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The Black Garden

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B.A. English, Truman State University – Kirksville, 2018

A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St.

Louis

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

December

2023

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Abstract

“The Black Garden” is a novel-length fantasy fiction work. It follows the narrative of Ryan, an 18-year-old girl, who has great expectations for what her first year at university will hold. Her entire world view is tilted when she attends a party with her new roommate, Blair, and wakes up in an unfamiliar place. Ryan must fight to keep her sanity as she is thrust into the world of faeries, witches, and far worse creatures than she could have ever imagined: including her parents.

Keywords: speculative fiction, novel, horror, fantasy

CHAPTER ONE

A small tear ran down Ryan's cheek as the dental hygienist scraped plaque from between her bottom left canine and the crooked lateral incisor next to it.

"Just a little more, oh I'm sorry. Thank you for being patient with me." Amina had been cleaning her teeth since her family moved to Denver eleven years ago. She was always so considerate about how Ryan obviously never flossed. She didn't ever balk when Ryan baldly lied to her about it every six months.

Ryan spoke the open-mouth version of "it's okay" even though she could taste the hot blood spurting from her gums. Amina hit an especially thick spot of plaque and Ryan had to grip the arm of the chair tighter.

"I am sorry— I know it is not comfortable." She pronounced every syllable in the word *comfortable*, her Bosnian accent snagging on the vowels. "Have you been flossing like we talked about?"

Amina took the devil's tools out of Ryan's mouth so she could reply properly this time. "About every other day," she lied. "Things have been hectic getting ready to leave for school, so I've skipped some days."

"Every other day is still good! You want to really get deep into the margin with this front incisor like we've talked about." Amina was the only reason Ryan knew the official name for that tooth.

"I'll be sure to spend a little more time on that one," She lied again.

Amina finished the rest of the cleaning with minimal bloodshed. After the dentist came in and gave Ryan the clean bill of health, Amina handed her a goodie bag and walked her to the front desk.

“So you are leaving for school soon?”

“Today,” Ryan said. “This was the last item on my checklist. Now I can hit the road with a clean smile.” She gave Amina a big cheesy grin and the hygienist chuckled.

“Just be sure to let the front desk know you will be gone to school so they can help you schedule your next cleaning on a break. I imagine it would be a waste of fuel to come back for a cleaning only to turn around and leave!” Amina hugged her, and Ryan could feel people looking at them from the waiting room. Ryan knew not everyone had a hugging relationship with their dental hygienist, but Amina was different. When Ryan was a child, shy and scared of everything, Amina had made the effort to ask her questions about herself. She was always warm and kind and personable.

Ryan checked out with the woman at the front desk and scheduled her next cleaning during spring break. The receptionist winked and told her to have fun at college, but not too much fun, and then laughed as if it was the first time anyone had ever said that joke.

Ryan huffed a fake laugh she hoped sounded genuine and made for the door.

Of course she would have fun at school. She was more than excited to study at Rockstadt— their programs in Bioengineering were among the top five in the country, and number one in Wyoming. She would have wide open spaces to study and work to end world hunger. Rockstadt was where her life would truly begin. Four years to study Bioengineering, apply to ecological internships in Europe and Australia, then find a non-profit organization to fund her research and end world hunger. Ryan was going to change the way humans and nature interacted for the better.

She had also chosen the perfect roommate. Her name was Rosalyn—Ros for short. Her parents were both music professors at the University of Portland, but she had no interest in staying in Oregon for school. She checked every box on Ryan’s list: clean but not clean-freak clean, loved alternative rock, morning shower person, extroverted-introvert, not a fan of pastel colors. They would get along just fine, which is exactly what Ryan wanted. She wasn’t looking to find a best friend— that could only end messily. She learned that the hard way this summer.

Outside the dental office her mom honked the horn of their loaded-down SUV. She gave the same cheesy smile she had showed to Amina, then hopped in the back seat.

“How’d it go?” her dad asked.

“No cavities, need to floss more, scheduled my next appointment over spring break.”

“Atta girl. I packed you some floss picks, don’t worry.”

“Dad those are so bad for the environment! You know they make compostable floss now.”

Her dad groaned and put the car in drive, “and where are you going to keep a compost bin in your dorm, Ryan? If you’re not allowed to have a toaster then I doubt ResLife will let you decompose your dental floss under the bathroom sink.”

Ryan settled into her seat, nestled against her parents’ overnight bags in the seat next to her. “I’m just saying. I don’t want to be a turtle murderer.”

Her mother cut in, “And the turtles appreciate that. But I don’t want to see my daughter with a mouth full of fillings because she neglected her dental health.”

Ryan stuck out her tongue in mock disregard.

Her parents were amazing— as far as Ryan was concerned there were no better parents on the planet. Her dad was Dr. Grant Black, head neurosurgeon at UCHealth and lead researcher on the team to end Alzheimer's. Her mom, Dr. Edith Black, was recently promoted to superintendent after serving as principal of the elementary school in Ryan's school district for 11 years.

While they had both obviously dedicated themselves to their career growth, they still managed to find time for Ryan. She couldn't remember a swim meet or dance recital they missed, never felt like they didn't love her above all else.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of truck stops and Wyoming road signs. Ryan slept most of the way while her parents took turns driving. She had offered to cut the 6 hours into thirds, but her parents were more worried about her getting carsick. "Better to just take a dramamine and avoid the nausea," her mother said. She couldn't disagree with that.

They got to Rockstadt just after 6:00. After they checked in at the hotel, Ryan found a Mexican restaurant within walking distance— she would *not* get back in the car today.

She changed out of the sweats and hoodie she had been wearing in the car and threw on the jeans and black tank top from her overnight bag. Ryan looked in the mirror and decided to put on some make up, too.

Ryan had always been confident in her appearance. She knew she wasn't gorgeous by any means, her face was fairly plain. But she still found features about herself to be beautiful— like the curve of her mouth, the way it drew attention to her

teeth when she smiled. She had always seen her smile more...animal. Her canines were slightly more pointed than others, and for some reason she took pride in that.

She flashed a snarling smile in the mirror and grinned. She didn't have the energy to do anything with the dark brown hair that was piled on top of her head in a bun, but she added some mascara to her eyelashes— fluttering her chestnut brown eyes at her reflection like a star-crossed damsel in distress. Hopefully Ros would be accepting of her silliness.

Ryan was ravenous from the walk to the restaurant. While her parents split a giant margarita she stuffed herself with chips and queso and chicken chimichangas. When the plates were clean and the chip basket emptied, Ryan thought she would never move again. But after the look of annoyance from the waitress, she noticed the line of people waiting to snag the booth where she threatened to die a gluttonous death.

On the walk back to the hotel the sky was fading into bright reds and oranges as the sun dipped down behind the mountains on the horizon. Ryan took in the city around her.

This was *her* city now. Smaller than Denver, sure, but still plenty exciting. The university campus was walkable, she didn't need to take public transportation to any of her classes. A small blessing, since freshmen weren't allowed to bring cars to campus and Ryan despised riding the bus. Downtown Rockstadt had lots of good restaurants and a coffee shop, there was even a small 4-screen movie theater. She smiled. Yes, this was a good place to call home for the next four years.

Once they made it back to the hotel Ryan told her parents goodnight and closed the door separating their conjoined rooms. She showered and brushed her teeth, her gums

still tender from the cleaning that morning. She rummaged around in her overnight bag for her favorite pajamas: a set of gray, ribbed bamboo jersey shorts and matching tank top she had gotten for Christmas last year. Her phone lit up on the bedside table just as she was crawling under the starchy comforter on the hotel bed. It was Gwen:

Landed in UK 2hrs ago. Already want to throttle my cousin.

A second text pinged:

Missing you...talk later?

Ryan started to text back, then stopped.

Gwen was the one who said they needed time apart, so why was she texting her the day after they said goodbye? Ryan knew she was being petty by not responding. Gwen probably just wanted her to know that she hadn't died in a fiery plane crash over the Atlantic. And her cousin really was annoying, always calling her yankee-doodle in a fake hick accent.

But against her better judgement...Ryan's heart fluttered as she stared at those words.

Missing you...

Ryan groaned into the pillows. Things with Gwen had been so easy once upon a time. Gwen was the truest friend she had. They had been the outsiders together since day one of first grade, when Ryan was the weird girl from Illinois who said *melk* instead of *milk*. Gwen punched Tommy McLoy in the gut after he poured Ryan's milk all over her lunch tray. The teacher on lunch duty blamed both girls for Tommy's tears, and gave them two weeks of lunch detention. Two weeks where they silently passed notes and giggled their way to friendship.

But this last year added an extra layer of difficulty that Ryan wasn't prepared to deal with. She thought Gwen would be her best friend forever, but now they were...more. And Ryan wanted that with her, but Gwen said the distance would be too much to handle now that they were graduated and off to have adventures. Ryan was starting her first year at Rockstadt and Gwen was spending a gap year working at her aunt's coffee shop in London.

Another message buzzed:

Look, I don't want to lose you. Please promise me we'll talk later. After we make other friends. Have adventures. <3

Ryan begrudgingly sent back 'K' with a heart emoji. What did she even mean by *later*? A week? Two? Or would it be a month? Ryan's blood boiled at the thought of Gwen making *other friends*. London friends who studied at 'Uni' and would take her to the coolest bars and clubs.

Gwen would never lose her. But she could damn well think she had until the sting of her words eased out of Ryan's heart. She tossed the phone back on the nightstand and settled into bed.

And tried not to miss Gwen, too.

The morning came too soon. Ryan woke to the smell of coffee and her mom's peony perfume. Of course she was already put together and well-caffeinated. Ryan had never known her mother to sleep past 5:30 in the morning. "Come on, Ryan—the first day of the rest of your life starts now!"

“Mmhuuggghh,” She rolled away from the enthusiasm and pulled the starchy comforter over her head, but it was no use. Her mother ripped the comforter off the bed and threw open the curtains to let in the too-bright morning sun. Something soft hit her in the head.

“Now eat that and get dressed. We need to leave in fifteen.”

Ryan groaned and rolled her eyes at the sad hotel banana.

Half an hour later her dad parked the car in the lot reserved for Freshman Move-In Day outside Oak Hall.

