



# A Bolt of Magic

**Author:** *Charlene Hartnady*

**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Find a powerful witch.  
Escape the fae Court together.  
Do it before the eclipse tomorrow.

It sounds straightforward, but my plan is riddled with more holes than a block of cheese. No self-respecting witch with any kind of clout will spare me a second glance. It doesn't matter that we're all captives here, shackled under the cruel rule of the fae. The harsh truth is that my situation is far more dire than theirs. Soon, I'll be dragged back into the hellish mines, expected to labor relentlessly day and night. It's a suffocating nightmare down there.

Tomorrow is my only window for escape, and I must seize it with everything I have.

It soon becomes painfully clear that I need to change my plan. I need a witch...but she will have to be as desperate as I am. A witch who has far less to lose than the others.

Then I find her. It's like she was dropped into my lap, or, perhaps, the other way around. McColl, though not nearly as powerful as the others, shares my burning desperation to flee this place. We're doing it! Hopefully, my insane plan will work. The stakes are terrifyingly high, and there's a significant chance one or both of us won't make it out alive, but we have to try.

**Total Pages (Source):** 135

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:57 am*

1

McColl

I feel myself fading. The mirror, as always, expects too much from me. Using me to the point where my head aches. It pulls...and pulls. I'm being used as a vessel, and it hurts. I grit my teeth against the pain. Sweat beads on my brow. The fae giving his power is beginning to look pale. He is still standing tall, but it won't last. None of them do. It doesn't take long before he grits his teeth as well, turning white as a ghost. His back starts to bow as he crouches, falling into himself. His face twisting in pain.

I feel it too.

Agony. On and on...

The mirror is relentless in its pursuit of power. She is relentless. Moons, but I hate her. It feels like I have been standing here for days instead of hours. I'm not sure how long I can go on, and I'm not talking about this session. I grit my teeth harder and suck in air. My head feels like it's going to explode like a ripe melon left in the sun on a scorching day. By now, the sweat is pouring, and I'm shaking.

I feel ill.

"I...I...I can't..." I croak through parched lips. "I..." I shake my head, gasping as the hold on me is released. I sigh with relief, breathing hard as I try to catch my breath. Bending fully through my middle, I fold my arms around myself as shivers run

through me. Nausea rolls in my stomach. It grips me and holds me as more sweat beads on my forehead.

“You’re useless, girl!” The fae overseer shoves me with so much force that I land hard on my knees.

I cry out as pain lances through me. I look up through my tangled hair at the old fae. His eyes are hard and angry. I see fear there, too. There is a small part of me that feels sorry for him. We’re all under pressure.

Every last one of us has to produce, one way or another.

“And you call yourself a witch,” he mutters to himself, shaking his head in disgust. His face is deeply lined. Too wrinkled for a fae. His hair is fully gray, which is unusual, too.

I wince as I pull myself to a standing position. My knees throb. I will have bruises come morning. I sway, working to keep my feet under me. Thankfully, the nausea is subsiding. You have to hold on to all of the positives in a place like this, where they are few and far between.

If he thinks his taunts will have any effect on me, he’s wrong. I’m used to it. I’ve had a lifetime of insults thrown at me, and by people I care more about than this old cod.

“Already used up, and we’ve barely begun,” the overseer spits. Now, all I see is anger and hate etched into the lines of his face. In his eyes, too.

A nearby guard snorts in disgust. Like it has anything to do with him.

“Take her away,” the overseer barks at the same guard, who nods once. “I’m not sure how you’ve lasted this long,” he mutters.

Sheer, stubborn grit. I don't dare tell him.

The guard takes my arm in an iron-tight grip. I bite back a hiss, not wanting to give him the satisfaction. More bruises to add to the ones I have already.

Bastard!

"If you can't fill your quota by the end of the week, it's to the mines, girl. That or the brothel." He looks me up and down. "That's if they'll take you. I'd start thinking about which option you'd prefer, since it's about to become a reality."

My options would be death within a year below the ground or years spent on my back. Neither is very enticing.

"I'm trying as hard as I can...I swear," I tell him, even though it would be best if I held my tongue.

"It looks like trying as hard as you can isn't good enough," he snarls. "Not nearly good enough, I'm afraid." He looks over at the guard standing opposite us. "It looks like we're going to need fresh blood soon. It might be time for another witch hunt."

I bite back a sigh, closing my eyes and looking away. My failure means that more of my kind will be ripped away from their homes.

I touch the amulet resting on my chest, looking down at the piece. It's quite beautiful, a stone of deep emerald embedded in the center, surrounded by intricate gold filigree on a pretty gold necklace.

I hate it.

I wish I could rip it from my neck. With it in place, I am left vulnerable and unable to

summon my magic, paltry as it may be. The overseer is right; I'm as good as useless.

I can't break the chain since it has been spelled by a witch or a sorcerer far more powerful than I am. What am I saying? Most witches are more powerful than I am. I wouldn't be in so much trouble, about to be sent to the mines, if I had any real magic to speak of. Actually, that's not true. The infuriating thing is that I have plenty of power, just not much access to it. I'm almost as useless as the emptyfae themselves.

Still, if only I could get rid of it. I know all too well what would happen if I tried, and it's not worth it. The thick gold chain will wrap itself tightly around my neck, choking the life from me. Letting up only as I'm about to pass out. The metal is unbreakable; it may as well be a part of me.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:57 am*

“Come on!” the guard says as he drags me away, his fingers digging into my flesh.

He pulls me down the hallway that leads to the servants’ quarters. By now, I can barely lift my feet. I feel like my limbs have been weighted down by rocks. I do my best to keep up.

After a time, I realize that the guard is leering at me.

“What?” I frown.

“I would pay for a tumble with you,” he says, smirking. “You should pick the brothel when you are asked to choose. I’ve never bedded a witch before. I have heard tales.” He scratches his chin, his eyes glinting.

“You’ll never bed me. I’d sooner die.”

His face turns red, and his jaw tightens. “You think you’re too good, witch? That your cunt is too good for the likes of me?”

“Yes,” I blurt. “You stink like a swine with a—”

He backhands me hard enough to send me reeling, but not so hard as to leave a mark. I hit the wall, seeing stars for a second as my knees give in, and I crumple to the ground onto my already bruised knees. I hate being this damned weak. I hate that I was captured. That no one from my coven has come for me. If Lydia or Willow had been taken in my place, they would have... No! I can’t think like that. It’s too dangerous, and so I can’t blame them.

“Up,” he growls, dragging me to my feet. Then he laughs in my face. “So, destined for the mines, then. You won’t last six moon cycles. Mark my words.”

“I’d rather die than lie with the likes of you, fae. Empty at that. So useless you need me to—”

“You should keep your mouth shut while I still have my temper in check. Any more out of you, and I won’t hold back when I strike you again. I might accidentally break something, and without the use of your magic, you wouldn’t be able to heal yourself. You’d die quickly underground. That’s for sure.”

I hate them, these bastard fae. Especially the empty bastards. It’s not my fault they can’t access their magic. Although I know all too well how that feels. I’m only one or two notches above them.

I start walking with more energy this time. I have barely taken three steps when I am almost knocked onto the ground again when someone is thrown from one of the rooms, landing on the floor at my feet with a hard thud.

“Don’t come back!” a woman yells. I recognize her voice since she’s a fellow witch. Her name is Rhiannon, a witch with hair as red as the flames of a blazing hearth. She stands in the doorway, her eyes bright with anger. They’re locked on the man at my feet.

By now, he has lifted himself onto his elbows. His eyes are blue; they flicker with mischief. Not bad looking for a human.

Not that I’m interested. How did that thought even creep into my mind?

I have neither the strength nor the inclination for such a dalliance. I haven’t so much as thought about sex in years. Perhaps it’s because I’m going to be sent to the mines

soon. At this rate, it is a given. The bastard guard is right; I'll be dead well within a year. It's depressing.

The scoundrel at my feet jumps up in one fluid motion that is impressive...for a human.

The guard shoves me forward, but I can't tear my gaze away from the scene unfolding. Rhiannon moves her eyes to mine for a brief moment before dismissing me completely. Again, something I am used to.

Then she slams the door so hard I'm sure that the wall will crack.

"Get going, girl!" The guard pushes me. "And you!" he yells at the human. "Get back to your quarters...now! This section is out of bounds. It houses witches only."

"Right away," he says in a voice that is so deep it sends shivers up and down my spine. "My sincerest apologies." He inclines his head at the guard, who seems placated.

I start walking before the guard pushes me again; he has to take a few big steps to catch up.

"You'd better get some sleep, witch! If you don't make quota, it's to the mines with you." He laughs. "I'd start packing if I were you."

I ignore him, my back prickling. I'm sure that the human is watching us leave. I want to turn back to check, but I don't.

Who is he?

I've never seen him before.



What is he doing messing with Rhiannon?

I'm too tired to care. As soon as I reach my tiny quarters, I go inside, shutting the door in the guard's face. Without bothering to undress, I lie down on the small bed. The mattress is hard, and the blanket is threadbare. I am asleep in seconds as exhaustion takes over, the human all but forgotten.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:57 am*

2

Kian

There has to be a witch who is willing to do what it takes to escape. Surely? I need someone with enough magic. Someone willing to take a risk. Why is this so difficult? I thought I would be able to take my pick of willing individuals who are sick of this place.

I sigh, looking down the dimly lit hallway. Candles flicker in lanterns hanging at intervals along the wall. I turn the corner and watch as the woman I nearly bashed heads with walks into her quarters and slams the door in the face of the guard, who scowls as he turns back in my direction.

He walks toward me, giving me a filthy look as he gets closer. "What are you still doing here? I thought I told you to leave. You lost or something?" He pushes me against the wall, pressing one hand to my chest, his flinty gaze on mine. We're eye to eye. I'm tall for a human. Strong, too.

I don't want trouble.

I let him dominate me. I know I can take a lone fae, but now is not the time. Not when I'm about to escape. I will get out of here. I must. I just need to convince someone with power to help me. As a last resort, I will make the attempt on my own, but my chances will be greatly diminished.

I need a witch.

I put up my hands in a show of submission. “I don’t want any trouble. I heard that the witches are...” I look down the hallway, first to the left and then to the right. “Are good in bed,” I whisper, like I’m letting him in on a secret. “I wanted to test the theory.”

He grins at me, letting me go. “You would be right. I’ve heard the same, but they also think they’re better than us. That one especially.” He points toward Rhiannon’s door. “Actually, they all think they’re better. They wouldn’t lower themselves to the likes of us. And you thought you’d what? Knock on the door and show them your member, and they’d let you in.” He laughs, slapping his thigh. “You look like you’re plumb out of luck.” He lifts his brows, his grin growing wider by the second.

“You might be right.” I sigh deeply, smoothing my tunic. “No luck at all,” I grumble, pretending to be upset.

“You don’t stand a chance,” he snorts, looking in the direction he just came from. “They all think that the sun shines out of their—”

I snort. “Typical.”

“You should go to the brothel. You would have your pick of women. There are even a few fae females, if you’re looking for adventure.”

I grin back at him. “I’ll do that.” I nod.

“You’d better hurry, or you won’t make curfew. I take it you have coin?”

“I do, indeed. I don’t need very long,” I lie.

The guard sniggers, nodding a few times. “Off you go, then.” He starts walking away but turns back. “Make sure you don’t get caught in this section of the servants’

quarters again. Next time, you might not get away so lightly. The overseer is protective of the witches and won't tolerate it. Like it or not, we need them to make quota."

I nod. "I know, it's just..." I shrug. "I was trying my luck. I meant no harm. Thank you for your help."

"Okay, then." He turns and walks away. I make as if to follow, but once he is out of sight, I turn back. I'm not going to be so easily deterred.

I need a witch if my plan is going to work. Ideally, a powerful one. If I'm going to risk my life, it needs to be worthwhile. The more powerful the witch, the better my odds, provided I can trust her.

Witches have been known to stick to their own.

The stable hand gave me the names and locations of a few of the more powerful witches staying at the Emptyfae Court. Or should I say, witches who are prisoners at the Court.

Same as me.

Same as most of us non-fae.

I've learned a lot living in the fae Court over the last few weeks. It seems that the fae themselves, although they have it better, are prisoners, too. We all serve her. I wish the kings would come back. That wrongs could be set right. I feel a prickle in the back of my mind. It's like my subconscious is trying to tell me something, but I ignore it. It happens to me more often than I'd like.

There is one left I haven't spoken to yet, and time is running out. I make my way

down the hallway until I reach door number eighteen.

I rap on the wood, looking left and right. I half expect the guard to return. I'll be in trouble if he does.

I knock again, and the door opens.

“What do you want?” the witch asks. She looks at me with wary eyes, her face a mask of irritation. Her hair is gleaming black. It falls in waves around her shoulders. She leans against the door frame, one hand clutching a small, worn book tightly to her chest. “I don't have all day.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:57 am*

I clear my throat, trying to appear more confident than I feel. “I heard you’re a powerful witch,” I begin, “and I need your help.”

She arches an eyebrow, unimpressed. “And why would I help you?” She looks down her nose at me.

I swallow hard, feeling the weight of desperation settling in the pit of my stomach. “Because we’re both trapped. I want my freedom. I’m sure you do, too. I’ve figured out how to make that happen, but I can’t do it on my own.”

She laughs in my face. “Don’t you think I would have escaped by now if there was a way? Like you said, I’m powerful. My big problem is that this is keeping me here.” She clasps a ruby amulet in her fingers, then drops it like her hand was burned. “Unless you’re a powerful wizard, you can’t help me, which means that I can’t help you.”

“That’s just it. I have an idea. I—”

“An idea?” she sneers. “You realize that we are dead if we are caught trying to escape?”

“I’d rather be dead than rotting in this Court. This is no life. Don’t you want to go back to your coven?”

Her eyes brighten, but the light soon dims. “I want nothing more, but I’ll take this life over none at all.”

I look up and down the hallway. “Then let me in, and we can talk about it. I’ll tell you of my plans.”

Her eyes narrow, and she folds her arms tightly across her chest. “No, you have ten seconds to give me a brief idea of how you plan on getting us out. You need to convince me of why I even need you.” Her jaw tightens. “Thing is, I don’t have it that bad here. My quarters are comfortable. I get certain...privileges. I would be stripped of everything. I’d be thrown into the dungeons. Or...put to death.” She shakes her head. “I would love my old life back, but at what expense if we fail?”

This is what I was afraid of. The truth is, my plan is just a theory. I don’t know if it will work, and she doesn’t need me...not really.

“But you would prefer your freedom...surely?”

“Of course.” She snorts.

“You would need to trust me. If I can get the amulet off your throat, you’ll help me escape. Do we have a deal?”

“No.” She rolls her eyes. “The amulet can’t be removed. That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. You have to give me more than that, and quickly. I’m growing tired of this conversation.”

“Okay...fine.” I sigh. “I managed to get my hands on a tool that holds magic,” I say under my breath.

“What tool?” Her eyes narrow with interest, but it’s clear that she’s also skeptical. “And what kind of magic?”

“A hammer. I believe it holds enough magic to remove your amulet by breaking the

chain.”

“You believe? Believing something and knowing it are two different things.” She shakes her head. “Not good enough, human. You realize that the moment you break the chain, there will be a gigantic magic shift. The fae will know that one of the witches is escaping. They may even know that the witch escaping is me. In fact, I’m sure they will. They’ll come for me...for us, if you survive breaking it, that is.”

“I know they will come for us. I know the risks, but I don’t care. I have a plan. We’ll need to time it just right. So that by the time they find out, we’re long gone.”

She narrows her eyes in thought and then gasps, her eyes brightening. “You’re planning to do this tomorrow during the eclipse, aren’t you?”

“Yes, there’ll be a big surge of magic, which could mask the shift when the chain is broken.”

“Could, maybe...” She shakes her head again. “I believe. I don’t like any of these terms. You’re not sure that this will work. In fact, you’re going to take a huge gamble. Gambling with your own life is one thing, but gambling with mine is another entirely.” She shakes her head slowly as she speaks.

I’m doing a terrible job of convincing her.

“It will work.” It has to.

“You hope it will, you mean. Bring me this hammer you say holds magic. If it does, we can talk about it, and I’ll give it some thought. Without seeing this magic hammer, my answer is no.”

“There isn’t much time.” It’s the truth, but not the reason I don’t want to bring her the



tool.

“I know,” she grinds out. “That’s why you’d better hurry.”

“Be reasonable; curfew is nearly upon us. Let’s talk through the plan. It will work. The hammer is strong, and so am I. Quick, too.” I wince inwardly. I shouldn’t have said the last. It makes me sound desperate...which I am.

“You’re a human,” she says in disgust. “Hardly strong. Best you run and fetch the hammer. I’m not attempting an escape unless I am certain it holds the kind of magic you say it does. Don’t come back without it.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:57 am*

I nod once and step back as she closes the door.

The gods be cursed. This is terrible. I was so sure I would be able to convince one of them, and I couldn't.

I failed.

The chances of escape are little to none without a witch at my side.

There won't be another opportunity. It's tomorrow or...I'm doomed to go back to the mines. It's backbreaking labor and soul-destroying at that. I was only down there for a year, and I nearly lost my mind.

I start to trudge down the hallway and stop in my tracks. Then again, maybe I'm going about this all wrong. I scratch my chin, the stubble catching.

There is another option. A last chance. One I must take.

3

Kian

I make my way back down the hallway. If I'm caught now, I won't be able to talk my way out of it, but I don't care. I'm doing this. I have to convince one of these witches by the eclipse around noon tomorrow, or all will be lost.

I find her door. According to the black paint, it's lucky number thirteen. The smooth

wood of the door feels cool beneath my knuckles as I rap twice. The sound echoes down the hallway, a slow double-thud that seems to reverberate in the silence of the court. Long moments pass. My heart beats faster with each one.

