, wings fluttering so quickly they sent a small breeze through Meela’s hair.

“The crystals from Circe would look incredible strung throughout.”

“Sometimes I swear we share the same mind, Mer.” She handed over the crystals, and Meri wasted no time weaving them among the leaves. The light caught on them like scattered stars. As they worked, Meri launched into another tale about the pixies’ grand summer solstice party.

Meri huffed. “It’s so fun. You *need* fun. And I want you there.”

Meela softened. “You should go, Meri. It’s been so long since you’ve seen them. I’d just be a distraction. I don’t want to jinx it, but Orion invited me to Rimehold for their break.”

She spotted Carmen sitting at a long wooden table, surrounded by others. She almost turned around, suddenly feeling nervous, but Carmen’s gaze found hers. With a deep breath, Meela approached. “Hi!” Her voice came out too loud in the quiet library, too eager.

Meela internally cringed, knowing she was already messing this up. Carmen’s smile never reached her eyes.

“Why are you here? You don’t go here, you don’t belong here. Did you even attend school…” She tilted her head. “*Like*, *ever*?”

“I’m sorry if I upset you.” Meela stared at the ground, throat tightening. She didn’t understand why she hated her so much. She had only ever tried to be nice. Tried to get to know Orion’s closest friend. “I’ll go.”

“Please.” Carmen stood, fist pressing into the table.

Meela turned to leave, before her tears could betray her.

“Gods, Carmen,” someone muttered.

“What?” she sneered. “Sorry, I didn’t realize you were all close with his small-town whore.”

“*Whore?*” Orion’s voice snapped. He paced the length of his room. “Who said that, Meela?”

She stayed silent, staring ahead, locking herself inside her mind.

“Please. Don’t push me out. Talk to me!”

“I’m not pushing you. You’re pushing *me*.”

“You are.” His voice rose. “You always do. You lash out. Then retreat into yourself. You do it *all the time*. Fight with me, Meela.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to answer. She wished she had said nothing at all.

“Meela.” His voice was wounded.

“I don’t know why you’re upset,” she mumbled. “I should be the one upset.”

“I’m upset because *you’re* upset and you won’t fucking talk to me. You’re hurt over something some coward who doesn’t even know you said.” His anger burned through her defenses, but she still couldn’t look at him. She’d pushed him too far. “It was Carmen, wasn’t it?” He let out a humorless laugh. “Meela, I’m standing here telling you I love you. It’s always been you.”

She knew he did, but couldn’t say it aloud. She only shook her head. Orion groaned loudly and grabbed her hand.

“Where are we going?”

This time, he didn’t answer. He led her through hall after hall until the air changed. The scent of straw and feathers filled her nose.

“Suzaar,” Orion called.

The raven swooped toward them, landing lightly on his forearm. Orion led them outside, settling beneath a tree. He gestured for Suzaar to stay close, then ran a hand down his face, exhaustion in his eyes. “Please, talk. Talk to Suzaar if you can’t face me. But for my sake… *talk*.”

Meela was the coward. The fact that he had to go this far proved it. The raven only tilted its head, watching her. He blinked toward the raven, and in a moment Suzaar’s eyes took on Orion’s gleam. The bird flew to the lowest branch, now at her eye level.

“I’m embarrassed,” she said finally. “You should be embarrassed to be with me. You might not see it, Orion, but I do. I see it in their eyes — they think you’ve lowered yourself for me. I’m not smart. I have no family. I’m weak. Cursed. And I’ve cursed you to this fate too. You have everything here. A real shot, a real future. And I…” She scoffed, “I work at a flower stand. You want to know my grand plan? Survive. *That’s it.*” She let out a bitter laugh. “That’s not much of a life, is it? And I love you so much, Orion. So much that I want more for you.”

The raven clicked its beak softly.

“Yes. I’m done.”

Orion blinked as the connection broke. He ran a hand through his hair and gestured for her to sit in front of him. “Do you know why I’m here?”

“To learn, to grow as a mage.” She’d heard it all before, from him and his mother.

Orion rolled his eyes. “Sure. But mostly because a recruiter came to town looking for students with potential. They spoke to my mom, and suddenly it was all she talked about. Pushing me to study, to get in, to be bigger than her and my father. I never had the heart to tell her I didn’t give a damn.” He shrugged. “The only time I ever prayed was the night before I got accepted, and I prayed not to. I liked our life on the farm. I never understood why she hated it so much.”

He leaned in, taking her hand. “I feel alive in Crowmore. Like I’ve gotten myself back. And you, you give me purpose. I love magic, but I can learn it anywhere. I just want to be with you.”

“I see you with those students… You look so happy.”

“I’m just as happy helping you and Meri at the stand. Watching you build your dream by the river. If all you want out of life is comfort, safety, and a flower stand, I think that’s beautiful.” Orion smiled softly. “I’m ready to listen when you want to talk about what happened before Crowmore. But moving there… that’s for me.”

“When does Orion get home?” Meri asked, flipping through one of the books Orion had brought back from his last visit with Phaio.

Snow fell heavily outside, a thick white blanket covering the land, burying her roots and trees beneath it. Meela loved the heaviness of it. Winter months in Crowmore always brought comfort. Everything rested. They had spent most of the night looking through the texts and studying the diagrams, laughing at how complicated some of them made the simplest forms of magic seem. Neither could understand how anyone learned this way. Magic came so naturally to them that the thought of sitting down with a book and studying how to feel something that just existed completely baffled them.

“He was meant to be home tonight,” Meela said, looking over the back of the chaise toward the window. “But with the snow, he may stay in Rimehold.”

“We’ll have to celebrate when he gets back. Maybe go to Alden’s for cards so we can crush you again.” She snickered.

“Oh, please.” Meela flicked her, laughing. “You two cheat.”

“No. Mr. Treeman and I just have the same mind.” She yawned, stretching her arms above her head before sliding from the chaise. “I think I’m going to head home.”

“Send me a message when you get there.”

Meela walked Meri to the door, wrapping the blanket around herself as she followed her onto the porch. Snow immediately caught in Meri's pink hair as she flew, making her look as though she had little stars scattered through it. Meela watched her fly away, waiting until she disappeared between the trees before stepping back inside.

She had only wandered around the house for a few minutes when she felt something moving through her forest. Meela stopped, listening to the familiar awareness that lived beneath her skin. There were several of them, their movements disturbing the quiet she had felt only moments before. Her hand immediately found the pendant around her neck, relief settling some of her nerves when she felt its warmth beneath her palm. She was still hidden.

An hour passed, then another, and still the hearth never sparked with Meri's message. Her home was only a few minutes away. She should have sent something by now. Meela tried to convince herself that Meri had gotten distracted, that she had arrived home and immediately fallen asleep, but the longer she stared at the hearth, the harder it became to believe.

She grabbed a piece of parchment and scribbled a message.

Did you make it home?

She tossed it into the fire and watched the flames engulf it. Still, nothing came.

Meela pulled on her boots and wrapped herself in a wool cloak. Snow crunched beneath her boots as she followed the familiar path, occasionally glancing toward the trees. She had almost convinced herself that she was being ridiculous when something large crashed through the brush ahead. Meela shrieked as a grovenbear came barreling toward her. She stumbled from its path, watching as it tore past so quickly she felt the gust of its massive body, snow flying from the moss covering its back as it disappeared between the trees.

She watched it go, her heart pounding. Grovenbears never ran from her. She turned back toward the path and saw blood. Her stomach dropped. She followed the drops, dread building with every step. The trail disappeared between the trees, and she pushed through the brush after it, her eyes searching the snow until something small came into view.

Meela ran. Her knees hit the ground beside her hard enough to hurt. Meri lay on her stomach, one arm tucked beneath her body, her pink hair spread

across the snow. Blood soaked through the back of her dress and stained the white surrounding her.

Her wings were gone. For a moment, Meela could only stare at the places they should have been.

“Meri?” Meela carefully gathered her into her hands. “No, no, no.” Meela brushed the hair from her face, searching for something. A breath. A twitch. Anything. “Come on, Mer.” She pushed her magic into her without thinking, reaching for the familiar spark of life she had felt from Meri a thousand times before. “*Please*.”

She reached into the earth beneath her knees. Into the roots sleeping beneath the frozen ground, the trees standing around her, every small piece of life tucked away from the cold. She could feel all of it. The forest opened itself to her as easily as it always had, magic rushing through her palms and into Meri.

“Meri, please.” But she couldn’t feel the pixie. A broken sound left her as she pulled her against her chest, curling over the small body in her hands. Something shimmered in the snow. A few feet away lay one of Meri’s wings, its delicate edges catching the moonlight, stained red where it had been torn from her body.

Meela stopped breathing. She hadn't wanted to believe it. But, something so cruel could only have been done by one person. She knew it as well as she knew this forest. It had been Cora terrorizing Crowmore. She had found her sanctuary. She had found Meri. And it was only a matter of time before she finally came for her.

The warmth in Orion’s brown eyes turned wild with panic. “Please.” Orion’s voice was wrecked, raw with desperation. “Do not go, Meela.”

“She killed Meri.” Her voice broke. “She wants me, not them. If I don’t go now, how long until it’s you?”

“Meela, talk to me, please. Tell me who she is. There has to be another way. Let me find another way. Why do you think she's going to listen to reason if she's already gone this far?”

“I can be convincing, and the less you know, the better,” Meela insisted.

Orion shook his head violently. “If you love me, you will not go.”

“I love you.” Her voice cracked. “So I *have* to go.”

“You won’t come back.” His voice broke. “If you leave now, this will be the last time I ever see you. Please, don’t leave me. There’s still so much life we have to share.”

Meela felt her chest cave in. He wasn't a man with empty words. If he spoke warnings, they were true. But this truth, this fate, she couldn't accept. "I'll come back, I promise."

Orion dropped to his knees in front of her, his hands trembling as he clutched hers. He pleaded with her like she was his god, like his entire existence rested in her hands. "I'm going with you then."

"Only me." Meela crouched down, pressing her forehead against his. "She won't hesitate to kill you on sight."

"And that's exactly what she's going to do to you!" Orion shot back. "Stay with me. We'll run, I don't care where. I don't care how far. I'll run with you the rest of my pathetic life. There is another way, Meela. Let us find it together."

"I'm tired of running." Her voice was quiet. "I'm tired of her pushing me out of my home."

She reached for the dagger strapped to his thigh. Meela winced as she dragged the blade across her palm. Then, she took his hand, his eyes never leaving hers, as the blade bit into his skin.

"This will be your reminder of me," she whispered. "And my promise to you."

"A pact?" he rasped, watching their blood seep together like the fates had bound them by force.

She stood, but Orion was faster. In a heartbeat, he was on his feet, slamming his back against the door. His chest rose and fell with frantic breaths. "Meela."

She looked up at him, taking in every detail. His long dark curls were tousled from running his hand through them. His eyes burned with so much love it made her ache. A scar ran through his full lips, and she reached up, cupping his face, letting her thumb trace the jagged line. Orion closed his eyes and leaned into the touch.

"Please, Meela."

His voice faded and warped. The warmth she would have recognized anywhere became the voice of a stranger.

"Meela," someone whispered. "*Meela*."

Her body no longer felt like her own. The light was too bright. The world felt unsteady, like she had just woken from a dream. She turned toward the sound and saw a man standing at the edge of the building, wrapped in shadow. His dark clothing hung in tatters and folds, stitched and reinforced

as if prepared for anything. A hood was drawn low over his head, a mask covering the rest.

Only his eyes were visible. Warm brown. Beautiful. Frantic and wild.

Meela blinked. *Do I know him? He seems familiar,* she thought.

Something about him pulled at her. She searched her mind, expecting to land on a name, but all she found was a hollow, aching void. The man raised a finger to his lips, then pointed to the treeline. A large raven perched on a gnarled branch. *Odd.*

She turned away, trying to remember where she was, what she was doing. A strange pressure built in her chest, quiet panic clawing inside her. Her body grew hot, but she trembled like she was cold. She must be tired. She hadn't been sleeping well. The dreams had been keeping her up all night.

That's all it was.

Meela looked at the plate of food in front of her, but it felt foreign. She didn't remember ordering it. She didn't even remember sitting down.

Where was I before this?

Her gaze swept the table. Cora was there, her mother's eyes fixed on her. A bird cawed. Cora's head snapped toward the sound. Delphine shook her head.

Something's not right. This doesn't feel right. It keeps happening.

A small rock struck her leg. She looked down, confused. The man had thrown it. He was still there, waving frantically for her to come.

Why is that man looking at me like that?

"Mother," Meela said slowly, the word strange on her tongue. "There is a man over there."

Cora turned her head, following her gaze. "Maris, please go see."

"My pleasure, High Priestess."

Meela looked back at the man, but his eyes went impossibly wide. Then he was gone, vanished as if he had never been there.

"No one," Maris said. "She must be seeing things."

"Sorry." The word felt foreign. She glanced down, making sure she wasn't imagining it.

The rock was still there.

"Meela."

The table was suddenly gone. Her mother stood behind her now, cold hands settling against her neck.

Meela looked over her shoulder before turning back, locking eyes with him. Her heart fluttered with hope. He was so handsome today, golden hair gleaming in the firelight, dimples forming as his smile grew.

“And let us lead the happy couple, forging their love eternally.”

His smile faded as hands seized him, yanking his arms behind his back.

“What’s going on?” Heath’s voice rose, panicked as he struggled against their grip.

“Let him go,” Meela said, turning toward her mother.

Cora did not look at her. She extended a hand toward Alice, who silently placed a dagger in her palm before lowering her head and turning away.

“You’re hurting him.” Meela surged forward, reaching for Aurora, who held him. Her body locked in place. Her limbs froze, her breath caught in her throat. “Stop. What’s going on? Why can’t I move?”

The edges of her vision blurred. Black crept in as terror choked her. “Mother, is this part of it?”

“I didn’t want to scare you, darling,” Cora said. “This is the exciting part.”

“Meela,” Heath fought against the force holding him, blue eyes wild with fear. “Meela, I—I don’t understand.”

“Someone shut him up,” Cora ordered.

A hand gripped his chin, whispering something slow. His lips moved frantically, but no sound came. His screams turned silent.

“Please, Mother.” Meela struggled against the invisible bindings.

“You’ll be let go as soon as I can trust you’ll do what’s best for the coven.”

“I would do anything for you! Just tell me what’s happening.”

“Ah, but that’s the thing, little moon.” The diadem shifted as she tilted her head. “How can I be sure? Can your heart take this? I don’t need anyone getting silly ideas.”

“Tell me, I’ll do it. Just let him go, please.” Meela sobbed, jerking against the restraints.

Cora lifted the dagger, pressing the cool blade to Meela’s lip. She smiled as she dragged it down. “I want you to take this blade and shove it right in his chest.”

“What?” Meela’s voice shook. “No. No, I can’t… I… I can’t do that.”

“But this is what the coven needs. I thought you’d do anything for us?”

Meela shook her head so hard her braid came loose. “I won’t do that. No.”

“I think you will.” Cora sighed, pressing the dagger into Meela’s hand. “Let her go.”

The unseen force vanished, and Meela collapsed, knees hitting the cool earth. The dagger was clutched in her hand.

“Do it,” Cora whispered. “This is our way.”

Meela watched Heath convulse against the magic holding him down. His chest heaved, his desperate eyes never leaving hers.

“No, I can’t.” Meela dropped the blade. “Please, another way.”

Cora grabbed the dagger. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

“It has to be her,” a voice rang out from the circle.

Cora nodded, then reached for Meela. She screamed, stumbling back. “No! No gods, no, please!”

“Help me,” Cora ordered.

Hands seized Meela from behind, pushing her forward as she thrashed wildly. “No! No! Stop, please!”

Cora leaned in, her grip on Meela’s hand bruising, her voice cold and furious. “Do it.”

Meela fought, heels digging into the earth. She kicked, her throat raw from screaming. “Help! Someone help! Please!”

Cora’s hand guided hers as the blade pierced Heath’s skin. His body convulsed, lips forming words she could not hear. Meela sobbed, shaking. “Mother, please.”

Cora’s grip never eased. The blade pushed forward. Meela felt the puncture of flesh, the pop as warmth spilled over her hands. She screamed, louder and louder, as Heath’s body jerked, then slumped forward. Cora released her. The dagger slipped from her sticky hands as she dropped to her knees, falling over his body.

Blood was everywhere, warm against her skin, soaking her dress. Someone grabbed her face. She fought against the grip. A cold glass vial pressed to her lips. She clamped her mouth shut, but hands pried them open and bitter liquid poured in.

She choked, trying to spit it out.

The world blurred, the sound faded.

Then nothing.

“Meela.” A voice reached through the dark.

One she would recognize anywhere. “Little witch.”

She liked this voice. The way it settled against her, soothing something deep inside. It wrapped around her like thread, tugging her forward, guiding her home. Each time it called her name, the thread wound tighter, reeling her through the void.

“Meela.”

Another pull.

“Please come back to me, my love.”

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Chapter Thirty-Four



Orion's face was the first thing that sharpened out of the haze. His lips curved into a small, almost disbelieving smile. "Finally."

Meela tried to push herself upright, but her body resisted, her head as heavy as stone strapped to her shoulders. She sank back with a groan, rubbing at her temples. "Fucking gods."

"That good, huh?" Orion caught her hand before it slipped away, pressing a kiss into her palm and holding it there, like he needed proof she was still with him. "I was starting to worry."

Her throat was raw when she spoke. "How long?"

"Almost two days," he said, quietly, as if the words alone still scared him. "Phaio swore it was normal, but…" He trailed off, his thumb brushing across her knuckles, betraying how tightly he'd been wound.

She let out a shaky laugh. "I feel awful."

His laugh was low, rough with affection. "Poor girl." He brushed a loose strand of hair from her face, his eyes searching hers. "Did it…?"

The memories surged like waves slamming against rock. Meela swallowed hard. "Yeah," she whispered. His grip tightened immediately, grounding her as if to keep her from being swept away. For a long while, she couldn't find words.

"I can't imagine," he said, voice breaking through the silence, "what it must feel like. Years of your life forced back all at once." He drew in a breath. "I love you."

Her hand rose, threading into his hair. "I love you too."

His eyes widened, flaring with shock and something dangerously close to breaking. And that was when it hit her. She hadn’t said those words to him again. Not once since the day everything was torn apart. She hadn’t realized how tightly she’d been holding them back until now.

She glanced around the room. They were in a dorm, its stone walls bare, a desk pushed against the far wall, and a single window overlooked the grounds. The bed was narrow, and Orion barely fit on the edge.

“Carmen found us an open room.”

His shoulders were tense, and there were dark smudges under his eyes.

“Have you slept?”

“Couldn’t.”

Meela hummed in response, shifting herself closer to the wall to make space. Orion smiled at the invitation, and after a moment's hesitation, relented. His body was solid and warm as he settled, his arm wrapping under her head and around her waist as he pulled her closer, pressing soft kisses to her forehead.

Phaio was right. She shouldn’t have been so desperate for them back. Because now she had to find a way to live with it all again. The loss, the grief, the love.

Orion had asked about the memories, if she was willing to share. For so long, the thought terrified her. The weight of them felt too immense, too tangled and painful to lay bare for another. But now, wrapped in warmth, she found she wanted to.

She spoke of Izzy. Of how brave her mother was, how they moved from town to town, never able to stay, always trying to escape her sister's shadow. How it ended with her mother’s death. Followed by her time in that willow, and her journey to Crowmore.

She told him of Alice’s quiet love, the promise she made and the only piece of future she could offer her. She shared Circe's kindness, and the relationship they forged as Meela grew.

Her voice softened when she reached him, how he had come for her, how even when her mind didn’t remember, her heart always had. And she admitted that still, even now, she couldn’t understand why Cora had made the choices she did.

Orion listened without a word. His grip tightened when her voice cracked, his thumb drawing gentle circles against her back.

And when at last there was nothing more to say, he gathered her closer. Their legs tangled, his breath slowed against her hair, steady and grounding. His hold never loosened, as if he meant to keep every piece of what she had given him safe.

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Chapter Thirty-Five



“Are you sure you’re up for this?” Orion asked, his hand twitching against hers.

“Absolutely.”

Meela looked around the courtyard, the stone pathways weaving through lush gardens filled with a strange luminous flowers that she made a mental note to come back for. She found Carmen, her striking eyes glancing between them.

“This small-town whore wants another apology.”

Orion snorted beside her, she saw his head whip in her direction, his smile growing wider than she had ever seen it, but she didn’t take her eyes off Carmen.

“Of… of course,” Carmen stammered. “Meela, I’m sorry. I feel awful. I shouldn't have—”

“You shouldn’t have.” Meela kept her expression stern. “And I accept. Whatever happened should've been handled with him. You can’t blame a girl for having good taste.”

Orion made a pleased sound, and before either could say anything she clapped her hands together. “Now show me the Wyvern.”

“Dragon,” Orion corrected.

“Same thing,” Meela shot back.

“Well, no.” Orion shrugged, dropping it.

“They’re very different.” A voice rumbled behind them.

Meela turned, finding a man built like a fortress. He had bronzed skin and dark hair with scruff covering his jaw.

“Dragons have four legs, live in the southern hemisphere. Wyverns, much smaller, two legs, stay up north.” He grinned, an easy confidence that softened the sheer size of him. “You must be Meela.” He extended a paw of a hand. “Khol.”

Khol nodded toward Orion.

“This dragon… Carmen said it had been hurt.”

“She was,” Khol confirmed, walking towards Carmen. “Pretty common for these beasts. They’re extremely territorial. My team and I found her. She’s making a good recovery though.”

Before Meela could ask more, Khol reached for Carmen, dragging her close.

“Guy is half-giant, good *gods*.” Orion leaned in, his voice low with amusement.

Meela smirked up at him. “You have similar builds.”

Orion pressed a hand to his chest. “Ouch.”

Meela barked a laugh. “Oh, *you’re* fine.”

Khol threw them a look over his shoulder, grin sharp. “Alright, lovebirds, follow me. You wanted to see a dragon, let's not keep her waiting.”

They fell in step behind him and Carmen, weaving through winding paths bordered by enclosures. Creatures Meela had never dreamed of filled the sanctuary. Hundreds of species shifting in the light. Some basked in the last warmth of the sun, their scales glinting gold and bronze. Others curled in nests of stone and moss. In the far corner, a cluster of beasts sprawled across an icy pen, snow drifting from their hides as if they carried their own winter wherever they went.

Khol narrated as they walked. Orion was enthralled, slowing every few steps to gawk at a creature or pepper him with questions.

“Why didn’t you ever show me this?” Meela poked Orion’s arm.

“This is new,” Carmen answered. “We’ve been working on it for about a year now, it finally feels like it’s coming together.”

They had just passed an enclosure where a group of antlered hares bounded effortlessly over rocks when Orion came to an abrupt stop, eyes wide with childlike wonder.

“Oh, that’s Hoothoot,” Khol said next to him.

“*Hoothoot?!*” Orion’s mouth dropped open, shaking his head as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You’re fucking with me. Its name is really Hoothoot?”

The griffin was magnificent. Sleek golden feathers catching the sun, deep brown fur rippling over its hindquarters as it strode forward without hesitation. It pressed its beak into Orion’s chest with a low trill, feathers fluffing in a familiar, affectionate greeting.

Orion made an undignified sound that was half-laugh, half-gasp, his hands diving into the creature’s thick mane of feathers. He turned toward Meela, eyes wide and gleaming like a boy at his first festival.

“She likes you,” Khol chuckled. “I think.”

“I want one,” Orion declared, his laugh bubbling out with unrestrained joy.

Carmen snorted, folding her arms. Orion caught the sound and flicked a look at her, brows drawing together as a smirk began to form. Meela could see the cutting remark about to take shape. She pressed both palms against his back and shoved. “Bye, Hoothoot,” she said brightly. “Dragon time.”

Orion stumbled forward with a laugh, still glancing back longingly at the griffin. He leaned over his shoulder, voice pitched low and dramatic. “I’ll write.”

“Oh gods.” Meela groaned, shoving him again. “Move.”

They moved further, heading towards the farthest enclosure where jagged stone spires jutted into the sky. The temperature shifted, now a dry climate. A deafening roar split the air.

Meela yelped, latching on Orion’s arm, who smiled down at her. A shadow moved across the cracked earth ahead. As they stepped forward, the full scale of the creature came into view. The dragon was enormous, its scales a deep, iridescent black that shimmered violet in the light. Its wings were folded, but one hung lower than the other. The dragon’s horns curved backward, giving her an almost regal appearance, but the slitted, golden eyes were calculating. Her tail flicked once, sending up a small cloud of dust.

Khol grinned. “This is Lightlok.”

Orion stepped forward, with no concern. “She’s gorgeous.”

The dragon let out a low, rumbling growl as she brought her head lower. A puff of smoke came out of her nostrils. Orion only grinned wider.

“You probably shouldn’t be so close.” Meela said.

Khol chuckled, stepping beside Orion. “Eh. She likes confidence.”

“Perfect,” Carmen said. “Orion has always been too dumb to be afraid.”

Orion shot her glare, raising his middle finger before turning back to the creature who watched him with interest.

Khol stepped to the gate. He lifted his hand as Lightlok dropped her head, leaning into his touch. “I was sent to retrieve something completely different. But while we were hiking back, I heard the sounds of a nasty fight and then her screams. It took days to reach her.”

“It seems like she’s healing okay?” Orion noted, tilting his head.

“She is. Recovering fast, aren’t ya, girl?” He rested his forehead against the dragon's snout. Lightlok stood there, closing her eyes for a moment. “Mostly nerve damage. Could’ve been worse, but right place, right depth. She’s a fierce fighter, she held her own.”

“Will she stay here?” Meela asked.

“That’s her call.” He stood back, brushing the dust off his hands. “When she flies again, she’s free to go. We’ve gotten enough data, and a beast like her shouldn’t stay caged. Do you guys want to meet her properly?”

“What do you mean?” Meela looked at him, then Carmen.

Khol simply smiled, nodding his head toward the dragon.

“Yes.”

“No.”

“No, Khol. I cannot deal with a death on the academy grounds.” Carmen groaned.

“Oh, come on.” Khol raised his hands. “Is Orion the only one brave enough? You have a chance to meet a *dragon*, and you’re gonna stand all the way back there?”

He extended his hand towards Meela. “Be brave, Meela.”

She swallowed, watching the dragon as it watched Orion’s every move. She grabbed Khol’s hand, allowing him to pull her forward. The closer she got, the more she could feel its presence, the heat radiating off her scales. Meela extended her hand. Lightlok lowered her snout, nostrils flaring. Then, slowly, Lightlok dipped her head even lower.

Khol stiffened beside her. Meela was too afraid to make any sudden moves. “What’s happening?”

“She’s never done that before.”

Meela swallowed. “What should I do?”

“Bow back.”

“You’re joking.”

“Not in the slightest.”

Its eyes remained locked on hers. Meela slowly looked over at Khol, searching for any hint of amusement, but found none. She took a single step back and bowed.

The moment she did, the wind shifted. Lightlok let out a deep, resonant sound, her powerful feet stomping against the earth. Meela had no time to react before Orion wrapped his arm around her, yanking her into his chest.

“She’s happy.” Khol laughed.

“That’s *happy*?” Orion's voice rumbled down her back.

“Come on in, it’s good for her to meet more people.”

Lightlok turned in a slow, deliberate circle. Her good wing stretched wide, the membranes catching the light, while the other stayed tucked to her body.

“Must’ve been a small dragon,” Orion mused, “The bite isn’t very big.”

Khol shook his head as the two leaned in to inspect. “Take a look from the back and tell me what you see. I’ve been needing another set of eyes.”

Orion scanned the marks carefully, then froze. Slowly, he peered at Meela around the wing, nodding for her to come over. Curious and slightly wary, she moved closer.

Nestled in the crook of Lightlok’s wing was an unmistakable, *human* bite mark. Meela and Orion exchanged a look of pure disbelief before bursting into a fit of laughter. Lightlok snorted, stepping back at their sudden outbursts while Orion held his stomach, head back as his shoulders shook. “There’s no way.”

Meela looked at him, jaw dropped shaking her head. The sheer absurdity of it made it impossible to stop their laughter.

“What’s happening?” Carmen looked between them, completely bewildered.

They tried to compose themselves, but every time their gazes met, another wave of laughter hit.

“That is a *human* bite mark.” Orion finally managed to catch his breath.

Khol only blinked. “No,” he gestured toward the dragon. “She seems tame now, but the only reason I was able to even get close with my head still on was that injury. There's no way someone got that close, let alone bit her.”

“Oh, I believe you, Khol. But those indentations are human.”

“I considered it, but there were no bodies. We looked.”

“Of course not. He walked away.” Orion shrugged.

Meela snorted. “Slid down the mountain, landed in snow, *actually*.”

“That’s right.” Orion waved a hand. “Sorry, I was a little drunk. Fuzzy on the details.”

“*You* did this?” Carmen's eyes widened.

“Gods, Car.” Orion scoffed. “Give me a little credit. Meela and I sat with a hunter at a tavern in Crowmore. He loves to tell this wild tale about fighting a dragon.”