Oak Hall was...quaint. It had earned its charm and character as the oldest student living facility on Rockstadt's campus. It was also the only residence hall without air conditioning. The only reason Ryan had agreed to live here was because Ros was an English major. She said this place would give her inspiration for her writing like Emily Dickens and her secluded bedroom. Ryan had only hoped that didn't mean Ros planned to never leave their room.

Ryan and her mom snagged one of the purple carts from the ResLife table. She didn't think 'cart' was the right term, they were more like dumpsters on wheels. At least it would haul all her belongings up to the fourth floor. On the walk back to the car she tried and failed to steel her nerves. Her heart plummeted to her stomach.

What if she wasn't ready for Rockstadt? This past spring when Gwen had told her about her plans to take a gap year Ryan called her crazy. She couldn't imagine putting off college for a whole year. The fear of losing her school edge after a year-long break was greater than the wanderlust and allure that a gap year had to offer. But now that she was

here, surrounded by total strangers...she dug her nails into the palms of her hands to stop them from shaking.

Once the luggage from the trunk was unloaded, her mother started to reach for the hard shell container strapped to the top of the car.

“No, honey, there’s nothing in there,” her dad tried to turn his wife away from the car but she held firm.

“What do you mean there’s nothing in there? Why would we strap it to the car if there’s nothing in there?”

“Mom, come on. We need to go,” Ryan gestured to her new home behind her. Oh, god her new *home*. The hall was huge— six floors of red brick stared down at her. The six corinthian columns that stood between her and the front door were like giant teeth in the maw of a monster that threatened to swallow her whole.

“Dad, just tell her already.” Ryan couldn’t keep the secret any longer. She needed her parents’ focus to be on her, needed them to steady her rising nerves.

Her dad gave her a disappointed look. “I’m not going to say anything until we leave town.”

“What is happening?” Her mother looked between them.

Ryan groaned. “Dad is taking you on a trip. You can talk about it after you move your only child into her first college dorm.” The trip was all he could talk about for the past month. Her mom didn’t go back to school to prepare for the fall semester for two weeks, so her dad planned a roundabout trip home. Before they went back to Denver they would drive up to Yellowstone to hike and camp and...Ryan didn’t want to think what else her parents would do with their alone time.

Her dad looked to her, his mouth in a tight line. “Did that feel good?”

Blood pounded in her ears. Her nerves were about to push her over the edge and—there. She could feel the word vomit about to spew out of her mouth.

“You know what doesn’t feel good, Dad? Knowing that you were so excited to be rid of me that you planned a vacation to celebrate my absence.”

“Ryan Amelia—“

“Don’t give me that.” She cut her mother off. The words came to her mind too fast, fueled by the emotions she had so desperately tried to bury these past few days. “You didn’t even want to eat *breakfast* with me this morning. You threw me a banana and shoved me towards the car.”

“What is going on with you?” Her mother took both of Ryan’s hands in her own, then tried to pull her into a hug.

A car pulled into the spot next to them and started unloading. Ryan clocked the mom in the driver’s side casually assessing the situation. “Mom, stop!” She pulled away from the hug, suddenly mortified by the affection. She couldn’t be the girl hugging her mommy and crying on college move-in day.

Her dad gave her that look then. The same look he used when he caught her sneaking back in the house from her midnight date at the track with Gwen. Disappointed, but concerned and a little pitying. Because he knew more than she did. Knew that she was making a mistake...and maybe she was. But her emotions were flying too fast now, too fast for logic to catch up. Her heart pounded.

“Ryan,” her dad took a step toward her. “We are not celebrating because you’re moving out. We’re going to miss you like crazy, honey.”

The tears were welling in her eyes now. “You know what, please just go.”

“What?” Her mother’s voice was breathless. But it was too late, the words were already out.

“Please, just leave. Thank you for helping me unload but I’ve got it from here.” Ryan wiped her eyes and hugged her mother then. “I love you both, but I think we need some space.”

“Ryan don’t be like that,” her dad put a hand on her back as she gave her mom one last squeeze.

She turned to him. “Look, Dad, I just— need to do this by myself. Go on your trip and call me when you get home, but not before. I..I just need—“

“You know, Ryan, I agree. We do need some space. You need to cool off and remember your roots. Remember that your mother and I only have each other. And that while we have no parents to fall back on, no one and nothing beyond ourselves, at least you have us.”

“Don’t,” Ryan breathed. “Don’t you *dare* use that card to make me feel guilty right now.” They hardly spoke of her parents’ parents, or the lives they lived before they were shunned by their families. Ryan only knew her father’s family didn’t approve of the marriage, and her mother’s parents were lost to a house fire when she was a girl. After the fire killed her parents she was taken in by her Aunt Mavis. Then later, when her mother left home to marry her father, Mavis died in a car crash. She was the last of her familial line, not including Ryan.

Ryan spit the words out before she could think, “Your families were shit. That is not my fault so stop dragging me into it.”

Her mother's eyes flashed with hurt, and Ryan knew then that she had struck home.

The world slowed around her. God, how had this escalated so quickly? "Mom, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"I guess the guilt flows both ways," her mother wrapped her arms around herself. "Grant, let's leave her to it."

Ryan felt those words fall upon her, cleaving her to the bone.

What had she done.

"I take it back. I didn't mean it, please don't go," she breathed the words as loudly as she dared, still trying to avoid making a scene in front of the whole damn freshman class. She reached a hand toward her mother.

She took the outstretched hand, but didn't move closer. "You wouldn't have said it if you didn't mean it." Their hands dropped.

It took all of Ryan's strength, every last shred of her muscles and bones not to fall to her knees in front of her parents and beg their forgiveness. She had poked a red hot iron into a wound she knew damn well was still bleeding in her mother's heart. A wound that would probably always bleed, no matter how much time passed.

Her mother smiled— actually smiled— through the pain and hurt Ryan had caused, "We love you. Take this time for yourself, to be by yourself. We'll call in a couple weeks, and not before. Goodbye, sweetheart."

Ryan looked to her dad, but he only nodded in her direction, his eyes sad and distant. It hadn't occurred to Ryan how hard it might be for him to say goodbye to her. How it might remind him of a goodbye he was forced to make 20 years before.

She gripped the edge of the stupid purple dumpster that held all her belongings, her knuckles turning white from the pressure, as her parents got in the car and drove away.

CHAPTER TWO

Pushing that dumpster across the parking lot by herself was the hardest thing Ryan had ever done. Never mind the fact that one of the wheels was missing, which she hadn't noticed when she and her mother had been pushing it to the car together. Never mind that she could hear her lampshade crunch under the weight of one of her bags because she was too scatterbrained to put in on top of all her bags like her father warned.

Those problems were cake compared to the utter embarrassment that shook her to her core as she realized she was the only person walking into Freshman Move-In Day alone.

She kept her eyes glued to the ground in front of her dumpster, trying and failing to tune out the happy, laughing families that seemed to swarm around her like bees in a hive.

This isn't happening. This isn't happening.

Her mind couldn't stop racing. She had said those awful things to her parents. Oh, god she had practically banished them— she was no better than the family that refused to acknowledge her father's existence.

Ryan would never forgive herself for the hateful words she had spat at her parents. Even if they found it within themselves to forgive her, she would carry this guilt, this heartache, within her soul for the rest of her life.

As if the universe wanted to consummate that silent, sorrowful vow of self-pity with a veritable act, a second wheel snapped from the bottom of her dumpster. Now she would have to lift the side with no wheels and push it to the dorm like a wheelbarrow. She was going to die from embarrassment in this parking lot.

“Hi!” A bubbly voice suddenly manifested beside her and Ryan nearly jumped out of her skin. The voice belonged to a girl slightly taller than Ryan. Her denim shorts and lacy white top showed off her sun-kissed skin, dusted with freckles from head to toe. “Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to sneak up on you,” the girl flicked a long, auburn bubble braid over her shoulder, and her hair seemed to shimmer with shades of red and gold in the sun.

Ryan searched for her voice, shaking off the girl’s stunning appearance. “No, no— no need to be sorry. I was in my own world.”

“I’m Blair,” the girl smiled and stuck out a hand.

“Blair, I’m Ryan,” she took Blair’s hand and couldn’t help but admire the dainty gold rings that graced her long fingers.

“Ryan Black? This is great! Well, not great. I, um, saw what happened with your cart,” Blair pointed to the sad broken wheel that lay discarded on the asphalt. “I just finished moving my things in and was returning my cart but then I saw your’s break so I wanted to offer it to you, but it turns out that you’re you!”

Ryan raised an eyebrow and tried to process the sentence that just came from Blair’s mouth. “Yeah, um, how do you know who I am?”

“I’m your roommate,” Blair smiled widely.

“Oh! I’m a little confused...I’m supposed to be rooming with a girl named Rosalyn.”

“Not anymore,” Blair started pulling out Ryan’s belongings and loading them into her not-broken dumpster. “I don’t think it’s meant to be public information, but the ResLife lady I talked to said that Rosalyn had a panic attack and decided not to come. I

guess her parents are college professors? So she's staying in Oregon. All details I definitely didn't ask for but the lady was more than willing to share— makes you wonder about the privacy policies, right?"

Ryan wasn't sure what to feel. Her whole plan, the day she imagined in her head was dead and gone. She was still coming down from the adrenaline high during that fight with her parents. All that lay before her now was uncertainty and new information and...she couldn't breathe.

"So they gave me her spot. I was supposed to be rooming by myself but I told them I *really* wanted a roommate. What's the point of college if you don't have a roommate, you know? Oh, are you alright?"

Ryan's voice shook with the tears that threatened to well in her eyes, "Yeah. Yes, I'm fine," she coughed and tried to pull her head out of the foggy emotions swirling around her. "I just wasn't expecting this, and my parents just left, so I'm trying to process."

Blair loaded the last of Ryan's belongings into the new dumpster, then folded her hands in front of her and looked to the ground. The gesture reminded Ryan of a servant somehow, passive...not wanting to intrude. "I'm sure this is a lot to take in, I'm sorry if I overwhelmed you."

"No, it's not that at all!" Ryan shook her head and wiped the small tears from her eyes. "I was being selfish. It is so wonderful to meet you, and I really appreciate your help with my dump- I mean, cart."

Blair smiled again and nodded toward their new home, "Shall we?"

Once Ryan was upstairs in dorm room, away from the chaos of students and families, she felt better. Not normal, she probably wouldn't feel anywhere close to normal until she talked to her parents again. But in the quiet of her room, unloading and organizing her belongings, she felt better.