I knock again, a little harder this time.

Come on! Come on!

I'm sure she's in there.

"What is it?" the witch asks as she opens the door, rubbing her bloodshot eyes. Her brown hair is disheveled, and her clothes rumpled. She looks like she hasn't slept in days. "Who are you? What do you want?" Her voice is groggy. Her gaze goes from tired to wary as she takes me in.

"We met earlier..." I use my thumb to point down the hallway. "Well, not officially. I'm—"

"I remember. Rhiannon didn't seem to like you much, either. What do you want?" she snaps.

I find myself wondering if all witches are this touchy or if I bring out the worst in them. Perhaps it's a bit of both.

"I'm trying to partner up with—"

"Not interested." She shakes her head. "I'm in no mood to be partnering up with anyone. I need to sleep for a week... If only that were possible," she mumbles to herself. "Maybe if I weren't so tired." She yawns, giving me the once-over. "You're certainly attractive enough." Her eyes flare like she hadn't meant to say that. Like she's shocked that the words even came out of her mouth. "For a human. But I don't

have time for such things. I need rest.” She tries to shut the door, but I put my foot out to stop her.

“Apologies, no, um...you misunderstand me.”

She thought I was here for...that. And even considered it, albeit her consideration didn’t last very long.

Now that I actually take her in, I realize that under her tousled outer appearance is quite a beauty. Her eyes are a mesmerizing shade of hazel, like sunlight filtering through a dense forest canopy. She’s a little on the thin side but still has curves. I lift my gaze back to hers. There’s a vulnerability there, a weariness that makes me feel sorry for her. I can’t help but wonder what trials she has endured to leave such a mark on her spirit. Then again, I can well imagine. These fae are bastards. Most of them are, at any rate.

“I didn’t come here for that,” I say softly, my voice betraying a hint of sympathy. “I need your help to escape this place. We can help each other get out of here.”

Her tired eyes snap to mine, a glint of defiance sparking within them. “Escape?” she mumbles, looking defeated in the next instant. “And how do you plan on doing that? We’re surrounded by fae, powerful enough to crush us with a flick of their wrist or a thrust of a sword.”

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what comes next. “I have a plan,” I explain, keeping my tone steady. “But I can’t do it alone. I need someone with power, someone like you.”

She studies me for a long moment, her gaze piercing through me as if searching for deceit.

“Please, just hear me out. My name is Alaric.”

She folds her arms and looks me in the eye. Hers narrow. “How many witches did you approach before coming to my door, Alaric?”

I lick my lips, looking down at my feet before looking back up at her and holding her gaze. “You are the fourth.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:57 am*

“Why did the others throw you out?”

I shrug. “My plan has holes. It may not work. There are numerous pitfalls...but...” I shrug. “I have a good feeling about it.” I decide to play open cards with her. I have nothing to lose at this point. Also, where I felt like I had to play my cards close to my chest before, I don’t feel that with her. I’m not sure why. Maybe it’s because she isn’t nearly as powerful as the others I’ve approached.

Perhaps it’s simply because a different approach is needed. This is my fourth attempt, after all. Probably my final attempt if I want to make curfew.

“A good feeling?” She laughs, shaking her head.

Kakara help me! This is how every single conversation has gone thus far. “Please tell me your name. Please let me in so that we can talk about it.” I notice how she is leaning against the frame. “You look tired. Like you could do with getting off your feet,” I try.

“Fine.” She sounds irritated. “But I meant what I said. I need to get some rest. It’s McColl...my name.”

“Good to meet you, McColl.” I smile at her as I enter her tiny quarters. So small it would be impossible to swing a cat. Even a small one.

The corner of her mouth twitches, but she doesn’t return the smile. I’ll take it!

She sits on the very edge of her tiny cot, and I sit on a rickety wooden chair that

would do a better job as firewood.

“I’m all ears.” She has her hands on her thighs, her eyes firmly on me.

“It’s quite simple. I will remove the amulet – I have found a way to do this – and in return, you ensure that we are able to move through the barrier without needing a fae to assist us.”

Her face remains impassive.

“I would attempt to escape myself, but the biggest problem I face is getting through the dome barrier surrounding the Court. I would need to move quickly, and having to bring a hostage fae along would hinder my escape. I don’t think I’d make it out without help.” The barriers around each Court are designed to allow fae to pass freely. Humans need to be touching a fae in order to pass. The fae needs to be alive and conscious, or the barrier won’t relent. It’s an effective way of keeping us trapped. Since fae are much stronger than the average human, taking a fae hostage isn’t as easy as it sounds. It would be easier to escape without the need for one. Quicker, more efficient, and less risk of recapture.

“Let’s just say that you can, in fact, remove my amulet, and we make it past the barrier. What then? Do we go our separate ways once we are free of the Court?” She lifts her brows.

I shake my head. “I would suggest that we travel together. I know how to survive out there. How to find potable water. How to hunt. What is edible, and what will kill you. You have your magic, which will come in handy, too. Lighting fire, shield spells, and the like. It would be a partnership. I think it would work.” I can’t help the animation that has crept into my voice.

Her eyes turn hazy with what looks like fear. I don’t think she has the skills it would

take to survive on her own. She's thinking of everything that could go wrong, and granted, there's a lot.

"We would work together to both escape and to reach our destination. I think we would stand a good chance, McColl." This might just be working. I hold my breath and force myself to stop talking.

A few long moments go by. "What is the plan exactly?" she asks, interest brightening her eyes.

I fill her in, keeping it brief since I haven't worked out some of the details yet.

"You say that this hammer holds magic. How would you know?" She narrows her eyes. "You're a human. Humans don't know much about magic...at least, in my experience."

"Yes, it...I..." I start to say and then stop, shaking my head. "It's a hammer like any other. A straight peen, to be exact. I'm the new blacksmith...at least until the new permanent one gets here. Then, I'm going to be sent back to the mines, hence my need to escape before it happens. We're heavily guarded down there." I am tempted to tell her that I am very good at being a miner. That the fae are desperate to send me back there. They have not made quota since I started working as a blacksmith. They need me. I will be hunted down as soon as they realize that I have escaped. I need a witch to help keep them from tracking and finding us. I had hoped to convince a powerful one, but that hasn't proven to be the case. At this point, McColl will have to do.

"Why are you being replaced? Are you no good at being a blacksmith?"

"No...it's not that. I worked as a striker for a few years before taking up arms." I lick my lips. "I worked as a mercenary for years until I was captured."



“So, you’re an apprentice, not an actual blacksmith.” She lifts her brows.

“Yes, and it’s been a while since I worked as a striker...a long while.” I lift my brows. “Since there was no one to replace the blacksmith – he died a few weeks back – they put out the call, and I answered. Turns out I’m the best there is until the new smithy arrives in a couple of days.”

Days. Kakara help me, but the desperation starts to claw at me. I push it down.

“I take it they’re going to send you back underground? That’s why you’re trying to find a way to escape this place?”

I sigh and nod. “Yes, and I refuse for that to be my fate.” I rub my hands on my thighs. “I’m going to be straight with you, McColl: the hammer isn’t magic at all. You’re right...I’m desperate. Thing is, we don’t need a magic hammer. Any hammer will do. I will break the chain keeping the amulet in place, and we will escape.”

She gasps at my words. “How are you going to break the spell without magic?” She touches the tips of her fingers to the piece of jewelry around her neck.

“It will work. The chain is breakable. I’ve done some research,” I tell her, because I can’t very well mention that it is my gut instincts at work. I haven’t done any research. I know I’m right. Just like I know other things I shouldn’t. I just do. I learned to trust my instincts. How do you explain that to another person?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:57 am*

Impossible.

“Okay...let’s say that it is breakable. Do you know what will happen as soon as you attempt to break the chain?”

“Yes.” I nod. “The amulet is designed to suppress your magic. You can’t access your powers while it is around your neck. The amulet is also designed to strike back if someone attempts to remove it. It will strike at me, possibly at us both simultaneously.”

“That’s right. I have attempted to remove it numerous times. I have almost been strangled to death each time. Because I am the wearer, it stops just short of taking my life. It would not be so lenient with you, Alaric. You would be struck down by a bolt of magic. Your heart will stop. You will die in an instant. Are you willing to risk your life?”

Fear sparks through me, but I push it down. I would rather die than remain here. A slave to the fae.

McColl

Why am I trying to dissuade him?

If this human wants to risk his life to free me, I should let him. I should accept his offer and attempt an escape. I am headed for the mines, anyway. At this point, just like him, I have nothing to lose. I won’t last long below ground. Yet here I am, trying to put him off.

I'm an idiot.

It's that simple.

Alaric pulls in a deep breath, his broad chest expanding. His blue eyes narrow in thought. His jaw tightens as he runs through his crazy plan and all the risks attached to it.

"It is a risk I am willing to take. They're sending me back into the shafts. The mines are heavily guarded. My chances for escape would be nonexistent. I won't get a break like this again. It's rot and die down there or die in an escape attempt. I'm fast...I'll take my chances."

"A bolt of magic would be faster. You would be struck down. You will die." I need to shut my mouth already.

"But you would be free," he tells me. "You'd be able to use your magic...to heal me. To bring me back?" He lifts his brows.

I should lie.

I really should, but I can't!

"I don't know if that would be possible. I'm not the most powerful witch." I shrug, feeling shame burn my cheeks. "I have plenty of power, but struggle to access it. I don't know why that is. I come from a long line of powerful witches." I shrug again and sigh. "I can promise to try to bring you back, but I don't know if I would succeed. You would be gambling with your life...and mine." I'm not sure I would even be able to get us through the barrier. I won't tell him that. He won't have any use for me.

Truth is, I'm used up.

I've always been weak, but now I'm...I'm pathetic.

"I'm willing to take the risk if you are," he says. "It needs to happen during the eclipse tomorrow, just after noon."

My eyes widen. "We use the power surge to mask the release of magic as my amulet is removed." I sound animated as I finger the piece of jewelry.

"Yes." Alaric nods, his eyes glinting. "It's the Feast of the Shadow Moon. The whole Court will be assembled to watch the spectacle. The mead and mulled wine will be flowing. It's the perfect opportunity to escape. My last chance. Perhaps yours, too?"

My heart sinks. "Except I won't be in attendance. My quota has been far below the required amount for some time now. I will be expected to work the whole day. I won't be able to attend the feast."

"Fake illness," Alaric says.

I shake my head. "They wouldn't care. I would still be expected to work...even half dead."

"Offer to work on your rest day."

I choke out a humorless laugh. "I haven't had a rest day in the longest time." I put my hand over my mouth to cover a wide yawn.

He frowns. "How can that be possible? Even the mineworkers get a rest day every six or seven sun-cycles."

"I'm not making quota. If I skip so much as a day, I'll end up in the mines. Right now, I'm facing being sent there regardless of what I do." I look down at my lap. At

my hands clasped there. “I want to try, Alaric. You say it’s your last chance; well, this could be my last chance, too. Let me worry about getting out of work. Where will I meet you? What will I need to bring?”

We spend the next few minutes going over the details.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:57 am*

I scrub a hand over my face. “The others were right; this plan is full of holes. I should kick you out on your ear.”

Alaric gives me a half smile. “But you won’t?” He lifts his brows.

“No. Unlike the others, I don’t have much to lose. If we succeed in removing the amulet, what then?” I ask, my voice low.

Alaric’s gaze meets mine, filled with a glimmer of something that looks very much like hope.

“We’ll need to be quick and make a run for it. There’s a hidden path through the forest behind the castle. It leads away from the Court. I will have two steeds ready; they’ll have some basic supplies, including food. I’ll help you get back to your coven. I swear it. All you have to do is get us out and keep them from tracking and finding us. Once we’re out, we’ll have to rely on each other to survive.”

I’m not sure I have what it takes to get us out. Let alone the rest of it.

I’m not sure of anything.

Survive. The word lingers in the air, heavy with uncertainty and possibility. I feel a sliver of excitement, which I push down. We have a long way to go before getting to that point.

I shake my head. “I’m not the most powerful witch, Alaric, but I will do my best every step of the way. I don’t want to be sent to the mines.” I wouldn’t last very long

at all.

I will use my power to bring Alaric back. To heal him. I know he thinks that he is fast and strong, but I know better: he will be struck. He will more than likely succumb to his injuries.

We are gambling with his life...mine, too. I can do it. I have to. He is willing to take the risk; we both are. That's all that counts right now.

"More holes than in cheese," I mutter to myself as I think through all that Alaric has said. This is madness.

"I happen to love cheese." He grins, standing.

I crane my neck, having to look up and up. At least if we make it out into the desolate, barren landscape, I will have something pretty to look at. I take in his broad shoulders and his stubbled chin as he looks down at me. That ever-present glint of mischief is in his eyes.

"I'm all in," Alaric says as I stand.

My quarters are so small that we're almost touching. He is a big, strong man.

"Me, too," I whisper, my eyes firmly on his. I know the risks, but the thought of freedom tugs at something deep within me.

I can do it.

I can.

"I'll see you tomorrow next to the old bell tower just before the eclipse." He lifts his

brows.

“I’ll be there.”

Alaric nods, and then he turns and leaves. My gut is churning. I feel sick to my stomach, but for the first time in months...for the first time in what feels like forever, I am smiling. My face feels like it could crack open it’s so wide.

4

Kian

It’s hot. Sweat drips down my brow. The sound of revelry has already begun. There is singing and laughter. Before long, the feast will be in full swing.

“Is this the last horse for the day?” I ask my striker, who is stoking the fire.

“Yes.” He nods, excitement dancing in his eyes.

“Pack away the tools, and you can go,” I tell him, wanting privacy to carry out our plan.

“Are you sure?” he asks, looking at me quizzically. “I don’t mind helping you finish up. Then we can go to the feast together.”

“I’m sure. I know that your lady is waiting for you.”



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:57 am*

He grins. “Yes, she is, and I can’t wait to see her.”

“What are you waiting for, then?”

“Thank you, Sir,” he tells me, running to do as instructed.

I smile. “Have fun,” I tell him as soon as he finishes up. I watch as my young striker almost falls he dashes off so quickly. Then I take the smoldering horseshoe from the fire and starthitting it to finish shaping it, placing it in a basin of cold water, where it sizzles as it cools.

The horse nickers and stomps. I put my hand on the beast’s neck. “Easy,” I tell him, and he settles.

After checking the fit of the shoe, I pick up my trusty hammer and a few nails, putting three between my teeth. Then I get to work.

I lose myself in the rhythm of it, the clang of metal against metal echoing in the small space. I quench the hot metal in the water, the satisfying hiss filling the silence. My mind is consumed with thoughts of escape, of the risks we are about to take. A glimmer of hope shines through the darkness that has clouded my days for so long.

As I finish up the last shoe, I wipe my brow with the back of my hand, smudging black soot across my skin.

I tidy up my tools, taking my hammer and pushing it through my belt. Then, I untie the horse and make my way to the stables.

There is laughter and shouting. Someone is playing on a lute. Several people start singing a well-known folk tune. A man turns the corner; he staggers, spilling mead from a cup. He grabs the wall, laughing, and then goes back down the alleyway he came from. He doesn't seem to notice me.

This is going just as I hoped it would.

Once the horse I just shod is safely in his stable, I tack up the two horses I earmarked for our journey.

They're smaller than the fae steeds. Surefooted in rugged terrain and able to cope with the difficult conditions that await us outside the dome barrier around the Court.

I get the saddlebags I stashed earlier and have just placed one on the first horse when I hear footfalls. Someone has just entered the barn, and they're coming this way.

Their steps are sure and true.

Kakara help me. No! I don't need this. Not now. I had banked on everyone being at the feast.

I stand still, putting my hand against the horse's shoulder. I practically hold my breath, hoping whoever it is will go away.

They don't.

They keep walking between the stalls. It's like they're searching for something, and they're coming this way.

Perhaps they won't look into this particular stall. Maybe I'll get away with it. I go down on my haunches at the horse's front leg, facing away.

I pray to the gods that I won't be found out so soon. I pray that whoever it is isn't a fae. That it's one of the human stable hands.

Of course, the person stops when they reach the stall I am in.

I run my hand down the horse's leg.

"Alaric." I recognize the voice; it's the stable master. He's an older fae. Not as bad as many of the others. I would go so far as to say that I call him a friend.

I lift the horse's hoof, inspecting it.

Then I look up, turning over my shoulder. "Tyron." I smile, hoping it isn't as tense as it feels. "You're still working? I thought everyone was at the feast. I should be, too." I make it sound like I'm grumbling.

His gaze moves to the saddlebag on the horse's back and then to the one on the ground at my feet.

"I thought I would check on the horses first. Is everything alright?" He narrows his eyes. I see suspicion there.

God's bones, but this is bad. At this rate, I'm going to be caught before I've even left the barn.

Stay calm. Keep your cool!

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:57 am*

“Everything is just fine. Some travelers arrived not so long ago. In fact, you must have just missed them. I was told that this horse was lame on the right front, and I wanted to make sure that all was well. I offered to untack them,” I lie.

The stable master furrows his brow and steps closer to the horse, his eye moving over the beast. “That’s odd. This looks like one of the horses that came in yesterday.”

“These shaggy ponies all look the same.” I chuckle. Thankfully, it’s brown without any markings, just like many of the beasts used to navigate through the realm between Courts.

He makes a noise of agreement, but it’s clear that he isn’t fully buying it.

“I can’t see any reason why it would be lame. Nothing stuck in the hoof, no noticeable swellings or heat.” I shrug. “Perhaps you’re just tired, hey, boy?” I speak to the animal, who doesn’t pay me any attention. He keeps eating his hay.

“Looks clean for one who just arrived after a long journey.” He lifts his brows, once again looking skeptical.