“Said it grabbed him,” Meela added. “And his grand idea? Bite it. Claims the dragon was so shocked, it let him go.”

“And the rest, as they say, is history.” Orion leaned closer to Meela, his voice carrying theatrical flair. Carmen and Khol watched them, their expressions somewhere between disbelief and a slow realization they were not in fact making this up. Finally, Khol looked over at Carmen.

“I need to meet this hunter.”

“Come to Crowmore,” Orion smirked. “We will take you Seph's, Eamon is there often.”

Still grinning, Orion turned back to the dragon, resting a hand on her side. “I’m sorry, Lightlok. I wouldn’t have wanted that drunk to bite me either.”

The dragon huffed, flicking her tail like she was deeply offended they were reminding her and telling them what had truly happened.

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Chapter Thirty-Six



Meela hesitated when they stepped back into the Old Forest. Before, the trees had loomed, their shadows stretching long, drinking the magic from the air until it felt thin and brittle. Now the woods thrummed with a quiet vitality. The air was heavier, warmer, carrying the soft murmur of leaves that sounded less like wind and more like voices half-heard. Even the soil beneath her boots seemed to pulse, as though it carried its own hidden rhythm.

She slowed, turning in place, unable to shake the sense that the forest was watching, listening, moving with her breath.

“Did we go this way before?” she asked, scanning the trees, her voice hushed without meaning to be.

“Yeah.” Orion followed her gaze, “Why?”

She turned in circles, taking it in. “I don’t know, it feels… different.”

“Explain.”

“It doesn’t seem as dark.” Meela frowned, trying to put it in words. “It felt draining being here before.”

Orion watched her, a smile planted on his face.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I had a theory. It seems I was right.” Orion shrugged, twirling his staff.

“Explain.” She narrowed her eyes.

He mirrored her mocking expression, amused. “You were nervous to explore your gift, but now you remember what it was like before she twisted it. Harder to pretend it isn’t there anymore, my love.”

Meela stood still, focusing on the energy around her. The trees whispered, not just in the wind but in the roots below. She felt them pulse beneath her feet, as though it wished to anchor her there. She crouched, digging her fingers into the soil. The moment her skin touched the earth, something surged through her, a sharp current that made her gasp. She looked up at Orion, eyes wide.

“I wish you could feel it,” she whispered. “It’s alive.”

All around, flowers unfurled in sudden bloom, their colors spilling like paint across the forest floor. Vines crept forward, curling in welcome, while the trees swayed though no breeze stirred.

Orion exhaled, his gaze sweeping the blossoms unfurling at her feet. For a moment, he only watched her, something soft flickering in his eyes. “It is beautiful,” he admitted, voice low. “But if I let you keep at it, you’ll have the whole forest dancing for you, and Alden will wonder where we are.”

Meela shot to her feet, the energy in the forest halted at once. “Alden?”

He chuckled. “When you were out floating in the void, I figured I could make myself useful. Suzaar and I took a little trip.”

She glanced up at the raven, perched high above them. “You two can never relax, can you?”

Suzaar mimicked, “*relax,”* as he bounced on the limb he perched on.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Meela grinned.

Orion paused, lips curling in disgust.

“What?”

“You’re very excited about this.”

“Of course, I miss Alden.” She shrugged.

Orion scoffed, turning back before rolling his eyes.

“Are you jealous?” Meela smiled, nudging her shoulder to his arm.

“Am I—” He scoffed again, his tone defensive. “No. I am not jealous of *Alden*.”

“Oh, my gods,” she laughed. “You are!”

“I’m not,” he grumbled. “In fact, I personally cannot wait to see my old friend again. Now that we’ve had this pleasant conversation, I’m even more excited. You’ve just reminded me he and I have something to settle.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.” Orion grinned over his shoulder, continuing to walk through.

They moved at a quick pace, weaving through the towering trees, their footsteps muffled by the thick bed of fallen leaves. The air felt crisp, though

sunlight was barely visible through the thick canopy.

Meela let her magic unfurl in small, fleeting touches, gentle alterations to the world around them. A root slithered aside at a mere flick of her fingers, clearing their path. A neighboring tree stretched a new limb, which delighted Suzaar. He swooped low, perching on every newly crafted branch before launching into the air. Encouraged, she shaped tiny passages within the limbs. Small tunnels for him to dart between, his wings folded as he pierced through in perfect precision.

She tried, more than once, to bend wind itself, but it never heeded her call. It was a wild thing, too free to be grasped. Still, she would continue. She earned more than one glance from Orion, who seemed to approve of her persistence.

Pausing for a break, Orion offered the food from his satchel, enjoying the dried meats Khol had offered them. She rummaged through her own bag, going through the items Liri had packed. A small flask, bandages, and salve. A modest amount of dried fruit, which they had picked at throughout. And tucked at the bottom, her favorite thing.

A single raven feather.

Meela's lips twitched into a small smile as she pulled it free. The deep black sheen caught the light, revealing hints of purple and midnight blue. She ran her fingers along the edges. It brought comfort, something solid, when her thoughts drifted too far.

Orion watched from the fallen limb he had sat on. A smile tugged at his lips as he moved his hand steadily, the soft scrape of knife against the wood filling in the quiet. He hadn't commented on the feather, but she could tell it made him happy.

"How are you feeling today?"

He had asked dozens of times since regaining the memories. Each time, she brushed it off, offering a small reassurance and moving on. It was easier than admitting she wasn't sure herself.

"I'm okay." Meela forced a small smile, hoping it would still be enough.

He didn't look convinced. His brown eyes studied her, but instead of pushing he simply offered a smile and nodded, his gaze holding an unspoken promise. Without a word, he reached for her hand, lifting it to his lips, pressing a kiss to her scar etched across her palm. The tenderness sent a sharp ache through her chest.

It was a strange thing, grieving what she had already grieved. Wounds she thought were long healed now felt raw and exposed. Her mother lingered in her thoughts, an echo she couldn’t shake. She found herself reliving moments, searching for anything that would make sense of it all.

She wished she could understand her mother's struggles, wished she had been older to help carry whatever pain she tried to hide.

Her fingers drifted to her throat, grabbing the pendant she had worn since Alden’s. It was cold, and hadn’t warmed like it had in those first few days. Back then, she had simply wanted to keep it on, drawn to the sense of security it provided. Now, she was terrified to take it off.

She looked up, finding Orion watching her, the hesitation in his eyes. The war between wanting to push her, and knowing she wouldn’t budge. She knew speaking the words would make her feel better. She also knew it would ease his worry. But she was scared that once she did, she would fall apart.

And she couldn’t afford to do that yet.

She had to be strong.

There would be a time for grief later, time to sort out the emotions she was burying. But right now, she needed to keep moving, to find distractions and remind herself there was still good in this world.

“You’ve been quiet today,” Meela said. It wasn’t a question, more an observation.

“Sometimes you forget how well I know you. Meela, you aren’t okay.” His eyes held her in place, daring her to move. “I haven't been quiet. I’ve just avoided filling the space when you’re lost in your own mind. I’m—” he stopped himself. “I’m worried about you. I’m not going to tell you how to feel, but pretending you don’t is not healthy.”

“I’m fine.”

“Meela,” he said her name so softly, it hurt. “Please, talk to me. I can’t tell if you're angry, if you’re sad, or if you’re feeling nothing at all. You’re pushing me out, please don’t do that to me.”

Guilt and fear lodged in her throat. She forced it down. “I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“You don’t have to do this alone,” he pressed. “Are you thinking of your mom? Cora? Lead me in a direction.”

Her lip twitched. She stared down at her feet as she dragged her thumb against her scar. Orion looked down at his palm for a moment. He leaned

over, taking her hand in his. His thumb brushed slow circles over her skin. Meela swallowed at the touch. It was grounding and overwhelming at the same time. The wind stirred in the trees around them.

“My mom,” she admitted. “Then Cora.”

The moment her name left her lips, she felt it. The sting behind her eyes, the tightness in her throat.

“Your mom.” He nodded, giving her space to let the words settle between them. “She sounded extraordinary."

Meela let out a shuddered breath. “She was. I looked like her.”

“Really?” His voice turned eager, and warm.

“Yeah.” She smiled. “Same hair. She had prettier eyes, though. Green, like spring moss. And freckles, all across her face.”

“I love your eyes,” Orion whispered.

She blinked, caught off guard by the sincerity in his voice. She searched his face as he smiled. “I keep wondering what she would think of all of this,” Meela said. “She seemed terrified of her own sister. Even when I was a child, I felt that urgency, her fear.” She shook her head. “She told Cora she didn’t want *it*, she would give *it* to her.” Her hands curled into fists. “I just don’t know what *it* is. And worse, it wasn’t even enough for her.”

Orion didn’t speak, his eyes never leaving hers.

“I keep playing it in my head. Trying to understand what I’m missing. Phaio says it doesn’t matter, but it does. Because *I* can’t make sense of it. I can’t justify someone being that cruel. She ruined my life, she ruined my mother's life, and for what?” She let out a bitter laugh. “Was it power or simply because she could? Is she truly that desperate?”

She felt it now, the anger burning beneath her grief, bubbling up like a tide.

“All of this.” Her voice shook. “It's fucking *horrible*, Orion.”

He nodded, still silent, still listening.

“She took everything from me.” She went on, her words gaining momentum, like a storm finally able to break free. “She took my childhood, and then when I finally made something good and decent for myself. I found love, *real* love. She played me. She slaughtered her way through Crowmore knowing it would draw me out. For what? So I could kill for her?” Her hands trembled. “*And I did.*”

Her breath hitched, but she couldn’t stop.

“She killed Meri. She took you away from me. She took so many people away, and I’m supposed to live with that now?” Her voice rose, her pain now fury. “Even if she dies, she still won. I’ll never get that time back. I’ll never get those pieces of me back.”

Meela's hands came to her temples, fingers pressing hard into her skull. “I have her screams playing in my head, over and over. I hear it when I close my eyes, I hear her begging Alice to not let Cora kill her baby.” She let out a ragged breath. “And then Cora, the twisted woman she is, convinces me *she's* my mother, while she abused me. While she made me feel like I was nothing but weak and stupid. And for what, Orion? *What?!*”

The forest came alive around them. Meela's breath was coming in short. She felt raw, exposed, like every wound Cora carved into her was now laid bare.

“I can’t even focus on what the worst part is.” Her voice wavered as her fury grew brighter. “Is it that, is it my mother, the lies? Alice knew, she fucking *knew*. She made my mom that promise and turned a blind eye whenever she saw something she didn't like. And Circe? Circe knew. She would never admit it, but she was Wyrdwood. *I felt it.*”

Her vision blurred with tears. “All those years. All those people, and no one did a thing about it? Do I deserve this? Did they all know this was my path and just let me walk towards it? Was I born to be some sacrificial girl who needs to die in the perfect moment?”

Orion moved, grabbing her closer as he wrapped his arms around her.

“I can’t do this, Orion. I can’t. I’m terrified. What if I just crumble the second I see her?”

He cupped her face, pulling it up to force her to look at him. “You won’t. You’re so brave, Meela. Cora was forced to go that far because of how much you were willing to fight for yourself. I won’t let you forget who you are.”

His thumb brushed away her tears, only to be replaced with more.

“You don’t get it. If she did something to you, because of me, I wouldn’t survive it.” Her voice broke.

“If anyone understands it, it’s me,” he whispered. “Do you think I’d let her touch me? That I’d let her take me from you now that I've just gotten you back?”

“You sound so sure.”

“I am sure.” He pulled back, enough to look at her. “Cora thinks I’m your weakness, Meela. She will be coming for me. She thinks you will do anything if she threatens me. Let her believe it.”

Meela frowned, trying to catch up with the shift in his voice. “What?”

“If you want to win over her, give her exactly what she expects. If she thinks you’re weak and defenseless. Let her believe it.” His eyes hardened. “She doesn’t see the fire burning inside you, Meela.” His hands tightened, before releasing her. “Use that to your advantage. Let her think you’re the girl she left in the dark all those years ago, and then make her regret it.”

A chill ran down Meela’s spine. He was right. Cora thought she knew her. Let her assume what she wants. Let her believe she was weak and powerless. She wiped her face with her cloak. “You think I can do that?”

His scarred lips turned into a smile, his eyes filled with fire. “I know you can.”

The forest seemed to exhale with her, Cora’s shadow loosening its grip for a moment. Orion clicked his tongue, calling Suzaar closer.

“We are far enough away to jump. Are you ready to go?” His staff pulsed blue and flared to life, casting a soft glow over the forest. “M’lady?” he said with exaggerated charm, offering his arm.

Meela couldn’t help the small bubble of laughter. She rolled her eyes and linked their arms. “That was the worst one yet.”

Orion smiled, staff hovering just above the forest floor. “A laugh is a laugh.”

“Can I do it?”

He laughed. “Unfortunately not, little witch. Only I can.”

“How does it work? You just think of where you want to go?”

“I wish. There has to be a connection. I can’t go somewhere I’ve never been. Suzaar helps with that.”

“Compared to other mages, you don’t seem to use it much.”

“Are you deflecting emotions in the name of knowledge?” Orion smirked. “That’s my thing.”

“Yes. So, what? You know plenty of my magic, and I know little of yours.”

“I appreciate the honesty,” he chuckled, idly twirling the staff. “It takes a lot of energy, especially with passengers. When I was younger, I overdid it. By nightfall I’d be drained, almost magicless. Over the years I’ve learned I

prefer the journey. It gives me time to think." He glanced at her. "And I like being here with you, seeing the forest alive."

"Does anyone else know you're a softie under all those dark layers?"

"No," he whispered. "Our secret."

"So you don't need it?" Meela asked.

"It's a tool. It amplifies, keeps things stable. That's all." He shifted behind her, one hand settling at her waist to guide her forward. "Hand over mine." His arm circled hers, pulling her close. "On your count, love."

Meela grinned, fingers tightening over his. "One…"

His arm pulsed with energy beneath her hand, lifting with hers.

"Two…" She flinched as it dropped toward the ground.

A low chuckle rumbled behind her, his grip steadying.

"Three."

With a sharp crack, the world folded in on itself.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven



Suzaar let out a sharp cry, the moment they landed in open woodland. Orion moved quickly, his arm sweeping Meela behind him as the blue stone's power flared, raising the fine hairs on Meela's skin. She felt them, moving through the trees, their hands on the bark as they approached.

"In the woods on our left," Meela said. "Only one."

A figure emerged, her hands raised. "I'm not here to hurt either of you. I only wish to talk," Alice said, her voice even but laced with urgency.

Meela took a deep breath before stepping out from behind Orion. Her fingers trailed down his arm, feeling the tension coiled beneath his skin. He caught her hand in a firm grip. "Don't come any closer, Alice."

A breeze passed through the clearing, carrying the distant smoke of a hearth. Alice only looked at Meela, searching for something within her. "Meela, please. She doesn't know I'm here. I swear it, I mean you no harm. I found Alden, and—"

"Where is he?" Orion cut in.

"Here." Alden stepped from the trees. "I was coming to meet you first. I hoped to ease you into it."

Orion's head shook. "I don't believe it."

His amber eyes filled with warmth as they found hers. A slow, familiar smile pulled at his lips. It made her want to run to him, to throw herself into his arms and thank him for everything she did not yet understand. She took a step forward before Orion gripped her back.

"A few weeks ago, I would've agreed," Alden said.

“Prove it,” Orion demanded. “That you’re really him. This could be some trick.”

She looked at Alden, uncertainty creeping through her, but he only sighed, looking more annoyed than anything.

“Fine,” he said. “But Alice just found me clothes, so at least let me undress.”

Meela looked back at Alice. She had grown accustomed to Alice’s eyes sliding past her, treating her like a shadow, so the full weight of it now felt wrong.

Alden tugged his tunic over his head, his body flexing with the movement. Meela averted her eyes, aware of the heat going to her cheeks. Orion huffed out a noise, causing her to look at him. His eyes were locked onto hers, his brows slightly raised as his eyes darted to Alice.

Meela slowly turned her attention to Alice, who was now watching Alden undress, her brows lifting ever so slightly as his pants hit the ground.

“Enjoying this, witch?” Alden grumbled.

Alice's head tilted, a smile on her face as she took him in. “Good for you, tree.”

Her eyes met Orion's at the same moment he turned to her. Realization struck them both. *How long has Alice been here?* Orion was already asking the question before she did.

Alice seemed amused. “Off and on since that night. Cora wanted eyes on him and I knew you two would come eventually.”

“And you were right.” Orion’s eyes hardened. “Should we be preparing for your lover's arrival soon?”

A tense silence followed. “No.”

A sharp crack echoed through the forest, tearing their attention away. Alden’s form unraveled and reformed. His limbs elongated, bark spreading like veins across his skin, twisting into knotted wood. But even now, as he towered over them, there was no mistaking him. Beneath the gnarled bark and moss, his eyes remained.

“Happy?” the deep, resonant voice asked.

“I suppose.” Orion’s tone remained unimpressed. Though the grip on her hand, and on his staff, finally eased. “Change back.”

Meela’s head snapped toward him. His voice stayed distant, a blade laid flat. Alden sighed but obliged, shrinking until flesh replaced wood. He

rolled his shoulders and reached for his discarded clothing. The moment he tugged on his boots, Orion moved.

Something in him cracked open. A smile ghosted across his scarred lips. Suzaar lifted from his shoulder in a sweep of dark feathers and landed on Meela's shoulder, eyes narrowing at Alice. Orion let his staff drop, closing the space between them. Alden lifted an arm, clearly expecting a handshake. Maybe a hug.

Orion's fist met his jaw instead.

Alden staggered back with a strangled shout. "What the fuck, Orion?"

Meela gasped and rushed toward him. Orion only bent to retrieve his staff, expression unchanged. "Kissing her was never part of the plan, Alden." His voice held the calm of a man reminding someone to tie their boots.

Alice snorted. Orion's gaze snapped to her, all warning. "Let's talk."

Meela grimaced and turned back to Alden. "I'm sorry."

Orion's head whipped around, offended. "Don't apologize to him."

"Are you okay?" she asked, ignoring Orion.

"Fine," Alden muttered, rubbing his jaw. "I deserved that. I did what I had to do. She wasn't moving. Don't act like I betrayed you."

Orion rolled his eyes, muttering something sharp. Meela ignored him and wrapped her arms around Alden. "Thank you," she whispered against his shoulder.

He hesitated, then returned the embrace. "I'm sorry it ever came to that. Did you both do what you needed?"

"Yes," Orion answered before she could. His hand found the small of her back. "Meela will share what she wants."

"Good," Alice said softly. "This will be easier, then."



"I couldn't stop myself once I started." Alden chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. "My eating habits are different, once I returned to human form, well… I wanted it all." His cheeks warmed looking at the feast he had prepared. "Alice was able to oblige my requests."

“This smells amazing,” Orion said, already reaching for the food, piling it on both his and Meela’s plate. “Thank you, seriously.”

Alden rested a hand on Orion’s shoulder in quiet appreciation before leaning back. Meela’s gaze lingered on the two men. So utterly different, yet bound by something steady and unspoken. Orion carried sharp edges, restless energy that never seemed still. Alden was slower, immovable, like a rock in a fast-moving river. The entire walk to the cottage had been filled with their conversation, slipping easily from one thought to another as though no time had passed.

The cottage itself bore no personal touch. A single room, sparse and functional, shaped only by necessity. The only sign of magic was the people now seated inside it.

Meela didn’t know how she wanted to approach this. The anger sat heavy in her chest, but so did the understanding.

Alice had loved Cora, she didn’t need to say it out loud. She saw it in the way she held guilt in her shoulders, curling inward in a mournful way as she picked through her food.

She understood. Love makes it easy to make reckless decisions. Had she never met Orion, she would’ve run. But the thought of him being hurt had made the choice to face Cora easier to swallow. Orion had spent over five years searching, unraveling the pieces just to find a way to free her.

How could she condemn another for making desperate choices out of love?

Still, understanding did not make it hurt less.

The air in the room felt fragile. Four people bound together by love, by betrayal, by impossible choices. She would give Alice the chance to speak her truth. But she would not forget.

Orion leaned back in his chair, balancing on its back legs. “And, how did this come about?”

“I knew you were friends,” Alice’s violet eyes darted to Alden before she spoke. “It was my only chance to speak with you.”

“Alden, you were okay with this?” Meela sat forward. She didn’t mean for it to come out as sharp as it did.

Alden gave her an easy smile, then glanced at Alice. “She saved my ass. I was ready to die that night, they could’ve ended me right there, but she gave me an out.”

Orion frowned, his fingers tapping on the back of Meela's chair. "How? You were near us when most of it happened. Thanks, by the way."

Alice sighed, resting her hands in her lap. "Followed you first, I needed to make sure Meela was with you. You're welcome, by the way," she said, a small smile forming at her lips. "It was chaotic when I got back, it was easy to make the deaths look accidental."

Meela studied her. "Were they not your friends, your sisters?"

Alice's lips pressed into a thin line. "Not for a very long time, I hardly knew most of them." She met Meela's eyes again, offering a rare softness. "I keep my promises."

Barely. The thought lingered on the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed it. "Well, thank you."

Alden cleared his throat. "After all that, I went into hiding. Took the longest route I could think of to make sure no one was following me. Those two witches you saw in the Old Forest, they had been tracking me for days."

"The one wrapped in the tree? All her." Orion smirked.

Alden's brow shot up, his eyes flaring in surprise. "I've never seen a head snapped like that."

"So your powers are back?" Alice tilted her head.

Meela met her gaze. "Yes."

Orion leaned forward, arms resting on the table. "How was Cora doing it? Was it a spell or potion?"

Alice hesitated, her eyes finding Meela's before she spoke. "It took a few tries," she admitted. "Ida had to make multiple brews but it was never fully suppressed. Cora just…"

"Don't hold back now, Alice." Meela muttered.

Alice sighed. "She had beaten you down so thoroughly that it was easy to convince you that whatever you may have felt was delusion."

A sudden pressure on Meela's thigh made her blink. Orion's hand was there, firm and unyielding. Her knuckles whitened, fingertips numbing around her fork until he slid it from her grasp.

"Oh," was all she managed.

"Anyway," Alden said, cutting through the moment. "Alice brought clothing, food. Told me that she needed to protect you." He shook his head. "I didn't need much convincing. She was distraught, and in the end, we wanted the same thing."

“And you were sure that once we arrived, she wouldn’t turn us over?” Orion’s voice was calm, but every word carried weight.

“I was,” Alden replied without hesitation, his tone softening. “Hear her out.”

“All ears.” Orion’s gaze fixed on Alice, cold enough to freeze her in place. “Tell us everything. Answer every question Meela asks. But don’t think for a second I’ll forget, or forgive that you stood by while she suffered. You closed your eyes to it, and you let it happen while you warmed her bed.”

Meela didn’t want to stop him. His words were a blade, and each one found its mark. Even if Alice was here now. Even if Alden trusted her. When Meela looked at her, she no longer saw the woman she’d grown up with. She saw Cora’s closest confidant, the shadow at her side through every cruelty.

Alice didn’t flinch at his words. She simply nodded.

“There is a prophecy,” Meela said. “What does it have to do with me?”

Alice’s violet eyes burned into her. “Because we are Wyrdwood. Was your mother ever able to tell you the story?” Alice asked. “The tale of the coven and bargain with the moon?”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Orion turn towards her. His scarred lips twitched into something almost smug. “My clever little witch.” He stood from the table, reaching inside his bag. Smoothed it across the table, and looked to Alden who shook his head. Orion began reading.

“We all thought it was a story,” Alice began. “Something our mothers would tell us to help us understand the transfer of power, how we give back. None of us ever believed it, we hadn’t seen it. For decades, it was simple.”

Alice leaned forward. “Priestess to daughter, power flowing like a river. When the priestess had passed, and her eldest daughter came of age, the priestess magic would awaken.”

She stood, walking to her bag. From it, she pulled a leather-bound book Meela recognized instantly: her mother’s grimoire. She opened to a great tree, its roots twisting like veins, each branch carved with names.

“The Wyrdwood lineage,” Alice said, her finger following the tree from its roots. “Every High Priestess, recorded in an unbroken line of Diremoures.”

“Cora was next,” Alice went on. “She was already powerful beyond her years. Groomed for it, ready to take her place. The time came, and nothing.”

The word hung in the air.

“Nothing?” Meela asked.

“A strange occurrence, but magic is unpredictable. We thought maybe it was delayed, waiting for the right moment.” Alice exhaled, curls shifting as she shook her head. “And then Isabelle came of age, and the moon had made its decision.”

“Was Cora upset?” Meela asked.

“Upset?” Alice let out a dry laugh. “Oh, goddess, yes. Nearly killed her that night. She demanded your mother give her the power, fully knowing she couldn’t.”

Meela drew in a deep breath, feeling Orion’s hand on her back, his thumb rubbing slow circles.

“Looking back,” Alice said, “she wasn’t just angry, she was embarrassed. She was devoted, she was proud. While we danced under the moon, she memorized spells. While others played, she studied. After all those sacrifices, it skipped her.” Alice shook her head. “It sent her spiraling.”

Only the pop of fire broke the silence.

“For years, she changed. Some would say she turned bitter, but she was depressed, lost. She pulled away from the coven, from me. She devoted herself to mastering what she had, as if she thought if she just learned more, she would be at Izzy’s level. Time passed. The wound never healed. We are a powerful group of women, Meela. I don’t need to tell you that, I feel it radiating off you.” Alice studied her. “Izzy was a good High Priestess, but…”

“But what?” Meela whispered.

“She was as wild as the forest. She loved drinking, dancing, and traveling. She let the world carry her wherever it pleased.” Alice’s fingers drummed against the book. “She was content with who our coven was, but Cora wanted more for us, she wanted our freedom.”

“Freedom?”

Alice’s lips parted, then closed, glancing at Alden who sat silently. “When Izzy left, Cora plotted. She was never careless about it. Always watching, always listening to our sisters. She knew Izzy was a risk, she had the power, but Cora thought she wasn’t using it for what mattered.”

“So my mother just left the coven for weeks on end to drink and dance while Cora stayed back with the coven?”

Alice's sharp eyes landed on her. "We all were. Don't mistake my words. You have to understand, Meela. Those women were raised in the same house. Their lives were sheltered, bound to magic and expectations. They were shaped by the same hands and responded to their pain differently." She lifted a shoulder. "Izzy runs. Cora builds walls."

Her stomach twisted. Two sisters. Two fates. And a war brewing between them long before she was born.

"Why, though? What freedom does Cora want?"

"To command nature. Bend elements. Shape life and death. Men don't let that kind of power go. We became tools, not allies. Wyrdwoods were done with it, so we made the deal. Balanced the scales, and hid."

"And Cora wanted us to stop hiding?"

Alice nodded. "She wanted us to be seen again, and Izzy wanted to live."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

Alice studied her the way someone would examine a delicate thread, waiting to see if it would fray. "*Exactly*, and that's how easy it was to convince us. Ignore the moon's choice, follow her instead—because *she* knew better." Her gaze hardened. "But, it was never enough. Slowly, we began realizing, this wasn't about Wyrdwood. It was about respect. Cora thought she was better than Izzy, and she wanted to prove it. Then, your mother came home, pregnant. The coven was ecstatic, a new witchling. We knew you'd be fierce just like our Izzy."

"And that set her off?"

Alice slowly nodded. "Now there were two in her way. From your first breath, it was clear Wyrdwood was in you, deep as the oldest roots."

Orion's hand paused on Meela's back.

"The earth seemed to exhale when you first cried. The air lightened. The sun burned brighter. The trees…" Alice's voice faltered. "They moved, like they'd been waiting for you."

"Why not kill me then? Why the men? What's the prophecy?"

"She wanted to, but we pleaded with her. And then your mother ran. By then our coven was already fractured. Some were willing to make the sacrifice, others unwilling. I wanted freedom, but not like that. Not the way Cora meant to take it." Alice's voice faltered, her shoulders curling inward. "I loved your mother. She was my best friend. And I was in love with Cora. If anyone could change her mind, it should have been me. But my love for

her blinded me to who she was becoming. I never believed she would go so far.”

Her eyes dropped, voice lower. “The night Izzy died, the moon reminded us. It’s always there. Watching. And it saw Cora, It saw us all ignore its choice.”

Alice’s gaze lifted again, her eyes dark with memory. “Ida is a seer. She nearly died channeling its message. Her body lifted into the air, wracked with it. And when she fell —” Alice’s voice broke. “She had aged forty years in minutes.”

Meela’s stomach turned. Alice flipped open the grimoire, stopping on a folded parchment. Her fingers lingered before she looked at them and began to read.

> *Under the moon, the blood shall weave,*
> *Three must perish to receive. The first, with innocence so bright,*
> *Shall fall by choice on a starless night. The second, strong as mountain stone,*
> *Shall shatter when truth is shown. The third, who sees with wisdom’s eyes,*
> *Shall meet their end when shadows lie. The heir of moon, her blood shall spill. A binding forged by ancient will. Yet should the crescent break the chain,*
> *The moon shall wane, and chaos reign.*

“The next morning, Ida received another vision. Of you, much older, sacrificing men.”