It wasn't a large room by any means, but it was comfortable enough for two people. The room was a square, already furnished with two lofted twin beds, two desks, and a four-drawer dresser. The beds were arranged in an L shape along two of the walls. Blair had already unloaded all of her bags on the bed next to the door, so Ryan got the one next to the window.

The perk of living in Oak was that it had individual bathrooms. No need to travel through the dorm with her shower things and toothbrush. Ros was supposed to bring their bathroom furnishings, so Ryan was unprepared. Thankfully, since Blair had previously planned to live by herself, she already had a curtain and rings for the shower, along with a bath mat, hand soap, and hand towels.

Ryan also felt better about her surprise roommate as they unpacked and chatted. It turned out Blair was also moving in by herself. Her parents hadn't even driven her to Rockstadt.

"They're not very social," Blair explained. "I told them goodbye at home and then drove myself. I didn't mind, honestly. I'm more comfortable on my own. If they were here I'd just be worried about them saying the wrong thing or panicking around the wrong people!"

Ryan huffed a laugh as Blair waved her hands above her head like a crazy person. “Wait, if you drove yourself then what did you do with your car? I thought Freshmen weren’t allowed to have cars on campus.”

“It’s parked on the street across from the football stadium,” Blair gestured with a hand in the direction of the stadium, not even looking up from where she was stacking her shoes in the organizer that hung from the back of the closet door. “Oh! Remind me to move it on Tuesday nights. Street cleaning is on Wednesday so I’ll need to park it downtown for the day.”

Ryan smiled, carefully arranging her socks and underwear in the top drawer of their shared dresser. Blair certainly wasn’t Rosalyn— she was far more personal. But maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad thing to be personable with her. Maybe they could be friends.

“So where are you from?” Ryan asked. Blair tilted her head slightly, as if she was pondering why Ryan would ask such a thing.

“I’m from Canada. A small town just across the boarder of Montana.”

“Oh, so that means you’re an international student, huh?”

“Um, yeah, if you want to think about it that way,” Blair turned back to her shoes.

Apparently hometowns weren’t really Blair’s thing. Ryan definitely didn’t want to pry, so she changed the subject, “Well I’m here for Bioengineering, trying to decide if I want a minor in Agricultural Business. What are you studying?”

“I’m undecided,” Blair said, “but I like theater. Maybe I’ll study something like that.”

Ryan couldn't shake the feeling that Blair was being aloof for a reason. She didn't want to read too much into it, though. Maybe Blair was just having the same kind of bad day that Ryan was. After all, her parents didn't even leave home with her.

"That's great, you get to try out different paths and see if theater is the way to go."

"Yep," Blair's tone was flat, but Ryan could sense she was trying to put a happy spin on it to be polite.

Ryan decided to stop with the deeper questions. Maybe later Blair would be in the mood to share more. She hoped so, at least. It might be nice to get some of her feelings about her parents out in the open.

She walked over to the closet where Blair stood and surveyed the room. It was uncanny to her how well Blair's bedding and wall decorations coordinated with her own. Blair's side of the room was slightly more frivolous; her bedding was a mustard yellow color, accented with a white duvet that was covered in whorls of threaded vines and small flowers in the same color as her sheets. They had both decided to leave their beds lofted, so under the mattress Blair had tucked a flowing length of gauzy white fabric that draped down behind her desk and covered the ugly plaster wall. She had tied twine to the rafters under the mattress to hang different rocks and crystals of varying colors and shapes. They swayed on a phantom wind, glinting in the light that streamed through the window.

Ryan had bamboo jersey sheets in a dark heather gray color. She favored a quilt over a duvet, and her mom had found a forest green quilt with white stitching— simple but elegant. Under her desk wasn't nearly as personalized as Blair's, but she still added

some cute homey touches. A few pictures of her and her parents, Gwen, and a portrait of a giant brown bear she had painted for an art project in school.

Her lampshade was indeed dented, a casualty of the bag that held all her shoes. She nudged Blair on the shoulder. “Are you hungry?”

Blair smiled slightly, “Famished. First trip to the dining hall?”

“Let’s walk downtown. I hear there’s a good pizza place next to the thrift shop, and I need a new lampshade,” Ryan pointed to the smushed lamp. She had never been too fond of it anyway, it was just a cheap lamp she found at a TJ Maxx.

“Pizza sounds great.”

Ryan and Blair took the back door outside the dorm. Ryan had admitted to Blair that she wasn’t really in the mood to meet other new students just yet, and to her credit Blair didn’t push. She took in a deep breath. That wave of anxiety that threatened to drag her under was ebbing. She could make this situation with Blair work. Blair seemed nice, but not fake-nice like so many girls Ryan knew in high school. And she would work through things with her parents...once she could muster the courage to call them and apologize.

The walk from Oak Hall to downtown Rockstadt was about 15 minutes. Ryan didn’t want to push Blair to talk about her home life, so she asked about her interests instead.

“What kind of interests?” Blair replied.

“You know, like your favorite thing to do on the weekends, what kind of music you like, your favorite books.” Ryan wanted her roommate to feel like she had an interest in her life. Blair had been so kind to her thus far, and she wanted to return the generosity.

Ryan was warming up to the idea of being friends with her roommate, despite her feelings up until today.

“Let’s see,” Blair ran a hand down one of her long bubble braids. “I really enjoy being outside on the weekends. Anything to get me outdoors in the open air.”

She paused, but Ryan nudged her with an elbow, “Go on! tell me more.”

“Okay— jeez! Um, I like listening to all kinds of music, as long as it’s not something dark like death metal. As for books...how much do you know about folklore?”

“Well I’m with you on the great outdoors and any music is good music, but I don’t really know much about folklore. My literary taste is so bland. I read whatever Reese Witherspoon and Oprah tell me to.”

Blair chuckled at that. “Folklore always came very...naturally to me. I am well-versed in the world of mythical creatures and magical worlds.”

“Okay, so like vampires and werewolves? You don’t have to be ashamed to admit it, I read *Twilight* too,” Ryan teased.

“No, no— no vampires. I’m more interested in things like witches and nature spirits,” Blair paused and bit her lip, as if she was debating saying anything else. “And faeries.”

Ryan stifled a chuckle, she didn’t want to make Blair feel judged. She mustered up a serious tone of voice. “Fairies, okay. Like pixie dust and glowing wings?”

“Faeries— f-a-e-r-i-e-s, are much different from the Disney Channel version. The Folk— that’s the respectful term for their species— can be incredibly powerful. The High Fae are the most humanoid in shape and size, although they are typically taller than the average human. Then there are the Seelie Courts of Overground, they take on more

animal-like features, but can sometimes shift to be like the High Fae. The dark twin to the Seelie Courts are the Unseelie Courts Below. Where the Seelie Folk are protectors of the forests and other wild areas, the Unseelie are vicious and wicked. They are the soulless wanderers that haunt evil places.”

Ryan blinked and raised an eyebrow to Blair. “Wow, you do know a lot about folklore.”

“Yes, I suppose I do know more than most,” Blair played with her braid and blushed a bit.

“You’ll have to recommend a few books for me, I’ll need something new to distract myself from homework,” Ryan winked and smiled at her roommate.

They spent the rest of the walk chatting about Ryan’s home life: Denver, her favorite hiking spots, her friendship with Gwen. She didn’t want to tell anyone about how their friendship had turned into more of a partnership yet. Not because she was ashamed to identify as bisexual— that she was completely comfortable with sharing. She just wasn’t ready to come out about Gwen. Sharing details about their relationship was a level of personal that Ryan wasn’t prepared to have with Blair just yet. Instead she vented about her parents and the huge fight they had earlier in the day.

“Wow, that’s a lot to take in,” Blair said, after Ryan gave her a high-level overview of her parents’ family history. “So, are you going to apologize?”

“I...I don’t know how,” Ryan replied. She hadn’t processed the day enough to know how to apologize. She would need to pour over her feelings for the next day or two, build a defense as to why she said what she did and where she wanted to go moving forward.

“You’ll have to let me know how that conversation goes when you *do* have it,” Blair said.

“Yeah, sure,” Ryan replied.

Blair gave her a pointed look, “I’m serious. I...I don’t have many girlfriends where I’m from. It feels silly to say out loud, but I’m looking forward to being your friend.”

Ryan’s heart warmed a bit at that. “Blair, I’m looking forward to being your friend, too.” She huffed a laugh, “You’re right it does feel silly.”

When they finished at the pizza place— which it turned out did *not* serve pizza, only calzones— they walked over to the thrift shop. Ryan found a simple white lampshade for her desk, and Blair bought a vintage suitcase filled to the brim with clothes.

They made it back to campus around 4:00, just in time for freshman orientation. After enduring different upperclassmen lectures about how cool it is to live on campus and the dangers of underage drinking, Ryan and Blair left. Neither girl wanted to stay for the ‘mocktails mixer’ after they handed out student IDs and coupons for one free pretzel at the football kick-off game next Saturday.

Ryan took the first shower. She relished in the stream of hot water between her shoulders, breathing the hot steam in through her nose, then out through her mouth. It was only 8:00 when she got out, but she felt like it had been days since she slept. She put on an old sweatshirt and a pair of boxer shorts, then turned off the lamp on her desk.

“Blair, I think I’m going to bed. Feel free to stay up and do whatever, I know its still really early.”

Blair swiveled around in her desk chair, looking away from the mirror where she had been brushing out her braids. “Don’t worry about it, it has definitely been a long day and you deserve some rest. I’ll probably go out to the common area and read for a bit.”

Ryan climbed the ladder to her bed, the whole structure wobbling a bit as she settled in. She’d have to go down to the front desk in the morning and see if they had an allen wrench set she could use to tighten the screws. Blair got up from her desk a moment later, and Ryan heard the scrape of keys as Blair picked them up from where they lay on the dresser.

“Night, Ry,” Blair said.

“Night, Blair,” she replied. “Thanks for today. It was so weird how you showed up right when I needed a friend, but I’m glad you did.”

“Me too,” Blair replied. “Get some sleep,” with that, she walked out the door, flicking off the overhead light.

It wasn’t until Ryan’s eyes were heavy with sleep that she realized Blair forgot to take a book with her.