“I sprayed his legs down.” I wince inwardly because the horse’s legs are dry as a bone in the desert.

He makes another noise like he’s thinking it through.

I remove the saddlebag and start to untack the animal. “Perhaps tell your stable hands to keep an eye on him. I’ll check on him again in the morning. It might help to trot

him out, just to be safe.”

“I will tell Simon to give him the once-over when he feeds them their oats a little later,” Tyron tells me.

I nod, starting to breathe a little easier. I remove the saddle, placing it on the door.

“It sounds like you’re coming to the feast?” he asks.

“Of course. I wouldn’t miss it. I just wanted to finish up here first.”

“It would seem that great minds think alike. It’s a pity they are sending you back to the mines. With a little training, you would make a fine smithy. You have a way with horses.”

“I’m also strong and move many baskets of coal per day. I am far more valuable down there than up here.” I sigh, wiping my brow. Then I slip the bridle from the beast’s head, placing that over the saddle.

“I, for one, will be sorry to lose you.”

“Thank you, Tyron. The mines are the last place I want to be. It’s awful down there.”

“So, I’ve heard.” He looks solemn. “I’d better check on the rest of the horses.” He smiles, and I smile back.

I hoist the saddle over my arm, leaving the stable. Then I make my way to the tack room and start to pack it away. I’ll quickly re-tack the horse as soon as Tyron leaves.

“I will see you at the feast,” Tyron calls from the front of the stall.

“Yes. I’m right behind you,” I yell back.

“Blankets are too thin,” Tyron says. “You should take bedrolls, as well. There are a few packed away in the chest in the corner.”

My eyes go wide, and the air catches in my lungs.

He knows.

Of course he does.

Tyron is no fool.

“Goodbye, Alaric.”

“Goodbye.” My voice hitches just a little. He’s letting me go. I can scarcely believe it.

I hear the sound of his receding footfalls.

He’s gone. I’m grateful and lucky. Very lucky. Kakara be thanked. Perhaps there are some good fae, after all.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:57 am*

I push out a heavy breath and get to work. There's a lot to do before noon.

5

McColl

So much for coming up with a good plan.

I couldn't think of anything that would work to get me out of my duties. Not one reason that wouldn't land me being led straight down to the mines.

In the end, I opted to pack up some of my meager belongings and hide. I am holed up in a small alcove underneath the wooden stairs leading up to the servants' quarters. It's dusty and dim, but at least it's secluded. No one will think of looking for me here. The time ticks by slowly as I wait, my heart pounding with a mixture of fear and excitement.

At first, it is busy. I hear people talking and many booted feet on the wooden stairs. I'm pretty sure that some of those were guards looking for me.

As the Feast of the Shadow Moon draws closer, the sound of laughter starts to grow. Then the music and singing start up. My heart races with anticipation and dread in equal measure. I clutch the amulet around my neck, feeling its weight like ashackle. The plan is set, the stakes are high, and there's no turning back now.

I'm ready.

I have to try.

I leave the alcove, taking careful steps. The air is heavy with the scent of roasting meat and freshly baked bread. My stomach rumbles, but I ignore it. My strides are quick as I make my way to the old bell tower.

Thankfully, no one pays me much attention. They're having too much fun. I don't see any of the guards. None that know me, at least. I hurry to the bell tower.

Alaric is already there, his eyes scanning the surroundings, possibly for any sign of trouble. Or perhaps for me, because he gets a look of relief when he spots me, inclining his head for a moment as I approach.

"You came," he says, smiling. His blond hair glints in the bright sunlight.

"I said I would. Is everything ready?" I ask, eyeing the hammer through his belt. "Are we really doing this?"

"We are, indeed, and yes, I managed to pack away a week's worth of food and two days' water. The supplies are with the horses."

"Great."

"I hope you have something warm stashed away in that bag?" Alaric asks, looking unsure.

"I have a cloak." I nod. "It will do well enough. I'm wearing my boots under my dress." I lift the hem to show him.

He makes a noise like he isn't sure.



Alaric looks to the side as we hear someone approach. Heavy, booted footfalls that grow closer. It's more than one person. Voices filter through.

I recognize one of them, and it makes my hands go clammy.

"If I find that little wench..." It's the guard from last night. He hates me.

"You'll what?" another sneers.

"I'll take her to the mines myself, but only once I've taught her a lesson or two." He sniggers.

I suck in a breath. Alaric and I look each other in the eye. Mine feel wide. My heart is racing.

Kakara help me.

"They're looking for me," I whisper. "Guards," I add. "The one from last night."

Alaric curses under his breath. He leans in. "You need to trust me, McColl. Follow my lead."

They're about to turn the corner. About to find me. There is nowhere to hide. I'm out in the open. Exposed. The door to the bell tower is padlocked. There is nowhere to go.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:57 am*

I swallow thickly and nod back, my eyes locked with his.

Alaric pulls the tie from my hair, pushing my amulet into my smock and between my breasts. Then he presses me against the wall and covers my lips with his. He pushes his body solidly against mine. Hot and hard man.

I gasp, my body going stiff and my eyes flying open.

“Play along,” he says against my mouth.

I make a noise of agreement, my eyes still wide. He’s right. This is the only way. I have to play along, or I’ll...we’ll be caught.

He presses his lips to mine and slips his tongue into my mouth.

I gasp again, but he swallows the sound, deepening the kiss.

I kiss him back, moaning and sliding my arms around his neck just as the guards walk around the corner, stopping mid-stride.

One of them chokes out a laugh, but I ignore him. I have to. I pretend to be engrossed in the kiss.

Alaric wraps his hand around my thigh through the layers of my dress and pulls it up. He is cupping my jaw with his other hand, shielding me from their prying eyes.

“What have we here?” the mean guard asks as Alaric holds me tightly. The man

holding me so tightly scents of all things masculine, like leather and smoke, with a hint of sandalwood, perhaps.

The other guard laughs heartily.

My heart continues to beat wildly in my chest. It's fear. If they catch me, I'm done for.

"Well, well, well. Looks like we've got ourselves a little show," the other one chuckles. I recognize the voice but can't put a face to it.

Jessop's tit! I've gone stiff all over again. I need to relax.

Alaric pulls back just a little. "You're about to ruin my day, sirs. A little space...please." Then he kisses me again.

I will myself to relax. To give myself over to the kiss. I push my fingers into his hair.

"Let's leave the lad be." He laughs again. "Lucky bugger."

They don't move away. "Maybe I'll stay and watch." The mean bastard sounds like he is smiling.

I stop, putting a hand against Alaric's chest as if to push him away. His arms tighten around me like he's trying to keep me in place.

"Leave them be, Harlow," the other one says. "We need to find the witch. She has a lot to answer for."

"Fine," Harlow mutters, and they finally start to walk away.

I open my eyes.

Instead of stopping, Alaric deepens the kiss all over again.

I realize that the guards could still be watching. They could turn back. I slip my hands around his neck and finally start to relax, feeling his mouth against mine. His hands on me. His body against me. For a moment, I forget everything, including the reason why we are kissing in the first place. For just a moment, I allow myself to feel.

To feel him, to taste him, to smell him.

I'm lost and drowning in a kiss that isn't even real. I have never been kissed like this before. I like it. I moan just as he pulls away. Alaric holds onto me, steadying me.

"That was close," he says.

"Yes...it...um...it was. Too close." My cheeks are red. I can feel the heat blossoming up my neck, spilling over on my face. "You're good at pretending." Why did I say that?

He smiles, and my insides do something strange.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“You are, too.” He looks serious. Almost angry. I’m not sure why. “I’m glad you played along.” His voice is gruff. “That you trusted me.”

“We’re about to escape...together. I think that trust is important.”

“Very important.”

I look around, but the guards are gone, at least for now. I straighten my dress, trying to steady my racing heart. I wipe my mouth because it is still tingling.

I think I might have actually enjoyed a pretend kiss a little too much. Particularly with a stranger I am forced to trust with my very life. I will chalk it up to the adrenaline that is coursing through my system.

Yes, it’s that, and only that.

“I hope they don’t come back.” His jaw is tight. Alaric looks up at the sky. “Not long now.”

I look up and sure enough, the moon is already covering half of the sun. Once the sun is fully obscured, there will be a great release of power.

The surge.

Our chance.

Alaric takes the hammer from his belt. “Do you see that line of trees in the distance?”

He points using the implement.

I nod.

“Aim for between the two tallest trees heading due south. You will find the path I told you about. The horses are tied up to the right of the big flowering honeysuckle.”

“We’ll go together, so you don’t need to explain all this to me.” My tone is a little shrill because I don’t fully believe what I have just said. There is no way that it will go as smoothly as that.

Not a chance.

“Humor me, McColl. Besides, you never know.” I see his Adam’s apple work. He’s nervous. “Look for the flowering honeysuckle. You can’t miss it. The horses are tied to the right of the bush, just fifty or sixty yards into the undergrowth.”

I nod. He’s afraid he might not make it.

“You don’t have to do this. It’s dangerous,” I tell him.

“I know the risk involved, but I do have to go through with it. I have no choice. We need each other if we want to escape this place. I won’t last five minutes without your magic. We stick to our deal: I free you, and you, in return, get us out of here. If I don’t make it, you run. I’ll do the same.”

I’m not worried about myself.

“You could die.” Why am I trying to talk him out of this? I don’t know Alaric. I shouldn’t care.

Only, I do.

“You’ll bring me back, McColl. I’m not worried.” The tightness in his body tells me otherwise.

Will I bring him back? I’m not convinced. I nod anyway. “I will do my best.”

“I believe in you, McColl.”

I feel warmth spreading across my chest. It soon turns icy. The problem is that he doesn’t know me at all. He has no idea what I’m capable of. Or where my many weaknesses lie.

You’re useless! What’s wrong with you? You’re no daughter of mine. You’re no Child of the Veil. You’re an embarrassment to the coven.

I hear my mother’s voice running through my head. All of her cruel taunts stabbing like barbs.

I pull the amulet from between my breasts, looking down at it. I may not be good enough to be a Child of the Veil, but I’m good enough for this.

I have to be.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“Lie down.” He looks up, and I follow his gaze. We don’t have much time. The sun is almost completely covered. The sky is darkening more and more by the second.

I do as Alaric instructs, lying on my side.

He takes the amulet, pulling it as far from my body as possible. My neck feels exposed. The cobblestones feel hard against my side. I glance up, and the hammer in his hand looks impossibly big. It’s well-used, just like his hands.

“I am an excellent marksman,” he tells me. “Breathe, relax. I won’t hurt you. Just make sure you don’t move so much as a muscle, and you’ll be fine.” He gives me a half smile. It’s tight, showing his nerves.

I swallow thickly. “O-okay.”

The shadows lengthen as the moon continues its path across the sun, casting an eerie darkness over the courtyard. Alaric’s hands are steady as he positions the hammer above the amulet around my neck. I can feel the cool touch of the chain against my skin, a stark contrast to the heat of anticipation swirling inside me.

Please let this work.

“Ready?” Alaric’s voice is surprisingly calm.

I nod, unable to form words, as I steel myself for what is to come.

As the moon fully covers the sun, a surge of magic is loosed. My skin tightens. Goose



bumps break out on my arms, and all over my body. Prickles run up and down my spine. The surge hits, and I have to do everything in my power to keep from moving.

With a swift motion, Alaric brings the hammer down on the amulet. There is a great clang as metal hits stone, breaking through the gold. The impact sends a shockwave through me, a rush of magic colliding with my senses. It feels like lightning coursing through my veins. The pain is sharp, but thankfully, it is over quickly.

I bite down on my lip, fighting back a scream as the chain snaps and the amulet falls away from my neck. For a moment, everything is silent. The world seems to hold its breath.

I fill my lungs, my body buzzing. I'm free. I look up at Alaric, and he looks down at me.

It worked!

He was right.

I start to smile just as he falls to his knees, his eyes wide and startled.

"Alaric!" I yell, moving to a sitting position.

He gasps and falls into a crumpled heap on the ground. His eyes are wide and unseeing.

I smell magic in the air. I taste it, too. It's thick and metallic.

I crawl to Alaric's side. There is a faint shimmer around his body. When I turn him onto his back, I notice a black singe mark on his tunic over his chest where the bolt of defensive magic must have hit him.

No!

No! No! No!

“Alaric, stay with me,” I plead, my hands trembling as I reach out to touch him. His skin feels icy cold under my fingertips. Panic rises in my chest as I realize he’s not responding.

I don’t think he’s breathing.

I put my ear above his mouth. I don’t hear or feel anything. I press my palms against his chest, feeling for any sign of life.

But there is no beat.

His heart is quite still. His skin is ashen.

No! No! No! No!

Desperation grips me. I have to save him. That was the deal.

I can do it.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

Summoning every ounce of power within me, I focus on the healing energy that flows through my veins. Closing my eyes, I channel it toward Alaric, willing his heart to beat, his lungs to fill. I whisper a spell, chanting the words over and over.

“Come back, Alaric!” I whisper as urgency grips me.

I feel a sizzle as magic leaves my fingers, going into the human on the ground.

For just a moment, his skin color seems to improve.

But already my power is fading. No! I push harder and harder until sweat drips from my brow. Until I am shaking.

I can’t... I... I gasp, slumping over Alaric, my breaths coming in quick succession.

I sit back up and inspect Alaric. He looks somehow worse than before as the color once again begins to fade.

“No,” I whisper. “No...please.” I shake him, but it is of no use. His body lies still on the ground, his chest unmoving. “I’m so sorry.” I look down at my hands. It’s useless. I have nothing left to give.

Then I look down at Alaric’s still form. He’s dead, and it’s all my fault. I couldn’t hold up my end of the bargain. I failed. My mother was right; I’m useless.

I cover my mouth with my hand to stifle a sob. The sound of voices grows closer. The sun is still partially obscured, but not enough to provide any kind of cover.

If someone comes this way, I will be found out and thrown in the dungeons. And Alaric's sacrifice would be for nothing. I can't have that.

I look down at Alaric, handsome even in death. A tear slides down my cheek. I wipe it away.

I lift a hand to his cheek, his skin cold to the touch. I bite back another sob; more tears sting my eyes. Then I jump to my feet and run in the direction he showed me moments before the eclipse.

It feels like a lifetime ago.

6

Kian

I bring the hammer down with all of my might.

Just as I suspected, it breaks through the chain easily. As the amulet falls away, there is a flash of light. The witch was right – all of them were right – I am not quick enough to dodge it, and pain hits me hard in the center of my chest.

So much for being quick and strong. It feels like I have been speared right through the chest.

I gasp as the air is pulled from my lungs. My eyes go wide from the shock of it. I feel my heart stop in the next instant.

For a moment or two, I expect it to start back up again, but it doesn't. I look down at the newly freed witch, and she looks up at me.

Her eyes are quite beautiful. There seems to be more green swirling in their depths than before. Is it a play of the light, or is it because she is free?

Silly thoughts to have at a time like this, considering I can't breathe. Everything inside me has seized. I fall to my knees, willing my mouth to work. I have to ask for help. To beg for it as I feel myself fading. My limbs grow weak.

I beseech McColl with my eyes because nothing else on me will work. I can't move so much as a finger.

"Alaric!" she yells as she shoots up into a sitting position, her face a mask of concern.

I fall, hitting the ground hard because, at this point, I am a dead weight.

Dead.

No!

Help me!

"Alaric, stay with me," McColl pleads. There is a desperate edge to her voice. I think she touches me, but I can't be sure because I am...growing colder by the second. Something buzzes inside like an awakening, but it quickly fades.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

No!

My limbs feel like my blood was replaced with lead. My heart feels like a lump of coal.

“Come back, Alaric!” McColl begs.

I think she is using her magic on me because I feel warmth. It feels wonderful. It soon recedes.

No!

Please!

She must redouble her effort because it returns...  
Warming...warming...warming...fading.

Gone!

I’m sinking into darkness. I’m dying.

“No,” she whispers. “No...please.” She sounds distraught. “I’m so sorry.” She must touch me again because I feel a buzzing inside, same as before. I start to come back. It’s working. But as soon as she severs contact, I am sinking again.

McColl!

I try to scream her name, but my lips won't form words.

She gets up and leaves. I don't need eyes; I can sense it.

No!

Please!

Stay!

Don't go!

McColl!

It's not that she doesn't listen. She can't hear me. She thinks I'm dead but...I'm not. I'm still here.

My heart beats once, and then nothing. It beats again...harder this time.

That's when the pain hits. Perhaps I am dying. Is this what death feels like? Pain like I have never felt before takes hold of me as my heart starts to beat...faster than ever before. It races, trying to keep up with the wind.

If I am dying, why is my heart beating again?

I draw air into my lungs, but it feels like a thousand daggers have lodged themselves there.

I think I scream as my back bows. I swear that my spine will sever in two. My chest is on fire. My blood, too. I'm burning up from the inside out.

Just when I think that I will surely die from the agony...it stops. Just like that, it is gone as if it never existed.

The skin on my chest feels warm, and my bones feel...they feel different. It is the strangest thing.

I groan as I sit up, putting a hand to my forehead, which is sweaty. My chest rises and falls quickly as I attempt to catch my breath.

I think I died. I'm sure McColl brought me back, even though she doesn't know it.

McColl.

I look at the tree line. I'm sure that's where she went. It's where I told her to go. To the horses. To freedom. I need to get to her before she leaves. I might already be too late.



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

I feel different. I feel... Something niggles in the back of my mind, but I push it away. There is no time to think on it. I need to hurry. I leap to my feet and start sprinting.

My heart pounds in my chest as I run toward the tree line, adrenaline pumping through my veins. The shadows are longer than normal for this time of day because of the sun still being partly obscured. The ground blurs beneath me, my breath coming in quick gasps as I push myself to go faster.

I reach the edge of the trees and dash between the two tallest of them. Then I rush down the path, retracing my earlier steps.