Meela wasn’t even sure if she was breathing anymore.

“One for strength. One for innocence. And the last,” she looked over at Alden. “For wisdom.”

“Why would the moon want that?” Meela asked.

“We don’t know.” Alice shook her head. “That’s what scared us. Cora spent years digging for answers and hunting you. After that, the Wyrdwoods magic went feral. None of us could control it. I still can’t. And the longer we’re without you, the more it unravels.”

“The coven Cora has now, they’re not Wyrdwood, are they?”

“Goddess, no. When the moon made her displeasure clear, the Wyrdwood broke apart. What she’s built since is hollow. Those women who stand for nothing we ever were. They cling to blood-magic, to shortcuts, to scraps of power. Only a few of us stayed behind: Ida, the twins, Lenora… and me.”

Her mouth opened, then closed. No words able to come out. She couldn’t believe this. She had no words that would help her make sense of it all.

“You seem disgusted by what they are,” Orion said. “why stay?”

“At first, I told myself it was the only way to find Meela. I came to Crowmore once, I saw you and my mother at some dress shop, I wanted to stay.” She took a deep breath. “But I feared if I left, there would be no one to remind her of who she was, of what she could become again, if she chose it.”

Meela glanced at Orion. He met her gaze and she knew he was asking himself the same question. *What would you do if the person you loved went down a path of destruction?* The answer seemed obvious now, but Cora hadn’t fallen in a single moment. It was a slow descent. Choice after choice, until she became unrecognizable.

The thought of waking up, and no longer seeing the man she had fallen in love with made her heart ache. Seeing him, but not the soul within. Her entire body tensed at the thought. A strange, urgent pressure swelled in her chest. Goosebumps rose along her arms. Her heart pounded. She leaned into Orion, feeling faint.

“Meela, are you—”

A sudden gust of wind slammed against the windows.

A playful voice drifted through the air. “Alice…” she sang. “Where are you…”

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Chapter Thirty-Eight



Alice bolted upright, eyes wide, knuckles whitening around the book as she dragged it close. Orion's head snapped toward her. "What the fuck, Alice?"

"No one should know I'm here." Her breath shook. "I told no one."

"Well, they sure fucking found out." Orion was already moving, snatching up his staff, then Meela. "Fuck." He raked a hand through his hair. "Suzaar is still out there."

Meela stepped toward the window, pulse hammering, but Alden caught her wrist before she could lift the curtain.

"Don't," he whispered. "They may think it's just her."

A sweet, lilting voice drifted through the air. Closer now. "Meela… come play."

Orion exhaled sharply, jaw tightening. "Answers that." His gaze locked on her. A silent question, a grim promise. The room seemed to fold inward around them.

"Four against one." Alden rolled his shoulder. "Good odds."

His tone was light, but she could see his muscles tensing. He pressed his back against the wall, risking a glance outside. His entire body went rigid, and he looked at Orion.

"How many?" Meela asked, dropping to the chair.

"Six, maybe seven. I can't tell."

"How the fuck does she have that many still?" Orion paced the room, his eyes calculating.

“She has many followers, some even I don’t know. I don’t know where she found them all.” Alice replied. “Let me go out there, I can redirect them.”

Alice straightened her spine, shedding the uncertainty of the moments before. In an instant, she became the untouchable woman Meela had known in the past. Her eyes no longer held sadness, but distance.

“If it goes sideways, we have your back,” Orion said, standing behind the door.

Alice nodded before stepping outside. “Well, ladies. This is a surprise.” Her tone was sharp, cutting through the night like a blade. Meela almost felt herself shrink at the sound.

“Save it.” The voice outside was unimpressed. “Cora knows you have the book, so let's not drag it out. You’re surrounded.”

Orion straightened, rolling his neck. “Meela.” His dark eyes landed on hers. The candlelight cast shadows across his face, deepening the lines of determination. “Promise—”

“Yeah, I’ll stay here.” She finished for him.

“Promise me, we will leave here tonight together. You’re the most powerful out of all of us, you come with us.”

She expected him to tell her to stay inside. Instead, he wanted her out there. The thought turned her stomach. She had never been much of a fighter, only doing so out of survival, but this was different. This was head-on, not only protecting herself but making sure none of them died. She looked back at Alden, his hands gripping the back of his chair. He nodded towards her.

“No one sacrifices themselves tonight.”

Orion stepped closer, his finger brushing her jaw before trailing to the back of her neck, anchoring her in his grip. “You kill anyone who touches you.”

Meela exhaled. “I kill anyone who touches me.”

His forehead pressed against hers. His voice was soft, but no less intense. “I love you.”

“I love you,” she whispered, her fingers curling into his sleeve. “And I love you too, Alden.”

He huffed a small laugh. “Save it for later.”

Orion turned away, striding towards the table, as he grabbed the book and slid it into his bag.

“Orion, you can’t just—”

“Can’t I?” He didn’t look at her. “It's the High Priestess’s grimoire.”

Meela stiffened. Heat crawling up her body at the meaning. “I—”

“Hasn’t registered yet?” His dark eyes danced, the intensity pinning her in place. “Well, take a moment. Let it sink in.”

He gestured to the walls, toward the ones outside. “They’re the ones standing in your way. They want you gone. They want us *all* gone.” He stepped closer like a storm rolling in. “Are you the same Meela they think they know?”

“No, I'm not.”

Orion smiled. “You’re not, little witch.” He slung his bag over his shoulder. “This is your legacy. That is your fucking book. And the moon chose *you*, Meela." His voice dropped, “It doesn’t seem to like being second-guessed.”

Orion moved first, barely crossing the threshold before his staff pulsed with energy. A deep hum reverberated through the air, and in an instant, his hand formed the largest blue orb Meela had ever seen him summon. The glow bathed his face in an eerie light before he hurled it effortlessly toward the women speaking with Alice.

The witch had no time to react. The first hit struck her dead on, her body seized before she crumpled on the ground. Alice spun, wide-eyed.

“No need to waste time,” Orion said, blue runes floating around him, finding their next target.

Meela stumbled back, colliding with something solid. Alden’s hands found her shoulders. “It’s easier to focus on one thing at a time,” he said. “Remember who you are, Meela.”

The second his hands left her, she felt hollow. Her chest rose and fell in uneven breaths as chaos unfolded around her. She heard Alden shifting behind her, the guttural sounds of people fighting. She heard Suzaar through the night. His cry wove through the forest.

The ground felt like it was trembling beneath her feet. Her gaze snapped up, locking onto a witch prowling toward her, slow like a predator savoring the kill. Meela inhaled, her body tensing as she backed away.

“Found you.” The whisper coiled against her ear as arms wrapped around her from behind.

Meela froze, allowing herself one heartbeat of panic before she let the witch pull her closer, let her believe she’d won. Then struck. The dagger

plunged into the woman’s stomach, sinking deep enough to tear a gasp from her as she doubled over. Another set of footsteps vibrated through the earth, each one pulsing beneath Meela’s feet, and her eyes found the witch still advancing. She flexed her hand, feeling that raw pulse of life beneath her, and the earth answered.

Roots tore through the dirt and wrapped around the witch’s legs, twisting tighter as they dragged her to her knees. Meela ripped the dagger free from the woman behind her and drove it straight into her heart before she could recover.

“Fuck you,” Meela snarled.

She felt the footsteps of another, her blade ready. Blue flashed across her vision before she could react. Orion’s arms wrapped around her.

“It’s me! It’s me!” His grip was tight. “She’s not here, and I don’t want to wait to see if she’s coming.”

Her breath hitched as she scanned the carnage. Nine bodies scattered across the ground. The scent of blood and magic stained the air.

She spotted Alden’s towering form moving toward Alice. She was on her knees, slumped forward, shoulders shaking. Meela took a step towards them before Orion grabbed her wrist, shaking his head. They watched as Alden slowly approached, his form shifting with each step, like he was unsure of who he needed to be at the moment. Alice lifted her head, her eyes rimmed red as a sob tore from her throat. Alden caught her, his massive frame enveloping her.

“Where is he?” Meela asked, her eyes looking toward the darkening sky.

Orion’s lips curled into a smile as he clicked his tongue. A rustle of wings followed and within seconds, Suzaar landed on her shoulder with a scrap of skin in his beak.

Meela gagged, “Are you serious, Suzaar?”

The raven looked at her, the bloody strip dangling from his beak, before he tilted his head and swallowed.

Orion barked a laugh, swatting him away. “Oh, come on. I’ve raised you better than that.” His laugh faded into something grim as Alden and Alice approached. “Sorry about your clothes.”

Orion unfastened his cloak, handing it to him. “We should move before it’s too late,” Orion said, extending an arm toward the group. His fingers flexed on his staff, the magic already stirring. Meela stepped closer, looping her arm through his.

Alice took a step back. “There are some things I need to do first.” She placed a firm hand on Alden’s back, pushing him forward. “I’ll be fine.”

Alden didn’t budge, looking back at her. “I’m sure you will. Having backup is smarter.” He glanced at Orion. “Anyways, have you even transported this many at once?”

“Wow.” Orion’s voice was flat before he sighed. “No.”

Alden chuckled as he took a giant step back. “I’m not getting stuck in the in-between,” he waved. “You two go, we will meet up.”

Meela looked to Alice, who gave her a small nod. “Meet us as soon as you can.”

Alice smiled softly, but it left Meela unsatisfied. She closed the distance, wrapping her arms around her, holding her tight. “Stay safe.”

Alice leaned in, exhaling against her shoulder. When Meela moved to pull away, Alice didn’t let go. Finally, she loosened her hold, her hands sliding down to her wrists. “You both stay safe, too.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine



Meela anchored herself in Orion, and within a moment, they appeared in the forest. The world shifted around them as the magic settled. Her body was trembling, the rush of adrenaline beginning to wear off. Every truth had been uncovered, every memory was finally reclaimed, and it all clawed at her, threatening to break free.

Earlier was only the beginning. A small swell in the upcoming wave that was soon going to crash over her. It was coming quickly, and she knew she wasn't fully ready to face it. Orion's hand pulsed against hers.

"Stay with me a little while longer, Meela. I'll get you out soon."

She wanted to go home. Yet, they were still surrounded by ancient trees, their silhouettes sharp against the star-scattered sky. A chill clung in the air, but it did nothing to cool the fire burning in her skin.

Her head tilted back, her breath ragged as she searched for the thing she needed to see the most.

It.

The moon hung high above them, impossibly bright, cold and detached. Watching, always watching.

Her chest heaved as she looked towards it, a sob catching in her throat before twisting into something feral. A scream broke free, full-bodied and violent, ripping through the quiet night as she tore herself from Orion's grasp. She could hear him beside her, could feel his warmth, his magic flaring a pulse of blue that illuminated the trembling forest, but she couldn't

stop herself as she tore through. She screamed at the moon, at the thing that cursed her with this fate.

“Take it!” She screamed, her fingers curling into fists. “Take it! I don’t want it!”

But the moon did not reply. It stared back, silver light casting long shadows across the trees. It was silent. Uncaring.

“Meela.”

She barely heard him as the world around her trembled, the forest answering her fury. The treetops swayed violently, vines snapped free and whipped into the sky.

“You cursed me,” she yelled, her voice laced with anguish. “You’ve taken everything from me.”

The moon remained indifferent. It did not waver, it did not weep.

It watched.

Her legs buckled, the weight of it all crashing down, and the forest moved with her. Vines curling and sheltering her in their grasp as she sank lower, her body falling into the ground. “I don’t want it,” she yelled again, her mantra, her plea slowly turning into a whisper.

But she knew it wouldn’t listen, it never had. She was nothing to it. Just another in a long chain of protectors bound to its will, forced to bear this burden.

Orion’s voice cut through the storm in her mind. “*Meela*.”

His plea, his mantra.

“Call them back, baby.” His voice cracked. “Please, Meela.”

The vines shuddered. Roots began taking their place. Her power was a wounded beast. The forest was answering her grief, shielding her from anything that may want to hurt her. She couldn’t fight it, couldn’t stop it. She had been running from something that could not be outrun. The moon had decided her fate, long ago.

“It wants me dead,” she whispered.

“Don’t say that.”

She felt it when his dagger sliced through the vines. She gasped, the sensation cutting through her like it was her own flesh. She didn’t mind, it was a pain easily understood. A pain she could accept. Strong hands gripped her, pulling her from the tangled mess. Orion’s arms wrapped around her, his magic surging around them.

He carried her, gripping her tight against him before settling her against rough bark. Meela had already lost. Cora had merely been trying to quicken what was long overdue. The moon demanded a sacrifice for the coven's crimes, and it must be her.

The heir of moon.

Her fingers slowly moved to the dagger at her hip, the metal still sticky with the life she had taken not long ago. The thought settled over like a lullaby. If she ended it now, the suffering would stop. The struggle, the running, the endless ache of fighting something too large to be fought.

She took a deep breath as she stared at it.

"No!" Orion's voice cut through the night. He wrenched the dagger from her grip so hard it stung. "You do not get to do this." His voice shook with more than anger. He crouched, his rough hand seizing her jaw. "Look at me."

She did and it unraveled her. Desperation sharpened his features, the scar through his lips drawn tight. "This is not the easiest way out, Meela. You don't understand what this means, so don't get any fucked-up ideas. Understand?" His grip didn't ease. "*Do you understand?*" he asked again, voice breaking.

She nodded.

His shoulders sank. "Stay with me," he whispered, forehead to hers. "I'll pick up every piece of you later, but right now baby, I need you. We're being followed. It's you or that book."

Her breath steadied.

"Knowing Cora, it's the book," he said. "We need to hide so we can confirm which. We can't lead them anywhere else." His lips twitched in something close to a smile. "Lucky for me, I have a clever woman with me."

"Trees," she whispered. "We can hide in the trees."

"Lead the way, little witch."

Something other than despair stirred. She lifted her hand, fingers trembling, and the branches curled in answer. Orion moved her against the massive trunk, arms braced around her.

A sharp whoosh split the forest. Orion's grip tightened, his other hand clamping over her mouth. Above them, Suzaar swept low, eyes locked on something unseen.

"It's here, I can feel it."

“Mee-luh,” her name was drawn out to taunt her.

Orion pressed closer, shielding her. Meela felt them with each step, their steps slow as they wandered in search of her. She needed to do something. A plan slowly began to form in her mind. Orion saw it. His lips twitched, recognizing the spark in her eyes. He pulled back just enough to give her space, nodding once.

Slowly, she crouched low on the limb to track the two women. She waited for them to fall into step with one another. When they aligned, her finger twitched and a root coiled upward. The first woman’s foot caught, sending her sprawling toward the forest floor. Her companion reacted too late and went down beside her with a muffled curse.

One rolled over, scanning the trees. Meela let her power surge again, roots slithering over the ground to curl around their arms and hands. The vines smothered their screams, reducing them to muffled sounds as they struggled.

Meela and Orion stayed perfectly still. The forest whispered around them. Leaves rustling, the wind a faint sigh, but no footsteps followed. No voices called again.

They dropped from the branches in a smooth, practiced descent. Orion hit the ground first. Blue runes shimmered into existence at his command, floating like cold stars before he flicked his fingers in two quick, merciless shots. It should have felt cruel. Weeks ago, it would have. But Meela had learned the hard truth. Her kindness would not save her. She’d wasted too much time begging mercy from people who never intended to give it. Hoping hearts might change when they’d already decided who she was, what she was worth. And still, because she refused to kill that part of herself, she held on to the belief that change was possible. Now she understood that she could hope and protect herself.

Orion stepped over the bodies without slowing, digging through his bag until he pulled free the grimoire. Meela lingered only a breath longer, watching the stillness she’d helped create, before following him.

He reached for her hand without looking back. “Can I have some of your blood?”

“What?” The word tumbled out, her thoughts snapping back to him.

“Your blood,” he repeated. “Might be enough to break the binding. If Cora’s using blood magic, then…” He shrugged, “It’s a hunch.”

She offered her hand. He drew her closer, turning her palm upward. His blade flashed in the moonlight before grazing her fingertip. He tipped her hand, letting three drops fall to the book's cover.

The reaction was instant. Inked sigils flared green, pulsing with unnatural light, twisting like they were alive. The glow swelled, almost blinding, before the magic snapped and vanished. The book lay still in his hand, ordinary again.

Orion smirked, bringing her fingertip to his lips. His mouth was warm as he closed around the tiny cut. Her breath hitched; his eyes never left hers.

She groaned, dragging both hands over her face. "I don't care where we go, but right now? A bed sounds like the best thing in the world. And a bath. A very hot bath."

Orion chuckled and tucked the book away. "Then a bath and a bed it is, little witch. Let's pray our pal Seph has room for two stragglers, because I'm not risking sleeping at ours."

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Chapter Forty



The alley was dark, slick with rain. Ahead, the tavern glowed like a beacon in the night, and for the first time in hours, Meela felt something besides exhaustion. Laughter spilled into the street, mingling with the clink of tankards and the low hum of conversation. They ran to the side door as Orion drew a key and ushered her inside.

Warmth.

A small smile tugged at her lips. She had missed this.

Life. Energy. People of all kinds surrounding her.

At the bar, Seph looked up from pouring a drink. His eyes caught on them, and his face broke into a grin that didn't quite hide the relief in it. He moved down to the end of the counter, slipping past a pair of men locked in a drunken arm-wrestle, two mugs in hand.

"You two look like shit," he said, voice warm despite the words.

"Then we look as good as we feel," Orion replied, leaning on the bar. "Room for the night?"

"Aye." Seph wiped his hands on a rag. "Same as always. No one's stayed since you two, so help yourself."

"Thanks, Seph." Meela lowered herself onto a stool. She took a slow sip and let the noise and heat of the tavern soak into her bones.

Orion brushed a kiss into her hair, but before he could sit, a scream cut through the room. The fire popped in the pause that followed, every head turning.

A burst of golden curls broke through the crowd.

“Fucking gods,” Orion laughed under his breath. “Liri, you nearly stopped my heart.”

“Oh, you two!” She was on them in an instant. She wrapped herself around Orion first, then Meela, holding them both as if she could keep them there by force alone. Her hands framed their faces, lips scattering quick kisses over cheeks and brows.

“Gods, I’ve been so worried.” She stepped back just enough to take them in. The dried blood, the torn clothes, the exhaustion sitting deep in their eyes. Her fingers curled tighter on Meela’s shoulders, as though pressure could erase what had put it there. “Come back here all bloodied up,” she sighed. “Are you hungry?”

“No. This is perfect,” Meela said, raising the mug.

Liri gave a disbelieving snort. “Right.” She looked them over again, her lips pressing together, eyes flicking between them like she was searching for something unsaid. “Rough night?”

“You could say that.” Orion exhaled heavily, leaning back as laughter broke out behind them. “We’re heading up after this. We'll see you both in the morning.”

She kissed the crown of his head before wrapping Meela in another hug. “It’s good to see you, loves.”

When Meela turned back, Seph was watching Orion, something like worry shadowed his expression before he smoothed it away. He slid a key across the counter. “As long as you need it.”

They finished their drinks, letting the energy settle them before Orion tugged Meela toward the back stairs. The further they moved from the tavern's commotion, the quieter it became. The wooden steps creaked under their weight, neither spoke but the grip on her hand remained firm.

Suzaar flew ahead, his dark wings a blur against the dimly lit corridor, perching on the familiar door.

The room was unchanged, and Orion moved through it with ease. Shedding layers as he unpacked, reaching for fresh garments.

Meela watched him, the motion practiced. He was used to this, arriving in strange places, settling in as though they were his own. Hard days followed by making himself at home where he shouldn’t. He had a home, and because of her, he never went there.

With a flick of a finger, candles flickered to life around them. Orion crouched low by the hearth, coaxing flames to life. The glow stretched

across the wooden walls, the soft flutter of flame was the only other sound but their breath.

Meela wandered, unfastening her cloak, fatigue clinging to her like a wet cloth. The bed called to her, but she was filthy with dirt and dried blood, the scent overpowering everything else in the small space. More than anything, she wanted heat. The kind that melted away grime, the kind that reminded her she was alive.

Orion's presence warmed against her back. His hand brushed her hair aside, his lips grazing her shoulder in a featherlight kiss.

"Take a bath with me?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Meela nodded, turning around in his arms. "Please."

His eyes warmed as he pushed her hair back. A wicked grin flashed across his face before she had time to react. His arms wrapped around her in a swift motion, lifting her off the ground. She let out a startled squeal as he slung her over his shoulder.

"We'll be back, Suzaar," he called over his shoulder as he carried her down the hall, his grip firm where his hand held the back of her thigh.

"This seems unnecessary!"

Orion chuckled. "Oh, this is *very* necessary." His hand slid higher beneath her skirt, pushing fabric aside as his teeth grazed the tender skin of her thigh, then bit. She yelped, laughter spilling.

"No more walking for you tonight," he said firmly. "You do nothing but get taken care of, understood?"

Meela stilled, her fingers curling lightly against his back. "And who takes care of you?"

Orion slowed. The question landed deeper than she meant it to. His grip tightened before he eased her down onto her feet. He didn't speak at first. Instead, his hands traced down her arms, brushing the inside of her wrists before settling at her waist. "Trust me," he murmured. "This is exactly what I need."

The room was dim but warm. He lifted his hand, whispering something low, and candles stirred to life, one by one, until golden light pooled over every ledge and surface. The deep tub began to fill, steam curling upward, carrying the soft scent of dried lavender that drifted across the water.

Meela glanced back at him, a smile tugging at her lips. He chuckled, shrugging. His fingers moved to the laces of her dress, untying them slowly. The fabric slipped to the floor, leaving her bare in the candlelight. Orion

turned her with care, his hands threading through her hair, loosening her braid until it fell in soft waves.

His hungry gaze drifted over her, a smile deepening as his teeth caught his bottom lip. Meela stepped closer, fingers slipping beneath the hem of his tunic. He lifted his arms wordlessly, letting her peel it away. Lean, scar-marked strength came into view. She traced one with the tip of her finger before loosening the ties of his trousers. For a moment, they simply looked at each other, the air between them thickening.

“Get in the bath, Meela.”

She obeyed. Heat enveloped her as she sank in, seeping into every exhausted muscle, every bruise, every tight coil of worry. She pulled her knees to her chest and let the warmth hold her. Orion settled opposite her, stretching out his long legs under the water. He lowered himself with a low, quiet sigh, tipped his head back, then slipped under entirely. When he resurfaced, dark curls dripped down his face in heavy strands.

Silently, he reached for her and tugged her against his chest. She softened into him as his fingers worked soap through her hair, eyes closing when he dragged the cloth lower over her skin.

She shifted, taking her turn. Running the cloth over his shoulders, down his corded arms, across the ridges of his stomach. When she finished, her hands found the knots in his shoulders, kneading the weeks of tension.

Orion reached for the rim of the tub, replacing the water until it steamed again. They still didn’t speak, their eyes holding a quiet understanding. She moved to straddle him, fingers sinking into his hair, mapping every line of him as if grounding herself in his shape. His hands settled on her hips, steadying her, his head tipping back against the tub’s edge as if offering his whole self to her without question.

She was too tired for explanations, too drained for the right words, except one, it felt heavy and unavoidable.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. His head came up, eyes sharp on hers, his grip tightening. “I wasn’t going to do it,” she said, swallowing. “But the thought crossed my mind.”

“Please…” His breath shook as he pressed his forehead to her shoulder. “Don’t ever act on that thought. It would be the greatest tragedy.”

A lump rose in her throat. She leaned into him, cheek to his shoulder, syncing her breathing with his. Two exhausted hearts trying to match their rhythm. When the water cooled, Orion stood, wrapping her in a warm, soft

linen and tying another around his waist. He kissed her forehead, then carried her to the fire in their room. She sank before it, letting the heat dry her skin as she slowly combed her fingers through her damp curls.

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Chapter Forty-One



Her hand reached out instinctively, searching for his warmth, only to meet the chill of sheets long abandoned. Unease settled quietly in her chest as she pushed herself upright, eyes sweeping the dim room.

Neither he nor Suzaar was there.

The streets outside were silent, the sky still heavy with night. She slipped on her boots, the floorboards creaking softly beneath her weight as she eased the door open. “Orion,” she whispered into the darkness.

No answer.

She tried again.

Still nothing.

Her steps carried her down the hall toward the stairs, where a faint flicker of candlelight leaked through the crack between the back kitchen and the bar. Orion sat alone near the hearth, shoulders drawn tight, head bowed. Suzaar was in front of him, hopping in place as Orion tossed berries from a small bowl with precision.

She pushed the adjoining door open. At the sound, Orion’s head lifted, weary eyes finding hers before the tension in his features softened, the faintest smile touching his mouth.

“You weren’t in bed,” she said as she approached.

He exhaled, running a hand through his hair before reaching an arm around her hip, holding her loosely. “Couldn’t sleep.”

She didn’t comment on the shadows beneath his eyes. Her gaze drifted to the table, where several books lay open, pages crowded with scattered

notes. One, in particular, was turned to the moon's demands; beside it, a loose sheet of parchment bore his handwriting. Lines underlined, crossed out, rewritten again and again, as though he might wrestle meaning from it by sheer will alone.

Meela climbed into his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Come to bed, my love," she whispered, "We can do this tomorrow."

"I can't sleep, little witch. Trust me, I've been trying."

"Not very hard," she teased. "The bed was cold."

A small, tired smile tugged at his lips. His arms tightened around her as he let out a small breath, his face pressing into her neck. "Fine," He mumbled against her. "I'll be up in a moment."

Meela leaned back, narrowing her eyes. "Liar."

She reached back, snapping the book shut. "This is my book. I'll let you know when you can read it again."

Orion huffed a quiet laugh, shaking his head as he watched her stand. Moving around his legs, she shifted the book under one arm. "Suzaar."

The raven, smarter than his master, took flight instantly, landing on her shoulder.

"Don't forget your notes," she added, turning back to see Orion still sitting there, watching her with a small smile tugging on his scarred lips.

After a beat, he began gathering his scattered notes.

Meela waited by the door until he stood. Satisfied, she turned and started back up the steps. Behind her, she listened to his boots against the wooden floor as he followed.



She watched the slow, fleeting smiles tug at his scarred lips, each one loosening something in her chest. She wondered what dreams coaxed them forth, and selfishly wished that they were of her.

The steady rise and fall of his chest pressed into hers, his arm draped over her waist with a comforting weight. She shifted just enough to see him better. Sunlight caught in his hair, streaking the dark strands with auburn

warmth, turning the edges of him to gold. His face was softer in sleep, unguarded, the furrow between his brows smoothed away.

She drank him in.

The sun kissed his cheekbones, touched the curve of his jaw. For a heartbeat, she thought of waking him. If only to see those eyes open, knowing the light would turn them to warm honey.

Beyond their room, Crowmore was waking. Wagons rattled over the cobblestones, the iron wheels clattering in the quiet morning air. Somewhere, Liri's voice hummed the same tune Meela had heard the night before.

Her gaze wandered as the sunlight crept further into the room, spilling across the floor in lazy ribbons. The light found the desk. The grimoire sat crowded with his scattered notes on top, a glimpse of the mind she craved almost as much as his touch.

She could easily imagine Orion rubbing the sleep from his eyes, then immediately returning to that seat, so he could pore over it with the same determined focus he had last night, searching again for answers, some hidden meaning he may have missed. The thought made her smile. Maybe, if Meela were lucky, she could drag him away from those pages long enough to walk.

She was finally back home, with every piece of her intact. She couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to walk the markets again and pick up on the things she had missed previously.

Her lips brushed softly against the crown of his head. She tried not to think about it.

But, it came anyway.

The bloodthirsty moon.

A thing she once thought to be the only truly constant thing in her life.

Always there, steady and enduring.

She had taken solace in it. Searched for it. She'd lose herself in its beauty, her face turned up in awe, no matter how empty or lost she had felt. On nights when nothing else could offer her comfort, the moon was there. She had taken pleasure in strangers calling her moon-blessed, how her hair and pale skin would shine like the great star in the sky.

In the years before Cora, she would imagine her mother looking at the same moon. She held on to the thought, the knowledge that once, before the world swallowed her whole, Izzy had stood beneath the same sky, her face

bathed in the same light. Meela would lower her head, and send quiet prayers as she had watched her mother do. Back then, she believed that if she looked hard enough, she might feel closer to her. She might find a trace of her, some echo of her existence.

She took comfort in knowing that many before her and many after would one day tilt their heads and lose themselves in its beauty.

But now, the thing that was once her only refuge represented something terrible.

She was the moon's price. It wanted her blood, her life. For the future of everything, a sacrifice to rebalance the world. A sacrifice for cruel things she did not wish for.

As much as she wanted to stay tangled within Orion's warmth, she needed to take charge of every moment.

Starting with that book.

She stared at the scattered notes, the prophecy lying open before her. Beside it, loose sheets bore his hurried script. Last night, she barely wanted to look at it. But today, it tugged at her. She was the supposed High Priestess to a coven that barely existed now. A leader of ghosts. She knew almost nothing of the women who came before her. But even flipping through, she felt distant from the bloodline she had come from. She wasn't part of it, she was the aftermath left to carry the weight of their choices.