CHAPTER THREE

The first week of school went by in a flash. Before Ryan could blink she had six chapters to read for biology and a preliminary paper due for her English 101 course. After her Friday afternoon class let out, she she stopped by her room long enough to drop her books and tug on her favorite leggings. She needed to move her body and shut off her brain for a mile or two.

Outside Oak Hall, she took a minute to stretch her hamstrings and tie her hair back into a high ponytail. There was something satisfying about feeling her hair swish back and forth across her shoulder blades as she ran, like a metronome keeping time with her strides.

Before she hit play on her playlist, she sent a text to her mom.

First week of school was good...I'm drowning in homework. Can we talk tonight?

They said they wouldn't call her until they got home from their trip. Ryan hoped it was only for her sake that they made that promise— that by reaching out first she could open that communication between them. She so desperately wanted to apologize for her words, her actions. All week she had been running the events of move-in day through her mind, but couldn't quite wrap her mind around how to start her apology.

Especially since what she said was true.

Her parents *did* make her feel guilty for their parents' actions. Ryan loved her mom and dad, that would never change— but sometimes they held onto her too tightly, reminded her too much of how important it was to keep their family together. It was like they were afraid she would abandon them just like their parents had. That kind of pressure— to be perfect, to not disappoint— suffocated her.

She shook off the feelings and scrolled through her playlists. She hit shuffle on the one titled “ABCDE - F U” — it was a compilation of tracks that she felt like she could scream at someone when they pissed her off. Guitar and bass pounded in her ears, her feet aligning with the beat against the sidewalk.

Oh, she definitely needed this.

Her heart picked up the pace, pushing blood to her body faster and faster. She savored the push and pull of her bones on her muscles and tendons.

More, more, more.

She had set out to do a long, easy jog, but now her soul begged for extra effort. She pushed her body to go faster, to lengthen her strides, relishing in the air time between one foot hitting the pavement and the other lifting off the ground. Track after track blared in her ears as she covered more ground, about half a mile away from Oak now.

Ryan loved running. Even though her body wasn’t built for it like her father’s— he had long, lean muscles and sure-footed strides. Ryan took after her mother: average height and short legs with a longer torso. Her broad shoulders were the perfect wingspan for the butterfly stroke, and had won her a fair share of blue ribbons on the swim team in junior high and high school.

The only time she ever felt embarrassed about her body tone was when she was 13 and the pediatrician noted that her build was ‘stocky.’ She would never forget the pointed stare her mother gave the doctor, or the rant she gave Ryan on the drive home.

“*Stocky*, I have half a mind to call the hospital board and complain,” her mother gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles.

“Mom, I’m fine. I know I’ll never be tall or skinny enough to be a model.” Ryan was acutely aware that while some of her classmates wore Hollister and Abercrombie and Fitch jeans, the circumference of her thighs would never be able to squeeze into those tight threads.

Her mother reached over and grabbed her hand, “you are beautiful in your own way and I know you know that. Those girls on *Top Model* are miserable, mark my words. I’m angry because Dr. Highton’s education failed him today. *Stocky* is a word meant only to describe cattle. You, my darling Ryan, you are *strong*. Strong like my aunt.”

The memory faded away as Ryan rounded a corner, circling around the block and back toward Oak. That was one of the only times her mother had mentioned any of her family.

Yes, Ryan was strong— like her mother. Strong enough to run even though she was built for butterfly stroke and the weight room. Strong enough to recognize her weaknesses could still be honed into strengths if she dedicated her energies to do so.

Her breath turned ragged in her lungs and she willed herself to suck in a larger breath and hold it— hold it for five strides before she let it out in a slow exhale.

One, two, three, four, five—

She blew out the breath in a slow tight line, toward that nondescript finish line at the end of the block: the lowest hanging branch of the birch tree in front of Oak Hall. Her vision narrowed on that branch swaying in the wind, waving at her as if to say, *over here!* Her pace quickened, she guesstimated the distance, 200 feet and she would be triumphant.

Faster, faster— her body begged. She fell into an all-out sprint, putting her breathing on hold just like she did for swimming. Her swim coach’s mantra zinged through her brain like a bolt of lightning:

You can breathe when you’re finished— not before.

She reached for that competitive nerve inside her, willing her body to compete against herself, to push push push—

Ryan skidded to a halt, nearly pulling every muscle in her legs as Blair stepped directly in her path.

She took out her earbuds and cursed under ragged breaths. “Blair! Where did you come from?”

Blair’s smile widened as she point to the lecture hall on the other side of the sidewalk. “My statistics class just let out. Lucky me, running into you after I just received the most AMAZING news!”

Ryan slowed her breathing again and put her hands behind her head, still processing the transition from in-the-zone running to Blair, bouncing on her heels clapping. Not an unusual Blair thing to do. Ryan had seen this same reaction from her this past Tuesday, when the dining hall served a tray of mini desserts instead of normalized treats. “Amazing news, huh? Are you dropping stats?”

Blair giggled and slapped Ryan playfully on the arm, “No, and statistics isn’t all bad— it’s interesting to know how many things you can track and monitor if you have the right data. Who knew? Anyway, my new friend Jarrod has a friend on the soccer team who’s friends with a guy on the tennis team and they are having a house party tonight and we are invited!”

“To the soccer house?”

“No, to the tennis house. I couldn’t have been more clear, Ry, pay attention! We are going to a party!” Blair linked her arm through Ryan’s and started skipping down the sidewalk, but Ryan pulled her back.

“Blair, I’m not going to the tennis house. I think I’m just going to relax and watch a movie before I have to start homework tomorrow.”

Blair pouted and lowered her chin, making puppy eyes at her and whining softly. Ryan hadn’t noticed until just now that Blair’s eyes weren’t all brown. Around her pupils sat a ring of green and gold that Ryan had never seen in a person’s eyes.

She sighed. *Make friends. Have adventures.*

“What is the tennis house address.” An answer, not a question.

“Eeeek! This is going to be so much fun.”

Blair linked her arm with Ryan’s again, not giving her the chance to reach that birch tree finish line.

After a shower Ryan joined Blair and her new statistics friend for dinner in the dining hall. Jarrod, who kept sneaking adoring glances at Blair when he thought Ryan wasn’t looking, was an English major and a Math minor from a small town in Iowa. He was tall and thin, but still built enough that Ryan couldn’t help but notice the way his t-shirt hugged his biceps. She was surprised to learn he had never played on a basketball team, but not surprised to hear that he played the saxophone in his high school’s jazz band. He and Blair were assigned to be study partners for the semester.

“Lucky me, huh? Study partners with a Math minor, what an advantage. Sorry I can’t return the favor, Jare,” Blair sighed dramatically and flipped an mess of auburn curls over her shoulder. “My talents lie elsewhere, I’m afraid. Call me if you need help rehearsing lines for a play.”

Jarrold blushed a bit and coughed, “Do you offer those talents to all your friends?”

“Only the friends I want to keep,” Blair winked and popped a grape into her mouth.

Ryan lowered her gaze to her chef salad, trying to hide her smile. She had seen those looks of adoration on too many boys to count in high school. All of them for Gwen, of course. Ryan had long since accepted her role as the wallflower friend when they went to parties, and she never minded it. Gwen never noticed the looks though. She was always too distracted by the dance floor. It was one of the things Ryan loved about her friend.

Ryan rolled her eyes at the humor of the universe. She had hoped to breakaway from the wallflower role at Rockstadt, maybe earn herself a few pining glances from some people. Maybe she could socialize, *make friends, have adventures*. Ryan imagined texting Gwen a picture from the party to show her just how social she could be.

Pushing her Gwen-schemes to the back of her mind, Ryan stabbed a tomato with her fork and pointed a star back at Jarrod. “So, *Jare*, who is your soccer team friend and how do we know him?”

Jarrold stabbed at his chicken breast, “Oh, Ben is more of an acquaintance. One of my mom’s friend’s sons from home. He’s friends with a guy on the tennis team and invited me as a favor to her. I wasn’t going to go but Blair thought it would be fun.”

“It *will* be fun,” Blair said, and pointed her fork at him in warning.

After dinner Ryan followed Blair back to their room to get ready, which apparently entailed an unwelcome, involuntary inventory of her entire wardrobe.

Ryan counted the *thunks* of her hanging clothes hitting the floor from the other room.

Twelve. She counted twelve *thunks*. That was almost all her hangers. She sighed and continued straightening her hair.

“No...no...no— don’t you own anything other than flannel and jeans?” Blair’s tone was borderline frantic.

Ryan hadn’t planned on wearing anything too ostentatious but apparently her roommate had other plans. “I was just going to wear a black t-shirt with my green skinny jeans and my chucks.”

Blair stomped into the bathroom, her hair already pulled back into those bubble braids she had on move-in day. “Ryan. You are being too practical. You have the freedom to wear anything! Why wouldn’t you take advantage of that?” Blair ran a hand over the black t-shirt hanging on the bathroom door and frowned. Her brows furrowed at some silent contemplation Ryan couldn’t identify. In the week she had lived with Blair she had never caught the girl not smiling, but looking at her now...it was as if whatever she was thinking drained the sun kissed glow from her skin.

Ryan ran a brush through her hair and turned off the straightener. She swallowed her instincts and faced her roommate. If she wanted to break away from the wallflower crowd, maybe this was the way to go. “Maybe I could borrow something from your closet?”

Joy immediately erased the furrow in Blair's brow. "I would love that!"

Twenty minutes later, they were ready. Blair, sporting a sequined long sleeve shirt and flared black jeans with specks of glitter down the thighs. Ryan, in a gold shimmering long sleeve crop top and white skinny jeans with rips in the knees.

"Here, this will complete the look," Blair snagged a long black chain with a clear crystal pendant at the end and tied it around Ryan's neck.

Ryan rubbed a thumb over the point of the crystal, watching how the colors within played with the florescent lights overhead. She looked in the mirror and didn't recognize the person staring back.

Blair had braided her hair in random spots, adding texture to contrast the straightened lengths. Her eyes were underlined with gold tone that matched the shade of her shirt perfectly, and her lips shone with the same color.

"Blair, this is amazing. You have a real talent for this type of...design. I look incredible." That wasn't a lie. Ryan's style had always been dark and minimalistic, she opted for tones that would contour her curves. But Blair managed to accomplish that same contouring with these lighter colors. That shimmering gold highlighted every contour of her face, her eyes, her body. She felt like a different kind of beautiful.