I hear a horse nicker. Hope and relief surge through me as I break through the honeysuckle bushes, spotting McColl up ahead.

She must hear me crashing through the undergrowth because she turns, her eyes wide.

“Alaric?” Relief bleeds into her expression before she staggers back, her mouth falling open. “No! How?” She’s gripping one of the horse’s reins. The other is tied to a tree. “Stay away!” she yells. “Leave me alone.” She sounds scared...of me. Why is she afraid?

I look behind me, expecting to see fae guards, but there are none. Is she afraid of me? Surely not.

“McColl,” I call out, my voice hoarse. “It’s me, Alaric,” I say stupidly because she

doesn't seem to recognize me.

Alaric... That doesn't feel right.

Why?

She turns away, facing her spooked horse. "I said to stay away." She tries to mount up, but the animal dances around her in circles, making it impossible.

"It's okay," I say in a soothing voice as I slowly approach. "It's me."

"You...you..." She shakes her head. "It can't be. It can't. No! No. No. No." She tries to mount up again and fails.

"It's okay."

"It's not okay, Alaric. Have you seen yourself?" A tear streaks down her cheek.

"You're a fae. You're one of them." She looks at the side of my face, at my ears.

What?

What is she talking about?

I put a hand to my head and sure enough, my ears are pointy. It all comes flooding back. All of it and all at once, leaving me stunned. My mouth falls open.

McColl finally manages to pull herself onto the horse's back, and the beast starts to run. She almost topples off the animal, somehow managing to stay in place by holding onto the saddle horn. The shaggy pony is surprisingly fast. She almost comes off again as it snakes through the trees.

I have no time to ponder on all that has happened. I touch my ears again. This can't be happening.

It is!

Iama fae. Not just any fae but...

No time!

I run to the tethered horse, taking precious seconds to untie him, and am on in one leap, kicking the animal into a gallop as soon as my butt hits the leather. I lean forward, giving the animal his head. The horse follows his stablemate, weaving through the trees and then jumping over a fallen log. I move with the animal. It comes naturally to me, like breathing. It feels good to be back in the saddle.

It doesn't take long to clear the forest, and when I do, I instantly see McColl ahead, her hair streaming out behind her as she rides. I push my horse to go faster, trying to catch up to her.

"McColl!" I shout, my voice carrying through the forest. She glances back, her eyes widening at the sight of me. She turns back, kicking her horse, trying to get away from me.

I can't blame her.

"Stop! Please!" I shout. She looks back over her shoulder again before riding on. She's terrified...of me.

I draw closer, trying to keep up with her horse as he gallops through the meadow beyond the trees. The sound of hooves thunders, and the dome barrier grows ever closer. McColl's horse is swift and sure-footed. McColl is much lighter than I am,

which means that I'm struggling to catch her. I can't close the gap.

Up ahead of us, the barrier looms. Lush green grass on this side and mud and a wasteland on the other.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“McColl. Stop!” I yell, but either she doesn’t hear me or refuses to listen. I’m going with the latter. Then again, she is pulling away from me and could be too far to hear me scream.

She needs to slow down. She needs to use her magic to get through the barrier. Otherwise, it will block her. She will be hurt...or worse.

With a sinking feeling in my chest, I watch as McColl’s horse charges toward the barrier at full speed. At this point, she is pulling on the reins, doing everything in her power to stop or at least slow, but it isn’t working; her horse is too badly spooked. He won’t listen. He’s taken the bit and is picking up speed.

When it becomes clear that she isn’t going to be able to slow, let alone stop, she drops the reins and lifts her hands, facing them toward the barrier.

They shimmer, illuminating in the partial light. Her hands grow brighter, her body painted in the glow.

Maybe it will work. It has to.

The only sign that the barrier is there is the change in landscape. That is it! It’s magical all the same and designed to keep all non-fae inside...or out. Completely see-through; it may as well be a solid brick wall for a non-fae, for McColl.

Oh gods!

I hold my breath, praying that her magic works. That she is stronger than she gives

herself credit for. I am alive. I'm sure she had something to do with that.

Her horse speeds up as they approach the barrier. The beast is wholly unperturbed, since the magic will have no effect on the creature.

Time seems to stand still as the horse starts to go through. I cry out when McColl is flung backward from the saddle, hitting the ground hard. Her horse keeps running, clods of mud flying from his hooves as he eats up the ground.

McColl doesn't so much as move. She lies prone on the ground, flat on her back.

I spur my horse on, frantic to get to her. Once I do, I leap from the beast while he is still in motion. The animal follows behind the one up front, running hell-for-leather. My attention is on McColl.

Her right arm is clearly broken. Her face is bloody and wrecked. Her leg is at a strange angle.

"No!" I shout as I drop down beside her. "McColl!"

I pull her into my arms, cradling her broken body against me. The fear of watching her die grips me in a viselike hold that has my blood running cold. Blood trickles from a cut on her forehead, staining her hair a dark crimson. More runs from the corner of her mouth and from both nostrils. Her skin is pale. Her eyes are closed. I press a hand against her cheek. Panic surges through me as I realize the extent of her injuries.

I put a finger beneath her nostrils, feeling the softest touch of her breath. Her chest doesn't look like it's moving. She's barely alive.

Magic buzzes through my veins, but I can't use it. I'm useless. An emptyfae. I have

no well and, therefore, no way to access my powers.

It's infuriating.

I'm not a magicless being, but I may as well be.

I pull her against me and will her to heal, anyway. It's stupid because it won't work. It can't.

Only it does.

There is a buzzing inside me that pulsates through my veins, surging toward my fingertips.

I gasp. This can't be happening.

Warmth spreads from where McColl's body touches mine. Light radiates all around us. Her broken arm starts to straighten out, bones knitting together before my eyes. The gash on her forehead closes up, leaving behind nothing but smooth skin.

Am I doing this?

Or is she?

How?

I don't understand. Even the grass beneath our feet grows another inch or two, and a flower opens its petals. Slowly, color returns to her cheeks as she stirs in my arms.

Seconds later, McColl opens her eyes, looking into mine. They are, indeed, swirling with green and flecks of pure gold around her irises.

She's beautiful.

McColl starts screaming.

7

McColl

He's a fae. A fae. One of them. The enemy! I don't care that he helped me escape.

Was it all a trick to get me to free him? To...what? Why did he want to escape? Who is he? One thing is for certain: he's been lying to me. He isn't a smithy or a mercenary. He can't be. He's one of them.

My enemy!

There is screaming. It takes me a few moments to realize that it is me. I am the one screaming.

Alaric – if that is even his name – is saying something to placate me. I don't care what it is. I need to get away from him. As far away from here as possible. I punch him as hard as I can. That's the one positive thing about having so many brothers: it taught me to rough and tumble even though I am older than they are.

I catch him square in the nose, and he lets me go, his eyes widening in shock. Blood runs from both of his nostrils. Good! I take the opportunity and jump to my feet. I stop just short of what I know is the barrier.



My memory of colliding with the magical dome comes crashing back. The pain...the crunch of my bones.

I look down, seeing blood on my dress. I don't feel pain. Am I hurt? Is it the adrenaline keeping me on my feet?

No. I felt warmth. I felt...magic. I think Alaric healed me. I don't care if he did. It was probably because he wants to use me some more. That's what they do...these fae. They use you until there's nothing left. I need to get away. I don't trust him, not even a little bit. He played me. Used me. Lied to me.

"McColl...please hear me out," Alaric says from behind me.

I turn, seeing him on his feet, his chest heaving. His eyes are a bright green now.

Green!

They've changed completely. They're too bright, too pretty to be on a human. Despite the bloody nose, which he wipes with the back of his hand, his features are even more attractive than before. His hair thicker and shinier. His shirt strains across what looks like more muscle. He looks taller, bigger, far more impressive. His ears are pointed.

A bastard fae.

My enemy!

"Stay away from me." I start back toward the Court. I have no plan save to get away from him.

I stop dead when I see them.

Moons, no! It can't be. Just when I thought it couldn't get worse.

"Kakara help me," I whisper under my breath, my hand going to my throat to touch a piece of jewelry that is no longer there.

It's a group of mounted fae guards, and they are coming this way, moving quickly with swords and spears in their hands. Their great steeds eat up the ground below.

They may not have seen us yet...but they will at any second.

My mind races as I scan the area for any possible escape routes and find none. There isn't so much as a boulder to hide behind. We are like sitting ducks out here.

I jump as Alaric takes my hand. "No..." I start to say, trying to pull away, but he holds on fast.

"Stop," he says to me. "I won't hurt you. I swear." His hand grows warm. His eyes widen as his magic surrounds us, making the air seem murky. He's casting a masking spell to hide us. It was him...Alaric healed me. It had to have been. He isn't an emptyfae. That might be why he's leaving this Court. I know that relations between the fae species are strained.

It doesn't change anything. I keep asking myself why he needed me. Had he masked himself to look human? He more than likely healed me because he still has a use for me. Unfortunately, I need him, too. I wish to the gods that I didn't, but here we are.

Within seconds, the spell is woven. All that the approaching fae will see is a clump of bushes or a pile of boulders. Whatever Alaric conjured in his mind. They shouldn't be able to see us. Not if the spell is working correctly.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

The air fills with the scent of strong magic, which gives me hope that the masking spell is working. There is a buzzing through my veins that must be him, since it can't be my own magic. I have never had access to this much before.

I wonder what kind of fae he is. He's not an emptyfae. They're not capable of accessing their magic...much like me. A shadowfae, perhaps? I don't know much about them, save that they manipulate the shadows somehow. I tell myself to relax, to breathe slowly.

"I'm sorry. I swear I didn't know," Alaric says, talking under his breath. "I won't hurt you. Nothing has changed."

Does he still have his faculties?

"Everything has changed," I say between gritted teeth. "Let's get through this, shall we?" I whisper.

He makes a noise of agreement, still clasping my hand tightly.

We hold our collective breath as the fae draw closer. The sound of hooves grows louder and louder.

As they draw near, I see the glint of their weapons and the intensity in their eyes. My breath catches in my throat, fear coursing through me like a river. Alaric's presence beside me is a strange comfort, his touch grounding me even as chaos looms. It shouldn't, given who he is.

I don't understand it.

The guards pass by without noticing us, their horses continuing on their path without faltering. Relief washes over me in waves as they disappear into the distance. I turn to Alaric, my eyes wide at our narrow escape. I huff out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

He puts a finger over his lips, and my heart stutters when I realize why. The guards are turning their steeds and coming back this way. It doesn't take long before they pass us again.

"They're here somewhere," one of them growls. They're all searching.

"Somewhere close," another shouts.

How do they know? Did they see us? They must have.

Moments later, they swing back, going east as they pass us for a third time. This time, they stop right next to us, and my heart lodges itself in my throat. I can hardly breathe.

They're so close, I can smell the horses. Can hear the squeak of the leather as they move in the saddles, searching left and right.

The head guard has a longer spear and a golden crest on his helm. "Queen Snow can sense that he is using his magic. He's somewhere close." He presses a finger to one of his temples and closes his eyes. "Yes, Your Majesty." He speaks and then makes noises like he is listening. "Understood. I will find them, my Queen."

He looks straight at us. I clutch a hand over my mouth until he looks away.

The queen!

What? How can she sense Alaric?

Is he speaking with the queen through some sort of mental connection? Then again, it wouldn't surprise me. Why would the queen care about a nobody like him?

Unless...

Unless he isn't a nobody.

Our gazes lock. Alaric squeezes my hand, silently pleading with me to keep trusting him.

I don't.

I'm stuck, though. It's him or the guards. I'd sooner pick neither, but right now, and in this situation, I have no choice but to stick with him.

I nod once, and he relaxes his shoulders by the smallest of margins.

They circle us twice before heading west.

"You need to take over the spell," he whispers.

"I'm not strong enough." I wish I were. It's my greatest wish. It always has been.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“We have no choice, McColl. They will soon figure out that this clump of anthills is more than meets the eye, and we will be done for, anyway. You heard what they said about Snow. You saw what happened. They are tracking my magic...or she is, but it makes no difference. They will be back in no time. They will figure it out. You need to try.”

“Who are you?”

“Not now. We’ll talk later. I told you. They’re coming back. You have to try...please.” There is a pleading edge to his voice.

“I’ll try, but it more than likely won’t work,” I warn him.

“Then we will be captured.”

“No pressure.” I glare at him. It almost feels like I’m in school again, with Professor Thornfield giving me some impossible magical task. Only, instead of having to mop the floors because of my lack of magical prowess, I’ll end up in the dungeons.

“You can do it.” His eyes soften. “You brought me back from the dead.”

I want to laugh, but the approaching fae might hear. “That had nothing to do with me and everything to do with you being a fae,” I whisper.

“You can do it,” he repeats.

I close my eyes, focusing every ounce of my being on channeling the remnants of

magic within me. Only, instead of remnants, a bounty of magic rises inside me. My skin turns golden. I burst with magic. It seems to come out of my every pore.

Control!

Easy.

Like a trickle from a stream instead of a raging river.

Once again, I hear Professor Thornfield's voice inside my head, even though she never had to speak those words to me. It was always Lydia or one of the other stronger witches.

I have to tamp down my power, which I've never done before. I've seen it done. I know how to do it, so I do. The air still crackles with energy as I easily maintain the illusion we are shrouded in, taking over the spell seamlessly.

What is happening? How can this be?

The guards ride past us without a second glance, their attention diverted by something further down the meadow. Alaric sighs in relief, his grip on my hand loosening slightly.

"Don't stop," he whispers. "I'm sure they will be back."

It doesn't take long before they are.

"It's gone," the leader says. "He's stopped using his power."

"He can't just be gone," someone else yells. "He must be here somewhere. We're missing something," he mutters.

“Well, he is gone. At least he isn’t using his power anymore, so we can’t track him.” They go to the spot where I fell.

One of the guards dismounts, inspecting the ground. “It looks like someone either fell or dismounted. There are two sets of tracks.” He walks to the spot where Alaric jumped off. “He’s with someone. I think they might be on foot, but I can’t be sure.”

“Let’s split up,” the leader says. “Japhet, you take five guards and follow the horses’ tracks. We’ll keep circling. There are still a few hours of daylight. Keep your eyes open. They’re here somewhere.”

“They have to be,” Japhet says as he mounts up, turning his horse in the direction that the horses took.

They split up, a small group giving chase at a fast lope. The group headed up by the leader decide to check out a rocky outcrop in the distance.

I keep a tight hold on the spell until they are gone. It’s easy. I barely have to try. My well is full. My veins buzz with power. It’s exhilarating and a little disconcerting.

It’s also utterly baffling. How did this happen? Why now? I don’t understand.

“I thought you said you didn’t have much power.” He looks at me through narrowed eyes.

I drop his hand and end the spell. “You’re questioning me?” I shake my head. “You! I don’t think so. Up until not so long ago, you looked like a human. Who are you?” I demand. “Is your name even Alaric? I somehow doubt it. Everything you’ve told me is a lie, isn’t it?”



## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“It isn’t. I swear.”

“Just the part about you being a fae.” I snort. “What kind of fae are you?”

“It doesn’t matter right now. It’s not safe. We need to get moving. We’ll talk later...I swear.”

Curse the gods, he’s right. As much as I want to argue, I can’t. Those guards will be back soon enough.

“Where do we go?”

“We stick to the original plan,” he says.

I choke out a laugh. “You want to travel to the human realm...to the Regana Mountains? Because that’s where I come from.”

“Yes, that’s what we will do.” We start walking. “I said I would take you back to your coven, and I meant it. I will keep my word. To the Regana Mountains...more precisely, to Witch Mountain.”

It’s how the fae and the humans alike refer to my home. It’s in the Regana Mountain range. Our mountain is known as Witch Mountain. It’s not very inventive.

I doubt he is as noble as he makes out. There must be an ulterior motive I’m not seeing.

“I’m perfectly fine on my own, Alaric...or whatever your name is. I don’t need you, and you don’t need me. We’re free. The best thing would be to split up. I’ll head back home, and you can go...wherever you want, as long as it’s not with me.” Home. Why does the thought suddenly leave me cold? This is what I’ve always wanted. To show my mother, my peers that I am worth something. That I could be someone of importance. I could make a difference for my people. To help keep them safe from the fae by being able to use the magic inside me. I clear my throat, pulling myself from my thoughts.

“I’ll head home,” I repeat. “And you can go back to your own realm, wherever that may be. This is where our paths split.”

He starts to talk, but I put up my hand. “I don’t want to hear it. There is nothing you can say that would change my mind. You are a fae. Your kind hunt my kind. You use us in the worst of ways. Use us until we are shells, then you send us into hard labor until we die soon after. So many of my kind have been taken, broken, and killed. Many more are being held against their will. Many are yet to be hunted to be used in much the same way.”

“I’m sorry that—”

“Sorry? You? Don’t! Spare me.” I shake my head. “We’re enemies. If you follow me, I will have no choice but to smite you down.”

We arrive at the barrier. I hold up my hands and use a spell that will make the magic wall think I am a fae.

My magic isn’t quite as strong as before, but it still flows from me easily enough. I pass through without a problem. I have to bite back a smile. How? I push out a breath. These things work in mysterious ways.

Alaric passes through easily since he is a fae.

“I can’t use my power, McColl. They will know and will come for me. That leaves me vulnerable. I need your help to—”

“Why are you running from your own kind? Actually, I don’t want to know. I don’t care. My answer is no,” I tell him. For a moment, I feel terrible. My instinct is to help him. I remind myself that I don’t know him. I never did. I don’t owe him a single thing.

He is a fae.

Then again, he broke the spell by breaking the chain securing the amulet to my neck. He also brought me back from the brink of death.

He’s one of them, though.

He lied.

He isn’t to be trusted.