Meela found herself lost in the stories. The ink felt heavy with their sorrow and triumph, the parchment stained with the memory of blood and freedom. Wyrdwood was ancient, a lineage that stretched back farther than she could ever imagine, deeply rooted in the veins of Ronan. Their magic was an much a part of the land as the forest and trees. And now all of it was here.

Every rise, every fall, pressed between fragile pages.

She felt herself drawn deeper, her fingers brushing over the scrawl of long-dead witches. She couldn't stop the thought that not only her mother but Cora had read these same words. Poured over the same spells and stories. And along the way, those words sparked the same hunger in her, a longing to reclaim what was lost.

The women before her were fearless. They had spilled blood and woven fate, shaping the tides of power. When peace was brokered, they were there. When kings fell, they were there. They helped choose leaders, carved new

paths for other covens, any women, of any background to have choice, to have voices.

And gods, had they used them.

But they gave too much, they trusted too easily. Each choice was innocuous enough. Until the Wyrdwood women, once so revered, had become prizes. Kings killed for them, defiled their names, demanded powers as though they were mere commodities.

Daughters stolen as babes, torn from their mothers and raised far from the forest, bred and honed for battles they never should have faced.

It was no wonder why they ran, why they fled their homes and forsook their lands.

She stared at the inked names of the women who had come before her. Witches whose voices had once shaken the forest, now reduced to whispers on a page. The more she read, the more she realized she carried both their power and their sorrow in her blood.

Woman after woman, their names inked into eternity. Lines of blood and bone, sprawling like roots across the page. Another page of names falling in lines, descending through centuries of High Priestesses.

But her mother's was not there, nor was hers.

Meela stared at the unbroken line of names, her heart tightened in her chest. She half expected to see Cora’s, written somewhere in defiance, an impudent claim to a legacy she had torn apart. But not even Cora, with all her hubris, had defiled this book.

She tried to not let the anger creep in, she tried not to blame.

Now that she had read their history, Meela knew she could have been one of them. She could see herself standing there, all those years ago, listening to Cora. Her aunt’s coaxing voice, weaving her empty promise of something more.

Freedom.

Power.

She would have listened, she would have been tempted. She could not judge them for the same weakness she might have once shared. But she would not shame her mother either. She refused to let her grief turn cruel. She would not condemn Izzy for running, for not making the choices she had. She had survived the best she could, that was all.

But she could no longer follow in her mother’s footsteps. She would no longer run, not from this.

She would face this.

Last night, she had sunk to a low she had never known and never wanted to know again. She would carry the look on Orion’s face for the rest of her life. The trembling fear of someone watching the person they loved slip through their fingers, unsure if they’d ever get them back.

And at that moment, it almost made sense.

She had begun to tell herself that slipping away would be mercy, that it would stop all of this. But it was a lie. It was her own cowardice. She had been ready to give herself to a problem that would not be solved.

Regardless of the moon’s wishes, she could make sure Cora was gone before she was. No matter how inevitable her fate seemed, no matter how certain the stars were that her blood would be spilled, she would not let her aunt outlive her. She would not let Cora walk free to terrorize others.

She planned to make something of the time she had left, however long or little it might be. Time had been stolen from her once, but now it was hers again. She knew the moon would come to collect the debt, but surely it would not mind waiting a little longer.

Her finger trailed over the last recorded name, Isadora Diremoure. Meela’s gaze drifted around the room, finding Orion’s bag slumped against the wall.

He was still sprawled across the bed, face half buried in his pillow. His dark hair tumbled around his face, an arm reached out in the space she had slept in. She stepped quietly across the creaking boards and crouched beside the bag, opening the worn leather.

Her hand sank deeper, rummaging through layers of spell components, stray coins, and folded scraps of parchment. She had no idea how he ever found anything.

She glanced over at Suzaar, who sat perched near the window, preening his sleek black feathers. The sunlight caught the blue-sheen edges of his wings. He paused his grooming to watch her, his head tilted curiously as he dropped to the floor beside her.

“How does he find anything in this, Suzaar?” she muttered, peering into the endless abyss.

Suzaar clicked his beak softly, amused at her struggles.

“Gah,” she huffed, glaring at the bag. “Stupid thing, give me ink.”

The instant the words left her lips, she felt the cool, smooth glass snap into her palm. She stilled, looking down at it. Her cheeks warmed.

“*Oh.*” She glanced at Suzaar with a small laugh. “Suppose that makes sense.”

The raven let out a mimic of her laugh, his eyes glinted at her before hopping to the bed and settling on top of Orion.

Brushing her fingers across the leather cover, she opened it again to the page where the tree ended abruptly, like the Wyrdwoods withered and died. She uncorked the ink, dipping the quill with slow care. Her hand trembled slightly but no longer with fear.

Her mother’s name flowed in delicate, steady strokes. Dark as night and permanent as blood. When she set the pen aside, her eyes burned faintly. A holy sort of stillness settled over her, as if she hadn’t just added a name, but mended something long broken. She would not write her own.

Not yet.

Not until it was finished. Not until it felt earned. Meela didn’t know what that moment would feel like — or if she’d ever be granted the full power.

She rose and dressed quickly, the worn fabric soft against her skin, its fraying seams and small holes a quiet testament to years of use. Her gaze drifted to Orion, unwilling to wake him now that he had finally surrendered to sleep.

“You coming?” She whispered.

The raven glanced at Orion, then shook his head and tucked his beak beneath his wing.

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Chapter Forty-Two



Seph was mid-mop, pushing the worn bristles across the floor in a steady stroke. The door was wide open, pulling in the cool fresh scent of earth-rich air still tinged with last night's rain. Behind the bar, Liri worked a damp cloth over the counters, humming under her breath.

Both heads lifted when Meela stepped in from the back stairwell. For reasons she couldn't fully name, a flicker of nerves darted through her, as if she'd walked into a moment that wasn't hers, or a home where she hadn't quite found her place. But their expressions were nothing but warm. Soft in a way that made the nerves feel almost foolish.

"Good morning," she said, her voice slightly caught.

"Mornin' little witch." Seph nodded without missing a stroke of his mop.

"Hi, love." Liri's face split into an easy smile, the brightness easing Meela's tension. "Breakfast is still hot."

"Do you need any help?"

Liri paused, glancing over her shoulder. Meela knew Orion worked the bar to cover their room, knew how much these two had given them without asking for a thing. More than meals and a bed, this place felt like safety.

"No." Liri waved her off, shifting to another task. "We're 'bout finished up anyhow."

"Please." Meela shook her head. "I'd really like to help."

For a heartbeat, Liri simply studied her. Then her expression softened into a slow, fond smile. "Fine," she exhaled, surrendering. She tipped her chin toward the stack of dishes. "I wash, you dry."

The three of them fell into an easy rhythm, filling the space with light conversation. They spoke of the weather and of the markets bustling outside. Merchants yelled as they walked by. Liri chuckled about one in particular that she liked to barter with, and Seph added that the mans choice of wine was terrible and recounted a time he and Orion broke into a vineyard outside of Crowmore, after that same man had taken his money and not delivered, only to find the barrels all drained dry by another upset customer.

Meela saw it, the brief glances they shared, and the slight hesitations in their voices. They wanted to ask, but didn't. The first customer strolled in. An older fae with long gray hair, his boots caked with mud. Seph looked up from his mopping as he walked past him. He looked over at Meela, shaking his head with his arms raised in defeat. The fae said nothing as he slumped onto the stool, only offering a slight nod. Seph didn't ask for his order, he simply grabbed a tankard and began filling. Meela chuckled before turning to Liri as they moved to the tables, flipping down the chairs.

"Did you both accomplish what you set out for?" Liri's voice was light, her eyes tracking Meela's face carefully.

Meela's fingers lingered on the back of the chair. "We did, mostly." She glanced at Liri, offering a short smile. "Met with Phaio, got the memories back."

Liri's eyes softened. "I can imagine that's a relief."

Meela let out a small, shaky laugh. "Um…"

"Oh gosh," she cringed. "Worse than you thought?"

"No," Meela said. "Just a lot… at once."

Liri offered a reassuring smile. "Good to know yourself a little more though."

"Exactly."

"Any troubles on your way?" Liri tilted her head. "You two looked… well, you've looked a lot prettier than you did last night."

Meela laughed. "That's a nice way of putting it."

"You looked like shit." She paused, grinning with a hand on her hip. "Is that better?"

Meela barked out a laugh. "We met up with Alden and it went sideways very quickly."

Liri's smile wavered.

“But,” Meela added quickly. “Your blade came in handy. I do thank you, *and* your mother.” She smiled, trying to keep the tone light. As if death was just an unfortunate detour. She didn’t want to taint today with yesterday’s darkness.

“I’m sorry it was used.” Liri hugged her.

Meela leaned into the hug. “I’m glad I had it. Even before then, it brought a lot of comfort.” She met her eyes. “Thank you, Liri. For it. For all of it. The bag, the hospitality. Words can’t explain how thankful I am for you both, and not just for me. But for Orion too. Just—”

“You two are family, sweets. It’s easy.” she said softly, cutting her off.



Meela heard the door open, followed by a smooth voice behind her.

“Well, hello, stranger.”

She turned in her seat. The approaching red-headed fae was tall and slim, both ears lined with golden hoops. A small stack of books rested in his hand. Something in the shape of his mouth, the tilt of his head, stirred a flicker of memory she couldn’t catch.

“It’s nice to see your face again.” He smiled as he set the books on the bar beside her, close enough that his sleeve brushed hers.

Liri popped her head out from the back. “Hi, doll.”

“Hey, Lir,” he called. “How are you?”

“I’ve been alright. Haven’t seen you in a while.” She leaned her hip against the bar. “Left with quite a pretty one, if I remember right.”

The man chuckled, a faint blush touching his cheeks as he glanced at Meela. “Ah… a very fun night. Swore off drinking for a while after I woke and couldn’t remember her name.”

“Flora, doll,” Liri supplied, grinning. She leaned in to inspect his ears. “Goodness, your points are gonna start draggin’ soon. I know your mother can’t be happy about that.”

“It’s become an expensive habit, I’ll admit.” His smirk softened. “She’ll be in for a shock, I’m sure. It’s probably doubled since I last saw her. She’s been staying in Goldrun for a while now.”

“Ah,” Liri said. “Your father movin’ too, or just her?”

“He’s up there often, comes back when he gets nervous I might’ve burned down the shop. But it’s been months, so I think she’s finally convinced him I’m not a total loss, and that I can actually *do* the thing he trained me for.”

Meela stayed quiet, picking at the last of her breakfast while she watched them. She knew this man. She could feel the memory of him pressing close, just out of reach. The heavy thud of footsteps slammed down the stairs, making all of their heads snap towards the door joining the kitchen. Meela twisted in her chair as Orion barreled into the tavern, his eyes wide, scanning the room in a flash.

His gaze landed on Meela, and his entire chest deflated with a sharp breath. Relief unwound the tension in his shoulders. Then, noticing the others, he straightened, forcing himself to appear composed, running a hand through his hair.

“Morning,” he said, clearing his throat and holding the door for Suzaar.

Meela’s stomach dropped. The last time a man had stood this close, it hadn’t ended well. This man was close too, close enough to imply something. But Orion only narrowed his eyes and smiled.

The other man tipped his head back, laughing. “Gods, I’m so glad I was here to witness that.”

“Fuck off,” Orion grumbled. He stepped between them, hand hovering at her back. “And move, will you? She can barely breathe with you in her space.”

The man’s smile got even wider and looked at Liri who smiled and shrugged.

“You should’ve seen him the other night,” Seph called from the back. “Nearly thought Orion was going to snap a chair in half and stab a man with the broken pieces.”

“That's an exaggeration,” Orion shot back, stepping closer. He pressed a quick kiss to Meela’s forehead. His eyes flicked to the fae’s gold-lined ears, amusement sparking. “Gods, you’re gonna get robbed soon.”

The fae gave a mock-offended look. “*These*? Please. Anyone trying would have to catch me first.”

“Then they’ll just pry them off your cold, dead ears,” Seph said, earning a laugh from both men.

“Your books,” the man said, nudging the stack toward Orion. “I swear, Meela, this man reads the most boring texts. I glanced through one and

nearly fell asleep standing up.”

Orion pulled the stack closer, plucking one from the top. The title read *Wiccas: Omens & Prophecies*. He raised his brows at her.

The man leaned over, glancing at the grimoire open in front of her. “Haven’t seen this one before… deep-diving into Wyrdwoods, what for?”

“What do you know of Wyrdwoods?” Meela asked, her brows knitting. “Who even *are* you?”

His eyes widened. Then, looking over her head toward Orion, his smile spread slow and wide. “Gods, years have hardened you up, haven’t they?” He stood a little taller. “Years have been *very* kind to me.” He dropped his elbows to the bar so they were eye-level. “Think hard, Lala.”

She searched his face, but there was no spark of a name. She felt the confusion giving way until she looked into his eyes, the recognition slamming into her like a gust of wind. She shot to her feet so fast her chair scraped the floor. “Oh my gods… *Ash*?” Her gaze swept over him, disbelief breaking into a grin. “You’re like… a man now.”

The fae laughed. “Puberty hits fae a little harder,” he said with mock solemnity, though his eyes danced.

She looked over at Orion, still trying to bridge the gap between the boy she remembered and the man in front of her. Gone was the lanky, wide-eyed bookkeeper's son who used to sneak them in after hours or hide rare editions for Orion. His shoulders had broadened. His stance carried the quiet assurance of someone who knew his place in the world. Even the unruly shock of red hair had become a darker auburn.

“Wow,” she murmured, shaking her head. “So you’re running the shop now?”

“I am,” he said, smiling. “You look great, Meela.”

“You too, Ash. I’m sorry. It didn’t even register at first.”

While she had been locked away in sleep, the world had kept moving without her. Boys had grown into men, voices deepened, eyes sharpened with years she hadn’t witnessed. It was one thing to know time had passed. It was another to see it standing in front of her, tall and self-assured. Even Orion bore subtle changes she still caught herself finding, but Ash… he was a reminder of all she’d missed.

Orion’s hand found the small of her back, his thumb drawing slow, grounding circles.

“I know only what you’ve told me,” Ash said. “I’ve skimmed a few of the texts Orion’s borrowed.” He leaned over to read the open page. “‘*Heir of moon, her blood shall spill’*? Gods, do you two *ever* read a simple novel?”

Orion snorted. “You should read the books Meela likes. I’ve gotten quite a bit of inspiration from Lord Blackwood.” His mouth curved. “Filthy fucking mouth on him.”

“Excuse me.” Meela snapped her head to him. “When were you reading my book?”

“Couldn’t sleep, and I was interested in what kept making you blush.” He shrugged.

“Ah.” Ash chuckled. “A Lord of the Shadows.” His smirk deepened. “Have you read the sequel? The ladies at the book club loved it.”

“There’s another?” Meela gasped. “No, when did that come out?”

“A few years back,” he chuckled, “When I go to Solmaris next, I’ll be sure to add it to my list.”

“Thank you,” she said slowly.

“Anyway,” Ash went on, “blood shall spill.”

“Prophecy,” Orion called back without looking up.

“No kidding.” Ash slid even closer, resting his forearms on the bar beside hers and reading the page in full. “Well, that’s just grim.”

“I know.” Her voice dropped. “I’ve been going over it again and again, and I don’t know what it all means.”

“Mm.” His gaze lingered on the page. “Who foretold this?”

“The... uh…” She hesitated, glancing toward Orion as he returned from the back with his own plate of food. “The moon.”

That made him look up, first at Orion, then back to her. Somewhere behind the counter, Liri let out a small, sharp breath.

“The moon?” he repeated.

“It’s a long story, but the moon was using a witch as a vessel and… *this* was foretold.”

“And who is the heir of moon?”

“You’re looking at her.”

“Oh, fuck.” He grimaced, then leaned back slightly. “Well, sometimes it’s good to look at things from another point of view. Maybe you’re too close to it. I mean, think like the moon.”

“Think like the moon?” Orion echoed, nodding as if he were trying the thought on for size.

“Well, good luck.” Ash straightened, resting a warm hand on Meela’s shoulder before patting Orion on the back. “I need to get back to the shop.”

“Thanks, Ash. I’ll drop these off in a few days,” Orion said.

“No rush. You’re the only dull bastard who reads them.”

Orion settled beside her, his thigh brushing against hers. Seph and Liri returned to their work, voices blending softly with the tavern's gentle morning hustle. He took a sip of his tea, softly humming before digging into his breakfast.

“So I’ve been thinking,” she began.

Orion’s eyebrows raised, the corner of his mouth tugged upward. “Mm.”

“Well, I thought it would be nice to get out. Have some sense of normalcy, since our last days have been anything but.”

Orion nodded, chewing on his breakfast, letting her go on.

“I just want to do something other than fill ourselves with dread. And maybe it’s a distraction, I don’t know. But I thought it would be nice to walk around. Be home, and actually know what I’m looking at. Get some fresh air and—”

“Sounds like a wonderful day, love.” He cut in, smiling.

Her rambles faltered, caught off guard by how easily he agreed. She thought there might be some pushback. That he would want to stay in, researching, his nose in all these books, finding answers.

“Suzaar will enjoy it, too,” He added, scratching beneath the raven's large beak.

The raven let out a satisfied noise, enjoying the attention. Orion smiled wide at him before turning back to Meela. “You know you don’t have to ask me.”

Meela leaned back in her seat, “You just flew down those stairs because I wasn’t there when you woke up.”

Orion stilled, the corner of his mouth twitched up as he chewed. His eyes turned playful.

“Deny it, Scarrow.”

“Okay… true, *Diremoure,*” he admitted, chuckling. “But…”

“There’s a but?” she asked, leaning on the bar, her chin in her hand.

“But. It sounded like you were asking for permission, which is unnecessary. A note would have sufficed. Should go get our money anyhow.”

“Our money?” Her brows lifted.

“Yes?” he teased. “I certainly didn’t need much while traveling. It’s collecting dirt and dust, I'm sure.” Orion stood, stretching his arms overhead, the hem of his shirt lifting enough to expose a sliver of skin.

“Let me get dressed,” he said, grabbing their plates. “I’ll be back.”

Meela watched as he turned back, “unless maybe…” he raised his brows, his teeth biting his bottom lip. “You might have Blackwood on your mind.”

“Go get dressed, Orion.”

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Chapter Forty-Three



She found it odd to see Orion without the usual attire. Gone were the layers of black, the heavy cloak, the mask that had once obscured the lower half of his face. Now, dressed in a simple tunic and dark trousers, he looked like any man out for a walk, blending easily into the bustle of the street.

Well, *almost*.

His staff shattered any illusion of a simple man. It pulsed with magic, blue swirling up the dark, ancient wood. Suzaar perched atop it only added to the effect, sleek feathers gleaming beneath the sun, his piercing gaze catching every movement in the crowd.

They wound through the streets, the maze of Crowmore making it easy for one to lose their bearings.

“Just up here,” Orion nudged her gently, guiding her away from the market and down a narrow street lined with moss-covered stone homes. The scent of baking bread and burning firewood lingered in the air. The cobblestones beneath their feet gave way to packed dirt.

Buildings thinned out, replaced by open yards with hanging game and drying pelts. Moving past the final row of homes and into the treeline. The ground dipped into a ravine, a narrow well-worn path guiding them down. Meela watched as Orion began to slow, his brows furrowing.

“Don’t tell me you forgot,” she teased.

He scoffed. “No, I just need to retrace my steps.” His gaze went to Suzaar. “There was an old oak…”

“You left it in a tree?”

He shot her a look in defense. “*Near* a tree.”

“I don’t even know if I should be upset or not,” she said. “Why not just __”

“Found it,” he called, his voice bright with triumph.

She followed him deeper into the wood, weaving through ancient trees with trunks as thick as two men. Then she saw it. The tree he had spoken of. The oak stood alone, towering over the others, gnarled limbs sprawling outward like arms of some ancient guardian. Thick moss clung to its bark, and its roots coiled in wide ridges over the earth, creating natural alcoves and hollows.

Meela slowed as she approached. She could feel this tree’s breath in hers, how deeply its roots settled under their feet, how vast they spread.

Orion turned with a small sheepish smile. “It reminded me of you,”

“What?” she asked, feigning offense. “An old tree?”

“A *stubborn* one, rooted deeply.” His voice softened. “Steady and beautiful.”

She felt her cheeks warm at the tenderness in his voice, and watched as he began tapping the end of his staff against the base. The ground thudded softly against it. He moved around the tree, continuing, pausing when the sound shifted. His eyes flicked up to hers, brows raised and eyes filled with mischief. Without warning, he stepped back and sent a surge of golden light arching from his palm, striking the earth near the base. The soil erupted in a shower of damp dirt.

The forest around them inhaled sharply, the leaves rattling with a sudden startle. The trees shivered from the magic that jolted them awake. The canopy above shifted, limbs groaning with disapproval.

“Forest is *not* happy with you,” Meela muttered, eyes scanning the branches. “They did not appreciate being woken up.”

“Sorry!” Orion yelled upward, calling to the trees. “Your guardian wants a new dress, blame her!”

She gasped, slapping him on the chest. “No! Blame Orion!” She shot back, raising her voice. “He’s the one who dug it up and left it here!”

The branches overhead groaned in agreement before settling with a slow, reluctant sigh. He crouched low, brushing the loose dirt from the box. He rested his hand atop it, the box glowing blue before becoming the same weathered box once again.

Inside was a modest stash, a collection of coins, one glittering jewel and several pieces of jewelry that Meela immediately recognized—her golden rings, a delicate chain and cuff he had gotten her one winter solstice, etched with runes.

He grabbed a handful of coins, slipping them into Meela's bag before dumping the box inside his own pack.

“I don’t feel good keeping this on us at the tavern,” he said. “Should probably drop it off at home.”

“Why didn’t we go home?” she asked softly.

He hesitated. “I considered it last night…” he admitted. “It feels… odd to go there when so much is at play. You went through a lot of trouble and I’d hate for anyone to show up and ruin your only sanctuary.”

As they retraced their steps back, Meela glanced at him, seeing the faint furrow in his brow, the way his jaw tensed. He was only trying to protect her, even from the place that was meant to be hers.

“I want to go home,” she said finally. “I love Seph and Liri, don’t get me wrong. But I miss home.”

He looked down at her, his eyes warming like sunlight through a canopy, the tension in his shoulders already melting away. “I miss it too.”

They strolled along the winding streets hand in hand, the rhythm of their footsteps blending in with the gentle hum of others around them. Lanterns were being lit, children darted between carts chasing fireflies that were conjured by a street performer. Men haggled loudly over the price of a blade. Orion’s head tilted upward often, checking for the familiar shadow of Suzaar flying above. The raven occasionally dipped lower, with a playful sweep before catching another updraft.

“Do you think we should worry about Alden? Or Alice?”

“Probably not,” he said. “Hard not to, though.”

“Do you think they…” she trailed off, tilting her head.

Orion let out a short laugh. “Alden’s not the type, and he wouldn’t tell me anyways. Do you think she’d tell you?”

“I don’t even know what that relationship is,” she chuckled. “They definitely seemed close though, right?”

“Oh, absolutely.” Orion glanced at her. “Alden’s always had a soft spot for damaged things.”

“Harsh.” She swatted his chest.

“I just mean… Alice is clearly struggling, and Alden’s the type who can’t help but step in. When you’ve been through enough of your own storms, you can’t watch someone else drown without reaching for them. He thinks it’s his responsibility.” He gave a loose shrug. “I was in need, you were in need, now she is.”

“Yeah… he’s good at that.”

“Wisdom, amirite?” He teased, leaning closer with a crooked grin.

Meela groaned. “Don’t start. I can’t believe that's what it was. I was holding on to this idea that Cora was just… insane.” She gave him a weak smile. “That when I finally knew the truth, there would be a glaring hole. A mistake in the madness.”

Orion’s expression darkened, his lips pulling into a grim smile.

“She’s not, though.” She stared ahead. “I read through the book this morning. What she wanted for us… *I get it*, Orion. Does that make me terrible?”

“Not at all.” Orion shook his head without hesitation. “I remember reading of Wyrdwoods even before I met you. Your coven was unstoppable. It’s the approach that’s the issue.”

“It’s the moon that's the issue. If the coven had a choice, they would’ve chosen her. Do you think Cora would have ever gone this far if it didn’t interfere?"

Orion’s eyes lingered on her. “I think you shouldn’t think about that,” he said quietly. “It happened, you can’t change what’s in motion now.”

“But for conversation,” she pushed.

Orion grinned. His eyes remained soft. “Fine,” he sighed. “I think her goal was reasonable. But she isn’t. Alice said it herself, she was quick-tempered. Lacks empathy to see things from another's perspective, and she thinks she's always right.” He shook his head. “Those aren’t qualities of a good leader. And while I agree the cause was noble, I don’t think that’s what it was for her. Someone like Cora? The aim was much higher. And while we are at it, I don’t think what was written means your death.”

“You don’t actually?” Meela studied him. “Or you just hope it doesn’t?”

“It doesn’t add up,” he said. “What Ash said earlier, *think like the moon.* He’s right. Why are we thinking about this in human terms?”

“Phaio said it himself… it’s possible to interpret the same passage six different ways.”

“Exactly!” Orion turned, smiling. “Cora is seeing it through her own angle. She believes sacrifices are worth it, she understands it.” He shook his head. “She’s bending the meaning to fit what she already knows, or *hopes*.”

“Which, in turn, is influencing our understanding,” she finished. Meela considered his words, tilting her head to glance up at the moon, half-veiled. It’s light was soft, looking almost serene. “And how does one think like the moon?”

Orion let out a short, dry laugh. “No idea.” He grinned, breaking some tension. “I considered sending a message to Phaio, but I don’t know.” He shrugged. “It feels like this is something we need to figure out on our own.”

“Why would something so beautiful want so much blood?” she asked.

“Excellent questions, little witch.” His eyes narrowed in thought before his mouth moved into a crooked grin. “One I was trying to figure out before I was so rudely interrupted last night.”

Meela scoffed, pushing his arm. “You need sleep, Orion.”

“Since when?” he leaned in, teasing. “Sleep is for the weak.”

“No, sleep is for the smart,” she corrected. “And this isn’t something you need to figure out on your own.”

His eyes lingered on hers for a moment, his lips parted like he might say something meaningful, but his playfulness won. “Well, look who is suddenly so full of wisdom. Sounds very familiar, I think I recall someone saying that same thing to you.”

“They must’ve been very smart.” Meela smirked. “College-educated, even.”

“Very smart, indeed.” Orion puffed out his chest. “Oh, that’s right, it was me. Such a wise and selfless man I am.”

“Really? That doesn’t sound like you *at all*.” Meela stopped, thinking, her finger on her nose. “I could’ve sworn it was Ash.”

His face dropped, eyes narrowing. “*Oh*, *fuck off*,” he barked out a laugh, his hand tightening around hers as he pulled her closer, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. “I’m going to get you for that, little witch.”

The once bustling streets had softened into a quieter hum, the last remnants of market clatter clinging to the air. Suzaar had made his way to Orion’s shoulder once they had stopped for food. The raven seemed smug about his perch, occasionally ruffling his feathers as though to remind anyone watching that Orion belonged to him.

They walked close, their hands brushing as they strolled. She tried to focus on the warmth of his hand, but she couldn’t help the occasional glance over her shoulder.

She saw Orion doing the same.

Neither of them spoke of it, but they both knew one of them could be near, finally emerging from the shadows. She felt the inevitability of it, just barely out of view. It clung to the edge of her vision, making it impossible to ignore. Cora wasn’t naive, the likelihood of her knowing Meela was in Crowmore was high. A small, traitorous part of her almost wished it would happen. Just to be free of the waiting.

To finally stop holding her breath.

Maybe then she and Orion could have one day, just one, where they weren’t looking over their shoulder. Where darkness didn’t press against the edges of every moment of peace.

But peace, it seemed, was something they were only allowed in glimpses.

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Chapter Forty-Four



Watching Orion and Suzaar practice magic together was something Meela hadn't realized she missed so deeply.

She watched from the field beside the cottage. Orion's easy laughter, full and unrestrained, was a sound she hadn't heard from him in far too long. They moved in seamless rhythm, an effortless pair. The raven sliced through the air in sharp, precise dives, swooping low to dodge the bursts of magic Orion sent crackling his way. Each spell streaked in a brilliant arc, striking the earth in controlled bursts before fizzling into glimmering remnants. She caught the twitch of Suzaar's wings just before he pivoted, turning as if they shared a single mind.

Her fingers toyed with the tall blades of grass, their tips brushing softly against her skin. Around her, the land stretched in every direction, a wild sea of color unfurling at her feet. Clover scented the air. She kept glancing between Orion and the quiet hum beneath her fingertips, the pulse of the earth answering her touch. Little by little, she had been coaxing the land back to what she remembered with a breath of Wyrdwood magic. Blooms swelled, petals opening wider.