Blair smiled at her, "thank you," she whispered. "No one has ever complimented me on my style like that."

Ryan could have sworn she spotted small tears in those gold and green-brown eyes. Had Blair really never been complimented on her style before? The girl was so talented, always so fashionably dressed in beautiful clothes that accentuated the beauty of her body.

Ryan smiled and clapped her hands. Tonight was about having fun with her new friend, not tears. Despite her earlier mood, she was actually excited to go out for the night. “Let’s go have some fun, lady.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The tennis house was three blocks off campus, about a half-mile from Oak Hall. Blair had offered to drive, but Ryan was in the mood to walk. It would feel like a pilgrimage, dressed to impress, strutting down the sidewalk with her new roommate to their first college party.

Before they crossed the street to officially be off campus grounds Ryan checked her phone. Her mom still hadn't opened the text she sent before her run. Had she hurt her so badly that she really didn't want to talk until they returned home from the trip? Ryan shut down the thought before it could fully take root. No, her parents were in the middle of Yellowstone. They probably didn't have any cell service. Her mom would text back when she was closer to a cell tower.

It was just past 9:00 when Ryan and Blair arrived at the tennis house, but judging from the crowd it seemed the party had started *much* earlier. Four tables had been set up on the front lawn for beer pong and flip cup, and all four were packed with players and watchers. The girls weaved their way between drunken students toward the front door, avoiding the sloshes of drinks from the games.

The tennis house was two stories with a huge wraparound porch that was currently filled with coolers and random buckets of snack cakes and crackers. Ryan thought it very responsible of the hosts to think about filling their drunken guests with carbs, until the smell of weed wafted in her direction. The snack buckets made more sense after that.

Blair pulled Ryan to the side before they could enter the house. “I almost forgot! Drink this before you go in,” she pulled two mini water bottles out of her purse. They had an opaque amber liquid inside, like cloudy apple juice.

“Oh, Blair, I don’t drink. I’m just wanting to dance.”

“It’s not alcohol, just a hydration multiplier. It will keep you hydrated while we’re on the dance floor. It prevents headaches, too.” Blair held one of the water bottles out for Ryan. “Trust me, you will be grateful later.”

For once in her life, Ryan didn’t think twice. She did trust Blair. It had only been a week but she felt like she had known the girl all her life. She regretted having any anxiety over their surprise rooming arrangement. Blair was a genuinely good person.

“You are such a thoughtful party-goer. Remind me to stick with you more often!” Ryan took the bottle from her friend and twisted the cap off, “cheers to our first party!”

Blair held up her own bottle to toast and they chugged the contents. Ryan threw her empty bottle in the overflowing trash bin on the porch and walked through the tennis house front door.

For the first time in a week, Ryan left her stress behind her. Her worries about her parents, about Gwen, could all wait outside until she was ready to pick them up again.

Ryan didn’t know how much time had passed since she stepped foot inside the dancing house. Couldn’t quite put her finger on where her body stopped and the dancing began. She only knew that she was part of it, and it was part of her. The world slowed around her in bright shimmering lights, crystals of every color dripped from the ceiling like falling stars. She didn’t ever want to leave this place.

So she couldn't— wouldn't— stop dancing.

She opened her mouth and the music poured down her throat, settling in her belly like a Sunday morning pancake breakfast: sweet and sticky, hot, and oh, so satisfying. She licked her lips and begged it for more.

Somewhere amidst the music were her feet. They reached for her attention, telling her to *stop, stop stop*.

But she would never stop. The thought of leaving the music nearly ripped her soul in two. No, she would dance until her feet were bloodied. She would give every part of her body to the music, even if it killed her. She would gladly die this death.

Suddenly the music changed. What had been an upbeat, happy tune was now quiet and sorrowful. Ryan adjusted her dancing to follow the music's mood, honing in on every chord, every beat.

Ryan, darling, the music whispered, silently questioning.

It wanted something from her. It wanted something so she would give it. "Yes," she answered. "Anything."

Follow me outside.

Ryan obeyed. She waltzed her way across the dance floor, silently passing between bodies and furniture until the cool night air brushed against her cheeks. "What now?"

Close your eyes.

Again she obeyed. Her eyes fluttered shut but her body still moved, swaying intently to the soft song in her soul.

She felt something slide over her head, rebounding the hot air from her lungs back onto her face. Then something tied around her wrists, but she didn't mind. She would just move her arms together as one.

Be still.

"But you're so beautiful...I don't want to stop." Pain crept in then, a small kernel snaking its way up her legs leaving itching red welts in its wake.

I said, be still.

"Okay— okay," she started crying silently. She didn't mean to upset the music. It was so lovely, far lovelier than anything she had ever experienced. She was nothing, and it was everything.

Now, sleep.

Ryan's eyelids grew heavy. She listened to the music, slow and sweet, let it cradle her in its arms. Let it guide her into sweet dreams of rainbow crystals and swirling amber liquid.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ryan woke to a rosy light pouring in through the open window. Ryan could hear birds and squirrels chittering outside. A soft breeze kissed her face, smelling of juniper and ginger.

Her head was pounding.

Ryan rubbed the heels of her palms into her aching eyes. Her tongue was like sandpaper against the roof of her mouth. Water, yes, she needed water. But when she opened her eyes to find the ladder of her lofted bed, it wasn't there.

This wasn't her room.

Panic set in. Her body went rigid as she shot upright, her head screaming in protest as she took in her surroundings.

She was alone, thank god. Her body sank down into a large, plushy mattress on a four poster bed frame. A heavy duvet and various throw blankets nestled around her. The room was small, barely enough room for the bed and accompanying dresser at its foot. Despite her panic, she couldn't help but notice how...cozy...the room felt.

"Focus, Ryan," she whispered to herself, her voice barely rasping from her dry throat. Oh man, how long had she been asleep? Someone had replaced her top and jeans with a cotton camisole and light flowing pants. She shuttered at the violation of strange hands undressing her. Had she been drugged? Was Blair in trouble too? That initial panic began morphing into fear.

Ryan clenched her fists to keep them from shaking and shook her head. No time to be afraid. Falling into fear was as good as giving up.

And she was not ready to give up.

She slipped from the bed with feline grace, careful not to creak the mattress or hardwood floors beneath. The room seemed feminine in nature, wallpapered with botanical designs in soft pinks and yellows. That didn't mean she was safe. It could be a tactic to get her off her guard.

Her clothes were nowhere to be found, and her phone had been in her jeans pocket.

She looked around the room for something— anything— she could use to defend herself. There weren't many decorations, but on the dresser top there was an oval mirrored plate strewn with necklaces and rings, one of which was the crystal necklace Blair had lent her. She slipped the necklace over her head and lifted the plate, testing the weight. The plate itself was silver, trimmed with floral patterned edges to keep the jewelry from slipping off the mirrored surface. She slid a finger along the raised edge, the botanical whorls would definitely draw blood if she swung the plate with enough force.

She steeled her nerves and silently crept toward the window, not wanting to alert anyone who might be posted outside. Peeking through the curtains she could only see that she was on the second floor— at least a 20 foot drop separated her from the grassy lawn below. The yard stretched into a wooded area about 500 feet out.

Her mind raced as she tried to put together a plan: get outside, get to the woods, then...then what? Hope nobody followed her? Shot her down as she crossed the lawn?

Man oh man oh man oh man.

Breathe, breathe. Focus.

Slowly, so slowly, she crossed to the bedroom door and turned the crystal knob. It was unlocked. Had her captors not expected her to wake so soon? She pushed the door

open just wide enough to fit the plate through the crack. She couldn't make out much from the mirror's reflection, only a large, dark parlor with heavy wood furniture.

Ryan pulled the plate back through the door and squared her shoulders. It was now or never. She pushed the door all the way open and checked her surroundings once more to confirm— no guards, no goons.

Goons, Ryan?

No, no time to be self critical. Get out and get somewhere safe. That was the only plan she needed.

The walls were paneled halfway up with the same rich, dark wood as the floors. The top half of the walls were covered in a deep forest green wallpaper broken apart with snaking white and gray vines. Paintings depicting everything from scenes of forest glens to kings and queens of long ago hung in ornate frames. The black fireplace held dying embers, the kindling and logs burned to ash.

A shudder ran down her spine as she speculated where her kidnappers had gotten the money for such ornate headquarters. Against her better judgement, she ran through the mental checklist of possibilities: blood smugglers, terrorists, sex traffickers...

No. She would not succumb to those horrible things.

There was a windowless hallway to her left, lined with unlit sconces on one side. From what she had gathered at the window in the bedroom, it was mid-morning. She just needed to get outside, then she would have plenty of daylight to find help.

The hallway floor featured a long, blood red rug. It was well-worn in some spots, as if someone had spent too much time pacing back and forth outside the two doors on

the internal wall. Bedrooms, if she had to guess from the layout. Which meant the door at the end of the hall would lead down to the main level.

Ryan slipped past the first door, careful not to squeak the floorboards. She was directly in front of the second door when she saw a shadow pass from the crack under the door.

She froze. Her breath stalled in her chest as she watched that shadow pace once, twice, three times back and forth. Perhaps this was the culprit of the worn spots in the rug.

Perhaps it was her kidnapper.

It hadn't noticed her yet. With one eye on the door she inched her way down the hallway—

Creeeeeeek.

She froze again. *Shit. Shit shit shit.* The shadow stopped pacing.

She didn't give it time to open the door. Sneaking be damned— she was getting out of this place.

Ryan bolted for the end of the hall, throwing herself through the door. Stairs went down, down, down to a landing, then another door opened into a well-lit living space. Two men sprawled across velvet couches, sleeping. The couches faced each other, separated by a coffee table littered with glass french presses of coffee and tea, china and small sandwiches. Behind the farther couch was the exterior door.

“Hey! Wait!” The voice from the top of the stairs was hurtling toward her. It was female.

The man on the couch that faced her opened his eyes, bolting upright.

Don't think, just react. Her brain went into survival mode.

Ryan leapt over the back of the couch with the still sleeping man, stepped on the coffee table and kicked one of the carafes onto the man with the open eyes.

“Ah! *Shit!*” he growled, hopping from the couch and pulling the hot soaking shirt from his chest.