He is my mortal enemy. I have to remember that. He wants to use me some more. It has to be that.

“We made it out of the Emptyfae Court,” I tell him. “You are on your own now. You can’t come with me. Good luck.” Then I turn and walk away, sloshing through a puddle of mud as I do.

I feel him watching me as I leave. I refuse to feel guilty. I won’t!

Kian

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

I watch her walk away, her dress sweeping in the mud.

I want to give chase. To talk her out of it, but I think it would be a useless endeavor. Perhaps it is better if we split up.

I need to find the others. I have no idea where to begin, but I have to try. I look back at the Emptyfae territory. At the Court in the distance, a mere speck on the horizon.

My people.

My home.

MyCourt.

For now, I have to leave so that I may free them from Snow. From her evil clutches. I need to run, and I need to hide. I must find somewhere safe for the night. I wish McColl had given me a chance. I think we would have been good as a team, but I understand why she feels the way she does. I am, indeed, her enemy, even if I don't see her as such. There has never been much love between the magical community and the fae. Especially the witches. It's so much worse now under Snow's rule. They hate us, and I can't blame them for it.

I look down at my hands, turning them over and examining both sides. I can't use this newfound power buzzing through my veins. I have no idea how I am able to access the magic inside me. I'm an emptyfae. I shouldn't have a well, but I do. It makes no sense.

No matter. It's clear that the fae can track me if I attempt to use it. That she can track me. I give one final glance at McColl and force my gaze away from her. I force myself to start walking.

It's a pity. I think we would have been better together. Safer, stronger. No matter. The witch wouldn't listen to reason.

After a short while, I pick up the pace, starting to jog and making good time despite the muddy terrain. There is the odd tuft of dead or dying grass and the very rare tree. They are either dead or very nearly there. They're all covered in lichen and moss. The sky is murky and covered in thick clouds. It looks like it might rain before long. I wish I had my oilskin jacket, but it's tied to my horse, along with the rest of my supplies.

I trudge on, mile after mile, keeping a close eye on my surroundings, looking for hiding places should I require them.

It doesn't take long before I do. I hear the thundering of the hooves first. I dash to a rocky outcrop, just managing to squeeze myself between one of the tight spaces, where I hunker down.

It's cold and wet. Mud seeps into my breeches, sticking to my leather boots, but I sit tight until they are gone. Then I get moving again. I repeat this pattern several times; each time the fae guards get close, I hide until they move off. I'm careful to leave as few tracks for them to follow as possible. It's tough in this type of terrain. I almost wish it would start raining to wash away any sign I was here. I keep walking at a steady clip until I am faced with a large open plain.

It would be foolish to attempt to cross with the guards out searching for me. If the search party came this way, it would be easy to spot me and to capture me. There is a big, deep cave in one of the rocky outcrops. I'm tempted to use it for shelter for the

night, but I'm sure they'll check it if they come this way. I know I would since it's the obvious choice.

There is still some light, even though the clouds are getting darker by the second. There is a small cluster of dead trees that offer no shelter at all. In the end, I settle on a small hollow underneath an outcropping of rocks just up the way from the cave. If I pull myself into a tight ball, they shouldn't be able to spot me once inside. It's not ideal, but it will have to do. I squeeze into the tight space, my breath misting in the cool air. The ground is damp, but it's better than being out in the open.

My stomach growls, reminding me that I haven't eaten since this morning. There is nothing I can do about that right now. One thing is for sure: it's going to be a very long night.

McColl

I made the right choice.

I did.

I'm not going to feel bad about it. About him. Alaric – or whatever his name is – is a big, strong, powerful fae. He'll be just fine on his own. He doesn't need to be babied by a witch.

I need to get back to my own. I can't team up with the likes of him. I won't! Take him with me to the Regana Mountains? I don't think so.

I keep walking. It's going to take me a very long time to get home on foot.

I look in the direction of the mountain range that makes up my home. It's too hazy to be able to see it. At least I know where I'm going. More importantly, I have my magic

to keep me safe. I'll use it to find food. To fight and to hide.

I can do this. There is a tight bundle of nerves inside of me, nonetheless. I keep my eyes open for signs of the fae.

Fae.

I think once again of Alaric. I'm tempted to look in the direction he took, but I don't. By now, we've both walked too far to be able to see each other, so there is no point. It's better this way. Besides, my grandmother always told me that it is always better to look ahead than backward. Less chance of tripping. More chance of getting to where you want to go.

I keep going, willing myself to walk faster.

I'm not surprised when I hear multiple horses' hooves and a snort of the approaching beasts. All I need is a simple masking spell to keep me hidden, so I hold up my hands and close my eyes, pulling up my magic, but nothing happens. There's no buzzing. No glowing. No rush as my power runs through me and out of me.

Nothing.



## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

As always, I feel my magic deep inside. I just can't reach it. Plenty of power but with no way to use it.

No!

Why?

The sound of hooves grows closer. I turn and see them galloping straight for me. They shout as they catch sight of me. I start to run as fast as my legs will carry me. Not that there's much point, but I have to try.

It isn't fast enough. It's no use trying to hide because they have eyes on me already.

It doesn't take long for them to reach me. The horsemen come to a sudden stop in front of me, their steeds skidding in the mud as they surround me.

I raise my hands in surrender. One of the fae guards dismounts, his eyes narrowing as he approaches me.

"It's the witch." He laughs. His eyes narrow, dipping to my neck. "They found her amulet on the ground at the bell tower." His eyes move to lock with mine. "We were briefed that you don't have much power to speak of, but I'm going to give my standard warning, anyway: don't even think about using magic on us. We'll gut you in a heartbeat, girl."

"Where is the fae you were traveling with?" another one asks, his eyes hard.

I shrug. "We went our separate ways."

"Tie her up, Ren. Llayda and Nyx fan out and search the immediate area for the wanted fae," Japhet orders his men, who do as he says without question or hesitation.

"He can't be too far away," a guard at the rear says; he is leading two ponies. They're our horses. I recognize the one I was riding. The one I fell from when I couldn't pass through the barrier.

One of them comes up to me. He must be Ren. He starts to bind my wrists. The rope bites into my skin. I wince but hold my tongue. There's no use in fighting or complaining; it will only make things worse.

Japhet, the one who seems to be in charge, circles me like a vulture, his eyes scanning the horizon before coming back to rest on me.

"Did a fae help you escape?" he asks. "Or was it the other way around?"

I shrug.

"You need to start talking. What is his name?"

"Alaric," I tell him. I'm somehow glad I don't know his real name. I don't like divulging any information about Alaric to these guards. It feels wrong somehow, even though I don't owe him anything.

"Where is Alaric now?" Japhet asks.

"The agreement was that we help each other escape and then go our separate ways," I lie. "We have since gone our separate ways. I don't know where he is, and I don't particularly care."

“I’m not sure I believe you, witch.”

“I don’t care what you do or don’t believe. I am telling you the truth.”

The fae strikes me using the back of his hand. I stagger back, tasting blood. Just as I’m about to topple over, Japhet grabs a fistful of my hair, yanking my head back so that I’m forced to look into his cold, hard eyes.

“You’ll speak to me with respect, witch,” he growls. “Now, tell me where Alaric is, and don’t bother lying. We have ways of making you talk. Ways you may not like much.” He pulls a wicked-looking blade from a sheath at his side.

Someone sniggers behind me.

I grit my teeth, my scalp burning from his grip. “I told you, I don’t know. We parted ways. I don’t care where he is or who he is. He served his purpose. I can’t help you.”

He sneers, throwing me to the ground. I land hard, the mud splashing up around me.

“Help them search the area thoroughly,” he barks at the guard who tied me up as he pushes the knife back into its sheath. “If the witch is lying, we’ll soon find him.”

The guard mounts up, leaving me with Japhet and another fae, who keeps a watchful eye on me. I sit in the mud, feeling the rope cut into my skin.

I try to summon my magic, but although it is there, I can’t access it.

Why not?

It's infuriating.

I sit on the cold ground for what feels like a long time. Two of the guards finally return, their horses blowing a little.

"No sign of him?" Japhet asks, even though I can see he knows the answer already.

"No, nothing," Nyx says.

"There are no tracks at all; we searched high and low," the other one says. I think Japhet called him Llayda.

"Perhaps you were telling the truth, after all," Japhet says, glaring at me like it's a bad thing. "We need to meet Lord Ondine before nightfall." He goes back to addressing his men. "We can't return to the Court empty-handed and therefore we can't return at all."

"We have her," the one holding the ponies says, eyeing me.

"A washed-out witch with no power." Japhet snorts, shaking his head. "She means nothing. We need to find this fae. The queen wants him captured. He is our main target. Not this useless wench."

My mouth falls open. This again.

The queen.

Why?

Who is Alaric?

The sound of a horse approaching brings me out of my thoughts. It's Ren.

"No sign of the mystery fae," he tells Japhet as he pulls his horse up.

"Get up, girl." The leader nudges me with his booted foot.

Thankfully, my hands have been tied in front of me, so I can use my arms. I clamber to my feet, my cheek stinging a little from where he hit me earlier. I have been hit enough times to know that it more than likely won't leave a bruise.

"Put her on one of the ponies, Arwin," he instructs the fae holding the horses.

Arwin nods once. He's a beast of a fae, with a shaven head beneath his helm and hard eyes.

He gets a smile I don't particularly like. I know that look.

"It would be my pleasure," Arwin says, taking me by the waist and lifting me easily onto one of the ponies. He grips my rear and squeezes the flesh. "Tasty little thing," he tells me under his breath.

"Don't," I warn.

He laughs. "You be a good witch now." He winks at me. "Don't give us any trouble." He grins like he's hoping I will do just that.

I wish I could kick him in the head, but since it wouldn't help me, I bite my tongue and put my feet in the stirrups instead.

The rest of the fae mount up. To my dismay, Arwin takes the lead rope attached to my horse's bridle. It looks like the big brute is going to be in charge of me.

"Let's meet up with Lord Ondine at the rendezvous point. I hope you all brought bedrolls, men. We're sleeping out here tonight," Japhet says.

It's met with grumbles as we head out.

I look down at my bound wrists. The fae holding my horse's lead is leering at me. What have I gotten myself into?

9

McColl

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

We take off at a slow jog. My rear is starting to chafe when one of the lead horses neighs. It is met with a responding neigh from another beast in the distance. I think we might be at the rendezvous point soon.

“We’ll stay in the Jacartas Caves tonight,” Japhet says.

Sensing we are almost there, our horses speed up into a gentle lope. I do my best to hold on to the saddle horn, but it is difficult with tied hands. There is more neighing from both sides as we get closer.

Minutes later, we pull up at a rocky outcrop.

“Llayda and Nyx, do a sweep of the perimeter,” Japhet says, swinging in his saddle to look back at the fae in question. “Be quick about it. Night will be upon us soon, and there are hywolves in these parts. They like to hunt in the dark, so do yourselves a favor and get back soon.”

“Understood,” Nyx says. They kick their horses’ flanks, loping away, mud splashing in their wake.

“Arwin, get the witch into the cave,” Japhet instructs, looking in the direction of the gaping mouth. There are horses tethered together just outside.

Before he can act on the instruction, a tall, lean fae walks from the cave. “No sign of them?” he says in a booming voice. His whole demeanor speaks of authority. From how his shoulders are set to the tightness in his jaw. He walks like he owns the whole realm.

“I’m afraid not, my Lord, but we did capture the witch. She doesn’t know where the fae is, since they parted ways almost as soon as they escaped.”

“And you believe her?” The leader looks at me, dismissing me almost immediately.

“I do.”

“We need to find that fae,” he practically growls. “Or the queen will have our balls.”

“Understood, my Lord. I sent two guards to sweep the area. We will hunt him down as soon as dark lifts.”

“Not soon enough, but it will have to do,” the lord grumbles as he turns and walks back into the cave.

The scent of woodsmoke wafts in the air. That and the usual smell of rot and decay.

Arwin grabs me, yanking me from the saddle. My hands are still bound in front of me, making it difficult to move freely.

“Let’s go, witch,” he says as he drags me toward the mouth of the cave. Thankfully, I won’t have to be alone with him. I hear several voices from inside and breathe a little easier.

How did I get myself into this mess?

Perhaps I shouldn’t have escaped in the first place.

No, I had to try.

Perhaps I should have stuck with the fae.



I refuse to berate myself for leaving Alaric. I had to make a decision, and at the time, I thought it was the right one. I am not too proud to admit – even to myself – that it may have been the wrong decision. But these things are always easier to gauge in hindsight. Who knows what would have happened if I had left with the fae. Perhaps I would have been worse off. Those words don't ring true.

Inside, the air is cool and damp, the smell of earth mixed with the tang of smoke. The fire crackles in the center of the chamber, warming the space. It looks comfortable enough, except for the fae guards scattered about inside.

Several of them sit around the fire. They grunt a welcome, quickly going back to their meal of what looks like cheese and bread. My stomach growls, reminding me that it has been an age since I last ate.

“I think I'll keep you close to me, witch. How would you like that?” Arwin wraps an arm around me. “Nice and cozy. We could keep each other warm tonight.” His meaty hand clasps my waist.

“I'm plenty warm enough.” I try to worm from his grasp, revulsion making my skin crawl.

He doesn't let me go. “I think you'll keep me company, little one. I think you'll do nicely.”

“Let me go!” I pull away, panic rising in me. No one is trying to stop him. No one is saying anything. They continue to eat as if nothing is happening.

Arwin starts walking deeper into the cave, dragging me along with him.

“Leave me be!” I start pummeling him, but it's no use. I'm like a butterfly in a snowstorm.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“Let the witch be,” one of the guards says around his food.

“I won’t hurt her,” Arwin grunts.

“She might end up turning your prick into a toad,” another one says, and they all laugh.

“You heard the brief; she doesn’t have much magical ability to speak of.” Arwin looks down at me. “If you had any magic, you’d have used it by now, witch. I have a little magic to use on you.” He winks, laughing cruelly.

As always, my power is there but just out of my reach. After using my well earlier, it will take time to refill. Time I don’t have.

“Come, girl,” Arwin says, dragging me.

I start screaming and fighting in earnest. I claw the side of his cheek, kicking at his legs.

Arwin’s eyes go wide as my nails open his flesh. He roars, pulling back a meaty fist.

“Stop!” someone says in a booming voice from the opening of the cave.

It’s the lord. His eyes are wide and blazing. His hands are fisted at his sides. He looks angry. Nostrils flaring and red-cheeked.

“Lord Ondine.” Arwin lets me go.

I move away, pressing myself against the cold stone of the cave wall, shuffling away from Arwin. My chest is rising and falling in quick succession.

“What is the meaning of this?” Ondine asks in a booming voice. “You will leave the witch be. We were instructed to bring her in...that is all.”

“And we will bring her in, my Lord. She’s headed for the brothel, anyway. I may as well break her in now...surely.” Arwin laughs, leering at me. “I will pay her for her trouble if it makes you feel better.”

“I don’t want your money,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Be quiet, witch,” Arwin growls at me.

“We are not animals,” Ondine says, narrowing his eyes. “This is not how we conduct ourselves. If she ends up working in the brothel, you can pay just like any other. Forcing ourselves on females is not the way of the fae guard.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Arwin inclines his head. “I’m sorry, witch.” He gives me a half apology that I know he doesn’t mean. “I meant no harm.” All lies. I can see it in his eyes.

Bastard!

This is why I left Alaric when I did. This is why I wanted to break from him. This kind of cruel treatment led me to the decision. Most are not as bad as Arwin, but not by much. They don’t see me as a living, breathing creature with feelings. I am a witch. An animal. Actually, I think that their animals are treated better than we are...the humans, too. It’s wrong. I know it stems from fear because we are different, but it is no excuse.

“You can guard the horses,” the lord tells Arwin, whose face falls. “Someone will relieve you...eventually.” He gives the brute a taunting look that begs the guard to defy him. The fae nods, accepting his fate. Then he leaves the warm and safe confines of the cave to take up vigil with the horses.

“You can sit here, witch,” one of them tells me. Much to my dismay, he points at an empty patch of ground directly next to one of the other fae men.

I do as instructed, since I don’t want trouble.

“Hungry, witch?” one of them asks me.

I’m desperate to tell him to go to hell, but my stomach growls again.

“Yes...I am,” I admit.

He gives me a scrap of bread, and I mumble my thanks, eating it in two bites.

Another fae hands me a waterskin, and I drink greedily, giving him a nod as I hand it back.

Ren drops a bedroll next to me, together with a blanket. “Don’t even think of attempting escape. We’ll let Arwin hunt you down, and I can’t guarantee what he’ll do when he finds you.”

I can guess just fine.

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

He drops his own roll beside mine. I'm surrounded by fae, with zero chance of escape – unless I can find a way to use my magic, that is. I'm not too hopeful about that.

I don't say anything; instead, I open my bedroll, which isn't easy since my hands are still tied. I get inside, pulling the blanket tightly around me. It's getting colder by the second. It would be worse if not for our shelter and the fire. At least I'm warm under the blanket. The scrap of bread was enough to stop the worst of the ache in my belly. It could be worse, but not by much.

I need sleep. I need to replenish the meager access to the magic that I have. I may very well need it. In fact, I'm sure I will.

Kian

The second group of fae arrived some hours back.

They have her!

How?

Why didn't she use her magic to hide? To fight? To escape? What is she playing at? McColl is powerful. Was she lying to me when she said she wasn't? I can still picture her falling off that horse. I can still see her broken body in my mind's eye. I somehow doubt it. It doesn't matter at this point because they have her, and she can't seem to escape.

Dark has long since fallen. All is quiet.

A single fae sits outside the cave mouth. I'm quite certain that at least one more will be on guard inside. The rest will sleep and take turns to stand vigil.