She could see his devotion in the way he cared for their home during those lost years. It was clear he had done his best to protect it, cherish it. But not even his magic could keep up with what she had built. She and this house were one. The large oak in the center of their home was weathered, showing its age but now, its limbs stretched outward with newfound strength, its leaves a richer shade of green, as though it had finally drawn its

first gulp of water after years of thirst. This was theirs. Blood, sweat and too many tears had gone into it.

They had turned this cottage into a home, a safe haven just for them. She refused to lose it. At least, if Cora sought her out, she wouldn’t be putting even more at risk. Their cottage was a few miles from the town and its markets, tucked deep where few wandered.

Orion had spent the morning teaching her protective spells, layered over his own, and while she knew they were strong, there was only so much magic that could ease her anxieties. She had no regrets about coming back home, but she was fiercely protective of it.

One of the texts he had gotten from Ash was brimming with magic that even Meela was tempted to play with, but today she was determined to focus on the power she did have. She still relied mostly on memories and spells from the coven’s book, and had no clear sign if the priestess's powers were hers yet.

It had taken three years after her grandmother’s death for her mother's to awaken. There was no telling how long hers would take, she might have had it for years already.

But even without any certainty, she could feel the depth of it. It was unfathomable. While Orion rationed his power carefully, wary of burning himself out, hers had no bottom. She could draw and draw and never feel the strain.

With a soft sigh, she lay back staring at the endless stretch of sky. She welcomed the stillness, letting herself sink deeper into the small piece of solitude she had carved out for herself.

As much as the land was coming back, she realized she had too.

Every ounce of her pain boiled down to this small passage. A few short lines of ink, holding the weight of her entire existence. They had dissected it endlessly, tossing around alternate meanings, finding new implications, turning the words over until they were worn down to nothing. She had practically memorized this page now.

Still, she read it aloud, the words bitter on her tongue as they were the first time.

“*The heir of moon, her blood shall spill.*” Her voice was flat as she shook her head. It stared back at her, so blunt and final. She had scoured every word for some double meaning, and though she wanted to share Orion’s belief that it didn’t have to mean death, he had no alternative either.

She exhaled as she pulled out the worn parchment Orion tucked between the pages. A loose collection of his notes, hurried scribbles that mirrored their frantic search for answers. She scanned the list, her eyes catching on the names.

Wisdom, Alden.

Innocence, Alexander.

Strength, Heath.

A short humorless laugh slipped out, not that this was funny, but she couldn’t help but find the small trace of humor in Cora’s choices. Had her aunt truly believed these men embodied what the moon demanded? *Had she even gotten to know them?*

If she had, Meela doubted the moon would agree with the choices. Cora may be clever enough to understand the moon's desires, but Meela had long accepted that the woman was going mad.

Alexander… innocence. Meela huffed under her breath. “Cora’s innocence, more like.”

That man was far from innocent. Even in the brief time she knew him, it was clear he was a liar. She saw him steal from his own family, a fox in lamb's skin. She moved her thumb over Heath’s name, the word nearly smudged from how often she pressed over it. *Strength.*

She rolled her eyes. He looked strong, sure. His arms were thick with muscle, and he towered over most men, but strength was more than stature. Quick-tempered, reckless and easily goaded. His ego was as high as the trees that surrounded them, swaying with every gust of pride. He was chosen for the breadth of his shoulders, not the strength of his spirit.

And Alden—

Meela pressed her lips in a hard line. Her friend was clever and thoughtful. He always knew what to say, and when to say it. *But wise?* No, not truly. A wise man didn’t barter his existence for revenge. But Alden, so blinded by grief and getting even, made bargains that could never be undone.

Alden was not wise. He was insightful and heartbroken.

She stared at the names, these were the men Cora had chosen to sacrifice. Three pawns, hand-picked for the roles she needed them to play. It was almost poetic, in a warped, self-serving way. Cora’s 'grand prophecy' was nothing more than a trio of flawed men wearing borrowed masks.

An unwelcome question surfaced. *What if the moon hadn't agreed?* The thought sat heavily, an unbearable weight to pointless destruction. What good could possibly come from this? Why would something so eternal, so revered—a force witches honored, prayed to, built their lives around—want anything so cruel? Why did it crave blood to preserve balance? Balance. That was what it claimed, wasn't it? Good and evil, light and dark, the endless tilt back and forth. But if the moon was truly the keeper of that fragile harmony, why would it demand suffering as its price?

"What are you doing over here, my love?"

She looked back just in time to see him plop down beside her, wholly unceremonious. His fingers slid into her hair, threading through the silver strands with slow, absentminded strokes.

She gave a faint smile. "Spinning myself in endless thoughts."

"Mm."

No probing. No teasing nudge for more. She glanced at him again, expecting a quip but instead his gaze was roaming over her. Memorizing her shape, committing every curve to some private archive.

"It was nice seeing you here before we went to the academy," he said. Then, with his eyes settling on hers, "But I'll admit… this is far better."

His lips brushed hers. First with a smile, then a deepening kiss. His hand slid from her hair, down her side, fingers hooking at her waist. With a sudden tug, he pulled her into him, toppling her onto her side against his chest. She laughed, half-buried in his shirt, her hand curling instinctively into the fabric. He wrapped an arm around her, snug and certain, holding her as though daring her to try and slip away. Warm fingertips traced lazy shapes along her bare arm. An idle, contented touch that said he could stay like this for hours. Above them, Suzaar flew high, his wings catching the golden light, a black silhouette against the blue.

"Care to share those thoughts?" he whispered into her hair, breath warm at her temple.

She smiled, fingers trailing along the faint scar across his collarbone. "There he is,"

They lingered in the field until the sun sank low, too comfortable to move. When the sky turned molten, they finally rose and wandered inside. Light poured through the windows, soft and golden, catching on the crystals hanging there and scattering slender rainbows along the floor.

Meela rolled up her sleeves, glancing at Orion with a smirk. For the first time in too long, they made a real meal together. They moved through the narrow kitchen with instinctive ease: shoulders brushing, his hand grazing her lower back when he reached for a jar, her hip nudging his as she passed to stir the pot. They'd clearly gone overboard at the markets, giddy on the rare luxury of choice. By the time they sat down to eat, her cheeks hurt from smiling. Her heart felt impossibly full as they faced each other, the windows open to the soft rush of the river.

Only weeks ago, she wouldn't have dared to dream of this kind of happiness, of a home filled with warmth instead of fear.

They cleared the table together, hands brushing in the small space, each glance strung tight with something unspoken. When the last dish was stacked, he caught her hand and didn't let go as they climbed the stairs.

Sleep pulled at her, but Phaio's words clung: *it will end in death*. She would not let it end that way.

"What are you thinking about?" Orion whispered against her hair. His fingertips traced idle paths up her back, raising bumps across her skin.

She moved closer, draping a leg over his, resting her head against his chest to listen to his heartbeat. "Killing Cora."

Orion chuckled. "Not what I was expecting, little witch. But I like it."

She tipped her head to meet his gaze. "What did you think I was thinking about?"

"I wasn't sure. Maybe Hoothoot?"

"I think you were thinking of Hoothoot." She poked his chest.

"I am now." His grin softened.

Her laughter faded into something quieter as her hand drifted lower, brushing warm muscle. "What were you actually thinking about, Mr. Scarrow?"

"Mm." He leaned his head back, his hand gripping her, pulling her against him. "You."

"Me?" she whispered, lips grazing his neck.

"Always thinking about you," he breathed.

Meela shifted into his lap. Orion's hands tightened on her hips, hard enough to make her gasp. She kissed along his throat, nipping lightly, and he let out a sound that vibrated straight through her.

"Meela." A warning wrapped in need.

She smiled against his skin. Trailing kisses down his chest, lower, until her tongue brushed the head of his cock. “You stopped me before.”

His breath hitched, a low growl spilling from him as his hand tangled in her hair, urging her deeper. “Fuck,” he growled, gripping her hair and tilting her head back so she had to look him in the eyes. “If you keep that up, I’m going to pin you to this mattress.”

Her breath hitched, and his smile turned wicked. “That’s what you want, sweet girl?” he whispered. “You want me to take control?”

She didn’t answer fast enough. He flipped her onto her back, his body covering hers in one deliberate motion. She barely had time to breathe before his mouth crashed onto hers. His hand slid up her thigh, forcing it open, claiming space like it already belonged to him. He kissed down her throat, her chest, every inch of her like he owned the path. The first stroke of his tongue drew a sharp gasp from her, and he groaned against her like a man starved. Her fingers tangled in his hair as he worked her apart, every flick of his tongue pulling her higher until she shattered, crying his name.

With a growl, Orion rolled on his back, bringing her to straddle him, his lips searing a path down her collarbone until they closed over her breast. Meela moaned, rolling her hips, the friction making her shudder.

“Look at me,” he whispered. His hands slid up her spine, holding her like she was something holy and unbearably fragile, as he guided her down, the stretch stealing her breath. Orion’s head fell back, a ragged moan torn from his chest. "Gods, you feel so good.” His hand tightened on her hip, demanding more. “All of me, Meela. I know you can take it.”

His quiet curses only pushed her further. Her gasp broke into a helpless moan as he filled her, every inch stretching her until she was trembling, her voice breaking on his name. “Let me hear you. That’s it,” he whispered, the praise rolling over her. “Just like that.” Orion pressed a hand to her belly, thumb circling her core until she was writhing.

“So pretty,” he breathed. “Look at you, taking everything I give you.” When her rhythm faltered, he flipped her, chest pressed to the mattress. “On your knees.”

She obeyed instantly, and he rewarded her with a brutal thrust that made her cry out. His pace was merciless, the bed rocking against the wall as he drove into her. He caught her hair in his fist, yanking her head back so his lips brushed her ear. “I want to hear you scream.”

She whimpered, reaching back to touch him, but he pinned her wrist to her spine. His other hand wrapped around her throat, pulling her upright, her body arching as he pounded deeper.

Her world fractured. Pleasure ripping through her so sharply she cried out. *"Fuck, Orion!"*

Orion groaned like he was breaking apart with her, pulling her tight against his chest as if he couldn't bear a breath of space between them. "My perfect Meela." His forehead pressed to her shoulder, breath trembling against her skin. "Mine," he whispered. "Always mine."

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Chapter Forty-Five



A sharp knock broke the quiet. Meela startled awake, heart thudding. For a moment, she thought she'd dreamed it—the only sound was Orion's slow, even breathing beside her.

"Orion," she whispered into the dark.

"Come here, sweetheart," he murmured, half-asleep, his hand searching for her under the blanket.

The second knock was harder, rattling the frame.

She leaned close, her lips brushing his ear. "Someone's here."

"I'm about to take this door off if you two don't wake up," a voice called from outside.

Their eyes met for a breath, going wide before Orion threw off the blanket. The warmth left her skin like a small shock.

"Shit," he muttered, voice rough with sleep. He yanked on his pants, left his chest bare, and strode for the stairs, his steps quick. The bark creaked under his weight before the door groaned open.

"I see we must be interrupting." Amusement warmed Alden's voice.

"You're welcome to interrupt less," Orion shot back. "Though I think you get off on it."

Upstairs, the cottage seemed to stir with her. Ivy unfurled from the ceiling, brushing her cheek in a soft, familiar greeting. She padded down barefoot, the wood cool under her toes.

"Sorry if we kept you waiting," she said.

The ivy reached toward Alice too, one vine brushing her shoulder. A new softness bloomed in Alice's eyes, a smile Meela hadn't seen before. "This place…" she murmured. "It reminds me of my mother."

The words caught Meela off guard. For a moment, she smelled Circe's drying herbs, and heard the faint click of jewelry between her fingers. Her gaze moved over the hanging crystals, the green twined through the beams. Circe still lived here. In the crystals and ivy, in the quiet pulse of the air.

"She helped me plan it," Meela said softly. "When she passed, I brought a lot here. If you want anything, it's yours."

Alice's fingers grazed a crystal. Light scattered across her arm in shifting colors. "No," she said, her voice low. "It belongs here."

Alden stepped in, his hand dragging over the oak beam as though greeting an old friend. "Looking better these days." He glanced over his shoulder. "Seph said you made it home. He has something for you, Meela."

She frowned. "What kind of something?"

"He wouldn't say. Liri wouldn't even let me look."

Her eyes slid to Orion, catching the furrow between his brows that matched her own.

"Well," she said, "I'll find out later. What about you two? Did you finish what you needed to?"

Alden's glance toward Alice was quick, almost hesitant.

"I hope so," she said.

"And you're both alright?" Orion asked.

"We are." She smiled at Alden.

Meela noticed the way his expression softened before he masked it with a half-smile. There was more between them than either would admit aloud. "You're both full of information," she teased.

Alice's mouth quirked. "Come to Seph's and you can find out."

"I'm not fond of surprises," Meela said, narrowing her eyes.

"This one's good," Alice promised. "It will help us."

Orion's brow lifted. "Help us?"

Alice's gaze held on Meela. "You can't defeat her alone."

The fire popped, sending a few sparks drifting upward. Ivy shifted faintly in a passing draft. Meela folded her arms. "Think I don't have it in me?"

"You won't go as far as she would. Cora's blood magic is stronger. She'll distract everyone while she works. I'm not saying you can't handle it. I'm saying she'll use us all as bait."

“You’ve been gathering others?” Meela asked.

Alice nodded.

“And we can trust them?”

“Yes,” she said firmly. “I promise.”

Meela held her eyes for a beat longer before turning to Orion. He gave a small, certain nod. “Give me a moment to get ready.”

The forest seemed quieter as they walked the path into town. Orion offered to take them, but Alden quickly declined. Suzaar hadn’t left her shoulder, his talons anchored protectively into the fabric of her cloak. He hadn’t taken his eyes off Alice, and whenever she drew too close, his feathers bristled, telling her to stay away. Orion and Alden walked ahead, their boots scuffing against the path.

Orion’s shoulders were tense beneath his tunic, and he glanced back often. His eyes lingering on her, she could see the subtle clench in his jaw, like he was battling the same mistrust as his familiar. His hand flexed restlessly, ready to grab the staff strapped to his back.

“They will arrive later, but I feel I should warn you,” Alice said, her eyes fixed on the raven as she spoke. “You may see a familiar face.”

Meela’s head snapped toward her. “Familiar face?”

“Yes,” She said evenly. “And I hope you offer her the same courtesy of forgiveness you’ve offered me.”

Meela’s feet slowed. She stared at Alice, confusion hardening into disbelief. *“Who?”*

Alice exhaled softly, looking at Orion. “I was debating on whether to say anything at all,” she admitted. “I promised her I wouldn’t.”

Meela came to a halt, kicking up a thin cloud of dirt. Her eyes narrowed. “Well, you did,” she said, “Who, Alice?”

Alice looked down at her boots, swallowing.

Orion turned, seemingly battling whether to approach or give them space.

“You, I trust, because you mean something to me.” Her eyes cut into Alice. “So, unless my mother is alive, I cannot imagine another who I'd give that courtesy to.”

Alice’s face barely shifted, but the sorrow in her eyes was immediate and unmistakable. She heard Orion’s boots take a single step forward.

“You seem to offer a lot of promises, do they mean nothing to you?” Meela pushed, unable to stop herself. The words lingered. Suzaar shifted on her shoulder, letting out a low, guttural noise as if echoing her accusation.

Alice’s throat bobbed as she swallowed. She gripped the strap of her pack harder. “Of course they mean something to me.”

“Do they? You promise everything. You promised this mystery guest, and then told me anyway. What value do they even hold?”

Alice flinched.

“Meela,” Alden called out.

Her eyes snapped to him. “Stay out of this, Alden.” Her voice cut through the forest. “I’m talking to my *aunt*.”

The word hit Alice like a blow. Her head jerked back, eyes widening before she managed to mask it.

“You’re asking me to trust you. You’re leading me into this.” Meela stepped closer, locking onto those piercing eyes. “But tell me, when you lay your head down at night, do you count them? Do you weigh which lies matter more? Or do you just throw words around because it’s easier than disappointing people? Do you ever stop to consider what *you* need?”

“Yes. I think about what I need.” Her eyes flashed with desperation. “But right now, I *need* you to trust me.”

“Blindly, like my mother did?”

Alice narrowed her eyes. “I kept that promise.”

“Did you?” Meela’s voice cut in. “Or did it just happen to work out that way?”

“Don’t talk down to me,” Alice snapped. “You have no idea—”

“*Don’t you dare*.” Meela’s voice lashed out, too sharp to rein in. “Do not compare your troubles with mine. You had choices. I had none.”

Alice’s mouth pressed into a thin line, but Meela couldn’t stop. The words poured too fast, too hot to filter.

“My heart goes out to you. I know you don’t choose who you love.” Her voice wavered, then steadied, rage sparking in her eyes. “But for twenty-five years, Alice, you did choose. You made promises, and you looked away every time you saw something you didn’t like. You let others carry the weight until it was convenient for you to put it down. You chose Cora over my mother. You chose her over Wyrdwood. Over everyone.”

Her lip curled, her voice dropping into a sneer. “And now? Now that it costs you nothing, you finally walked away. You’ve suddenly woken up, and only now can you look me in the eye.”

Orion didn’t move toward her; he knew better. He could feel the storm breaking loose in her, how it needed to tear through before it could settle.

Meela's chest rose and fell sharply, her hands trembling at her sides, but still she didn't stop.

"Little moon…" Alice's voice broke.

Meela scoffed at the endearment. "*Don't*. I'm not a child. You think I don't know what she's capable of?" Meela asked. "I've been battling her my entire life. What's one more day?"

"Lenora," Alice exhaled.

The name struck her like a slap. Alice stared at her, those violet eyes unrelenting but never cruel, just steady and honest.

"And I don't think you're a child," Alice added softly. "I fucked up." Her hands lifted helplessly. "I won't hide it. I made mistakes, I chose wrong, and I'll live with that. But every promise I made was for you, never for her. I stayed because of you, Meela. I couldn't walk away, not knowing what she planned. And I don't regret it."

Her throat bobbed as she tried to swallow down emotion. "I only hope you can see beyond yourself, just for a moment."

Meela's eyes flashed, her voice snapping like a whip. "Beyond myself?"

"Yes." Alice leaned in. "You are the catalyst, but this is bigger than you and her. *This is a legacy.* Balance. Our coven. And I need my priestess alive." Her voice cracked but she pressed on. "I need you to look past your own rage long enough to see this is so much more, Meela. I believe in the choice that was made."

Her jaw clenched, her eyes fierce. "So yes," she said. "I will make promises. I will waste my life loving a woman who is a shadow of who she once was. I will bear that, if it means we reach the place I know you can lead us."

The muscles in Meela's jaw flexed as they stared each other down. "Fine."

"Fine?" Alice repeated. "After all that….*fine*?" She let out a single disbelieving laugh. "You know, you're a lot more like Cora than I think you realize."

"Mother, like daughter." Meela smiled, tilting her head, daring Alice to agree.

"No." She shook her head, smiling. "I take that back. You're just a *Diremoure*."

Orion and Alden remained still. Both were equally lost, unsure whether to step in or hold back. Orion's eyes were full of worry, watching for any signs

of losing herself. Alden, however, was still. His jaw was tight, his eyes locked on to Meela with barely restrained intensity.

She didn't look at either as she passed. "Let's go," she said, voice flat, empty.

They continued in heavy silence. The crunch of their footsteps was the only sound between them. Orion kept close. He wouldn't ask until they were alone. His quiet restraint was calming in contrast with the heat simmering inside her.

Alden had no such patience. She could feel his eyes drilling into the back of her head, along with heavy sighs letting his irritation known. Meela's jaw tightened every time she heard it. *He barely knew Alice.* He witnessed her standing beside Cora, watching the way they paraded her around like a prize. Yet suddenly, that meant nothing after a few fleeting gestures of kindness.

She knew she shouldn't have snapped. It was obvious they were only trying to help. She could see that, beneath the anger, they were grasping at any chance of survival. Alice with her closeness to Cora was their best option. Still, she couldn't stop the gnawing doubt. Alice came and went on her own terms, seemingly unscathed. Even now, she remained evasive. No one knows the full extent of her loyalties.

Orion's hand brushed against hers briefly. She glanced over and found nothing but softness and warmth in his eyes.

"Are we just going to pretend that didn't happen?" Alden exhaled sharply, his voice low.

"Alden, are you looking for a fight?" Meela snapped.

Alden's jaw flexed. "You don't have to like her, Meela. But you do need her."

She clenched her teeth. "I know exactly what I need, thank you." Her eyes narrowed. "Don't confuse that with trust."

Alden's expression grew dejected. "Meela…"

The three fell into silence once more. The road grew wider as they neared the outskirts. Orion lingered just behind her, his knuckles brushing hers once more, and finally she let her fingers unclench and found his hand. She felt her body exhale when they touched. He glanced down at her, his scarred lips curving into a soft smile as he leaned in, his lips brushing against her hair. "Don't overthink this,"

"Did I go too far?" she asked, keeping her eyes forward.

“You cut a tad deep, little witch.” He huffed a quiet laugh. “A bit deserved, but perhaps sharper than you meant it to be.”

Her gaze dropped to the ground, feeling the guilt creep into her face. Before she could focus on that feeling, he squeezed her hand gently, a steadiness meant to pull her back.

“There’s a lot of trust that needs to be given quickly,” he said quietly. “I don’t think rubbing her face in mistakes is going to help either of you.”

Meela tipped her head back to glare at the sky, making a soft frustrated sound in her throat. “Should I apologize?”

Orion’s eyes gleamed with something soft, “I don’t think you should ask me that question, my love.” He gave her a small lopsided smile. “If you feel like you should, do it. If not, move forward.”

She came to a halt, pulling him slightly off stride. She searched his face, looking for an answer he wasn’t going to give. He offered a small nod of encouragement before letting go of her hand and veering towards Alden.

She felt Alice come up beside her. They walked side by side in silence, neither of them looking at one another. *Say something, anything.* She hated how clumsy she felt, how small.

She didn’t take the words back, because they weren’t lies. Alice had betrayed her trust once and lingered too long in Cora’s shadow. But the sting behind them came from somewhere deeper, somewhere bitter. The hollow place carved out by years of despair and resentment.

Resentment that, perhaps, she had never truly deserved. For the first time in years, the woman who had once walked beside Cora, now walked beside her.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “You didn’t deserve that.”

Meela finally risked a glance and found Alice’s eyes softening with surprise. There was no anger, no bitterness, only the warmth Meela had known as a child, the kind that made her feel safe and loved. Alice reached out, grabbing her hand.

“I know I handled this all wrong.”

“No,” Meela said. “If I saw Lenora walk in without warning, I would’ve been upset.” She let out a shaky breath. “More upset. I’m sorry.”

“Maybe less Diremoure than I thought." Alice pulled Meela into a hug. “Wyrdwoods fight.” She shrugged, her eyes filling with affection. “And we always make up. We’re very intense women.” She gave a mocking serious

look. “Fiery, bullheaded, irrational. I’ve seen more fistfights between us than at any tavern.”

A weak laugh escaped Meela’s chest.

“I’m happy you trust me enough to be honest around me. Bottling feelings up is not good for a Wyrdwood. We’re okay, I prom—” Alice’s eyes widened. “Gods, I do say that a lot.”

Meela tipped her head back with laughter. “You promise?”

Alice’s smile stretched wider, as she slipped her arm through hers. “I promise. And with Lenora… give her the benefit of the doubt, she’s a challenge you don’t want to face, but I think you have more in common than you think.”

“You trust her?”

“With everything,” Alice said. “I trust her vision aligns with ours. I trust her heart broke when she did the things she did.”

“I think that’s what makes it worse,” Meela said. “She was the only one I trusted, and she led me down that path.”

“She did,” she admitted. “She played her role, as I did mine.”

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Chapter Forty-Six



“That didn’t take long,” Seph called from the bar, wiping down a glass with a rag that had seen better days. His shaggy blonde hair fell into his eyes as he leaned forward, resting his forearm on the counter with a crooked grin.

“We’re all very interested in what you have for my lady,” Orion replied, making his way towards him while the others drifted towards a table.

Meela pulled the book from her bag, letting it drop with a heavy thump. The sound cut through the tavern, catching a glance or two while the three of them stared down at the leather cover.

“I think we should just focus on Cora,” Alden said, leaning back in his chair. “She’s the biggest concern right now.”

“Oh, Alden.” Meela smiled, nudging his arm with her hip. “My sweet treeman, getting angsty to do some more killing?”

“*Funny*,” Alden replied, “And yes, it should’ve been done weeks ago. It’s giving her time to prepare. You’ve almost been killed how many times now?”

“It’s also giving *us* time to prepare,” Orion said, lowering himself across from Alden. "And Meela handled every single one.” His voice was casual, but there was enough edge to make Alden’s mouth press into a thin line. “For *you*.”

He slid a piece of parchment across the table. It was rough beneath her fingers, the edges slightly frayed from being handled more than once. She broke the seal carefully, her breath deepening as she read the words.

I've given you enough of a head start, Meela. I am becoming lonely without you at my side, and there is much to discuss, much we still must do. Every day I grow increasingly weary of your choices, little moon. This tavern is beneath you. Beneath a Wyrdwood. Beneath a Diremoure.

If you plan to run, do run fast.

She didn't need a signature. The sharp, elegant slanting script was enough. Her fingers tightened around the note. She leaned back in the chair, keeping her expression carefully blank as she slowly passed it to Orion. He read in silence, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the words.

"Gods." He rolled his eyes.

He slid the note across the table to Alden and Alice, but his eyes remained on her. They leaned in, both reading together. Alice's face paled as her eyes moved over the words.

"The note is…" Meela flicked her hands dismissively. "*Whatever*. Changes nothing, we assumed she knew I'd be in Crowmore anyway. I just don't get why she wants to play these games, why wait?"

"To make sure you have it," Alice said easily, rubbing her fingers slowly against her temple. "It was a concern, we didn't even know if it would fall to you."

"So why continue?" Alden's voice was bitter.

"Why risk stopping?" Alice countered.

Orion cleared his throat, glancing between the two of them as his hand came to her knee under the table.

"How would I know?" Meela asked. "When I'm chosen?"

"I wouldn't know firsthand, but you'd know," she said. "There was no mistaking it when your mother came into hers."

Seph appeared at the edge of the table, setting down a round of drinks with a heavy thunk. He stood with hands braced on his hips, giving the group a once-over, clearly catching just enough the conversation to come up with his own conclusions. "On the house," he said. "Ya'll look like you need it."

"Did you see who brought this?" Meela asked, holding up the parchment.

Seph shook his head, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. "No, sorry. Was on the door when Liri opened up."

"Thanks, Seph," Meela said, offering him a small smile.

His gaze went to Orion, his brows furrowing. "This trouble?"

Orion leaned forward, running his hand through his hair. "Possibly."

“We’re gonna try to keep this far from you guys,” Meela offered. “I'm really sorry.”

Seph scoffed, waving a hand. “Don’t you worry a thing, little witch. We’re alright, half this tavern would welcome a fight, they’re always lookin’ for trouble.” He crossed his arms loosely over his chest. “I just wanted to know if we should worry about you, is all.” He flashed her a lopsided smile, and shrugged.

Orion suddenly stood, grinning from ear to ear. “You big mush,” he teased, swooping in and pulling Seph into an exaggerated, bone-crushing hug.

“Get off, you pain in my ass,” Seph grunted, unable to hide his smile. Orion held him, trying to nuzzle his face on his shoulders before Seph finally pushed him off him.

“*No*,” Orion called dramatically. “I demand you come back and hug me properly, Sephirar.”

Seph’s only response was a middle finger behind his back as he stomped back behind the bar. Orion plopped himself back into his chair, still chuckling. He shook his head fondly, tipping back slightly on the rear of his chair. “What a guy.”

“Is this where you stayed?” Alice asked.

Orion’s chair settled back onto all four legs, his smile dropping as he glanced at Alden. “Stay a lot of places,” he said easily, the practiced words slipping from his mouth.

Alice didn’t press, she simply nodded once, but the faint smile gave her away. “For months, you were all they wanted to talk about. You were everywhere and nowhere. It drove her insane.”

“Good. She drove *me* insane," Orion said with a short, dry huff. “Suzaar and I were usually just behind you. Mostly Suzaar.”

Alice’s eyes went to the raven, perched behind Orion. Suzaar let out a small chatter in response. Her expression sobered as she watched him. “A lot of ravens died.”

Meela swallowed as she glanced back at Suzaar, who tilted his head as if he understood.

“When we got anywhere new, you could see her tracking the skies.” She shook her head. “*Anything that watches too closely*, she’d tell us.” her tone dropping to near perfect imitation of Cora's sharp, clipped tone. Alice looked over at Alden. “Your cabin drove her insane. Middle of the forest,

too many to keep track of. She was convinced Orion was lurking behind every tree. Sent more scouts out than I can count."

"How long did you know?" Meela asked. "The garden, you must've known already."

"Almost as soon as I got there." She admitted. "You were different, less dazed than usual. And your grandmother's amulet sealed my suspicion."