Ryan sprinted for the door. The man tried to grab her arm but she swung with both hands— the plate hit his with a loud *smack*. Blood sprayed from his cheek and she felt the mirror crack with the blow. Shards of the broken mirror fell to the carpet with the plate. She grabbed the biggest piece and made for the door.

No one outside the door, the grass was warm against her bare feet.

Get to the woods. Lose them in the woods.

Ryan sprinted faster than she had ever dared, instinct taking over, pushing the adrenaline into her muscles. The world blurred around her as she focused on the tree line.

“Ryan! Stop!” The other man, the one she hadn't burned and maimed, yelled from the doorway.

They knew her name. Oh, god they probably had her IDs from the wallet on the back of her phone. She kept sprinting, halfway to the trees, a little longer and she would lose them in the woods. She just had to get to the woods—

Ryan slammed into an invisible force, as if an unseen steel wall separated her from freedom. It knocked her to the ground, the impact reverberating through her bones.

“Ryan, please! Blair! Hurry!”

Oh god. Oh god oh god oh god— they did have Blair. Ryan pulled herself to her feet, wiping the blood that steadily dripped from her nose— probably from that impact

that had stopped her. She still gripped that shard of mirror from the broken plate. She angled it in her hand like a knife, struggling to recall the correct stance her dad had taught her for self-defense.

The man chasing her was close now. He slowed his steps and lifted his hands up in surrender. Ryan didn't buy it for a second. She kept one eye on him, but flicked her gaze behind him, to the girl who was also running after her.

"*Blair!*" she screamed across the yard. Ryan felt horrible. In her state of panic she had left her friend behind to face their kidnappers alone.

Ryan lunged for the man in front of her, faking a stab at him. He backed up a step, something like confusion in his eyes. She stabbed again, she would do anything to distract his attention from Blair.

"Get to the trees," she shouted. The second Blair was past her, Ryan would hurl the mirror shard at the man and run. They would get far away from this place, find help. They could do it together.

Blair slowed to a walk, coming to stand beside the man.

"Blair, what are you doing?" Pain stung Ryan's hand, her makeshift knife breaking skin. Warm blood trickled down her wrist.

"Ry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to happen like this," Blair stepped in front of the man—guarding him.

The ground tilted beneath her. "You're with them," she spat at Blair. "You did this." She *had* been drugged. The bottle Blair had given Ryan before the party but...

"why?"

Blair watched her with sympathetic eyes, the rings of gold and green around her pupils flaring as she explained, “I thought we had more time. I thought we would have at least two months and that I could get you to come without the fruit but...I’m sorry.”

The man next to Blair perked his attention back to the house, “Thorne is hurt bad, you need to go.”

Ryan was hallucinating. Blair wouldn’t do this— she would never drug her, kidnap her, she would never...

But she had.

Ryan dropped the mirror shard and made to run again, but that invisible wall was still there. It was impossible— an illusion, an after-effect of the drugging— but she couldn’t push past the spot where she stood.

“I can’t just leave her like this, she needs me, too,” Blair was crying now, her voice hitching with small sobs.

“He needs you more!” The man snapped, his voice harsh and strong. “I’ll handle her, just go.”

Ryan faced them, putting her back against that immovable force. Blair wiped at her eyes, then ran back to the house. The man inched toward Ryan.

“Back up!” Her head was reeling, dizzy from the blood dripping from her nose, her hand.

“I’m sorry,” the man whispered. Then he said something in another language and Ryan was falling, falling into that gentle, warm grass. She was unable to protest as the man lifted her with strong arms. The last thing she saw was a flash of pity in his red brown eyes, then she was pulled deep into a black slumber.

CHAPTER SIX

When Ryan woke again, she was not alone.

Blair sat in an armchair by the window, that same furrow of stress Ryan had seen when she was assessing Ryan's party attire creased the skin between her eyebrows. Ryan hated how picturesque she looked. How soft her features were in the gray light of the afternoon, her head propped on a hand, the minimal gold rings Ryan had come to admire pressing into her cheek, glinting in the light.

Blair had betrayed her. Had drugged her and brought her...god where was she?

As if she could smell the fury burning in Ryan's veins, Blair's eyes flicked to her. Slowly, she rose from the chair and approached the bed. Ryan tried to get up, but they had learned from their mistakes. Her hands were tied to the bed frame with rope. "I tried to talk him out of the rope, but Raynor didn't want to take any chances after what you did to Thorne."

The two men. The one that had chased her, and the one she had attacked.

"What do you want from me." Ryan schooled her face into a look of neutrality, not wanting to reveal the panic that was rising in her chest once again.

"I don't want anything from you, Ry. I'm just doing my job."

Ryan snarled, "So what now? You're just going to hand me over to them? Let them take me away from my family— my life?"

Blair's brow furrowed in confusion. "No, Ryan, you're not being kidnapped. Look, I'm sorry, I know this is confusing but you have to trust me. This was not my call."

"Save it. I don't want your excuses I just want to leave. Let me go."

"I can't." Blair's voice broke with the words.

A knock sounded on the door, then the man who chased her, Raynor, Blair had called him, stuck his head through the door. “One hour,” he said, then retreated and shut the door. Ryan had no doubt that he was standing guard just outside.

Blair walked to the side of the bed, her hands shaking slightly at her sides. “Please just listen to me. Do what I say if you don’t want to die.”

“Blair— if you’re in trouble we can get out together. Just let me help you,” Ryan gripped Blair’s hand, halting her efforts to untie the knots on her wrists. “We can make it out of here. Get somewhere safe and call the police, maybe even go back to school soon. Don’t you want to know if you belong in the theater department?”

Blair’s face was tight. Nothing but sadness and steel graced her features, paling the girl’s honey-tan skin. Even her freckles seemed to lose their coloring. She looked deep into Ryan’s eyes. “Listen to me, Ryan. We are not going back to Rockstadt. I’m sorry I...drugged you. I didn’t want to do that but they— he— made me do it.”

“He who? Blair, please just let me go. Let me run and get help.”

Blair just shook her head and closed her eyes. “You are about to meet a very important male. If you want any hope of leaving this place, of seeing your parents and apologizing to them, you will do and say everything I tell you to from here on out.”

For some reason, despite Blair’s betrayal, despite the fact that she had drugged her and brought her wherever they were, Ryan believed her roommate’s words.

“Okay,” she said. “Tell me what to do.”

Ryan kept her head held high as she and Blair, escorted by Raynor, stepped outside the front doors of the house and made their way toward the larger estate across the property.

Blair had dressed Ryan in a pale green gown that flowed just below her knees. It was made from some kind of thin, gossamer fabric. Soft like silk but breathable like cotton. Her hair was in a long braid down her back, with soft white flowers woven into the pleats. She was still barefoot, but her feet were no longer muddy from her outdoor escapades earlier in the day.

After Blair untied her ropes, she escorted Ryan down the stairs and through the first floor of the house. She took her to the primary bedroom and handed her a washcloth, towel, and robe along with a bar of soap that smelled of tea tree oil and lavender.

“Clean yourself up,” she commanded. “There’s a manicure scrub brush on the sink for the dirt and blood under your nails.”

Twenty minutes later Blair had transformed her into this— an ethereal vision in gossamer green crossing a country house courtyard.

Blair wore a simple long sleeve black dress and shoes to match. She had no make up or jewelry, her rings were sitting in a dish on the primary bathroom sink. Her long auburn hair was still shining, glimmering in the light with shades of red and gold. Although it was in the same long braid that Ryan sported, not the twin bubble braids that Ryan attributed to Blair’s signature look.

Behind them, Raynor was also dressed in black long sleeves and pants. Two daggers hung from his belt, and deep down Ryan knew he didn’t carry them for show. He was handsome, she supposed. She hadn’t been hallucinating earlier when she thought his

brown eyes were tinged with red— in fact they were mainly red with a tinge of brown. He towered over the girls, and his muscles looked as if they'd been carved from granite. With his stoic features and attentive glares, Ryan thought he looked like a warrior god from myth.

Didn't make him any less of a prick for tying her to the bed. Apparently Thorne, the man she had hit with the mirrored plate, was Raynor's twin brother. Ryan couldn't quite remember what he had looked like before she spilled hot coffee and broken glass on him, and he was not going to accompany them to this meeting. Blair told her he was still recovering.

"Remember what I told you," Blair whispered. "A dip of the head when you reach the dais, do not bow or courtesy. Do not speak unless a question is asked. End every answer with 'your majesty,' and do not, under any circumstances, make a bargain."

Ryan gave a curt nod, but she was still so confused. Blair had only told her she was meeting an important male— male, not man, she clarified. There was some difference in those terms of which she was still unclear. Beyond that, Ryan had nothing to prepare herself. No clue as to the kind of meeting she was walking into, or the *majesty* that awaited her presence.

"Can't you tell me his name?" Ryan knew the answer, but she asked anyway. Maybe Blair would slip up and reveal the information.

"I told you, I can't. Look— all I can say is that he is the only one with that information and I am not permitted to say anything beyond what he has ordered."

Ryan sighed through her nose. "Fine." She took note of the courtyard details as they walked, looking for any escape routes she might come back to later.

“Don’t bother,” Raynor sneered behind her.”

“What?” She didn’t think she had been obvious, she had barely moved her eyes from the path.

“That barrier you struck earlier? It surrounds the entire property. You do not leave without his permission.”

“How did you know—“

“Raynor,” Blair hissed, her nose scrunching like an angry cat. “Stop it. Leave her thoughts alone.”

Raynor broke his stoic features and huffed a laugh. Had he...

“Did you just read my mind?” Ryan clenched her hands into fists at her side, ready to hurl them at his stupid face.

He didn’t answer, only gave a wicked grin that promised nothing but trouble.

“Raynor, I’m serious.” Blair snapped her fingers and pointed a long finger at his face. She took a deep breath and smoothed the front of her dress. “We are being watched. Do not give them anything to report back.”

Raynor winked at Ryan and she felt something small— like a hair pin— fall from the spot where her spine met her skull. She hadn’t even noticed it before now. Somehow Raynor had been listening to her thoughts, worming into her brain like a parasite. Ryan tried to suppress her rage. She would be on guard for that worm from now on.

Oh, god. He had probably heard her every thought about his looks. Ryan blushed and tried not to cringe at the thought of his ego inflating at her calling him handsome.