I have two choices: I can forget the witch and stay right where I am until it's safe to leave. Then run as fast as my legs can carry me, getting as far as possible from here.

Or I can risk life and limb and attempt to rescue McColl, possibly getting captured in the process. That would be stupid. It would put everything at risk.

The witch made her decision. It was one that didn't include me. She made that very clear. Abundantly so.

The better option would be to leave her to her fate. I should leave her be...but I damned well can't. I sigh softly as I ease out from my hiding place, taking a few moments to stretch, for the blood to go back into my limbs. Then I spend another minute or two coming up with a plan.

It's terrible, but it's all I have.

I look in the direction of the cave and then down at my outstretched hands. Funny, I don't feel the magic like I did before. It was stronger the second time I used it. I'm sure it's there, but I need to forget about it. I can't use it, not without Snow tracking me.

It can't happen.

I've done without magic my whole life; I don't need it now. Placing one foot in front of the other, I slowly creep toward the cave, my eyes on the lone guard.

I approach in a wide arc, sure to be silent. He's sitting in front of the horses. His main task is to keep them safe and to sound the alarm if he spots anything untoward.

He should have had his back to the rock. He's left himself exposed. The horses don't take any notice of me. I pet one of the ponies I earmarked for us to escape on, noting that they are both there, together with all of our gear and fully tacked up. Handy. The guard is directly in front of me at this point, with his back to me. Stupid. He'll regret that soon enough. He turns his head to the right, peering into the dark, but soon relaxes, which is a mistake. I pick up a rock, testing its weight in my hand. It will do nicely.

When he yawns and stretches, his attention momentarily diverted, I take my opportunity and clamp my hand over his mouth, pulling him back against me with one arm. With a swift, silent motion, I bring the rock down on his bald head, knocking him out cold. I carefully drag his unconscious body behind the horses, where he won't be discovered. Then I nudge him a few times with my boot to ensure that he is out.

Once satisfied, I enter the cave, keeping to the shadows and avoiding the line of sight of the guard I'm sure will be waiting inside.

I am met with the sounds of soft snoring. Someone turns over, muttering in their sleep. I push myself firmly against the cave wall, keeping perfectly still. He settles, his snores sounding once again.

I creep a little closer. At this point, the fire has been reduced to embers. The guard is sitting on the other side of the fire and deep in the shadows. Lucky for me, he's asleep, even though he is sitting upright. His mouth hangs open, and his eyes are closed.

I look for the smallest form and find McColl easily among the big males. She's right under the guard's nose and between two sleeping fae.

This will be no easy task.

For a moment, I weigh up the risks once again, considering leaving her to her fate. In the end, I can't. I pick my way through the sleeping guards.

As I reach her, I kneel down, placing a gentle hand over her mouth to prevent any noises of surprise she might make. Her eyes fly open, widening in shock as she sees me. I press a finger to my lips, signaling for her to stay quiet. She nods, understanding the gravity of the situation. She carefully slips from under the covers, sitting up.

Next, I untie the rope that binds her wrists. She rubs them, wincing. I help her to her feet, gesturing for her to follow.

As she steps forward, a stone is dislodged. It clatters as it rolls away. The guard's eyes open, and he jumps to his feet, a shout of outrage on his lips. He reaches for his sword.



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

All of the guards stir, two others clambering up, blurry-eyed from sleep. The rest are following suit when McColl lifts her hands. There is a crackle and a blast of light. All of them fall back to the ground in crumpled heaps.

“Let’s go!” she shouts. “I don’t know how long I can maintain the spell.” She looks at her hands, which are glowing. It looks like she has plenty of magic to me, but I don’t say anything because I have to trust her. I’m right on her heels but stop to unbuckle a sword from a guard and again to steal a knife, slipping it into my boot.

We rush outside, spooking the closest horse, who pulls on his tie rope, eyes white with fear as he attempts to escape. When he sees that we are no threat, he calms down.

I race to the smaller horses, untying them and leading them from the others. I do up the cinches on both saddles.

When I turn to McColl, I see that she is glaring at the guard I downed earlier. He is on his back, still unconscious, although it could be McColl’s spell at this point.

“Pig!” she yells before loosing a bolt of white magic at his...his cock. The prone guard doesn’t so much as move, making me think that he is still subject to her spell.

“We need to go,” I urge her.

McColl seems to snap out of it. She nods and runs to where I am waiting. She mounts up easily enough, and I do the same. Then we ride hard and fast, putting as much distance between us and the cave as possible. Although it is pitch black, the ponies

are sure-footed and brave. The night air is cold, but the adrenaline coursing through our veins keeps us warm. Although the sky looked dark and ominous earlier, much to my dismay, not a single drop falls. It would have been nice to cover our tracks.

I glance back to ensure we're not being followed, relief flooding through me when I see no sign of pursuit.

McColl rides beside me, her hair streaming behind her like a dark banner. Her eyes are focused ahead, determination etched onto her face. The spell she cast back at the cave was impressive; it's clear her magic is stronger than she initially let on. Why didn't she use it against the fae who captured her? What is going on? I wonder if my breaking the amulet had something to do with our newfound powers. I suspect that it did. That it's the reason I have access to my magic now, too. I can't be sure, but it makes sense. I don't believe in coincidence. The eclipse. The breaking of the amulet. All of it. They're tied together somehow. Perhaps we'll figure it out; who knows? Only time will tell.

We ride hard for what feels like a long time, the landscape blurring past us. The adrenaline of our escape slowly fades, leaving behind an exhaustion that seeps into my bones. From the way McColl is slumping a little in her saddle, I would say that she feels it, too. The horses begin to tire as well, their breaths coming in heavy pants. Despite the chill in the air, they are gleaming with sweat.

We slow to a walk. I turn back for what feels like the hundredth time to check for signs of pursuit and find none. We would hear them unless they split into smaller groups. I turn back again, honing my senses. Thankfully, there's nothing.

"I cast a sleeping spell," she says. "It should have lasted for hours, but," she shrugs, "I can't trust my magic. It's always been predictably bad, but since our escape, it..." She shrugs again. "It's either there at full capacity, or it's not there at all." She looks over at me, her eyes locking with mine. "Thank you for coming back. You didn't

have to do that. Not after I insisted we split ways.”

“I had to rescue you.” I force myself to release my tight grip on the reins. My shoulders feel tense. All of me is tense. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?” She doesn’t look hurt, but that doesn’t mean anything. “Did he hurt you?” We both know who I’m talking about. “Did he touch you, McColl?” I bristle at the thought. Everything tightens inside me at the thought. I feel hot with anger just thinking about it. My knuckles turn white on the reins once more.

“No.” She shakes her head. “But he wanted to. Would have if Lord Ondine hadn’t stopped him. The rest seemed fine with it. They even made jokes. If it hadn’t been for Ondine...” She bites her lower lip, her eyes filled with anguish.

I want to return to the cave and run him through with my sword. Or throttle him with my bare hands. Anger courses through me. It takes a few moments for me to calm down enough to speak.

I sigh deeply. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened to them...my people. My kind. We’re not...we were never like that. It should never have happened.” My voice is a rough rasp filled with anger and sorrow. How is it that we’ve been reduced to this?

“It’s not your fault.”

“It feels like it is, somehow,” I mutter, shaking my head. How is it that I didn’t know who I was? Despicable magic...that’s how.

Dark, black, twisted magic.

“Don’t be silly. It’s not your fault, Alaric.” She narrows her eyes at me. “That isn’t your name, is it?”

I shake my head. “No, but it would be best if you didn’t know my real name.”

“Best for who?” She lifts her brows.

“For both of us.”

“The queen wants you captured. The queen! You’re someone of importance, aren’t you?”

“Used to be. Not anymore.” I wipe a hand over my face.

“That isn’t true, or she wouldn’t care so much about you.”

“I’m going to help you get back to your coven. I hope I’ve established that I’m not the enemy, that it is best if we stick together,” I change the subject. The less she knows, the better.

She chokes out a laugh that quickly dies. “I agree that we are no longer enemies. Having said that, we can’t be friends, either.” She lifts her brows as if seeking my approval.

I nod.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“As to taking me back home, I wouldn’t, if I were you.”

“Why not? It’s what we agreed on. I like to stick to my agreements.”

“We agreed to that when you were a human. As a fae, you would be hung and quartered. My kind don’t take kindly to your kind. Back to the part about our species being mortal enemies. You rescued me, and we have called a truce – for now – but nothing has changed as far as our species is concerned.”

“Everything has changed since Snow took over. The old ways of thinking need to change, too.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Her eyes are wary.

“We all need to work together if we are going to overthrow her. All. Of. Us. Regardless of species.”

“Overthrow her.” She laughs like I have lost my mind. “Don’t let anyone hear you speaking like that, or you will be killed on the spot. If the queen hears you, she’ll smite you down. It happens. Bolts of lightning from the sky. I’ve seen it with my own eyes, and it’s terrifying.”

“She can’t see me unless I use my magic. If she can’t see me or hear me, she can’t smite me down.”

“That’s impossible. The queen has eyes on all of her fae children. That’s what she calls you...her children. Did you know that?”

“It isn’t impossible, it’s true. The queen cannot see me unless I wield magic. I am not one of her children.”

“Let me guess – I can’t ask you to elaborate?” She looks at me with narrowed eyes.

“No, you can’t because I won’t. I swear it’s for your own safety. The less you know about me, the better. All you need to know is that my name is Alaric. I worked as a mercenary after apprenticing as a smithy. I’m a nobody. Let’s leave it at that, please. When I take you back to your coven, I won’t be hung and quartered because you will stand up for me. You won’t let them hurt me.”

“Don’t be so sure.” The side of her mouth lifts in the start of a smile.

“I know full well. You owe me one after I saved your bacon.” I smile.

She laughs, and I find that I like the sound. “I didn’t ask you to rescue me.”

It’s my turn to laugh. “You’re full of it, McColl. You know you wanted to be rescued.”

“I said thank you, and I meant it.” Her face falls. “If my coven decides to hang you or to turn you into a field mouse, I won’t have a say in the matter.” She shakes her head. “You need to understand that. Outsiders are not welcome, especially a fae. They won’t like it one bit.”

“You’re powerful, which means that you will have more say than you think.”

“I told you that my power isn’t reliable. It abandoned me when I needed it the most. My power means nothing.” Her eyes turn hazy with thought. “Do you think that something happened when you broke the amulet? I felt something more than just the surge. I thought it was the release from the eclipse; in hindsight, it could have been

more. The more I think about it, the more I know I'm right. The bolt of magic that hit you must have hit me, too."

I nod. "I've been giving it some thought, and I think you're right."

"What kind of a fae are you?" She cocks her head like she's trying to figure it out.

I shake my head. "I'd rather not say."

"Why? You want me to trust you, but you won't tell me anything about yourself." She rolls her eyes. "Let me guess – it's for my own good that I am kept in the dark."

I shrug. "Yes, it is. I mean it, McColl, you're going to have to trust me."

I notice that her teeth are chattering. She's freezing cold.

I'm also starting to feel the real chill in the air now that we've slowed to a walk.

"Your cape is tied to the back of your saddle, just behind your saddlebag," I tell her.

I twist around and untie my oilskin, pulling it around myself and slipping my arms into the sleeves.

She does the same with her cape. It looks too thin to be of much use. She pulls the hood over her head and ties the front in three places to secure it. And as if reading my mind, she says, "It's warmer than it looks, and it'll keep out the rain, too."

"You're right; it doesn't look like much, but I'll take your word for it." I look up at the gray sky. "It will be nightlift soon," I tell McColl. "We should start looking for shelter. I don't want to get caught in the open. It's not ideal, but I think that we should travel at night. I would rather contend with predators than get caught by the

fae.”



## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“So, you think they’ll come after us?” Her eyes go wide, and her face drains of blood.

“I know they will. They will come after me. I would suggest that we go our separate ways to draw them away from you, but I doubt you would get very far without magic. Since it’s erratic, we can’t rely on it. That means that we run together. They will come, and they won’t stop.”

She shakes her head. “You truly must be someone important.”

She has no idea.

“Sticking together is our only option at this point.” She says it like she hates the idea, which doesn’t sit well with me. I’m not sure why. “I’m sorry about my magical ability being so...bad.” She looks downtrodden.

“Nothing to be sorry about. We can’t rely on my magic at all. Good thing I’m good with a sword, that I know these lands.” I look around us. “Speaking of which, I think we should head for that forest and find somewhere to shelter.” I point in the direction of the thick clump of trees.

“Aren’t there creatures in the forest? Creatures that would like nothing better than to make a meal out of us?”

“Yes, but they mainly hunt at night. We’ll stick to the open at night, but we need to hide come nightfall, or we will be recaptured. It’ll take the better part of a week to get to Witch Mountain.”

“Maybe more.” She sounds wistful, and I don’t blame her. I wish I could go home, too. My home no longer exists...not really.

McColl yawns. “I’m looking forward to getting some sleep.”

“I’m looking forward to a meal.”

She gasps, touching her saddlebag. “We have food?”

I smile. “We do, indeed. Both food and water.” I look down at the waterskin that is still tied to the opposite side of my saddle.

She groans, and the sound shoots straight to my groin, which is a shock, given our circumstances.

“I can’t wait.” She smiles.

I try to smile back, but I’m sure it’s tight while I try to get my body back under control. I take deep breaths, looking away.

Am I attracted to the witch? Surely not. Then again, it has been a long time since I last lay with a woman...years.

But her?

Now?

No matter, it isn’t something I will ever act on. There are more important things to worry about right now.

We ride in silence for a while, entering the forest. I’m sure it was once magnificent.

Not anymore. All the life has been sucked from the lands outside of the fae Courts. It's all Snow's doing. It's sickening. Most of the trees are dead. The few still living have twisted limbs with hardly any leaves. Lichen and moss cover everything. They're the only things that seem to thrive out here.

As we ride deeper into the forest, the silence is heavy around us. The only sounds are the soft thudding of our horses' hooves on the forest floor and the occasional rustle of leaves in the light breeze. McColl looks around, her eyes wide as she takes in the desolate surroundings.

I scan the area, looking for a suitable spot to make camp. After riding for a while longer, we come across a small clearing nestled between a cluster of trees.

"That looks like a good place to stop for the night," McColl says.

"Looks good to me," I tell her, and we dismount.

I have a thought, so I put my tongue on the roof of my mouth and look at McColl sideways.

"What is it? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I was just wondering..."

"Yes?" she prompts when I don't go on.

"The spell you cast on that guard who wanted to hurt you..."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

She lifts her brows. “Yeeeees?” she draws out the word. “What about it?”

“What was it?” I ask. “What did you do to him?”

10

McColl

I laugh. I can’t help it. So far, he’s made me laugh far more than I would like. Far more than I thought possible. Especially out here. And then considering what happened with Arwin.

Then again, my situation could be worse. So much worse, I remind myself.

“Why do you want to know?” I ask as I start to unbuckle the cinch on my horse’s saddle.

“Don’t untack them in case we need a fast getaway. Just loosen the saddle a hole or two.”

I nod, doing as he says.

When I look back at Alaric, he’s got this half-smile that hits me in my lower gut, warming me. May the moon goddess strike me down, I’m attracted to a fae. I don’t even know his name. He’s keeping things from me – important things – and yet I’m attracted to him, anyway. His eyes are quite beautiful and fanned by thick lashes. His mouth is generous. His hair is thick and glints despite the lack of sun. His shoulders

are broad. He's muscled and lean...and...

He narrows his eyes, smiling. It's a tad unsure. "What? Now you're looking at me strangely."

Caught staring.

Oh, the shame of it!

"Nothing," I blurt the bald-faced lie. "I'm just waiting for a reply to my question. Why do you want to know so badly?"

"I'm curious." He shrugs. "That's all."

I giggle. "Maybe it was a little wrong of me. No!" I shake my head, shivering with revulsion when I think about what almost happened. Anger also courses through me as I think about what he almost did to me. What he would have done if Lord Ondine hadn't stopped him. "He deserved what he got. My first thought was to turn his...you know...his member...into an earthworm—"

Alaric barks out a laugh, keeping it softer than I think he would have liked, but we're out here being hunted.

"Why didn't you? You're right; he would have deserved it." His voice turns gruff, and his eyes seem to darken.

"The earthworm would have been alive, and I couldn't do that to the poor creature."

Alaric's eyes glint with humor. "I agree; that would have been cruel."

"The spell I cast was so much worse." I cover my mouth for a moment, feeling my

face go hot with embarrassment.

“Tell me already, McColl...please,” he urges. “I’m hungry, and I know you are, too. The horses want their oats. He deserved it, I assure you. I have to know. What did you do?”

I roll my eyes and bite my lip. “You’re going to think I’m terrible, but I don’t care. He likes to prey on women, so I decided to make him one...at least, down there.”

Alaric laughs; it’s loud. He quickly checks himself, but keeps on laughing. His shoulders are shaking as he bends over his middle. When he stands upright again, his eyes are glistening with unshed tears.

“That’s perfect. Absolutely perfect. I wish I could be there when he finds out.” He laughs some more.

I bite back a laugh. “Me, too.” Then I turn serious. “At least he’ll never be able to do that to anyone again.”

“No, he won’t.”

“I’m sure he’s done it before.” My voice is soft again. “I got that impression...you know.”

Alaric nods. He takes my hand and squeezes it before letting go. “I understand why you cast that spell. Trust your gut. You say he preys on women and that he’s done it before...that he would have raped you if given the chance...then he deserved it, and more. I would have killed him.” Alaric’s eyes are blazing, and his voice has turned hard. His jaw is tight. He’s angry. He takes a deep breath, and the emotion evaporates. “Let’s get the horses taken care of so that we can eat and bed down.”

I nod, feeling better after talking with him about the whole ordeal.