Meela's hand instinctively went to her throat, fingers brushing over the crescent moon.

"Not as subtle as you thought," Alice teased. "I tried staying close at that point. Zora was meant to be your keeper." At the mention of Zora, Alice's expression hardened. Her voice lost all warmth, her eyes went flat as though a layer of steel had slipped into place.

Orion's voice was low when he spoke. "I'm shocked she didn't catch on."

"So am I." Alden narrowed his eyes at Orion.

Orion leaned back, lifting his hands.

"Don't look at me like that." Alden pointed a finger. "You weren't being smart and you knew it."

Orion exhaled. "I know," he admitted, shaking his head as the corner of his mouth twitched. "Thought I ruined months of planning when you caught us. I just couldn't stop." He slid his arm around her, pulling her into his side as he pressed a lingering kiss to her temple, grounding them both. Meela closed her eyes and leaned in deeper.

"I was convinced you'd tell her," Meela said.

"I could tell." Alice's brows lifted. "But once I saw Suzaar, it felt like I could finally breathe for the first time in years. During the time Meela was sleeping, she was certain you'd move on." She shook her head. "I think that's why it took her a moment. By the last day, I'm pretty sure she knew."

Meela looked over at Orion, watching the subtle tension in his jaw. He didn't like talking about those years—the ones he spent chasing shadows and burning through himself just to keep going. His grip on her tightened, but he only watched Alice, letting her continue.

"I just knew I needed to keep everyone distracted." She glanced at Alden. "And you were already so protective of her." She nudged him with her shoulder. "And Suzaar was there, it was enough to know something was planned. It was all I could offer," she admitted. "You were right, Meela. I had no plan of getting you out, I didn't know how to do it safely." Alice looked at both men now. "I know you didn't do it for me, but thank you."

Alden’s eyes softened, and he gave a small firm nod. Orion didn’t deflect with a teasing remark. His eyes only held hers, his expression uncharacteristically solemn, and he returned the slightest nod of his own.

“Where does she think you are?” Meela’s voice broke the silence, drawing Alice’s attention.

“With you, I assume.”

“Where did she go?” Meela pressed on. “We haven’t seen her since that night.”

“Home. She sent others out, while she went back searching for alternatives.”

Alden’s voice cut in. “And is there one?”

Alice’s mouth opened slightly, but she hesitated before speaking. “For all we know, there is a Wyrdwood High Priestess out there walking around with all that power.” She sighed. “But there’s still the moon to deal with.”

Orion leaned back slightly, one arm resting behind Meela, the other turning the glass between his fingers. “Is there an alternative for that as well?”

“It was considered.” Alice turned to him. “But Ida’s vision was certain. It was always Meela.”

Meela’s fingers tightened around the edge of the table. Her eyes flicked to the note and then the book in front of her. “Then let’s all find a new answer, shall we?” she said. “Surely between the four of us we can find something.”

There was a beat of silence.

“That doesn’t revolve around your blood, and death.” Orion reminded her.

“Right.” She gave him the faintest smile.

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Chapter Forty-Seven



The tavern was alive in a way that early afternoon could offer, bustling with enough conversation but not yet swallowed by the rambunctious energy of the evening crowd. The scent of spice ale and roasted meats clung in the air. A bard tuned his lute in the corner, plucking lazy notes that barely rose over the low murmur of patrons nursing drinks.

The four of them sat around the wooden table, dishes piled in the corner. Alden nursed his drink, his large hands wrapped around the mug as he flipped through one of the books Orion had brought. He leaned over the table, fingers drumming against the wood in restless agitation. Meela sat beside him, her foot bouncing under the table.

Alice exhaled through her nose, shifting across the table, her head nearly touching his, her fingers pointing at a line. “You’re reading to into that, Orion. Think about…”

Parchment shifted as the door flew open, Liri strolling in with both arms wrapped around overflowing baskets. "Gosh, still going at it?” she called over, her voice carrying over the tavern.

Seph was already moving, peeling the baskets from her grip. “Gods, Lir, you buy the whole market?” he teased, eyeing the bundles of wrapped goods.

“Just about, doll.” She shot back, flashing a wide-toothed grin.

“Still at it,” Meela sighed, stretching, her spine popping in protest.

Liri popped over, her energy a stark contrast to the heavy thoughts lingering over the table. She leaned slightly on Orion’s chair, tilting her

head with a curious squint towards Alice. “I swear I know you from somewhere.” Her lips pulled to one side as if trying to piece it together.

Alice, ever composed, extended a hand. “I don’t believe we’ve met officially. Alice.”

Liri’s eyes lit up the moment the name left her lips. *“Yes!”* She stomped her foot in triumph, startling a drowsy patron at a nearby table. “Circe’s daughter!”

Meela and Alice exchanged a look before turning back to Liri, whose grin only widened.

“You knew my mother?” Alice asked, her tone a little higher.

“Oh yeah!” Liri waved her hand as if it were common knowledge. She held these women’s empowerment get-togethers over at Rosa’s once a month. I started going when I first moved here. Gods knew I needed more… feminine interactions." She giggled, her short blonde curls bouncing with every shift. "Not exactly a thriving sisterhood here." Gesturing toward the room, where a group of men were currently arguing over the proper way to pickle a turnip.

I didn’t know you knew Circe," Meela mused.

Liri nodded, tucking a loose strand behind her pointed ear. “Realized it after you and Orion left town. I told Seph you looked familiar. You lived with her, right? She never called you anything but her *little moon*. We all thought that was so sweet.” Her smile softened. “Meant to say something when you got back, but…” She trailed off. “She talked about you both at almost every meeting.”

Alice’s fingers curled around her mug. “My mother was…” she hesitated, as if searching for the right words.

“She was,” Liri offered, “And gods, you look just like her. You’re absolutely stunning.”

Meela smiled at Alice, her hand going out to give hers a small steadying squeeze. Liri noticed the shift in mood and pivoted without missing a beat. Her eyes mapped out the scattered parchment in front of Orion, his notes a tangled mess of ink and frustration. “Ooh, are we working on a riddle?” She clapped her hands together, leaning in with renewed excitement. “I love riddles!”

Orion lifted his head, arching a brow. “You like riddles?” He smiled wide. “You surprise me daily, Lir.”

She smiled down at him. “I’m *fae*, Orion. Go to Goldrun and you’ll hear nothing but riddles. It’s what we do, say too much without saying a single thing.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s my birthright.”

She plucked one of the papers where Orion had rewritten the prophecy, and began reading aloud, her voice lifting with an almost musical quality. “A binding forged by ancient will, yet should the crescent break the chain, the moon shall wane, and chaos reign.” Her voice grew deeper on the last line as she exhaled dramatically, pressing the parchment to her chest.

“Did you write that?” Her eyes beamed at Orion. “That’s beautiful.”

The four of them exchanged looks before a sudden burst of laughter escaped them. It was brief, and more of an exhale of tension. Orion shook his head.

“It’s about death,” Meela said.

“So?” Liri wiggled her shoulders, unbothered. “It’s still nice.”

Orion looked at her with an expression caught somewhere between confusion and curiosity. “Explain, Liri.”

Liri looked between them all. “You all seem smart enough, I guess I read it wrong.”

Orion shot up. “No, no.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pushing her down in his seat. “You said you’re good at riddles. By all means,” he said, grabbing another seat. “We need a fresh perspective.”

Liri looked around the table.

“Humor us, Liri.” Alden smiled. “The four of us have read this so many times we may as well be staring at a stone.”

“Well.” She looked at Meela, “I suppose I have female empowerment on the brain.” She shrugged. “Perish, like sheddin’ what no longer serves you.”

Orion leaned in, sliding the parchment toward her. “Fair enough. Three must perish. Innocence, strength and wisdom.” His dark eyes danced as he pushed her to continue.

Liri cleared her throat. “I didn’t take this as actual death and blood, I thought it was more figurative,” she shrugged.

Orion settled back in his seat, his eyes locked on to Meela. “How does one figuratively kill those three things?”

“Growth,” Liri said easily. “Death of self.” She stood, her hands adjusting her bodice. “But hey, what do I know? I’m just a barmaid.” She shot Meela a wink before striding off, leaving them in stunned silence.

Meela sat frozen, tying all the strings together. “Growth,” she whispered. The puzzle in her mind clicked in place. “Holy shit, Liri.” her voice shot through the room. “*Growth*, obviously!”

Before Liri made it two steps, Meela vaulted out of her chair. “Come here, *you gorgeous, brilliant fae!* Gods, I could kiss you right now!” She grabbed Liri's shoulder, her eyes wide. *“Growth!”* Meela threw her arms around her, planting a kiss on her lips.

Liri let out a surprised, dazed laugh, unaware of how much a single word had changed the trajectory of her life.

“Hands to yourself, Scarrow.” Meela shot Orion a look, still giddy.

Orion’s hands shot up in surrender. “Wouldn’t dare.”

“No?” Alden mused.

Meela’s breath was shallow, her heart hammering against her ribs as they stared at her. “I’ve said it before, Orion. Why does the moon want some murderous priestess? Cora is perfect for the role.” Her voice trembled, not with fear but certainty. “It never made sense.” She laughed. “Figurative. A death of *self*. Alice, you said it earlier, you want someone who is willing to see beyond themselves. This is bigger than Cora and me. It’s bigger than Cora and my mother. It’s *always* been about Wyrdwood. It’s telling us to heal. It’s willing to give it to someone who can do the work, someone who is willing to change and grow.”

Her hands rose to her temples as the final pieces locked into place.

She paced the table, and she knew she must look crazy but her train of thought was coming out of her mouth in rapid-fire. “Innocence,” she said, her fingers pressing against her skull as if she could reach inside and unmake the girl she had been.

Orion was watching her, his eyes following every step. "Innocence," he repeated.

“Yes,” she yelled. “Or naivety… obedience?” Her eyes grew larger. “I needed to kill the part of myself that let me be so easily led.”

Her hands fell to the table, palms pressing against the wood.

“Strength,” she said. "I'm stubborn, I isolate myself when I’m upset. Orion, how many times have you told me I *need* to let go of the idea that carrying this heavy weight by myself is the only way?”

She lifted her gaze, looking at Alden. “And wisdom,” she exhaled, the word rolling off her tongue like the weight on her shoulders. “Wisdom isn’t just knowing every truth…” She looked around the table, her head shaking.

“It’s also accepting them.” Orion finished for her, their eyes locked onto one another.

Meela let out a sharp breath, almost a laugh, but it was shaky and raw.

“It never wanted you to kill,” he said. “It wanted you to kill the version that wouldn’t survive it.”

Meela sat back down, breathless, her head tilting toward the ceiling, as if she could see the moon even through the wooden beams.

Alice let out a choked laugh. “I can’t decide if this is brilliant or mad?”

“Maybe both?” Alden offered, letting out a short huff.

Orion reached for Meela’s hand, his fingers interlocking hers, his calloused palm warm against hers. A smile grew on his face.

For the first time, she no longer felt like the moon's pawn. She felt like its heir.

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Chapter Forty-Eight



As the afternoon dragged on, their conversation shifted from prophecy to planning. While their understanding may have changed, Cora's had not.

And likely would not change.

The thought struck with bitter irony. The distance between what Cora wanted and what she could never have stretched impossibly wider with every desperate choice and every act of cruelty. Over the years, she had only dragged herself further from the thing she believed was her right.

Suzaar shifted restlessly behind Orion, the raven hopping and pecking at his shirt.

"What is it?" Orion leaned back, bringing himself at eye level. Suzaar's head turned sharply, once toward Meela before his eyes went to the door.

Orion nodded, his hand casually drifted to her knee. "They're almost here."

Meela sat a little straighter, her stomach dropping.

"It'll be fine." Alice's voice was soft, her eyes holding warmth Meela wished she could absorb. "They're excited."

Meela glanced back at the door, "Should we have done this here?"

"Better here than anywhere else, love." Orion offered. "You make the call, the moment you want to leave, we're gone."

"You make it sound easy." She gave a dry huff.

"It is that easy," Alden said. "None of us would be upset."

She stared down at her lap, her thumb brushing over the scar across her palm. Orion's hand opened, offering his own instead. She drifted her fingers

over the familiar edge of his, idly tracing the scar as she had countless times before.

“I’m nervous about Lenora,” Meela admitted. “It’s a little hard not to hold resentment. She acts so sweet.”

“It’s not an act.” Alice said, “I know it’s hard to imagine, but she did care for you.”

The tavern door swung open, and a chill draft curled through the warmth. Conversation dipped. Tankards paused midair as a small group of women stepped inside. Their presence alone seemed to hush the room, every gaze tugged toward them. Alice stood, making her way to the approaching women before they even made it halfway to their table.

Meela’s eyes found only one. Lenora.

For a moment, she wanted to look elsewhere. At the wood grain of the table, at Suzaar shifting in Orion’s lap, at the condensation trailing down her glass. But she couldn’t. Lenora’s tired, shadow-rimmed eyes locked with hers, and Meela’s chest tightened painfully.

“Gods,” Alden muttered under his breath, breaking the silence. “Quite the company.”

Orion grinned, boyish and reckless. “This is your chance to have a lot of fun, Alden.”

Meela smacked him on the head. “Shut up.” Her voice softened, her gaze flicking back to Lenora. “She looks awful, and she feels emotions, so maybe try watching yours.”

“Heed your own advice, little witch,” Orion teased.

“What? Why?”

“You look like you might toss your lunch any second,” Alden added, lifting his mug.

Orion pushed back his chair, its scrape cutting across the floorboards. Meela and Alden rose with him, and she felt Orion’s hand rest firm against the small of her back as Alice beckoned them forward.

“Introductions, of course.” Alice’s hand swept between the groups. “Orion, Alden, and Meela.”

The first woman inclined her head. She was tall and willowy, her black hair spilling over skin so pale it seemed translucent. A jagged scar slashed across her left eye, lending a vicious elegance to her beauty. But when her gaze landed on Alice, her fierce eyes softened. “Serissa.”

Next, a dwarf stepped forward, blue skin gleaming warmly against the tavern's candlelight. Her short hair was clipped roughly to her jaw, her long ears gleaming with silver jewelry. A heavy axe swung at her hip. She gave Meela a firm, grounding nod. "Orimm."

Then came the third, and Meela forgot to breathe.

She looked like her. The same silver hair, the same wide honey eyes, the same soft rounded curves. They were even the same height. But her pale skin was etched with moss, bark-like striations winding the length of her arms, and tiny mushrooms glowed faintly from her flesh. She seemed grown, not born, shaped by the forest itself. "Ena," she said, her voice like leaves stirred by wind.

Alice moved to the eldest. A long white braid, threaded with iridescent silk, lay across her shoulder. Her hands, blackened to the knuckles as if dipped in ink, stood out against the silver crescent at her chest—a twin to Meela's own amulet. The woman's green eyes studied her, sharp and unflinching. "This is Aerin," Alice said softly. "Eldest of the Wyrdwoods. And your great-aunt."

Meela's throat tightened. "You bend the wind. My mother spoke of you."

Aerin's lips curved. She stepped close, her blackened fingers brushing Meela's chin before gliding to her amulet. "High Priestess," she murmured, her eyes glinting. "You look exactly like my mother."

Finally, Alice drew Lenora forward, her hand a gentle tether. "And of course, Lenora, whom you all know. Though, I don't think you have officially met Orion."

Orion chuckled, extending his hand to her.

Meela's voice thinned to a whisper. "Hi, Lenora."

Lenora's mouth trembled, as if words fought to rise. "Hi, Meela."

A murmur rippled through the tavern as the introductions ended. A few patrons quickly looked away when Aerin's sharp gaze passed over them; others lingered in fascination at Ena's faintly glowing skin.

Alice, unbothered by the attention, gestured toward the empty benches around their table. "Come, sit. We've drawn enough stares for one evening."

Orion pulled Meela back into her seat, his hand brushing against hers beneath the table before he reached for his mug. Alden shifted to make space, shooting Meela a small, crooked grin as if to say that went better than expected.

The women settled in. Serissa fluid and poised, Orimm grounding herself with both hands on the table, Ena folding with quiet grace, and Aerin remaining impossibly still, her presence pressing on the room even as she sat. Lenora lowered herself last, her shoulders hunched as if the weight of so many eyes might crush her.

The tavern slowly remembered itself. Tankards clinked, dice rattled again in the corner, and the hum of voices rose. Though more than one curious glance still flicked toward their table.

Serissa leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. She let the quiet hang just long enough to set her pace, her gaze steady as it moved around the circle. “Let’s not waste time. Cora has hurt us all. We’re here to help. But mostly, we’re here for Alice.”

Meela’s brows knit, her head tilting as if trying to decide what response Serissa expected. The woman’s tone wasn’t cruel or challenging, only matter-of-fact, as though she’d simply laid down a truth.

“Lovely. Okay.” Meela rolled her eyes, more out of nerves than defiance.

Orion’s thumb brushed against her back in a quiet, steadying stroke. When she glanced at him, his brows were lifted, his mouth twitching faintly. He gave the smallest shake of his head, as if to say don’t bite.

Her attention returned to the others, her voice sharpening. “Everyone else is only here for Alice as well?”

Serissa opened her mouth, but Ena’s voice cut in before she could begin again. “She cannot speak for us all,” Ena said softly. “I’m here for you, Meela.”

Serissa scoffed, she didn’t bother to hide the curl of her lip.

“I am,” Ena said firmly.

“You’re here for yourself.” Serissa leaned towards her, her eyes cold and sharp. “What?” She looked at the others. “Am I wrong? We’re all here for selfish reasons. Meela can help us get what we want, but from what I've heard, the priestess doesn’t need people around her who feed her pretty lies to keep things nice.”

“The approach.” Ena shook her head.

“No,” Meela said. “She’s right. It’s refreshing to not feel like this is all on my shoulders.”

Serissa's eyes flashed with sudden amusement. She threw her head back with a roar of laughter before leaning forward again, her grin wide. “Oh it

is. I’ve been wanting a chance at that bitch for years. Can’t seem to get close enough.”

“*Serissa,*” Alice chided.

Serissa rolled her eyes dramatically. With a loud sigh, she leaned back in her chair, her arms folded across her chest as she looked at Alice.

Meela only shook her head. She didn’t mind the bluntness. It removed the guesswork, leaving no room for overthinking who was holding back and why.

“And you, Ena?” Meela asked, tilting her head.

Her eyes went to Orimm, her shoulders drawn in slightly. “Well…” she began. “Cora’s disruption is muddling my abilities. Which greatly affects my forest. I’m afraid if she finally gets what she wants, the magic there might die.”

Meela pressed her lips together. “So you *are* here for yourself,” she said, not meaning for it to sound curt. “Which is fine, Ena. I’m just trying to understand everyone’s reasons. I’m glad you’re here for something bigger.”

Ena’s expression softened, some tension releasing from her shoulders.

“I’m sure you understand why I’m here,” Aerin cut in, her head resting in her hands. “She ruined us, and I’m here to help take it back.”

Meela barely had time to absorb her words before Lenora spoke up.

“Same for me.” Her eyes briefly met Meela’s. “And for you, Meela. You deserve someone who’s willing to fight for you.”

The words struck deeper than she was ready for. She exhaled softly, turning to Orimm. “And you?”

“If you’re looking for honesty.” Orimm looked to Ena. “I’m here for her. Her magic fuels our lands and she’s my friend.” She smiled. “She’s not much of a fighter, and I’ll be damned if she goes into this without protection.”

“Wonderful.” She offered a small smile to the women around the table. She glanced at Orion, who was looking at Alden. Both men were quiet, their eyes heavy. Alden’s throat bobbed slightly before letting out a breath and nodded towards Orion.

“I’m here for you," Orion said, holding her gaze. “*Always* for you. She took away our future, and I want to fight beside you for that chance again.”

The words pressed into her chest. He held her gaze, offering her a small smile before kissing her palm. His dark eyes blazed with warmth.

Alden shifted slightly in his chair. “I’m here because I have a debt to pay,” he said, his eyes fixed on the table. “And for you, my friend,” he added.

Serissa, apparently happy with the heaviness around the table, lifted her glass. “Cheers to Cora’s untimely death,” she declared with a wolfish grin. “Let it be brutal and slow.”

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Chapter Forty-Nine



Outside, the faint patter of rain whispered against the glass. Inside, the room was filled with loud, steady voices and laughter. They all settled into small, scattered conversations. The long wooden table filled with dishes Liri had brought over.

Alden sat at the head of the table, broad shoulders relaxed, one arm draped easily over the back of his chair. His laughter spilled across the table as he traded words with Alice.

Meela was nestled between him and Orion, who was speaking with Serissa across from him, their stories of travel threading easily back and forth. Yet his attention was never far from Meela. His hand covered hers beneath the table, drawing it into his lap, his thumb tracing slow strokes across her skin. His leg pressed firmly against hers.

“You’ve been to Veyrinn, then?” Serissa asked.

“Twice, unfortunately,” Orion replied, his chuckle low. “The second time during their fire festivals. Have you ever gone?”

“I tried to sneak in once when I was younger to see the fire dancers. Got caught by a man who swore I was his niece, nearly convinced me I was.”

“Better off,” Orion said. “The dancers were worth it, but the festival itself was awful. I carried a drunk merchant halfway across the city, and he still managed to steal my coin on the way.”

As he spoke, he gave Meela’s hand a quick squeeze. When she glanced up, she caught him watching her, a faint smirk curving his mouth. Serissa

seemed to notice too, her brow arched, and she leaned back in her chair with a knowing little smile before looking over at Alice.

Beside Orion, Orimm murmured quietly with Lenora and Aerin. Lenora's gaze lingered on Meela, heavy with unspoken questions, but Meela ignored it. She sank into the steady warmth of Orion's hold anchoring her, and let herself be carried along by the low tide of conversation around the table.

"How did you meet this bunch?" Alden asked Alice.

"Better yet," Meela said, leaning forward with a smile tugging at her lips, "when did you meet them?"

"Aerin was the first to leave when things started getting bad," Alice sighed. "But we've stayed in touch over the years."

From across the table, Aerin's voice cut in, sharp enough to dim the room. "I had to. I wasn't staying around for *that*. Cora was always a troubled girl."

Meela felt the pulse of Orion's hand around hers, the weight of his gaze, but she didn't look at him. Her focus was fixed on Aerin, on what she seemed determined to drag into the open.

"She meant well in the beginning," Alice said, her shoulders stiffening.

"When, Alice?" Aerin's lips curled. "She may have let you glimpse some scrap of good, but the rest of us?" Her voice cut sharper. "We saw the truth."

Meela lowered her eyes, unable to look at Alice.

"Question for you, Priestess." Aerin leaned forward, her stare pinning Meela in place. "If you hadn't been chosen, if you were passed over, would you have been willing to create a disease?"

The table hushed. Meela felt every gaze settle on her.

"Because that's what she did," Aerin whispered.

Meela swallowed. "I would've accepted the choice. But…it seemed complicated."

"It wasn't." Aerin's tone was flat, merciless. "Don't take everything Alice has told you as reality. She loved her. And before you start, Alice—" her eyes snapped across the table "I know my sister gave her a hard upbringing. But Izzy got the same. So did she." She nodded toward Meela. "So did I. So did Lenora. So did you." Her gaze sharpened. "That darkness in Cora? No one could love it away, darling. That's a sickness. One the stars ended when we couldn't."

Alice’s fingers tightened around her mug, her lips parted slightly. “I choose to see it differently, Aerin.”

Aerin didn’t flinch. “And she will keep using that against you.”

Meela shifted slightly, her eyes flicking to Alice, suddenly feeling the need to ease the tension, before Serissa beat her to it.

“Alice and I met a few years back, I got into some trouble with the coven. I ended up seeing her again in some small tavern like this one, in a corner of the kingdom.” She glanced over at Alice. “Been close since.”

Alice’s lips curved into a small smile, leaning her shoulder into hers, but didn’t say anything.

Orion, lounging easily beside Meela, tilted his head. "Feels like that glazes over a lot of information.”

Serissa’s lip twitched, unbothered by the remark. “Oh? Tell me, mage, how did you and Meela meet?”

Orion glanced over at Meela, a slow, fond smile tugged at his lips. “I was visiting Crowmore and saw her working her flower cart,” he gave a small shake of his head, as if the image still disarmed him. “I introduced myself, spoke once and I was obsessed and in love, tried desperately to get her to fall in love with me.”

“I don’t think you had to try that hard,” Meela teased.

“Oh, trust me. I did, love.” He smiled. “It was some of my best work.”

“Glazed over a lot of interesting details,” Serissa mused.

Orion let out a laugh into his drink. “Fair enough,” he conceded. “It’s hard to sum it up once you’ve shared years with someone.”

“Exactly.” Serissa raised her glass towards him.

“So… you too…” he asked lightly, his voice trailing off with a casual gesture between her and Alice.

“Friends.” Serissa spoke, not looking at Alice. “I’m too jealous, I need to be someone's one and only.”

Orion arched a brow, offering a small nod. “Can’t argue that.”

Letting the moment pass, Meela turned to Ena and Orimm. “How did you both come to meet our friend?”

Orimm opened her mouth, but Ena was quicker. “I had a vision of you, and you were with her.”

“Oh.” Meela blinked, chuckling softly.

“I was in the woods, shortly after you ran from Alden’s. She just… appeared.” Alice chuckled. “And she's been nothing but helpful since. She

was able to help me track Alden. And our magic really seems to like one another."

"The mycelium really likes you." Ena's eyes crinkled with amusement. "They won't stop talking about you."

"They talk to you?" Orion leaned forward, intrigued.

Ena's eyes brightened. "They do. We are all one."

"Interesting." Orion's head tilted. "Are you a part of their root system, then?"

Ena sat up taller in delight at his understanding. "*Yes.*" The fungi pulsed with her excitement. "I am simply playing a part. We are all so deeply rooted."

Her eyes glowed with excitement as she looked at Meela. "They told me our guardian was back, and where to find you. That Wyrdwood could help."

Orion looked thoughtfully at Meela. "It seems one cannot live without the other." His eyes held hers. "Fungi need a source." He nodded toward Ena, "Wyrdwood controls that source."

"Exactly." Ena nodded, her eyes wide. "You each play a role in our delicate system."

"And Lenora," Orimm asked, leaning forward, "you knew them all before?"

Lenora's gaze flicked to Alice, lingering a breath too long, as if seeking silent permission. "I'm Wyrdwood. I was in the coven."

"We know that." Orimm chuckled, her eyes sliding briefly to Meela before returning to Lenora. "But you were in with Meela and Alice, yes? Up until recently. You must know Cora and you seem to be Meela's age, so what kept you?"

Meela hadn't expected Orimm to cut so directly. The question landed clean, sharp, and Meela felt the tug of it herself. She'd wondered the same thing for years. Lenora had always felt… different. Softer. A wildflower planted in the wrong garden. Nothing like the girls Cora shaped into weapons.

Curiosity stirred in her now. She leaned in without meaning to, studying Lenora's lowered eyes, searching her face for an answer she had never been brave enough to ask.

Alden's voice was softer when Lenora hesitated to answer. "What changed your mind, Lenora?"

She shifted in her chair. “I didn’t agree with how it was being led. So I left to follow someone I believe in.” The words came evenly, too smooth, as if rehearsed.

“And how does your mother feel about that choice?” Serissa asked.

Meela’s eyes flicked to Lenora, but it was Alice’s reaction she noticed first. The faint crease in her brow, then the sharp pinch on her side, meant to tell her to stop. Serissa’s gaze slid toward Alice, narrowing.

“Oh no.” Ena’s voice cut in, her head tilted, brown eyes warm and guileless. “Is your mother still with them?”

“Yes.”

Ena’s hand reached for Lenora’s. “You must convince her to join us.”

“I don’t think that will happen.” Lenora closed her eyes, drawing a breath. “Cora is my mother.”

Ena pulled her hand back. The fire crackled too loud, voices around them blurred into a dull roar. Meela’s vision tunneled; her pulse thundered. Orion’s hand went still on her knee.

Meela looked across the table at Alice. Her violet eyes were wide, full of fear. “Meela,” she said softly, coaxing, as if she were trying to soothe a wild animal.

Meela ignored her, fixating on Lenora.

Cora’s daughter. Of course.

The resemblance slammed into her with dizzying force. The same golden hair, the same sharp line of the jaw, those piercing Diremoure eyes. It had been there all along. Her breath came shallow. The betrayal she once felt from Lenora shrank beside this revelation. Lenora had walked away from her own mother to stand here, with them.

Gods. Poor Lenora.

“Meela,” Orion murmured, leaning close.

The words slipped out before she could stop them. “*What the fuck?*”

“You’re Cora’s daughter?” Orimm asked, disbelief hard in her tone.

“It’s not like I had a choice.” Lenora straightened, breathing hard. “It means nothing.”

“It doesn’t,” Alice said.

“If anything, Alice is my mother.” Lenora’s voice turned flat, disconnected. “Cora only birthed me. I was a vessel, nothing more. We have no bond deeper than blood.”

“For years, you heard me call her mother, watched her treat me as her own.” Meela said.