The main house was three times the size of the guest house where Ryan had been held. She supposed anyone who was referred to as *majesty* would be worthy of such a

large abode. It was basically a cathedral. The sun was setting behind the structure, which meant behind her was East, to the right was North, left South. She couldn't help but admire the landscaping that lined the edges of the estate's exterior: bushes of bright greens and reds and purples, mixed with beds of flowers in every color imaginable. She had never seen anything so elegant.

Before the main entrance stood two massive trees. Redwoods, she realized with a small satisfaction. As they passed between the trees Ryan felt a *zing* of electricity pass over her skin.

Ryan threw a questioning glance to Blair, but her eyes were focused solely on the front doors of the estate. "Blair."

Those brown eyes shot to Ryan, brimming with fire in their gold and green center. "Be quiet. Don't say another word to me or Raynor until we leave."

Ryan nodded, looking back to the towering doors in front of her. The stairs leading up to the door were just as extravagant as the estate itself, featuring two handrails of polished stone so black that it seemed to swallow what little sunlight was left from the day. Ryan expected the concrete steps to be warm, but they might as well have been blocks of ice under her bare feet.

The double doors swung open on a phantom wind. She expected to see other people inside the grand hallway, but there was no one. The silence only broken by their footsteps and breathing. Her instincts perked up, cataloging every detail around her. Something about this place didn't feel right. It was as if her blood, her bones, her soul was repulsed by the structure.

“This way,” Blair said in a hushed tone. “Keep your eyes on the backs of my heels. Do not look up.”

Ryan did as she was told. They walked for another three minutes, zigging and zagging through hallways. With her gaze on Blair’s heels the only thing Ryan saw was the floor, hewn from that same obsidian stone as the handrails outside.

The sounds of their footsteps began to echo, and Ryan could sense that they were in a larger chamber. Blair stopped walking, so Ryan did too. She wanted to ask if she could look up now but Blair’s warning rang through her mind.

They stood in silence for a full minute. Then two. Then Ryan heard something like a large door creaking on its hinges. To hell with their rules, she needed to see, needed to calculate what she was up against.

She kept her head bowed, but moved her gaze up from the floor.

They were indeed standing in a massive chamber. The walls were a stark contrast to the black stone floors: white marble with thick veins of grays, some as big around as her body, carved with arched shelves that held thousands, maybe even millions of books. Between the arches stood tall candelabras covered in hardened drips from the taper candles held in their hands. Ryan dared to move her gaze forward to the white marble dais, to the throne atop it.

She was greeted by the stare of the most beautiful creature she had ever seen.

He was tall, she could tell, even though he was seated in the ornate redwood throne. His blonde hair was long— longer than Blair’s— it fell in straight smooth lines down past his chest and spilled in his lap. But the thing that drew Ryan’s attention the most was his face. His skin was pale, almost translucent, but somehow shimmering with

silver light. His features were tight, unforgiving, but utterly perfect. He could have been carved from the same marble as the ornate bookshelves.

Ryan realized she was staring, but too late. His black soulless eyes bored into her own.

Ryan lowered her gaze back to the floor and tried not to move, to breathe.

From across the chamber, the man— male— spoke. “Ryan Amelia Black,” his voice was like honey, slow and sensual. “That is your human-given name.”

It wasn’t a question, so she wasn’t sure if she needed to answer. She just dipped her head the way Blair told her to, then dared to look up at that horrifically beautiful face once more.

He smirked. “Before we get into that, I will introduce myself. I am Koen Truhyll Abendrot, High Fae King of Ayrden.”

Ryan froze to the spot where she stood. When she had tried to get to know Blair she asked what kind of books she read...

Wow, you do know a lot about folklore.

Yes, I suppose I do know more than most.

The High Fae King...no, this wasn’t real. Blair must have been caught up in some kind of cult of freaks who pretended to be mythical creatures. This guy was probably wearing glittering powder and black contact lenses.

The doubt must have shown on her face, because the man on the throne smiled, flashing canines that were so long they couldn’t have been real. They were almost fang-like.

“Yes, it is a lot to take in. You’ve been slumming it in the human world for too long now. Tell me, what was it like?”

Her voice was a lump in her throat. “What was what like? Your Majesty,” Blair hadn’t said anything about answering a question with a question. She had no doubt Blair was right about how dangerous this crazy guy could be, but she wasn’t buying his whole supernatural gig. He claimed to be a king but wore no crown.

“To be an outsider. A wolf in sheep’s clothing for all those years.”

“I’m not a wolf, Your Majesty. I just want to go home.”

King Koen’s gaze snapped to Blair, “She’s still under the geas, isn’t she.”

Blair’s voice was quiet, barely audible, “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Why.”

“I was not told to remove it, Your Majesty.”

The king practically spat at Blair. “My patience wears thin. Remove it now.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Blair turned to Ryan and mouthed the words, *don’t move*. Then she spit directly into Ryan’s eyes.

“What the hell!” Ryan backed away from Blair, finding Raynor to be a solid wall at her back. She took a step forward, rubbing the spit from her eyes. She almost gagged as she replayed it in her mind— Blair had actually *spit* on her.

Ryan’s vision was blurry when she finally opened her eyes. She blinked a few times, looking to see how far Blair’s face was from her so she could smack the girl. When her vision cleared she found Blair staring at her, but her hair...was she wearing a hat?

No. Not a hat.

Ryan gaped at the furry, auburn pointed ears that twitched on Blair's head.

She shook her head and blinked again, but the ears were still there. So were her eyes, brown and gold and green but...the pupils were long slits that stretched vertically, contracting in the light. Ryan took a step back.

"You see, dear child, you have been looking through those drab human eyes all these years," King Koen was no longer sitting on the dais. He had stood from his throne and was now floating across the marble floor toward her. His appearance had changed, too. Pointed ears jutted out between his long, blonde locks, and his eyes...

They were orbs of the darkest ink. Dead, like the skull of a long-forgotten corpse. No whites or pupils shown, only that cold, dark promise that lingered even when he blinked.

"But now," he purred, "you see the truth."

CHAPTER SEVEN

It took all of Ryan's strength, all of her self control to not cower in the face of the being that stared at her with eyes of death.

King Koen smiled down at her, those vicious fangs glinting in the light from the candelabras. "Blair," he spat.

"Yes, Majesty?"

The king turned his attention away from Ryan at last. "Fetch a mirror for our dear Ryan."

Blair had cat ears. Cat eyes. Now that the king's stare was focused elsewhere she took note of Blair's other features. Her skin was still the same warm tan, but her freckles weren't freckles at all. They were spots, like a leopard. And her hands...her fingers were long and lithe, armed at the ends with black retractable claws. As she turned away to fulfill the king's order Ryan noted the tail, the same shade of auburn as Blair's long braid, both swishing behind her as she stalked away.

"What did you do to me?" Bile surged up Ryan's throat at what she was seeing. Had she been drugged again?

"Raynor," the king said, ignoring her panic.

"Yes, Majesty?" Ryan was relieved to see that his form had not changed.

Although his eyes shone with a predator's gaze, sharp and defiant and...red. Like in a picture taken from the wrong angle.

"Go find Fynna. Tell her to bring refreshments to my personal chambers. This shouldn't take much longer."

"Yes, Majesty," Raynor barked, strong and concise, like a military cadet.

Blair returned with the mirror the king asked for and he snatched it from her clawed hands, then turned his attention back to Ryan. “Your parents are nothing but liars and thieves, girl.”

Not real not real not real

“What are you talking about?” Her voice shook with the words.

The king circled around her. “Tell me, what human names did they construct? What pathetic lives did they lead in that world?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she replied, hiding her shaking hands in the folds of her gown. He was a mountain cat, and she was a trembling fawn. She just had to be quick enough to run before he could sink his claws in her hide.

“In this world, your mother was called Carina Dyer, of the Coven of Earthen Wilds. She was a witch.”

Ryan tried to follow the king with her eyes as he circled her. “My mother is not a witch.”

The king gave a haughty laugh. “And your father? Alarik Dagmar Abendrot, High Fae Prince of Ayrden. My only son.” His words were snarls. Ryan could hear the dinner bell ringing. Soon, he would strike soon.

As if he could see the connections coming together in her mind the king clucked his tongue and smiled. “Yes, Alarik was to one day take my throne. But then your whoring mother sunk her claws into his brain and stole him from me. Him, and you. Granddaughter.”

“You have the wrong person. Let me go,” yes, deny it. Deny it all and maybe he’ll doubt his own words.

“No, granddaughter. It is you who is wrong.”

Blair returned, holding a silver tray. Ryan risked taking her eyes off the king and glanced closer at the tray—the top seemed to move like water, but thicker. Blair bowed her head to the king and offered him the tray. He took it without looking in her direction, eyes still fixed on Ryan.

“See for yourself,” he crooned.

Against her will, her body walked to the king.

“What are you doing— let me go!” Silent tears slid down her cheeks. What was happening? Why couldn’t she control her own motions?

The king gave a small laugh. “You may leave when we are finished. Now, look, child. See.”

He waved a hand over the mirror and the reflection rippled. Then, an image appeared: a grassy wildflower glen surrounded by trees that swayed in the wind. Two figures sat in the center, a man and a woman weaving long-stemmed flowers into braided crowns.

“This is a witch mirror.” The king waved his hand over the mirror, and another image appeared. “It shows the past, present, and future of the owner’s lifespan.”

Ryan felt the color drain from her face.

“This mirror belonged to your mother.”

It was her. Her mother’s dark brown hair fell in curtains around her face. She looked no older than twenty, her skin smooth, her body slim and honed— as if she spent hours everyday working it in the gym.

“I— I don’t understand,” Ryan managed to say through her tears.

“This mirror is an account of her life: past, present, and future. Although since she flitted away with my son, we have been unable to see her present or future whereabouts.” The king grumbled something under his breath in a different language before continuing, “My task for you is simple. Find your mother and bring her to me. She must atone for the crimes she committed against my crown.”

Ryan’s head was still spinning, none of this made any sense. If her mother truly was a...a witch...then surely she would have confided in her. They had a strong relationship, there had never been secrets between them. “It isn’t true. None of this is true.”

“My child,” the king circled behind her and rested a cold hand on her shoulder. “I cannot lie. My crown and title forbid me from speaking untruths, or lying by omission. You are not under any mind-altering influence, nor have you been lead astray from the moment you were brought to me.”