## Page 33

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

Alaric leads the horses to a nearby brackish stream, and even though it stinks of rot, they drink their fill.

“Are you sure that’s safe for them to drink?” I ask him as he ties them using lead ropes.

“Yes. We can’t drink it, but they definitely can. They’ve adapted well to these harsh conditions. There are oats in my extra saddlebag on this side.” He touches the bag in question. “Can you feed them and clean out their feet? The pick is in the side pocket of the same bag. I’m going to find some wood for a fire.”

“You’re going to struggle to find anything dry enough to burn. Even if you do, it’ll smoke us out and probably give our location away.”

“You’re going to use your power to dry the wood and then start the fire for us.” He winks at me.

I lift my brows and give him a look. “You have far too much faith in my abilities.”

“We’ll soon find out. I think you’ll do just fine. I believe in you, McColl, even if you don’t believe in yourself.”

He keeps saying things like that to me, and I find myself lapping it up like I’m starved for compliments, and I guess I am. I haven’t had many of those in all of my twenty-eight summers. I’ve never had someone put such faith in me before, either, especially a fae. It’s a strange feeling, but one that warms me nonetheless and far more than it should. I need to tread carefully. I meant what I said; he isn’t my enemy,



but he certainly isn't my friend, and I need to remember that. He tells me to trust him, but I can't; it would be foolish to do so.

He leaves before I can argue the point further. I hope he didn't see the color heating my cheeks. Warmth at his compliments and sugary words. The fae is a charmer. I need to be on my guard.

I open the saddlebag with the oats and give each horse a helping straight onto the ground. There isn't much in the way of grazing. I'm sure they will be fine. Alaric said that they are used to the harsh conditions. That they have adapted.

The horses eagerly munch on the oats, their soft sounds of contentment filling the clearing. I take the pick from the side pocket of the saddlebag and check their hooves, making sure there are no stones or debris stuck in them. There's plenty of mud, which I pick out until they're clean. The horses seem calm under my touch, trusting me to care for them. I wish I knew their names. I pet each of them in turn. We're lucky we have them back with us. It would have been a long walk on foot.

After finishing with the horses, I make my way over to where Alaric has gathered a small pile of wood. There is a larger pile beside the small one. He gives me a hopeful look as he hands me a piece of the wood.

I take it.

"Just as expected, it's wet...too wet to burn," he tells me. "Let's see what you can do." He must see my expression because he adds, "No pressure, McColl. We will be just fine without a fire."

I nod once and take a deep breath, focusing on the moisture within the wood.

Channeling the magic within me, I envision the water evaporating, the wood

becoming dry and ready to catch fire. I feel a surge of energy flowing through me, the power within me responding to my command.

Slowly, I open my eyes and look down at the piece of wood in my hand. To my surprise, it's no longer damp, but dry and almost brittle. A small smile tugs at my lips as I hand it back to Alaric.

"There you go," I say, feeling a sense of accomplishment. "I did it."

"Of course you did. I didn't doubt you for a moment." There is no sign of surprise. Perhaps he wasn't trying to charm me. Maybe he meant it when he said he believed in me.

I get down on my knees before the two piles of wood, hold out my hands, and go through the same motions as before. The same thing happens, and the wood dries before my eyes. It's easy. It's simple. Only it shouldn't be...not for me.

I laugh softly in disbelief. It's the same as earlier; the magic inside of me is true and fully accessible. Why? How does it work?

Then I click my fingers, and the fire starts on the smaller pile. Flames spring to life, slowly getting bigger.

"Nicely done, McColl." He hands me an apple and a piece of jerky. I take them, sitting on a rock close to the fire.

He hands me a skin, and I drink, passing it back to him. Alaric does the same. The tension of the day slowly melts away as we eat in comfortable silence, the crackling of the fire providing a soothing background noise.

"We only have one bedroll and blanket," Alaric says, "which is fine, since we'll have

to take turns sleeping. Someone will have to stand guard just to be safe.”

“Oh.” I frown. “One bedroll—”

“I packed two sets, but I suspect that the bedroll and blanket you were using at the cave was one of those sets, and we had to leave in a hurry.” He takes a bite of his apple.

“We sure did. I um...” I stare into the fire for a few seconds. “I thought I might try a shield spell. Not just for us, but for the horses, too.” I bite my nail.

“That’s a great idea.” He takes another bite of his apple.

I lift my hands and close my eyes, feeling my magic well up. I’m filled with power. It buzzes through my veins. It’s shocking to me each time I feel it. Each time I access it. I shouldn’t be able to. Not like this.

## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“I can do it,” I tell him, opening my eyes. “I’m not so sure I can maintain it, though. Especially if I’m asleep.”

“We’ll take turns keeping watch, just to be safe. The shield will be a nice addition.”

I nod, closing my eyes again, remembering my teachings. It isn’t difficult since I studied and worked harder than most in my coven. Not that it helped me much. Perhaps all those long hours will come in handy now. I’d like to think so.

I murmur the incantation under my breath, weaving the spell with intricate gestures. The air around us shimmers briefly and then settles, the shield now in place.

“It’s done,” I say softly, opening my eyes to meet Alaric’s gaze. He’s watching me with an expression of mixed admiration and curiosity.

“I’ll take first watch. You get some rest,” he tells me.

“I don’t mind taking the first—” I start to say.

“Please...you go ahead. I’m not very tired yet. I’m happy to take the first shift.”

His eyes are bloodshot, and there are dark smudges beneath them. I saw him yawn just moments ago, but I don’t argue. If he insists on taking the first watch, then I’m okay with that.

I get under the covers, pulling them to my eyes. I must be tired because I fall asleep soon after.

I'm not sure how long I sleep, only that I awaken to the sound of low growling.

It's deep and terrifying, sending ice straight into my veins.

I turn and sit upright as soon as I see it. It's a hywolf, which is a mixture between a wolf and a hyena, only much larger and much more deadly. It's only about ten or twelve feet from us. I can see the yellow of its eyes and how sharp its teeth are.

I shriek, and the shield falls. The beast, sensing an opportunity at warm flesh, leaps at us, teeth bared.

I quickly pull the shield back up. I do it almost without thinking. The hywolf slams into the magical barrier. It hits hard, yelping as it falls back.

The creature snarls, circling around the shield, hackles raised, its eyes fixed on us with a hungry gleam.

A second and then a third hywolf join the first, saliva dripping from their great maws. There is a howl in the distance. One of the beasts lifts his head and howls a return call.

I look over at Alaric; he has a sword in one hand and a knife in the other. He is the picture of calm, which is at odds with how I am feeling...namely panicked. There are more of those things out there, and they're coming for us.

My eyes are wide, and my heart is racing. The horses are restless, too, pulling at their tethers. I can see the fear in their eyes as they whinny and stomp their hooves. The shield is designed to keep the outside world out, but the horses will be able to cross easily.

I'm worried that if they spook too badly, one or both might escape, and that would be

the end of them.

My power feels strong, even though I am holding the shield. I wave my hands and mutter a word or two, my gaze on our horses. They instantly calm.

My spell seems to have the opposite effect on the hywolves. More appear from between the dead trees, and more still, until we are surrounded by them.

My heart thumps like mad beneath my ribs.

The first wolf lunges again, this time with more force, slamming into the shield as it growls in frustration. The others try, too, snarling and growling as they fall back time and time again.

The barrier holds strong, shimmering with a faint light as it repels their attacks.

Finally, with a snort of disgust, the biggest of the hywolves turns his yellow eyes on me; it's probably my imagination, but they seem to narrow, and then he turns and pads away. The others follow suit, one after the other.

When they are all gone, I let out a huge breath, clutching my chest. My mouth feels dry.

“Impressive, McColl.” Alaric gives me a half smile that ignites something in me. Something I quell instantly.

I huff out a breath. “Why didn’t you wake me when he first arrived?”

“The shield was still in place. I hoped the beast would leave.” He sheaths his sword. “I know that fear can interfere with a magic spell. Hy-wolves are attracted to sound, movement, and the scent of panic.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“You’re right; fear does interfere with magical ability. You saw what happened when I got the initial fright.” Perhaps he was right to leave me sleeping. The other wolves arrived soon after I woke up.

He nods once.

“Next time, wake me up, anyway. That was...it was terrifying. If not for my magic, we might very well be dead.”

“We’re not. We’re still here; let’s concentrate on that.”

“You’re right...I guess.”

“Would it be okay if I rested now? Or do you need more sleep?”

“No...please, be my guest.” I realize that I’m still sitting on the bedroll and get up.

“I’ll keep watch,” I say as I pull my cape more firmly around me.

Alaric gets into the bed, pulling up the blanket.

“Sleep well,” I tell him.

He makes a noise of agreement. Within no time, his breathing changes as he falls asleep.

I can’t believe that he wants to come to the Regana Mountains with me. I will have to change his mind on that. My people will tear him to pieces.

The good news is that I have a few days to convince him. The bad news is that we might not survive the journey.

11

McColl

Nightfall the next day...

The sky starts to turn gray. Soon, there will be a murky light that will filter through an overhead haze, thick with black clouds. There won't be enough light to speak of today. Not that it matters to us, since we will be asleep soon, anyway.

"Are you sure we shouldn't get some rest before crossing the bridge? If we don't take shelter soon, we're going to get soaked. Not to mention that the horses are tired." I pat my pony's neck. He stumbled a little while ago, which isn't like him. He's walking with his head low; the spring left his step a while back.

"Very sure." Alaric turns his bright green eyes on me.

For a moment, I just look into them. I would blame fatigue, but it isn't that. He has great eyes, even for a fae. I wish I didn't notice them, him...but I do.

I shouldn't be having thoughts like these. Not right now. The first drops of rain start to fall, spattering on my face, so I pull up the hood on my cape. I probably deserve to be soaked with icy rain.

"Here we go," I mutter.

Alaric does the same with the hood of his oilskin coat, and I'm glad I don't have to look at his handsome features anymore.



“I could cast a spell to keep us dry,” I suggest.

“No.” Alaric shakes his head. “Save your power for if we really need it. There is risk in crossing that bridge, but once we’re over, we can find a place to rest and get dry.”

“You’re afraid they’re going to wait for us there, aren’t you? Ambush us as we cross.”

“That’s what I would do.” He lifts his brows. “They must know we’re going to Witch Mountain. Or at least that you’re going there. They know I’m with you, or more than likely with you, since I rescued you. That means we have to cross this bridge. It’s a safe bet. I only hope we have beaten them there.”

“Me, too. We’ve ridden hard.”

He makes a sound of agreement. I don’t like the tension in his voice. It’s unlike him.

The rain picks up, so I tighten the hood of my cape and urge my horse forward, following Alaric as we make our way toward the bridge. It pelts down, soaking through any of our clothing that isn’t properly covered. The bottom of my dress is a sodden mess. The relentless downpour is making the ground slick beneath our horses’ hooves. The sound of the rain is loud, drowning out any other noise around us.

It’s miserable, but I understand Alaric’s thinking. We need to keep going, regardless.

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

As we approach the bridge, my heart clenches with fear. The thought of an ambush looms large in my mind, sending a shiver down my spine. I grip the reins of my horse tightly, trying to push away the thoughts of what could be waiting for us on the other side.

Alaric rides ahead, his eyes scanning the area for any signs of trouble. I follow close behind, unable to shake the feeling of unease that settles in the pit of my stomach. Perhaps it's all the talk of ambush and nothing more. I pray that I am right.

The bridge looms ahead, shrouded in mist and rain. It looks old and weathered, like it could collapse at any moment. Alaric halts, putting his hand up just as I see them.

My heart sinks.

The fae are there. The group looks bigger than before. They're on the other side of the bridge. We caught them just as they were about to set up the ambush we talked about not long ago. There are too many of them.

I gasp as we swing our horses around to huddle behind a clump of trees and dying bushes. Alaric's jaw is set, his eyes steely as he scans their ranks, assessing the situation.

"What do we do now?" I whisper, my voice almost inaudible over the heavy rain. "It'll take us days of travel in the wrong direction to reach the next crossing."

"By then, they'll have that ambush set up there, too." He curses softly under his breath. "I should have anticipated this. We should have ridden day and night and only

rested once we were over that bridge.”

“That wouldn’t have been practical.”

“I don’t know what to do. Every path will lead to confrontation.”

“I agree, and that’s why I think we need to cross here. I’ll cast another sleeping spell. It worked well the last time.” I feel sick to my stomach just saying it. What if it doesn’t work? I lift my hands, feeling the power buzzing inside me and fully accessible.

I look at the fast-running river and then downstream at the rapids. If I trusted my power, I would make a bridge of magic to cross in a place of our choosing, but I can’t trust it. If the fae capture us, at least we’ll be alive. If we fall into the churning water, there are no guarantees.

I sigh.

I also acutely remember how my magic failed me before. How it’s failed me many times throughout my life. I can’t think like that now.

Alaric scrubs a wet hand over his even wetter face. “I agree. I think that facing the fae here and now is our only option. We cross the bridge. You cast your spell. By the time they wake up, we’ll be long gone.”

He makes it sound so easy, and it should be.

“We need a fallback plan because you never know.” I hate to say it, but it’s true. “My grandmother has a saying: ‘Prepare for the worst and hope for the best.’” My heart squeezes thinking about her. I hope she’s still alive and well. A lot of things can change in three years. That’s how long it has been since I was taken. Three long

years.

Alaric smiles, his eyes turning hazy. “My grandfather used to say exactly the same thing. Perhaps we aren’t as different as you think.”

I disagree. I would argue the point, but this isn’t the time.

“If all else fails and we’re left with no option, I will use my power,” Alaric says. “I doubt very much that it will be needed.” He gives me a tight smile. “Not when we have you.”

I hope I don’t disappoint him.

“So, you suggest that we just ride over the bridge?”

“It was your suggestion first.” He smiles. “But yes, and when they come at us, you put them to sleep, and we get as much distance between us as possible. It’ll mean pushing the horses, even though they are tired, but I think it’s necessary.” He shrugs. “You pulled off this spell before; I’m sure you can do it again.”

“I hope so, Alaric. There are more of them this time. I’ll do my best.” My gut is churning with worry. I wish I were brimming with confidence.

“Let’s go.” He puts his horse into a walk, and I follow. I hate that we have to put ourselves in danger like this, but what else can we do?

I rack my brain but come up blank. This is our only option. I test my magic, and it’s still there.

Good.

Then I say a silent prayer to the moon goddess. May she keep us safe. Then another to Kakara, who cannot forsake us. Not now!

Thankfully, the rain slows to a light drizzle. The ancient wooden bridge is just up ahead.

As we draw nearer, my heart pounds in my chest like a relentless drum. I taste my fear on my tongue. When I see the big, bald brute at the back of the group, I close my eyes for a moment. Arwin will be out for blood when he sees me.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

I try not to think about it. I need to have faith in myself.

At first, the fae on the other side of the bridge continue to mill about, clearly not expecting us to be so close. Their voices carry over the sound of the light rain; Lord Ondine is barking orders. There are general grumbles about the weather. Alaric looks back at me; he gives me a nod, a silent signal to be ready.

I nod back. I'm as ready as I will ever be.

I take a deep breath, gathering my magic within me. The power hums through my veins, ready and waiting. I can feel the potential of the spell tingling at my fingertips, eager to be released. We move closer to the bridge, the sound of our horses' hooves muffled by the wet ground and the steady drizzle.

The fae spot us as we near the bridge. Shouts of alarm ring out, and they scramble to pull their swords in preparation for battle. I recognize Ren, Japhet, Llayda, and Nyx. I recognize some of the others from the cave, but Alaric is right, there are more I have never seen before. They have easily doubled in numbers since my escape.

Most of them mount up, swords raised.

We stop just before the bridge.

"You may as well give up now," Lord Ondine shouts. "We have been instructed to hunt you to the ends of the realm. Not just our Court, but all the Courts have been enlisted. Running is futile."

I note that they don't attempt to come at us. That a few of them are looking at us... No, they're looking at me with fear in their eyes.

Arwin is glowering. When he catches me looking at him, he snarls, "You will fix me, girl, or face the consequences!"

There are sniggers from some of the others.

"Silence!" Ondine snarls, glaring at Arwin. Everyone pipes down in an instant. Then he turns back to us. "I'm giving you one opportunity to come quietly and without fuss. What say you?"

"We say no," Alaric says. "We have a counteroffer. We give you one opportunity to allow us to pass freely and to leave without harassment."

"I'm afraid I cannot accept," Ondine's voice booms. "I implore you to—"

I let the magic loose, saying the words of the sleeping spell.

The fae on the other side of the bridge immediately falter, their movements slowing to a crawl. One by one, they drop their weapons and sway. Those in the saddle fall to the ground with hard thuds, their horses spooking and running away as they drop. The fae on their feet collapse just as readily, their legs buckling under them.

Lord Ondine is the last to succumb, his eyes fluttering closed as he falls to his knees and then topples over onto his side with a great sigh.

A wave of relief washes over me. We urge our horses forward, and the ancient wooden planks creak under their hooves. Below, the brackish water rushes and swirls, the currents strong and true. The smell of decay is strong, but I ignore it.

“We need to hurry,” I tell Alaric.

“We need to go slow over the bridge,” he tells me.

I keep the shield spell active as we ride, wary of any potential threats that may still be lurking nearby. Soon, we are picking our way through the downed fae, readying ourselves to gallop away.

A couple of their horses lurk nearby, unsure of what to do with their newfound freedom. The rest are long gone, which should slow the fae down when they finally wake. I’m hoping the spell keeps them under for a good long while.

I am just starting to relax when I feel my back prickle with awareness. I turn, gasping as soon as I see him.

One of the downed fae is standing in the middle of the sleeping men. The hood of his cloak obscures his face.

Cold shivers run up and down my whole body.

Who is he?

How is it that he is awake?