“*Play* mother,” Lenora corrected coldly. “And yes. It showed me I was missing nothing.”

Meela turned to Alice. “And you always knew?”

Alice’s eyes softened as she shook her head.

“That didn’t bother you?” Orion asked.

“Why would it?” Alice replied. “I knew she wanted a daughter to carry her legacy. After Izzy got pregnant, Cora left. She sought power and chose a fae. From what I've gathered, he never wanted to be involved.” She swept her gaze around the table, then back to Orion. “Don’t guilt her. She did what she had to in order to survive.”

“No one’s guilting her, Alice,” Orion said softly. “We’re just… surprised.”

“Does it change anything for you?” Lenora asked.

Silence stretched, broken only by the hum of other patrons.

Meela inhaled. “Slightly,” she admitted. “When the time comes and the choice is there, will you be able to watch someone at this table kill her?”

“As I said, Cora is only blood.” Lenora’s eyes narrowed. “As she is for you.”

Meela held her stare. She had never seen her so vacant, so cold.

“Then no,” Meela said quietly. “It doesn’t change a thing.”

Because it didn’t. Lenora had been ignored, discarded like the rest of them. Just another pawn. From the corner of her eye, Meela caught Orion leaning back, lifting his glass. At the bar, Seph and Liri watched with sharp attention. Liri met her gaze, then slipped a pitcher into her hand.

“Hi, dolls. Another?” she asked brightly, resting a hand on Meela’s shoulder.

Meela exhaled, curling her fingers around Liri’s.

“Thanks, Lir,” Orion said softly.

“Well,” Meela cleared her throat, trying to shift the tone at the table. “Cora left me a sweet little note today.”

She dropped the parchment in the middle of the table. Serissa snatched it up first, skimming before dropping it back on the table with a scoff.

“Exactly. Utter nonsense, a threat with dramatic flair, but the message was clear enough. She’s coming. We’re gonna wait,” She shrugged. “She’s

coming regardless, so we might as well meet her on ground we understand."

"Tomorrow Alden and I will head out," Orion added, leaning forward slightly. "Ward the areas we think she will enter. Whenever she crosses one, we'll know. That'll be our chance to push her into neutral territory, away from the town and people." His gaze met Lenora's. "If you have anything… intel, murmurs, even suspicions."

"I've been in the dark since Alice left."

"That's fine," Orion said. "Nothing changes for us then."

"She's using blood magic."

Aerin gasped, looking back at Alice, horrified.

"We don't know what she's doing with it or what's she's capable of. So we don't know how to prepare properly. But she's coming for me, they all will. I'll do what I can to keep the attention on me, drag her in. Hopefully, by then, the bulk of the coven will be gone, leaving just her against us."

"And then kill her," Serissa said plainly. "Anyone's shot?"

"Anyone's shot." Meela nodded. "I don't need that glory. If you have a moment, take it."

Silence lingered, broken only when Orimm chuckled, arms crossing. "Been a while since I've had a proper fight."

A few at the table laughed, the tension easing as glasses lifted in a rough toast. Chairs scraped, voices shifted toward smaller conversations. Orion leaned close to Alden, murmuring something before the two of them rose and made their way to the bar, drawn into talk with Seph and a cluster of men nearby. Their absence left a hollow space at the table. Lenora watched them go before slipping into Orion's empty seat, her voice low, meant only for Meela.

"I need to tell you something." Her fingers traced the rim of his abandoned cup. "I overheard things before I left. Not much, just whispers from Ida. Cora's been pressing her to find a way to cut off plant magic. Yours. Something permanent. She kept muttering about killing the roots."

Meela's stomach tightened. There was no surprise in it. Cora had been trying to sever her for years. Of course she hadn't stopped.

"Thanks." Meela's gaze lingered on her cousin. "Well… she's your mother. That must be awful."

Lenora let out a sharp, bitter laugh. "Unfortunately. I'm sorry, Meela. For what I did. For what I didn't do."

The words settled between them. For the first time, Meela didn’t see her as one of Cora’s or a traitor, but as someone caught in the same snare. Once, those words would have made her flinch, stirring the bitterness in her chest until it swallowed her whole. She didn’t forgive Lenora.

Not yet.

But she wanted to.

“None of us made it away from Cora clean,” she said softly. “Generations of Diremoure poison run through us. I’d love a new beginning.”

Lenora shook her head, eyes shining. “Me too.”

“Good.” Meela’s voice steadied, a faint smile breaking through. “And, I’m really glad you’re here, Lenora.”

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Chapter Fifty



"Mom?" Meela slowly approached.

Izzy turned around, a slow smile tugging her lips. She looked the same as she did years ago. Bright green eyes, sun-speckled spots scattering her face, her long silver hair, unruly, drifting around her like she was weightless.

"Hello, little moon."

"Am I dreaming or are you real?" Meela asked, her breath hitching. She couldn't look away. It felt real, *she* felt real.

"You are not dreaming," her mother answered easily, her voice warm and familiar. Then, it began to deepen, a low, resonant sound drawn up from the marrow of the earth. "I will take whatever form you are most comfortable with."

Meela watched as her mother's face rippled. The features sharpened as it shifted. Suddenly, Orion stood before her, his dark eyes holding hers.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Even as the form twisted and changed again, becoming Alden, then Liri, Meela felt no fear. The faces were familiar, but the voice belonged to none of them. It was vast and boundless, layered with the sound of tides and wind, heavy with the weight of centuries.

"Ready for what?" She asked softly. "Who are you? You wear their faces but you are not them."

"I am what blooms in the darkness, and what guides the tides of fate. I am the moon, Meela. And you are my vessel."

Meela hesitated. “Why not Cora?”

“Power rooted in hunger devours itself. You only see the middle of the story, not the beginning, nor the end.”

Her voice cracked, her hands trembling at her sides. “Then why wait for me?”

“Because the one before you chose it so,” the voice replied. “She glimpsed your path, as the one before her glimpsed hers. It is a chain older than your name, older than your blood. Call it tradition, prophecy, or curse. It is all three. The moon binds you, but the priestess helps choose who will bear its weight. Others were born, others tried, but none carried both the weakness and the will that you do.”

“Weakness?” She bristled. “That’s what you’ve been waiting for?”

“That is what tempered you.” The form tilted its head, smiling with a mouth that was not her mother’s. “Soft metals bend. Hard metals break. But you…” Its eyes gleamed with shifting light, green to gold to silver. “You endured. You cracked and remade yourself. That is strength.”

“And if I say no? If I decide I don’t want this?”

“Then you live the life you choose,” the voice said. “And the world will collapse in your absence.”

“That doesn't sound like a choice.”

“All choices are costly.” It answered. “Freedom always is.”

She let the silence stretch. “And I say yes?”

“You will be remade, no longer yours alone but *ours*. The earth’s voice, the tide’s memory, the stars’ breath. You will be the echo of your bloodline. You will be my heir.”

“That sounds like losing myself,” she whispered.

The form leaned close, eyes gleaming with her mother’s warmth though the voice still carried its ageless weight. “No, little moon. It is remembering who you always were.”

The air around them shifted, humming faintly, vibrating through her chest. “She is coming,” the voice warned. The forms flickered faster now, a blur of faces she had loved and lost. “Choose quickly.”

Meela swallowed. “Will it hurt?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Her chest squeezed. “What if I’m not enough?”

“Then you will grow until you are.”

The air pressed in, sharp and alive. Her fear quaked inside her, but beneath it all was something stronger. “Yes.”

The form’s hand lifted. Its thumb rested gently at the center of her brow. “Then take what was always yours.”

The world cracked.

The first break was sound, a note struck from no instrument, deep as bedrock, rising like a chant. It reverberated through her bones, the rhythm of something older than language. Then came the scent, sharp and metallic like lightning on stone, followed by the sweetness of rain.

And then the light.

It tore through her, brilliant and violent, flooding her mouth with the taste of salt and ash. Her lungs seized, filled not with air but with the breath of the world itself. She choked. Around her, the darkness shattered into fragments, faces and voices weaving into the blaze. The voice thundered through the storm, not spoken but sung: *Breathe it in. Do not resist.*

She gasped, dragging the fire into her chest. It burned, sweet and bitter, sinking into her ribs until her marrow hummed. Her skin prickled, her tongue caught the taste of smoke, her ears filled with whispers, a chorus of women chanting her name.

She buckled, clawing at the emptiness, certain her body would shatter. But it did not break. It opened. The light coiled inside her, ancient and alive, an inheritance too heavy yet perfectly made to fit her bones. When her vision cleared, her hands looked unchanged. But the air bent around her fingertips, waiting, listening.

The voice faded, softened now into something warm.

You see? It was always you.

The light sank deeper, coiling low beneath her ribs until her chest ached with its weight. The chant still rang faintly in her bones, echoes of voices that were not hers yet felt bound to her blood.

Meela gasped and her eyes flew open.

The dream scattered like smoke, but the power did not leave with it. It surged through her veins, alive and restless. The air pulsed around her, bending toward her with every breath. She pushed herself upright, palms trembling, expecting to find them marked, but they were bare. Only the faint heat beneath her skin remained as proof that something had changed.

Her first thought was of him.

She turned, reaching for the steady warmth that always anchored her, but the bed was empty. Orion's place was cold, the blankets thrown back.

She scrambled out of bed, her feet barely touching the floor before bolting down the stairs.

The front door was wide open. Orion stood, his back toward her. He was still, staring into the distance. As if sensing her, he slowly turned, a sleepy lopsided smile tugging his lips. "I'm sorry I woke you," he murmured, his voice still thick with sleep. "Suzaar was restless."

"She's coming." She blurted, closing the distance between them. "The moon—"

"The moon?" Orion's brows furrowed, "What do—" He froze, his gaze locked on hers, his lips parted slightly. "Meela…" he whispered. "Your eyes are glowing."

Meela blinked quickly, pulling back.

"Orion, listen." Her voice became frantic. "Cora is coming. She's close. The moon… it visited me. I was granted the power. I… I can't explain it all now. Just trust me."

His face softened before rushing past her. "Suzaar must've sensed her, he woke me up about twenty minutes ago. He flew away and hasn't been back. Did it say how long?"

Orion climbed the stairs two at a time. Meela followed him quickly, her heart pounding. She yanked the tunic over her head, her hands trembling as she fastened the ties.

"No, just that she was close."

"Fuck." He ran down the stairs once dressed, bracing one hand on the frame, looking out into the night. He turned sharply, his eyes dropping to the floorboards, and let out a low laugh.

"What?" Meela blinked.

His gaze met hers, the corner of his mouth twitching. "Walk to me."

Unease prickled her skin, but she obeyed, stepping towards him. The moment she moved, his breath caught. He let out a low, incredulous laugh, running a hand over his jaw.

"Gods." He shook his head. "I don't think I can call you my little witch anymore."

She followed his gaze. Beneath her vines twisted through the floorboards, snaking around her ankles in tight coils. She turned her head, seeing the

trail she had left behind. A pathway of ivy and thorns. Her breath came in short bursts.

The oak in the center of their home began trembling. The wooden beams groaned as the branches pressed outward, growing larger by the second. She watched as the leaves darkened. The vines spread rapidly along the walls, twisting around the windows, spilling over the sills like wild overgrowth.

Meela's eyes widened. She glanced at her trembling hands. "Oh my gods…"

The house began to shake, every plant overtaking the space.

"Take a breath, love." Orion's voice was soothing. He stepped forward. "It's reacting to you, and probably a lot more power than it's used to."

A sharp call pierced the stillness as Meela took slow, steady breaths. Suzaar shot through the open door like a streak of shadow, the raven's wings beating frantically as let off a series of sharp calls.

"A few miles out still."

Orion bolted to the table, ripping a piece of parchment from the desk before writing something and shoving it to Suzaar. "Go to Alden."

Suzaar clamped his beak tightly and shot into the night. Meela had never seen the raven fly so quickly, his wings slicing through the air, disappearing into darkness.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes." She breathed. "I think."

He caught her hand as she trailed down the stairs, the house still thrummed with magic, everything twitching, sensing the oncoming storm. Her legs felt clumsy, but his grip was firm.

"Look at me," Orion said softly, cupping her face, his thumbs tracing over her rounded cheeks. "You are the bravest person I know, Meela."

The words were resolute, each syllable anchoring itself in her chest.

"You have everything you need." he whispered, his thumbs brushing away the tears that slipped free. "Trust yourself, okay? Focus on what's in front of you. Not me. Not anyone else."

She nodded quickly, clutching his wrists, her breath catching on the sob that threatened to break. "No goodbyes, Orion."

"No goodbyes." His grin curved, defiant even now. "This speech was leading into a 'let's tear her up, so we can be done with it.' I don't want you looking over your shoulder anymore. I want you here forever so I can love you the way I should have all along."

The tears in her eyes brimmed over. “I’d really like that.”

“Me too.” His voice broke.

His mouth crashed against hers with a heat that burned straight through the tears. He dragged her in, one hand fisted in her hair, the other locked around her waist as if he could anchor them both.

A sharp splintering crack echoed like a bone snapping, tearing through the tranquility. They froze. Just beyond the river, a cluster of birds erupted violently from the canopy.

A pressure rolled through the earth, as though the forest itself inhaled beneath the weight of approaching bodies. Dozens—no, hundreds—moving with the heavy stride of something built for force, not stealth. She felt them through the trees: bodies brushing trunks, hands grazing bark, each disturbance traveling through root and soil until it reached her. A great mass pushing steadily through the forest.

She stepped toward the open door, the night air brushing her face. Her magic pulsed in her fingertips, aching to be released.

“There’s a lot,” she murmured, shaking her head. “And they don’t feel human.”

“They still have to work through the protection spells.” Orion crossed the room in long, controlled strides, heading for his travel pack. He pulled a sword free, the metal catching the dim light, and strapped it across his back before securing a dagger against his thigh.

When he turned, his gaze snared hers. “We’re not winning this with magic alone, little witch.”

She huffed a laugh. “Any other tricks up your sleeve?”

He chuckled as he closed the distance. His thumb tipped her chin up, urging her eyes to his. His mouth hovered just above hers, breath warm against her lips.

“Plenty,” he said, his voice sliding into something dark and velvet-soft. “I’ve had many years to think about the ways I’d like her to die.”

He turned back to his pack, pulling free another dagger. When he held it out to her, the breath caught. The blade was long and elegant, a narrow sweep of metal with a pale sheen. The wooden hilt bore a curling motif of entwined vines, carved with a care that bordered on reverence.

“This is beautiful.” She angled it in her hand; it felt balanced, like it had been forged for her alone.

His hand slipped over hers, adjusting her grip with surprising gentleness.

“Liri was right,” he murmured. “You do need your own protection. And I expect to see a lot of blood on it later.”

Then his voice changed. Softened. Frayed at the edges.

“Meela.”

She looked up, and the world narrowed to the raw, shaking truth in his eyes.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “For everything. For this life. You are a gift from whatever god is out there, and nothing I do will ever make me worthy of you.” His voice caught. “But I promise you this. I will spend every day trying to make you feel as loved and understood as you make me feel.”

He swallowed hard, thumb brushing the back of her hand.

“Please, Meela. Stay with me. Don’t make me beg you to promise that she doesn’t win tonight. I don’t care what she threatens. Or who. *You live*.”

“I promise, Orion.” She clung to him, her fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt. The words rose to her lips: *I love you, you’ve always been worthy, always. B*ut she didn’t get the chance to speak them.

Through the open door, a mass of bodies slammed against the spell, shaking the earth itself.

Dark forms moved from the forest, the flicker of steel glinting under the full moonlight. The unnatural lurch of their bodies. Orion stiffened at the sound of her gasp, he turned, his grip on her tightening, instinctively pulling her behind him.

He slowly turned his head, to look back at her. “You can tell me the rest tomorrow,”

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Chapter Fifty-One



Orion bounced slightly on the balls of his feet, rolling his shoulders with a glimmer in his eyes. “Is it fucked up if I’m looking forward to this?”

Meela let out a short, breathy laugh as she watched the arrogant smirk form on his face. She didn’t know if she wanted to slap him or kiss him. “Yes.”

Her boots pressed into the damp earth, the tension loosened with each step she took. With the forest surrounding her, she could feel it—the wild pulse of the earth in her veins. It was deeper than before. Meela didn't hesitate. The first line of Cora’s defense was gone in a second. The roots shot forward with deadly precision, wrapping around ankles and throats. The violent snap of bones echoed through the field as the roots jerked and twisted, breaking their necks in a brutal, fluid motion. Bodies fell in a lifeless heap.

Orion inhaled sharply, a brief silence before a roll of breathless laughter escaped him. “*Fuck yes,*” he yelled, his eyes wide with exhilaration, watching her like she had given him the best news he’d ever heard. “Now *that’s* what I’m talking about, Meela.”

His face was lit with pride, his grin sharp and bright with adrenaline. She barely had a moment to think before he grabbed her face and fiercely kissed her.

“I will be right back.” He turned quickly, offering a wink, before his staff was planted in the earth.

The air around him rippled, the space distorting ever so slightly.

And he was gone.

For the smallest moment, she let the vulnerability of it settle deep in her chest, before she pushed through and stretched her hands outward.

Thick, sinewy vines erupted from the soil, twisting and curling into a wall around the house. Thorns as long as her fingers jutted from every twisting length, forming a vicious barrier of bramble. She layered the vines again and again, forcing them higher until they stretched into the treetops like a living fortress.

She could feel the forest eager for her command. The trees bristled with anticipation. She was barely thinking, the magic simply responded as easily as breath. She wasn't drawing magic, she was magic.

Before she could complete the barrier, the wind shifted. Orion reappeared in a blur of movement. He braced his hands on his knees, his chest heaving with sharp breaths, his hair clung to his forehead, glistening with sweat.

His eyes snapped up, growing wide at what she had done and grinned. "Miss anything?"

"Not yet. What were you doing?"

"It's a surprise."

A violent burst of dark magic ruptured through the vines, shredding through the wall of bramble like brittle twigs. Gaping holes tore through the barrier, blackened and smoking as chunks landed into the clearing.

Cora stepped through the jagged hole.

Her hands were lifted, her head held high. When her gaze met Meela's it curled into a cruel, satisfied smile. Behind her, two figures moved in perfect unison.

The hoods came down with a sharp, simultaneous flick.

"Oh my gods," Orion whispered beside her.

Zora and Delphine approached, but they looked so different. Their lips were pale, and their eyes were black. Both expressions were hollow, except for the flicker of hatred that burned beneath the surface.

"Get him," Cora ordered. Her eyes remained fixed solely on her.

He was already in motion before she could follow, his staff snapped upward, runes burning along its length as a current of blistering magic roared from the tip. It slammed into Zora, sending her staggering back with a vicious crack. Her head whipped so hard, the force snapped her neck.

She was still for a moment before her fingers flexed and she stood, forcing her head back into place. The wound sealed, skin knitting over like

nothing had even happened. Zora smiled faintly as she tilted her head, her neck popping into place.

Meela's eyes narrowed, her vines around her lashed toward Cora like a striking viper. But Cora only flicked her hands, and the magic disintegrated mid-air.

"Please, Meela, you can do better than that."

Cora's finger barely twitched, and a blast shot out so fast Orion barely dodged it, twisting his staff upward in time to deflect the brunt of the force, sending him skidding him back several feet, his boots digging into the earth, kicking up dirt.

Meela forced her gaze away, ignoring the instinct to make sure he was okay.

With each step Cora took, the ground withered. A thick, swirling black cloud drifted around her. The grass yellowed and crumbling to dirt. The cloud was putrid and suffocating. It stung Meela's skin, making her blink against the burn.

Cora smiled. "You should've run. I was almost disappointed you didn't, it's no fun watching you fumble around this pathetic town. I don't see my beautiful Alice. Nor Lenora. They ran to protect you, but where are they now that you need them?"

Meela sent a slender root under the ground, slithering toward Cora's feet. The moment it broke soil, the black cloud around her surged downward like a living thing and killed the root instantly.

"Go ahead, exhaust yourself," Cora said mockingly. "I've known that magic longer than you've drawn breath. I bathed in it before you even fumbled at its edges. Even Isabelle didn't wield it as well as I."

Meela flung a burst of thorns at her, wild and desperate. The vines cracked into the air, only to dissolve. Meela kept going, trying to find any gaps.

Cora only sighed. "You're playing in a garden I burned long ago."

Finally, Meela let the Wyrdwood magic go and recalled a spell Orion had taught her. A crack of green lightning cut through the night. For a moment, the smoke hissed.

Cora's smile faltered.

"That will be enough for now." She lifted a hand, and the smoke swallowed her whole.

Orion was already locked in combat when Meela found him, blades clashing as he fought against the two women. Then the first wave rushed in. Men and women with hollow eyes, gleaming with the same corrupted light that marked Zora and Delphine. They looked human, but no life stirred inside them.

Meela planted herself, remembering what Ena had said. She was one with the earth, simply another source in the system living beneath her feet.

Her breath slowed, and she pulled.

The ground tore open with her command. The wall she made fell, slamming into the charging figures, as the vines wrapped around limbs, lifting them off the ground mid-stride. Meela's hand clenched, the vines tightened.

Bodies crumbled with wet, sharp sounds, and the ground flooded with black blood.

There were more, and Meela didn't stop even when she heard Suzaar's cry coming through the sounds of battle. She could feel Orion's body close behind her, the heat of him steadying her as they moved in tandem, their backs pressing together. The soulless bodies kept coming.

"Aim for the head, Meela." Orion's rough voice cut through the night. "It will hold them off, but we need to burn the bodies, or they'll just keep coming."

Her stomach twisted as she looked around at the bodies littering the ground. Limbs that had been severed off only moments ago were reattaching. More and more lurched forward. A shuddering breath escaped her lips, before she felt his hand close around her wrist.

A rush of air, a dizzying pull, then quiet.

Meela stumbled back, her back hitting the rough tree bark. "Oh my gods, this is... this is..."

"I know."

Magic erupted around them, flames burst to life, trailing up the trees. Meela gasped.

"It doesn't hurt, does it?" His eyes were filled with worry.

"No," she admitted. The fire crackled, but it only tingled, like static under her skin.

He exhaled. "We need to move, we don't know—"

"I'm not running, Orion. We're finishing this."

A slow, grim smile pulled at his lips. “I agree, I mean we need to go back. Are you ready?”

She held out her hand. They landed in the open field, just beyond their home where the monstrous horde pressed forward.

“Suzaar,” Orion yelled.

The raven swooped down from his perch atop the oak. Orion bent to meet him, pressing his forehead against Suzaar’s and whispering under his breath. When he pulled away, Suzaar’s eyes shifted. Fire swept across his wings, crackling with every beat as he launched himself into the air. He tore through Cora’s army, weaving between bodies and leaving trails of flame in his wake.

Orion looked back at Meela, shaking his head. “Best purchase I’ve made in years. Remind me to thank Ash.”

A dull thump rattled beneath them. The tremors deepened. Then a sound tore through the night, a deafening, unnatural scream that ripped through the forest with enough force to nearly bend the trees in half.

“What is *that*?”

“Surprise!” Orion joked, an almost amused grin flashed across his face. “I had to get its attention. Watch out, it’s coming for me.”

Her stomach dropped. “Coming for you?”

Before he could answer, the army surged forward, their eyes locked onto them. The rumbling of the earth sent jagged cracks splitting through the field.

Meela braced herself, flexing her hands, but before she could act. The great oak shuddered. One of its colossal branches snapped out, sweeping through the air like a whip. The nearest bodies flung backward.

Her eyes darted around the field, finding Lenora sprinting towards her.

Behind her, more figures emerged.

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Chapter Fifty-Two



Meela and Lenora moved as one, Wyrdwood magic sparking between them, cutting through the horde in relentless rhythm. Behind them, Orion held the line, striking down any who slipped too close.

The world shrank to grunts and ragged breaths, the thud of falling bodies, and the grotesque crack of bones snapping back to life.

A deep vibration rolled through the earth, something massive tearing through the forest. It loomed above them, nearly as tall as the trees, its feline body moving with terrifying grace through the wreckage. Dark fur rippled over muscle, antlers twisted sharp from its skull, and its yellow eyes were murderous as they locked onto Orion.

It plowed through the horde, trying to make its way toward him.

“Why are they still coming?” Orimm shouted, frustration cutting through the chaos.

“I feel nothing from them.” Lenora clenched her jaw.

“They’re dead,” Serissa shouted, planting her boot and shoving it off her blade.

Orion lifted a hand, fire flicking from his fingertips. “I need more fire,” he ground out. “I can’t conjure enough.”

“Make a perimeter,” Meela ordered. “Burn them in a ring.”

A whirlwind tore through the field, whipping through the smoke and flame. The sudden gust sent undead bodies stumbling back, even the feline braced itself.

“Need help?” Phaio’s voice carried amusement, but it dropped the second he looked around. “Stand back, all of you.”

With a sharp stomp of his foot, a shockwave erupted around them. The horde was blasted backward, some exploding in air scattering like fallen leaves.

The massive beast tilted its head, its eyes now fixed on the professor. Phaio only laughed, glancing back at Orion. “You always were my favorite. She’ll be here soon.”

Alice appeared at Meela's side. “Any signs of her?”

“She left, haven’t seen her since.”

“We need to find her. Once she’s gone, they follow. The three of us need to go.”

“Wait for me,” Orion cut in. “Meela’s not going anywhere without me.”

A deep voice rumbled behind him. “We need you here.” Alden stepped closer. “You’re the only one with fire.”

Orion turned to Meela, desperation in his eyes. He didn't want her to go, she could see it in his clenched fist.

“I promise, Orion.” Meela pulled away, following Alice and Lenora.

Before Orion could protest again, Phaio turned his attention forward.

A roar ripped through the sky. Massive wings cut across the darkness, fire streaking behind them, carving molten fury through the horde.

“Please say that's a friend.” Lenora stiffened beside Meela, her voice wary.

Meela almost cried when she saw Lightlok descend. Her scales shimmered against the night sky. Two figures were strapped on her back. Khol's arms locked around Carmen as they soared, a wild grin splitting her face. The moment they were close enough, she nodded once toward Meela —then leapt.

“Friend.”

She landed with a soft thud and sprinted toward the feline.

Carmen raised her hand. The beast’s murderous gaze shifted, sinking low to its haunches, ignoring Orion completely. With a sudden, feral snarl, it turned on the horde of undead and tore into them.

“Fire!” Meela shouted, running toward her. Carmen’s arms opened, catching her in a quick embrace. “We need fire. It’s the only thing that will kill them.”

“You’re okay?” Carmen asked quickly.

“I am.” Meela nodded. “But they need help.”

Carmen nodded once before sprinting towards Orion.

Alice grabbed Meela’s wrist, tugging her toward the treeline. The three moved swiftly through the forest in search of Cora. The only sounds came from the others behind them, struggling to hold back the monsters that Cora had unleashed.

Meela glanced back at Lenora, who stared at the ground. “She’s so far gone, I can barely feel anything but you two.”

Meela focused, mapping out the forest in her mind, trying to sense where Cora was. Something pulled at her. “This way.”

She led them deeper, veering past a small stream just as two red-cloaked figures emerged from the shadows. Meela didn’t hesitate, she plunged the dagger into the chest of one, warm blood spilling down her hand. A limb snapped forward, slinging the second figure with a bone-crushing force.

Meela smiled at Lenora, who simply shrugged.

Looking at Lenora now, she wondered if she had ever been the woman Meela had known. Or had she, like Meela, been beaten down, forced into silence and solitude? They pressed on, Alice leading the way as Meela and Lenora scanned the darkness, anticipating another attack.

Instinct flared. She felt warmth prickle against her skin. Meela tapped Alice’s shoulder, and they veered into a new path.

“She killed the roots,” Meela whispered, “There is black smoke around her that makes ours mute.”

A flicker of firelight glowed ahead, barely visible through the trees. The three women stilled, locking eyes before taking a slow breath.

“Is there a plan?” Lenora asked.

“Not much of one anymore,” Meela admitted. “Kill her. That’s the plan. Let’s split, I’ll go in first.”

They moved closer, and the formation naturally broke. Meela advanced head-on while Lenora and Alice drifted wide to flank her. Meela kept her steps slow, letting them gain distance as she dragged the edge of her boot against the earth to draw attention.

“Walk.” Cold steel pressed against her throat.

Meela allowed herself to be brought forward. She shifted under the blade pressed to her neck. It bit her skin, sending a trickle of blood running down her collarbone.

Around Cora, women stood in silence. Their faces obscured by red hoods, each held a candle, wax dripping through their hands. In front of Cora lay a stained wooden plank, candles burning at its base, casting flickering shadows across her face.

“Bring her,” Cora said, her voice a perfect blend of charm and menace.

The woman behind her kicked her knees, forcing her to walk.

“I’ve missed you, Meela.” Cora stepped forward, brushing her thumb across Meela’s cheek. “The sun on your skin suits you, and Orion.” She sighed, almost wistful, turning back to her place. “I do hope you’ve had your fun.”

Meela stared ahead. She knew it frustrated Cora when she didn’t get a rise out of people. Meela let her have nothing.