“But that drink— that drink Blair gave me at the party— it made me do things I didn’t want to. It altered my vision, my brain.” She hated it. In the moment she remembered feeling giddy, not a care in the world could weigh her down. But when she tried to recall those memories now...she remembered the pain in her feet and legs, she hadn’t been carefree. She was careless. Reckless and stupid, so stupid to have given in so easily to that drug.

The king turned a hand once more and plucked an apple from the air in front of him, as easily as if they had been in an orchard. “This faerie fruit. It contains strong toxins that can be...inebriating to beings not of this world.” His temper changed as he

spoke, morphing from that absolute power to something soft. Still cunning, and wise beyond measure, but less overwhelming.

Ryan turned to see that the black in his eyes had receded to a normal size, edged by a soft white. “You said my parents were something other than human. So what does that make me?”

The corners of his eyes crinkled with smile lines, the only sign of age on his smooth, flawless skin. “See for yourself, granddaughter.”

Gingerly, she took the mirror from him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ryan looked in that strange mirror and did not recognize the face that stared back.

It moved when she moved, raising a hand to touch its eyes, its lips, the exact same moment she touched her own. The stranger's lips were full and plump. Her eyes were green like Ryan's, but more vibrantly colored and larger in size. Under the eyes a splatter of freckles crossed over the bridge of a sharp nose, reaching from one high cheekbone to the other. Her hair was a mess of dark brown curls, each individual hair a different shimmering color that glimmered when the stranger reached with a hand and tucked it behind delicately pointed ears.

"The geas prevented you from seeing even yourself as you truly are. You have your mother to thank for that, as well." The king's words were tight and controlled, as if he was trying to reign in his hatred for her mother. "Blair will take you back to the guest house now. Rest, granddaughter, tomorrow we will begin lessons."

Ryan lowered the mirror and looked to King Koen— his features were the portrait of neutrality. She didn't want to believe a word he said, but looking at him now she could see every granular detail of his face. She glanced around the room and saw everything with those new eyes.

"Even if you are telling the truth, why should I stay here? Why not get your lackeys to do your bidding and leave me out of it?"

"Because you are the only one who can see through the geas your mother constructed to hide herself and your father." The king started back toward the redwood throne atop the dais. "Take your leave. We will go over the details tomorrow."

Blair was at her side then, a hand on her elbow pulling her from the throne room. The king— her grandfather— simply waved a hand and perched back on his throne.

“What the hell was that?” Ryan was stomping away from Blair, away from the king’s estate, not wanting to give it a second look.

“Ry, please—“

“No,” Ryan cut Blair off before she could give her excuses. “I have known you for one week. You are a stranger who *drugged* me, kidnapped me, and spit in my eyes on behalf of my estranged grandfather. You are the last person I want giving me nicknames right now.”

Despite her anger and confusion, Ryan couldn’t help but notice the beauty of the courtyard now that night had fallen. The trees on the edge of the grounds were strewn with warm twinkling lights that imitated the starry sky above. The tree line was at least 500 feet from the grassy path but she could see every leaf, even the veins within the leaves. What had they done to her vision?

Blair was jogged a few steps to catch up to her. “Ryan. I am sorry.”

Ryan stopped walking. Stopped staring at the trees and the stars and looked to Blair, to those cat ears that stuck out from the sides of her head, twitching at the random crickets that chirped in the grass. She saw the sadness and guilt in those large cat eyes. “If you are truly sorry, you will tell me everything you know. Now.”

She couldn’t take it anymore. This mental whiplash of information flying at her from every direction. She wanted to go home— not back to her dorm in Rockstadt— home, to her bedroom in Denver. She wanted to wake up from this nightmare and walk

downstairs to find her dad fixing biscuits and gravy, her mom pouring milk and sugar in the coffee mug Ryan had bought her for Mother's Day.

She just wanted to be home.

More tears slid down her cheeks. God, would she ever stop crying today?

Between sobs she whispered to Blair, "Please just take me home."

Blair was crying too. "Let's get you inside and changed, and then we'll talk."

The guest house was dark and cold when they returned. Blair sent Ryan back up to the room where she had been earlier in the day and told her to find something comfortable in the dresser. To Ryan's surprise, she found an entire collection of soft cotton t-shirts and shorts, as well as some satin and lace undergarments, all in her size.

She looked in the vanity atop the dresser for as long as she dared, studying the features of her face that she had never seen before. She prodded at her canines, the points of her ears. At one point she was just nose-to-nose with her reflection, discerning each individual fleck of green within her eyes.

When she ventured back down to the hearth room Blair was sitting on one of the velvet couches, dressed in similar clothes as Ryan. She had built a fire in the hearth, and Ryan welcomed the comfort of the crackling logs and heat that warmed her cheeks.

"I know this has been a lot to process," Blair began. "But please believe me when I tell you I wanted no part in today."

Ryan nodded, too tired to be angry anymore. New refreshments scattered the coffee table, so she poured a cup of hot water with lemon and settled into the couch opposite Blair.

Blair sighed, steeling the words in her mind. “Everything the High King said is true. Your father is heir to the High Crown, and your mother is a witch of the Earthen Wilds.”

“But what does that even mean? Where are we?”

“There are many realms within our universe. This realm, Ayrden, is separate from the human world, but also the same.”

Ryan closed her eyes and rubbed her palms into them in frustration. “Stop beating around the bush with stupid riddles and give me straight answers.”

Blair sat forward and pulled a pencil and paper from the drawer in the coffee table. “This,” she drew a circle, “is the human world. And this,” another circle, like a Venn diagram, “is Ayrden. It exists alongside the human world, but not just next to it. The two realms are interwoven like a tapestry.” Blair started drawing lots of crisscrossing lines all on top of the circles. “So there are certain spots in the human world and in Ayrden that overlap. We call these the liminal space.”

Ryan sat back on the couch and hugged a deep blue pillow. “So what, we’re not on Earth anymore? We came here through a portal? Like the Bermuda Triangle?”

“It is difficult to explain in terms of astrophysics as you know it,” Blair crumpled up the paper and tossed it in the hearth. “All you need to know is that we are not currently in the human world, but it is nearby.”

“Fine. Whatever. Explain what just happened. Why am I suddenly needed by my grandfather whom I only just met?”

“Your mother’s true name is Carina. She was a well-known healer in the Coven of Earthen Wilds. They dwell in the forests of the Witch Kingdom, about three days

journey south from here. The Witch Kingdom is made up of five covens: earth, water, fire, air, and the spirit unseen— that’s the goddess of the hunt, Dyanna. The Grecians referred to her as Artemis.

“It is forbidden for the witches to court fae males. Only the High King knows why, and that is all I can say on the matter. But your mother courted your father, one of the most powerful high fae in these lands. The king believes his son would never go willingly with a witch— would never abandon his throne and his people without proper threat. A threat he believes your mother has held over him all your life, to keep him hostage in the human world.”

Ryan blinked. Once, twice. “My mother is a kind woman. She would never threaten anyone, especially my dad. They have one of the truest loves I’ve ever seen.” It was true. Ryan thought it was gross when she was younger, the way they would gaze into each other’s eyes and dance around the house singing off-key cheesy love songs. But after Gwen’s parents divorced...Ryan supposed it wasn’t so bad to have parents who were madly in love.

“I believe you.” Blair’s pupils dilated in the light of the hearth. “The problem is that the king will never see another truth beyond the one in front of him.”

“So what. I’m just supposed to hunt down my own mother? Turn her in to a wicked king for a crime she didn’t commit? And why are you on his side if you think he’s wrong?”

“Because he owns my name.”

Ryan didn’t know what to say to that, unsure of the severity of the statement.

Blair got up from the couch and crouched in front of the hearth, poking at the fire with an iron stick. “I couldn’t share the king’s name with you because he owns *my* name. That means he owns me— my thoughts, my actions, my future, everything. The folk gain power through secrets and bargains just like humans and money. One day, long ago, I was desperate. My family was dead and I was starving in the dead of winter. I showed up on the king’s doorstep half frozen and dying and traded him the only thing I had left, my name. In exchange he took me in. He fed me and clothed me and gave me shelter, and now I am in his debt.”

“But...he just told us his name. In the throne room, he said his name was Koen Abendrot. Why can’t you use that against him?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” embers fell from the fire as Blair poked and prodded. “He would have to willingly trade me his name. He’ll never be desperate enough to do that.”

Ryan digested the information, tried to connect the details in her head to make any sense of the shreds of details and history. “And he owns Raynor, and Thorne, too?”

“Yes.”

That was why he asked about her parents’ “human” names. It had to have something to do with the...what did he call it?

“The geas,” Raynor’s voice sounded from the kitchen, followed by the slam of the back door and a rustling in the cupboards.

“Get out of my head! How does he do that?” Ryan was up from the couch in an instant pacing to the fire, to Blair.

A moment later Raynor entered the room, holding a glass jar of cookies. He was sweaty and disheveled, like he had fought his way through an army from the estate to the guest house. “Apologies, princess. Sometimes its just second nature.”

“Go check on Thorne. And don’t you dare eat all those cookies, I just made them this morning,” Blair peeled a piece of bark from an unused log and chucked it at where he leaned against one of the couches.

Raynor held up a hand in surrender, then stuck it back in the jar and pulled out three more cookies before handing the jar to Ryan. She took it begrudgingly and slammed the lid shut.

As Raynor was leaving, cookies in hand, Blair continued. “He was born with it, the gift. Some demi fae are born without magic, but Raynor and Thorne were rare born twins. Their mother was a full-blooded fae female, their father a wolf shifter from the Unseelie Courts. It’s why their eyes are that red color.”

“And you?” Ryan asked. “I take it you’re not really from Canada.”

“No,” Blair smiled at that. “I’m only a quarter fae, on my father’s side. He was a demi fae, my mother was a leopard shifter,” she gestured to her ears, her tail flicking behind her.

Ryan sat on the edge of the brick hearth, exhausted from all that had happened and the dread of tomorrow’s lessons, whatever those may be. But there were still so many questions unanswered, so many anxieties bouncing around her brain.

“You really think he’s wrong? About my mother?”

Blair nodded.

If Ryan was going to get home, to find her parents and beg for their forgiveness for the cruel words she spat a lifetime ago, she needed an inside advantage. She had gotten nowhere thus far on brutish attempts at escape. She needed to be clever and calculated.

“Then tell me everything you know about her. And about the king.”