Movement flickered behind the circle of red cloaks. Now or never.

She threw her head back. The blade bit deeper into her throat, but the woman’s grip faltered. Just enough. Meela twisted free, ripped the dagger from her boot, and buried it in the witch's stomach.

She didn’t stay to hear her fall. Heart hammering, she spun as others lunged for her. Vines tore from the earth, snarling around their legs. Thorned brambles snapped tight. With a lift of her hand, she yanked them back against the trees. Each struggle drove the thorns deeper.

“You’ve unlocked it then?” Cora breathed, almost delighted. “Good.”

She lunged. Alice yanked her back. Cora whirled, grabbed Alice’s arm, and burned her. Fire raced up her skin. Alice screamed, crumpling as flames licked higher.

Lenora charged, but Cora’s counterstrike was merciless. A vine lashed across Lenora’s face.

“All of my lost pets in one place,” she crooned.

Meela surged. More vines burst from the earth, but the black smoke coiled around Cora, withering them before they touched her.

“Stupid girl,” Cora hissed. “It’s wasted on you.”

A tendril of black wrapped around Alice’s throat, hoisting her into the air. She kicked, clawing at the choking shadow. Lenora gasped, her magic sparking only to crumble into dust before reaching Cora.

Meela refused to look. Cora fed on fear and chaos. She would get neither. Jaw tight, Meela drew her dagger again and lunged.

Cora flicked her hand, and Meela froze.

A crushing force wrapped around her neck. She clawed at her neck but nothing. No air, just smoke forcing its way down her lungs.

Cora looked towards Lenora, a sliver of worry in her eyes before it was gone. Lenora lunged anyway, magic blazing. Meela did too. Even choking, crawling, she dragged herself forward. Her fingernails filled with tree bark. She didn’t care, she could crawl through fire if it meant reaching her.

The forest answered. Branches curled around Meela’s limbs and hauled her upward. Wind knifed past. From above, she saw the red-cloaks swarming, allies clashing through them. Summoning what she could, she sent vines spiraling around Lenora and Alice, dragging them out of Cora’s reach.

Cora’s head snapped toward her. With a sweep of her arm, she shredded the vines and hurled Lenora and Alice deeper into the forest. Meela felt the faint tremor of their landing through the earth, telling her they were alive. She dropped hard, hitting the forest floor as the branches around her twisted, ready to strike.

Cora lunged. Meela met her.

Strike for strike.

She couldn’t stop. Wouldn’t. Meela charged.

Darkness slammed around her. Cora caught her by the hair, yanking her close until their breath mingled. Meela raised her dagger, ready to drive upward—

—and her body went limp.

Her magic flickered out. Her limbs deadened.

Hands gripped her from the shadows. Cora smiled as a figure pried Meela’s jaw open. Another lifted a vial.

“All will be well, my sweet.” Cora stroked her hair. “Soon you'll be dead."

“No!” Meela gasped.

Cora nodded. The liquid hit her tongue like acid. She tried to spit it out, but the shadow forced her jaw shut.

Fire poured down her throat. Into her chest. Into her soul.

Her vision wavered.

A blood-curdling scream pierced the forest.

Meela blinked through the blur to see Suzaar’s talons rake across Cora’s face, his great beak tearing at her skin as Cora shrieked and flailed. The

shadows faltered. Meela dropped to her knees, gasping, hands searching blindly until her fingers closed around the dagger.

And struck.

She felt the blade connect. She didn't know where she was hitting, she was falling in and out of consciousness. She slashed over and over, her magic barely a whisper beneath her skin, but she called to it anyway.

"Meela!"

Her eyes cracked open at his voice.

Cora howled as Orion's blade cut across her throat, driving her back. Another blink, and Alden's gnarled limbs were wrapped around Cora's arms, wrenching them wide.

Meela reached for him with the last of her magic.

She poured everything she had left into Alden and felt his limbs wield beneath her power, pulling farther and farther apart.

Cora screamed.

Through the narrow slit of her eyes, Meela saw her arms tear from her shoulders.

When Cora stopped screaming, she knew it was over.

Silence.

The world dulled. Meela sagged, vision tunneling.

She was dying.

The poison raced through her blood, hollowing her out. Her knees buckled, but Orion caught her before she hit the ground. His arms were iron. His eyes, frantic. She saw his lips move, but heard only the wind whispering through the trees.

His lips.

She had always loved those lips. The scar cutting through them like fate had tried to mark him, too.

She wished she could kiss him one last time.

She smiled, weak and fading.

If his face was the last thing she saw, she considered herself lucky.

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Chapter Fifty-Three



Orion

Her body was limp in his arms.

"Meela." His voice cracked, breaking on her name. "Please, little witch, stay with me."

Black poison spilled from her lips, dripping down her face as her eyes rolled in the back of her head. Vines began circling around her arms, the forest ready to take her from him.

"*No*. No, look at me." He hauled her upright, forcing her eyes open with his thumbs. "Look at me, gods damn it."

Movement stirred in the trees behind him.

He didn't turn. He didn't care. Not when Meela's breaths were coming in thin, broken threads. But the movement persisted, red shapes detaching themselves from the shadows. He would hunt them to the ends of the earth, drag them bleeding from whatever holes they hid in, erase every soul Cora had ever touched. Anyone she commanded. Anyone she'd even *blinked* at. The fury inside him surged, too big for thought, too wild for the careful discipline he'd spent years mastering.

His training shattered under it. No technique. No finesse. No spell-craft. Just pure, catastrophic detonation.

"You should run," he said.

They didn't. They were too slow.

They were always too fucking slow.

Magic roared out of him like a star collapsing, and the shadows ahead didn’t have time to scream before they burst into fire. The shadows shattered, bodies burned out of existence mid-step. Not even ash left to bury. He didn’t care who they were. All that mattered was the dead weight in his arms.

“Come on,” he whispered, pressing his forehead to hers. His whole body shook. “Meela, please. Don’t do this. Not now. Not after everything. Please, baby, stay.”

Her throat spasmed and he felt her slipping again.

“*No*.” He shoved his fingers between her lips without hesitation, digging past her tongue to make her gag. “*Spit it out*. Don’t you fucking die on me.”

Black sludge smeared across his knuckles. She coughed, but not enough. It wasn’t enough.

“Breathe,” he demanded, voice shaking. “Meela. Breathe.”

The forest swayed around them, mourning alongside him. She slumped again.

Orion’s scream tore from his throat, a sound that echoed across the forest. Suzaar landed on his shoulder, talons flexing, the raven’s mind pressing insistently into his own. *Orion. Is she?* Orion couldn’t focus on him. He couldn’t focus on any of them.

“If you die because of them,” he whispered against her hair, “I swear I will burn this entire world down to the roots. I will kill every last one of them. I don’t care who they belong to. I don’t care what god tries to stop me.”

His vision blurred. Meela’s lips parted. A wet, choking sound escaped her lips as more poison slipped out. Her pulse fluttered against his thumb, already half-gone.

“No,” he breathed. “Stay. *Please*.”

He couldn’t survive it again. He had barely survived losing her the first time. But watching her die here, in his arms, would finish him. Body, soul, the fragile thing he called hope. Gone.

There was too much he hadn’t told her. Too much he hadn’t shown her.

She hadn’t gotten the life she deserved. Not even close.

And he had promised the gods, even begged them, that if they gave him the warmth of her in his arms once more, he would spend the rest of his life making up for every year that had been stolen from her.

He would show her the whole damn world.

Every sunrise. Every ridiculous festival she would drag him through, stopping at every stall because she wanted to see *everything*. Every quiet morning in the home she had built with her own hands. She would sit beside him on the porch with her feet tucked beneath her, those honey eyes crinkling as she teased him about his terrible bread or tried to tame the hair he had long since given up on.

He wanted to watch the years find her gently.

He wanted silver in her hair that had nothing to do with magic. Lines around her eyes from decades of laughing. He wanted to know every version of her the world had not yet been given the chance to make.

Forty. Sixty. Eighty.

He wanted her in every one of them.

A whole, ordinary, ridiculous lifetime of loving her.

He had promised her that.

And gods, he wasn't ready for that promise to become another thing he had failed to give her.

He gathered her tighter against him, arms locking around her like he could hold her soul in place by sheer force. Every ounce of magic and muscle strained toward her. He tilted her head down toward the ground, a desperate, useless instinct. Gravity, mercy, anything. He pounded her back, frantic, trying to force the poison out.

"You're my best fucking friend," he choked out. "You don't get to leave me. Not like this. Not for *them*."

Her body sagged further. Orion pulled her closer, mouth trembling against her temple. His heart stopped. A harsh, ripping cough tore through her, violent enough to jolt her entire spine. A splatter of black hit the ground beside them. He dragged in a breath so sharp it hurt and shoved her upright, one hand braced against her back, the other forcing her eyes open with trembling fingers.

"Meela, look at me. Look at me."

She was dazed, but alive.

A broken, choking sob tore from his throat before he could stop it. Relief hit him like a punch. He wiped his fingers clean on his shirt, smearing the black stain across the fabric so it wasn't on her skin anymore, wasn't in her mouth anymore, wasn't anywhere but out.

She stared down at the dark puddle on the ground, then at her chest where the black poison had spread, and he hated that she could still see the

evidence of what they'd done to her.

"No," he murmured hoarsely, pulling her face back toward his. "Don't look at that. Look at me, my love."

Her gaze found him again, heavy and glassy.

Orion swallowed hard, pushing his thumb gently beneath her jaw, feeling her faint pulse.

"You're here," he whispered, voice wrecked. "You're still here."

His hands were shaking so badly he almost dropped her.

"Breathe," he whispered, softer now, terrified still. "Just breathe for me."

She struggled for air. But she tried. His brave, beautiful girl tried. Orion curled his arms around her, pulling her fully into his lap, holding her as if he could anchor life back into her body by sheer force of will.

"Good," he breathed against her hair. "That's it. I've got you."

The rage still burned behind his ribs, the promise of vengeance coiled tightly around his grief, sharp and alive and waiting for somewhere to go.

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Chapter Fifty-Four



Cora's death shattered the blood magic that bound them, but it didn't end the nightmare. The horde no longer attacked, only staggering around vacant eyes. Still, they needed to be handled. The others worked quickly, driving them into clusters where Lightlok could finish the work.

Meela sank to the ground, every trace of strength drained from her. Overhead, the full moon slipped free of the clouds, spilling a pale light across the wreckage. A silent witness to all that had unfolded.

A shift in the ground made Meela turn. Ena approached, the soft glow of the mushrooms along her skin pulsing faintly. Orimm followed a few paces behind.

Ena lowered herself beside Meela, her eyes fixed on the fire before lifting to meet hers. The moment their gazes touched, Meela felt her. Not as a person, but as she felt the forest's breath against her skin.

Meela studied her. The features were familiar, yet not wholly human. Too graceful, too deliberate, as though shaped by a hand that only half-remembered what a human face should be.

"We will be leaving soon," Ena said softly. "I've been gone too long. There is much to mend."

"I'm sorry your forest was suffering."

Ena shrugged, a small, almost human gesture. "All things heal in time."

"You mentioned your people have stories of my coven. Good or bad?"

Ena's laugh drifted like wind through leaves. "Both," she admitted. "My people do not forget. But when I return, I will tell them of you, and that will

add to the good."

"My home is always open to you, Ena," Meela said with a smile. "I think you and I would be great friends under better circumstances."

Ena inclined her head. "As you are mine." Her gaze lingered, steady and searching. "Can you feel me… as I can feel you?"

Meela's throat tightened, but she nodded. "I can."

"We will always be bound—cycles of life, turning without end. Where the forest is, I am. They shaped me in your image. And you, you are my guardian." She held out her hand. Meela clasped it, their fingers twining in quiet promise. "All will be well, High Priestess," Ena said. "And we will meet again."

She rose, slow and graceful before turning toward Orimm, who waited in the distance.

"Orimm," Meela called. "Thank you."

She gave a sharp nod. "You have my blade, High Priestess. Always."

"Oh gods, Orimm." Meela groaned softly. "Not you too."

Orimm smiled, warmth cutting through her gruffness. "I hope to see you again, Meela."

"Hey," Carmen called out, stepping closer. "We're going to be heading back soon too. I shouldn't be gone from Rimehold too long."

Meela watched Orimm and Ena leave before lifting her head. "Can I hug you?"

Carmen snorted. "Not much of a hugger."

"You were monumental," Meela said instead. "I don't think we could've done it without you."

Carmen shifted on her feet, glancing over at Orion. "Well, Orion forced my hand, so I had to come before he was eaten alive by Rimehold's wardens. Anyway, I owe you both."

"You didn't." Meela shook her head. "But thank you, Carmen. And give my thanks to Khol and Lightlok."

Carmen nodded. "Don't be a stranger."

"Say hi to Hoothoot," Orion added, stepping beside her.

Carmen laughed. "It'll be the first thing I do," she said dryly before turning on her heel with a lazy wave of farewell.

Orion sank down beside the fire, pulling his knees up and looping his arms around them. The flames cracked and popped, their light spilling over scorched earth, throwing long shadows that danced and faded. For a while,

neither spoke. They only watched the embers settle, as if the world itself exhaled around them.

“I thought I was going to lose you again,” Orion whispered.

Meela turned to him. He was still, watching the flames, and she saw his throat bob as he swallowed, eyes shimmering. She didn’t speak, didn’t know what else to say, so she leaned into him, letting her head rest against his shoulder.

He shifted, wrapping his arm securely around her. His lips found her hair. Orion didn’t move. They just sat and breathed, held by the moment and bound in the quiet gravity of survival.

“Are you still with me?” he asked gently, interlocking their hands and pressing them to his mouth.

Tears burned her eyes as she slowly nodded, offering him a small smile. “Always.”

A small, tired smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. His eyes locked onto hers, so fierce and full. “Good.” He cleared his throat. “When you’re ready, we should talk with the others.”

Meela’s gaze drifted past him to where Alden and Alice waited, watching her with quiet patience. Orion pressed a final kiss to her temple, then rose and offered his hand.

The evidence of Alice’s fight was still written across her skin. Though Phaio had done his best, the burns remained vivid. Meela gathered her into a fierce embrace, and Alice’s arms closed just as tightly around her. When they parted, Meela turned to Alden, wrapping her arms around him. He stiffened only for a moment before yielding, his hand settling gently against the back of her head.

“Thank you for letting me use your body,” she murmured. “I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

Alden chuckled. “It was a strange sensation, not being in control, but no, you did not harm me, High Priestess. What would you have us do?”

Meela groaned, drawing back. “Not you too.”

“You’ll have to get used to it,” Alice teased. “We can all see the way your eyes glow.”

“And no coven,” Meela muttered.

Alice’s smile softened. “What a perfect chance to create something beautiful.”

“With your help?”

“Of course.” Alice glanced toward Lenora, still seated with Phaio crouched beside her. “And with hers.”

“And Aerin?” Meela asked, glancing toward the treeline where the woman stood, staring out into the forest.

Alice hesitated. “Eh, possibly. She’s as wild as the wind.”

Meela let out a breath of amusement. “You brought her.”

“She was brutal during the flight,” Alden offered, crossing his arms.

“Really?” she hummed, a smile tugging at her lips. “I do have a soft spot for wild.”

“Oh gods,” Alice mumbled, shaking her head.

She watched Aerin for a moment longer before turning her gaze to the land around them. The flowers she had coaxed to life only days ago had burned to nothing, leaving ash and blackened earth where color had once bloomed. She stood among the ruins of everything Cora had left behind, knowing what came next would belong to her. She would rebuild the land, rebuild the coven, and somewhere along the way, gather the shattered pieces of herself and learn how to make something whole from them again.

Meela looked back at them all.

Her family, who all had been touched by this chaos. She could feel the strength between them. The kind that would never come from power, but from the people you choose to stand with.

“I know we need to talk about the others that are left. But it's not only my decision, it’s the coven's.” Meela nodded, her gaze shifting to the remaining bound figures. “There’s something you need to help me with first. Something this coven needs.”

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Chapter Fifty-Five



Meela stood in the place where Cora had died.

The ground was still bloodied, her body scattered in heaps. Meela's arms hung heavy at her sides, but her breath steadied with the others close beside her. There was no fear left. Only an ache and the strange lightness of something unlatching from her chest.

She took their hands, closed her eyes, and knelt.

Small hands pressing into dark soil. Her mother's warm smile, her voice soft as earth. "*Don't force things to grow, little moon. You ask, you offer. If the earth is willing, it will bloom.*"

Meela bowed her head. She did not plead. She only offered.

The earth groaned.

Cracks split beneath Cora's remains. Soil shifted, reluctant, as though weighing whether to take the body. From that wound in the dirt rose a thin, crooked sapling. Bark blackened as if it had survived fire. Yet still it reached upward, stubborn, trembling, and at its crown unfurled leaves the color of spring. It bore the mark of ruin, yet strained toward the moon.

Life, from rot.

Meela pressed her palm to the ground, anchoring the roots deeper. A long breath seemed to move through the forest. Alice's hand found her shoulder and white blossoms spilled into the branches. Lenora bent low, lilies blooming in the soil at its base.

No one wept. No one spoke. They left the forest hand in hand.

It was not an act of forgiveness. It was release.

The moans returned as they stepped into the clearing—low cries, muffled by thorns. Four women remained, cloaked in red. They were the ones who had watched. The ones who had obeyed. Now they were bound in the vines, swaying from the branches like grim ornaments.

Aerin had lingered at the edge, unwilling to witness Cora's end. Meela's eyes drifted toward the cottage, where Orion, Alden, and Serissa stood upon the porch. Near enough to see, but far enough to honor that this judgment was not theirs to pass.

It belonged to the coven.

At last, Aerin stepped forward, offering Meela a small nod before turning her gaze upon the captives.

"Hear them out," Alice said softly. "They were hers, yes. But that doesn't mean they are guilty."

"They chose her," Aerin growled, spitting at them. "They are *not* innocent."

Meela said nothing. She moved forward. Her gaze slowly swept over each of them. "Just the four of you left, then?" Her words hung in the air. "You stood by while she tortured, twisted and burned. You let her poison your minds, your magic. And worse, you let her use *you* to poison others."

She kept her tone even, not needing it to rise. "And still, you had a choice. Even now."

A broken sound escaped one, "We were afraid—"

Meela raised her hand, the vines responded as they slithered tighter against the woman.

"Good," she said. "You should be afraid. You lived comfortably while others lived in fear."

The woman said nothing, only whimpered against the vines.

"I'm not going to kill you," Meela added, "You will answer to the coven. Not to me."

She looked at them, past the cloaks and anger. What she felt for them was not rage. It was grief.

"You let her turn you into monsters, tarnishing our name so recklessly the stars had to involve themselves." Meela shook her head. "That is not a legacy I can ignore."

Meela turned to the three women standing behind her. The last of the Wyrdwoods. The ones who had endured and chosen differently.

“My coven will not lead by fear, nor will it be ruled by my voice alone.” She turned to Lenora. “You have the gift of sense. You can feel what they feel, even things that might try to hide.”

“Yes.”

Meela inhaled. “Wonderful.” She turned back to the four women. “Now, let’s hear your truths.”

Meela loosened the thorns. The vines receded from the trees, lowering the witches until their feet touched the earth. The binding cocoon loosened, and then fell free.

They stared at one another.

One of them lunged. An elixir was thrown before Aerin pushed it away. Meela didn’t flinch. She was ready. She hoped they would reveal themselves.

The ground beneath the attacker split with a sharp crack and she vanished with a scream, swallowed whole. The earth closed in a heartbeat, sealing over like a mouth snapped shut. Another launched forward, rage twisting her features. Meela struck before she finished the spell, vines slicing through her midsection in a flash of green and red.

The body collapsed in two pieces.

The third bolted. But she didn’t get far. A branch snapped out, catching her mid-run and hurling her backward. Her body crashed into the tree with a sickening thud at the feet of the remaining witch.

She stood motionless, her head bowed low. Meela slowly approached. She waited, refusing to speak first. The final witch slowly reached up and removed her hood.

The Wyrdwood who had seen it all. The one who had whispered it to Cora, maybe never even realizing how deeply it would be misunderstood and misused.

“Ida,” Meela said as she stepped closer, “You stood by my mother. Then stood by Cora.”

“I did,” Ida said without hesitation. “And I’ll not beg for forgiveness, if that’s what you're hoping for, High Priestess.”

Meela let out a short laugh. “High Priestess? I’m finally worthy of the title?”

“Are you not?” Ida tilted her chin. “You were chosen.”

“And yet you stood by the one who was not.”

“Cora was the only option,” Ida replied. “Izzy had died.”

“Died,” Meela echoed. “What a polite way of describing murder. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Kill her, Meela,” Aerin snarled from behind. “That one has always been rotten.”

Ida didn’t flinch. She turned to Aerin and smiled. “Cora was better suited. Izzy herself admitted she didn’t want it. You were weak, running the first chance you got. You’ve never wanted a sisterhood, Aerin. You wanted control.”

“Is that what you call what you had with Cora?” Aerin yelled. “A *sisterhood*?”

“It was better than being a bitter old hag clinging to the past. At least I had purpose.”

Meela sighed, raising a hand to Aerin. She met Alice’s violet eyes, which gave nothing in return. Then to Lenora, who looked heartbroken.

“Lenora,” Meela called. “If memory serves me right, which granted, isn't always guaranteed,” she added with a wry smile, looking back at Ida. “You were close, practically at her side every moment.”

Lenora hesitated before nodding slowly. Her throat was working around a tight swallow. “Cora had asked me to learn from her.”

“What do you feel from her?” Meela asked softly.

Lenora stepped forward, taking a deep breath. “Resentment. Very sharp. Under it all, it’s peaceful…” She furrowed her brows. “Acceptance, maybe...”

“Peaceful?” Meela’s brows lifted. “Strange, this doesn't feel like a peaceful moment.”

“It would if you knew what was coming,” Ida said.

“You’ve seen tonight, then?”

“Oh yes, I’ve seen it all.” Ida’s lips curled.

“Do you share all your visions with Cora?”

“Not always,” Ida offered. “Not tonight, and none I intend to share with you, either. And none beyond today. I die in a few moments. You kill me. I made peace with it long ago.”

Meela studied her for a long moment. “I see,” she said quietly. “Would you like to die?”

“As I’ve said, I've accepted it.” Ida looked up at the stars beyond the canopy of trees. “I will not follow you, Meela. I’m tired of following others. I’ve made choices, knowing where they would lead. I do not regret them.”

She looked back at her. “I’ve welcomed my homecoming for a long time. Please, make it quick.”

Silence fell. She looked deep into Ida’s eyes, looking for any hesitation, any softness. The vines moved quickly, without warning, smooth as breath. Ida’s body dropped to the ground with a final thud.

“Very well.”

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Chapter Fifty-Six



The sun was beginning to rise, casting pale light across the treetops. Warm firelight spilled out of the open door, brushing against Meela's back. Suzaar flew out, wings silent as he landed beside her.

Meela looked back into the cottage. Alice collapsed into a chair before the fire. Serissa was on the floor in front of her. Lenora sat at the table, her head resting on her arms, speaking with Aerin.

Alden and Orion moved through the kitchen, gathering cloth and water and whatever they could find to tend the wounds that were left.

Suzaar hopped into her lap, his dark eyes watching her. "Hi, lucky charm." Her hand lifted to scratch the underside of his beak. "I'm surprised you're not out there feasting like a king."

She felt him, before she heard him. Orion's presence was always calming.

"I wouldn't think you'd be out here all alone," He said softly. "Are you looking for space?"

Meela turned. He leaned against the doorway, a cloth thrown over his shoulder, his dark hair a complete mess. She met his eyes and found something so soft and unwavering that it reached into her and slightly uncurled the pain.

"I never want space from you," she said gently.

Orion smiled, and without another word, sat down beside her. "You were incredible tonight, Meela. I know how heavy it all feels, but please remember you don't have to carry it alone."

“I don’t want them to look at me for answers I don't have yet,” she whispered.

“Let them look. You’ve given a group of people something to believe in again. They don’t expect you to be unbreakable.” He sighed, stretching out his legs. “And what have I told you about questioning the moon's decisions, little witch?”

“I don’t know how to rebuild a coven, Orion. I don’t even know how to belong to one. Do I even want to?”

Her breath hitched, shaky, her chest raw. His steadiness was the only balm she could find.

“Meela,” Orion’s voice was low, certain. “We stood and watched a High Priestess tonight, and you carried yourself with more than enough strength. I don’t know another soul who could’ve held what you did and still stood. I am in awe of you. The power, the grace.” His eyes softened. “The grief.”

He brushed away the tear slipping down her cheek, his thumb lingering on her skin. “Your coven doesn’t need perfection. They need you.”

“What am I meant to do tomorrow? Or the next?”

Orion didn’t look away. “You don’t have to decide that now. Let this storm pass, love.”

His arm came around her shoulders, and he pressed a kiss into her hair. Meela let herself breathe, this time not because she had to, but because something inside her had finally begun to loosen.

Tomorrow, she would begin again. Slowly, piece by piece, she would tend to everything that had been broken and learn what might grow in its place. Her world was not the one she had known before, nor was she the woman who had once lived inside it.

It was broken. It was uncertain.

But for the first time, it was hers to rebuild.

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Epilogue

The trail hadn’t changed much in the last year. The same mossy path, the same tangled roots that snagged her boots if she wasn’t paying attention.

The world was moving forward, and only now did Meela feel like she had finally caught up with it.

A few paces ahead, Alden walked with his staff in one hand and a picnic basket swinging from the other, far too heavy for only three people. Meela had tried to warn him, but he’d only laughed and told her she was severely underestimating her husband’s hunger.

Behind her, Orion trailed lazily, pretending to study a bird call somewhere deep within the trees. When she glanced over her shoulder, he caught her eye and heaved a dramatic sigh.

“You both lied,” he called out. “I was promised a short walk. A *nice stroll*, I believe were the exact words.”

“Oh, you’re *fine*.” Meela laughed.

“I only fear your sense of direction if this is your idea of short,” Orion teased.

“You could always go back to Alden's and borrow Suzaar’s eyes.” Meela smirked.

He squinted at her, pretending to be offended. “Hilarious.”

Ahead, Alden chuckled. “He’s been grumpy since you beat him at cards last night.”

“*That was luck!*” Orion protested, voice carrying through the trees. “And possible cheating on Suzaar’s part. Though I have no way of proving it.”

“Who knew you were such a terrible loser?” Meela kept her voice sweet, hopping over a rock. She didn’t need to turn to know he was smiling. She could feel it.

The memory of the first walk floated back to her. The tightness in her chest, the fear she hadn’t dared to name. Alden’s patience, and the weight he carried for them both. Now, the silence between them wasn’t heavy.

They crested the small rise, and there it was. The meadow Alden had shown her that same day, the one she had loved before and loved now. The field of wildflowers, the same sweeping valley view. Only now it was woven with promises and memories.

Alden settled onto a flat stone, unpacking the basket without a word. Meela sank down beside him, close enough to rest her head briefly on his shoulder. Orion remained standing, watching Suzaar dart and weave across the bright sky before, before dropping down beside her with a sigh and slinging an arm around her shoulders.

The sun kissed her skin. Meela closed her eyes and drew a deep breath, feeling the earth beneath her palms and the wildflowers brushing against her boots, whispering their secrets.

“How is everyone?” Alden asked at last.

“Good,” Meela said. “Alice is making her way west with Serissa. Lenora is in Solmaris. All we can do is hope they find their way.”

“They will,” Orion said easily, as though it were the simplest truth in the world.

Meela clung to that belief. The forest had always known how to call the Wyrdwoods home. Her door would remain open, her hearth would never burn low, and there would always be food waiting for any woman who found herself drawn beneath the trees.

Word was spreading now. There were no more walls to hide behind. No more fear keeping them apart.

Slowly, Meela rose and wandered into the meadow, her fingers trailing through the wildflowers. Her hand stilled over a single bloom, pale and silver-edged, trembling gently on its stem. She knelt beside it and pressed her palm to the earth.

With a steady breath, she let her magic unfurl.

The flowers spread across the meadow.

A gift for the girl she had been.

A promise to the woman she had become.

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This story became something much more personal than I ever intended it to be. While writing about a woman learning to trust herself, question the stories she had been told, leave behind what no longer served her, and build a life that belonged entirely to her, I realized I was doing much of the same. Maybe that's why saying goodbye to her feels so strange. I spent years asking Meela to be brave enough to walk into the unknown, and she ended up teaching me how to do it too.

A little piece of me will always live in these woods.

Thank you for wandering into them with me.

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About the author



Leigh Hawthorne is an author living somewhere among the Finger Lakes of New York. She lives with a four-legged familiar named Aggy, who contributes very little to the household financially but remains employed due to exceptional performance in morale. Leigh enjoys hiking and listening to music far too loudly. She spends an unreasonable amount of time staring at trees and remains convinced there is something going on in

there. She is slightly delusional and, thankfully, listens to the voices in her head when they tell her funny little stories.

Occasionally, she writes them down. Sometimes they become books.

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