I redouble my efforts, focusing on him. It has no effect.

How?

As if in answer to my silent question, he pulls down the cloak. He has a tuft of beard on his otherwise clean-shaven face. His head is clean-shaven, too. That’s when I see them: runes inked into his skin on the tops of his hands and up both sides of his neck.



There are black veins beneath the surface of his pale skin like spider webs. They are on his head, on the one side of his face, and creeping up the front of his throat.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

My blood goes cold, and ice creeps up my spine. I can barely breathe as fear hits me in great waves. I want to run, but I know that would be a mistake.

“Alaric.”

He turns, gasps when he sees the conjurer, and then spins his horse around to face the danger. I do the same.

The conjurer smiles; his eyes are cold and hard. It’s pure evil.

He lifts his hands and sends a blast of magic our way. I do everything in my power to fortify the shield around us, but it doesn’t work. I am nowhere near as powerful as a fae conjurer. We are thrown from our horses, who turn and run away together with the few remaining fae steeds.

Thankfully, due to the mud and moss on the ground, my landing isn’t as hard as it could have been. The air is still knocked from my lungs.

I think we could be in real trouble here. My thinking is confirmed when the downed fae start to rise, one after the other. The sleep spell I cast has been overridden by the conjurer.

“We might just be fucked.” Alaric says under his breath.

I jump to my feet, drawing my sword, although it is of no use against a conjurer.

A conjurer and a powerful one, at that, judging by the thickness of the black veins visible on his pale skin.

The others shake their heads to clear them, picking up their swords, hate in their eyes as they come for us.

The conjurer steps to the side, a smile toying with his lips. The fae rush at us, screaming a battle cry. McColl steps up beside me, her hands held high and glowing. At least she still has her magic, which is good since we are surrounded.

“Back-to-back,” I shout, and we step in together in a tight formation.

I hear a crack, followed by a sizzle and a cry of pain. The scent of magic is thick in the air. There is another crackle from behind me as my sword clashes with the first fae to attack.

The battle is frenzied, with fae coming at us from all sides. McColl’s magic continues to crackle in the air as she fends off attackers, her power a bright beacon in the semi-darkness at the edge of the forest. I fight with all my might, parrying blows and striking back whenever I see an opening. I wound a fae and kill another. They keep coming. There are so many of them.

The conjurer circles around us, his dark eyes gleaming as he watches the chaos unfold. He still has that evil smile plastered on his face. It’s eerie. He is using the fae to weaken us before he steps in to finish it. To finish us. Right now, it feels like his plan is going to work, which irritates the hell out of me.

I injure another fae, who falls back, clutching his arm. It won’t be long before he is back.

“Give up now!” Ondine shouts as he rushes at me.

“Never!” I snarl, sounding far more confident than I am.

I block Ondine’s strike with a swift parry, our swords clashing in a shower of sparks. The fae around us continue to press forward, their attacks relentless. McColl’s magic lashes out, knocking down several of our assailants. Only one stays down; the rest leap back to their feet.

The conjurer remains untouched, his dark energy sizzling in the air. As the battle rages on, I can feel my strength waning. The weight of my sword feels heavier with each swing. I glance over at McColl; concern is etched on her face as she fights off multiple foes at once.

She waves her hands, chanting words I don’t understand, and Ondine’s sword clashes against the magical shield. When he is struck by one of her lightning bolts, he falls back, clasp his arm, his sword falling to the churned-up ground below.

The others strike against the same shield, sparks flying as their swords clang uselessly.

“It’s weakening,” McColl says between gritted teeth. “The shield.” She’s struggling. That much is clear.

I make a decision to use my power. By now, Snow will know exactly where I am. It is said that she can see through the eyes of the fae...all of them. Not my eyes, it would seem.

I touch my chest. My mark is beneath the fabric of my tunic. There are runes hidden within an elaborate design. Perhaps they have something to do with it.

The time has come to fight fire with fire. I only hope that McColl and I together will be enough to stand against the conjurer.

I pull my magic to the fore. It feels strange. Unlike McColl, I have only used it once or twice. I have never been taught how to wield magic. I have no idea what I am doing. I will need to rely on instinct like I did before.

## Page 39

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

I keep pulling it to the fore and am shocked when there is even more than before. My veins burn with it. It rushes through me. The hair all over my body stands on end as I break out in gooseflesh. I'm powerful.

Good!

We need it. All of it.

I'm sure we won't be able to kill the conjurer, but if we could just incapacitate him for a short while, we might be able to get away.

I'm hoping it will work.

I drop the sword as a fae comes at me and lift my hand, sending a bolt his way. It misses. I try again using both hands, and a lightning bolt blows him into pieces. His chest explodes, blood spattering, pieces of smoldering flesh flying. I stagger back from the force of my power. Kakara's cat! The fae is obliterated.

My mouth falls open. It worked.

It's not exactly what I had in mind, but it worked. I can kill more of them.

Three more guards rush me, and I strike, using my magic. I don't have huge amounts of control and no finesse to speak of, but thankfully, it isn't needed right now. Fae come at me, and they fall to the ground, lifeless, smoke curling from their brokenbodies. The fae behind them exchange looks and turn tail and run.

I look down at my hands. I'm powerful. Clumsy but strong.

I turn my attention to the conjurer. His eyes widen in surprise as I focus my magic on him, a blast of energy hurtling toward him. He raises his hands, a grin forming on his face as he turns my own magic back on me.

McColl steps in front of me, whispering a spell. She manages to erect a shield, but it isn't strong enough. We are both thrown back by the sheer force of the bolt.

The conjurer laughs. "Give up. You don't stand a chance against me." He folds his arms.

The remaining fae guards circle us. There are still too many of them. I spot several of the wounded among them and curse our superior healing ability.

"What now?" McColl whispers as we jump to our feet. Her hands are glowing. Her brow is beaded with sweat. I'm sure that she is fortifying a shield spell.

"We can't keep this up for much longer." She glances at the conjurer, who looks bemused. He takes a step back, letting his arms relax at his sides. Content to let the guards have at us again.

"Stand down," Ondine begs. He is cradling one of his arms; blood drips between his fingers, spattering on the ground at his feet. He limps toward us, stopping. "Please."

I shake my head.

"We need the fae alive," he tells the conjurer. "By order of the queen."

"And the witch?" The conjurer narrows his eyes on McColl.

“The witch is mine,” one of the bigger fae guards sneers. He’s a brute of a male. I can guess who he is. “I’m willing to give anything to have her.”

“Anything?” the conjurer says, cocking his head. “Interesting. I will give it some thought.”

I press the handle of a dagger into her hand. “Take this. They want me...not you. Let’s split up.”

She shakes her head. “It’s too danger—”

“Most of them will come after me, including the conjurer. You will be able to handle the few who follow you.”

She shakes her head, her eyes on the big guard.

“Him, too,” I say. “While you still have the energy to fight. Remember to take his heart or his head...make sure you kill him this time.” At this rate, it won’t be long before we are exhausted. We can’t go on like this.

“You can’t escape him,” she whispers.

“I’ll find a way.” It isn’t a great plan, but at least McColl will be out of harm’s way. The way I see it, we’ll have a fighting chance. “If you get away...and I am captured, go back to your people. Tell them that they need to fight against her. That—” I start to say, but I’m interrupted by a screech from above.

In the next breath, a great dragon swoops down from out of the haze. Fire rains down, burning everything below.



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

The heat sears my skin, my hair, even my eyes.

I grab McColl and cover her body with mine. I do my best to shield us with my magic, but I don't think I am very successful. My magic has now grown beyond my capabilities. From the way McColl is glowing beneath me, I would say that she is the one holding the spell more than I am. I only pray that it is enough.

The fae guards who are not engulfed in flames scatter, their cries mixing with the roar of the dragon as it circles above us. The bridge is consumed in flames, the wood crackling and splintering under the intense heat. The forest behind us is burning, too, despite everything being wet from the relentless rain.

Everywhere is fire and smoke and ash.

I can hear the panicked whinnies of our horses in the distance, their fear palpable even over the roar of the inferno.

McColl coughs, her hand reaching out for mine in the swirling smoke and ash. The air is thick with acrid smoke, making it difficult to see or breathe. We need to move, to find a way out of this fiery nightmare.

"Come on," I cough out, pulling her up to her feet. "We need to get—" I gasp when I see it.

"He's gone," McColl whispers, her gaze tracking mine.

There is a hole in the blackened earth where the conjurer used to be. His magic was

no match for a dragon. There are more blackened mounds where other fae guards have fallen. The few left are running as fast as their legs will carry them. There is no chance to celebrate our good fortune. We need to get out of here before we are burned to a crisp as well.

“We need to go,” I say.

The dragon swoops back down directly above us, its fiery breath illuminating the carnage around us. I pull McColl toward the cover of a nearby copse of trees. Her gaze is on the great beast. The heat is intense, burning my skin and making it difficult to breathe. We stumble forward, our eyes stinging as we try to find a path out of the blazing inferno.

McColl’s magic flickers around us, creating a shimmering barrier that offers some protection from the flames.

My own power runs through my veins, but I am not proficient at actually wielding it. I could end up doing more harm than good, so I don’t even try to use it.

The dragon roars, landing beside us, its claws digging into the ground. There is a rider on its back.

I stop, holding fast to McColl, who is forced to stop, too.

She tugs at my hand. “What are you doing?” she shrieks. “We need to run. To get away.”

“Orion?” I yell. “Is that you?” I narrow my eyes. It’s hard to see through all the smoke and ash, but I’m sure I recognize him.

More so, now that I am really looking. I think I recognize his dragon, too. Her scales

are black like tar, with sprinkles of gold along her horns and ridges. I can't remember her name. Not for the life of me, but I'm sure it's her.

"Hello, old friend," his voice booms through the crackles of the fire.

McColl screams, and for a moment, I think it's because of her fear of the dragon. I turn and realize that it isn't that at all. Ice fills my veins as I see a fae holding McColl with a blade to her throat.

"Drop the knife," I tell the fae guard.

"No," he shouts. One side of his face is burned and blistered. The other is smeared with grime and soot. "Fix me, witch, or so help me, I will slit your throat," the fae screams. It's the one who attacked her.

"Fine. I'll do as you ask, but I need to turn around," she says. "I need to chant a spell. I can't...um...I can't do that with a knife at my throat." A drop of blood tracks down her throat from where the blade is pressed against her skin.

"No. Do it now! I know you can. Fix me, and I'll let you go." I can tell from the look in his eye that it isn't going to happen. He's going to kill her as soon as she casts the spell.

The dragon screeches, and the bastard whimpers, lifting the blade as he raises his gaze to where the dragon is crouched.

As soon as he gives her the gap, McColl acts quickly. She elbows the fae while lifting a magic shield and ducking out from under him. The fae swipes at her, sparks flying when the blade hits the shield.

McColl throws a bolt at him, and he falls onto his back. He's groaning and writhing,

clutching a wound on his belly.

“You’re dead,” he shouts. “You’re dead, bitch!”

I pick up a nearby discarded sword and, with one sweep, I remove his head from his shoulders. The fae screams profanities until his head rolls.

“No, you’re dead! What a waste of air,” I mutter.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

Then I drop the bloody sword and close the distance between us, putting my hands on McColl's waist. Her eyes are wide, and she's panting. Her face is white beneath the streaks of dirt and blood. She's panicking a little, and I can't say I blame her.

"Are you okay?"

She chokes out a laugh. "I am now." She swallows thickly. "Thank you."

"You did all the hard work. Once again, I'm impressed."

"I hate to break this up, but we need to go," Orion shouts from behind me.

I push out a heavy breath. "It's fine," I tell McColl, letting her go. "We can trust him."

She nods once, even though her lip trembles in fear. The whites of her eyes are still overly large. "And the dragon? It's him I'm worried about."

"We're safe," I tell her, giving her hand a squeeze. "And the dragon is a her."

Orion slides down his dragon's leg. He is dressed in riding leathers.

"Kian," he says. "You're back." He is grinning broadly as he walks up to us. He pulls me into a bear hug, smacking me once on the back. "Looks like I got here just in time. Delphine and I saved your ass."

"You sure did." I laugh as we let go of each other. "It's good to see you, old friend."

Orion's gaze lands on McColl. "Who is your lady friend?" He sniffs the air. "That was nice work. You can wield magic?"

I ignore the question. "This is McColl. She helped me escape. McColl, this is my friend Orion."

"Hi...um..." Her eyes are firmly on the dragon, who stands quite still except for the occasional blink of an eye. "It's nice to meet you." She still doesn't take her eyes off the beast. "I'm sorry; I've never seen a dragon before. I've only ever read about them."

"You are quite safe," Orion says. "We are tethered...ahhh...bonded, I suppose you could say. Delphine does my bidding."

The dragon turns her great head, looking at Orion. She snorts in clear disgust, a plume of smoke rising from her nostrils.

"Okay...okay...girl. We understand each other?" He lifts his brows. "Is that better?"

The dragon huffs, looking away.

"I suggest we get going before more guards arrive. I saw several groups of them headed this way and from different directions. It would seem that you are wanted." He grins.

"Our horses are gone." McColl looks longingly into the distance.

"No." Orion shakes his head. "Horses will not get you past all the fae closing in. We're all going to have to ride my dragon." He turns and pets his beast's neck. "Who wants to mount up first?"

13

McColl

Ride a dragon?

Me?

All three of us?

I suppose that Delphine is more than big enough to carry all of us at once.

“Up there?” I point at the sky above like an idiot.

“Delphine will take excellent care of us,” Orion says. He has dark, thick hair and green eyes similar to Alaric’s.

Although this Orion person called him Kian...not Alaric. I knew it. Not that he ever denied that Alaric wasn’t his real name. He just wouldn’t tell me what his real name was.

## Page 42

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“We’ll be fine,” Kian says. It feels weird to think of him as Kian. He doesn’t look like a Kian.

“What if we fall? Is this a good time to mention that I don’t like heights?”

“You will be fine,” Orion says. “Just close your eyes. It is a quick flight, even though Delphine will take it slow. Your only other option is to stay and risk capture. And you will be captured, McColl.” His eyes turn solemn.

“You need to come with us,” Alaric – not his name – urges. “Please, McColl. I will get you home, I swear. Right now, we need to get to safety before it is too late.”

“If you say so, Kian.”

His eyes seem to darken, and he gets a sheepish look for all of a few seconds.

“How do I even get up there?” I ask, looking up at the huge dragon.

Orion taps his dragon on the leg, and she crouches down as low as she can get, smoke curling from her nostrils.

Even though her chest is practically on the ground, it’s still very high. Impossibly so.

Using her leg, Orion is up in two graceful leaps. He sits astride his beast, grinning. Then he reaches down his hand to me.

“Your turn,” he tells me.



All three of us look up as we hear them...the sound of horses approaching fast. It's now or never.

"I'll help you," Alaric tells me. "On three."

I nod, not trusting my voice.

Alaric puts his hands on my waist and lifts me with ease. I grasp Orion's hand, and he pulls me up behind him. I scramble into place behind Orion. The dragon's scales are surprisingly smooth and warm beneath my touch. I quickly work to get a good hold, my heart pounding. Alaric...Kian...follows suit, climbing up behind me. His strong arms wrap around my waist, securing me firmly in place. I can feel the steady beat of his heart against my back.

Orion leans forward, murmuring softly to Delphine. The dragon spreads her massive wings and, with a powerful downstroke, launches us into the air. My stomach lurches as we ascend, the ground falling away beneath us. I squeeze my eyes shut, holding on to Orion more tightly, feeling the wind in my face.

The dragon flies up and up and up until I feel the sun on my skin. I open my eyes. The sky is blue and the sun bright. I look down for a second; all there is below us are thick white hazy clouds for as far as the eye can see.

"Are you okay?" Kian says into my ear.

"I'm fine," I push out.

The dragon is careful. When she turns, she does so gently so as not to displace us. As exhilarating as it is to be up here, I long to feel solid ground beneath my feet.

Eventually, Delphine begins her descent. The dragon dips below the cloud cover,

revealing a desolate landscape below. It's sad to see from up high just how bad the realm has become. Everything is dead or dying for as far as the eye can see.

Although in the distance, I spot a small belt of green. It isn't lush, but it is still stark against the devastation. It looks like a fertile valley between a mountain range. In the far distance, I spot the Regana Mountain range. My home. We're closer than we were. That is something, at least.

As we draw nearer to the green belt, I see birds flying; there is a flock of them moving from tree to tree. Birds, out here. That is almost unheard of, save for small pockets like this one.

The grass looks green in patches instead of the usual yellow or brown. The trees have more leaves, as well. Most of them are alive; some are even thriving.

There is a large wooden cabin and what looks like an even bigger barn beside it. Behind the homestead is a big, glittering lake that still looks blue. I think there might be ducks or geese swimming on its glassy surface. It's incredible. My mouth falls open as I take it all in.

As we get closer, I note that there are, in fact, waterfowl present, as well as several horses grazing in a large field. It's picturesque, like nothing I have ever seen outside of the Courts and our own mountain sanctuary, which is sustained by magic.

It really is something to see life again. I almost forget where I am as I lean a little to the side, looking down.

Kian tightens his grip on my waist. "Careful," he says; there is mischief in his voice.

"It's beautiful," I whisper. My words are blown away by the wind that rushes at us while we make our descent.

“It certainly is.”

## Page 43

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“We live here for now,” Orion says, projecting his voice.

Delphine screeches as we near the ground. Soon after, the door to the cabin opens, and three people walk out. Two women and a man...another fae.

Kian laughs. “Damon is here, too.”

“Yes, indeed.” Orion turns back for a moment. “Xander will be back soon, as well. He had to go to the village.”

“Xander, too?” Kian sounds a little choked up.

“Now that you are free, there are four of us in total.”

Then Delphine lands on the grass in front of the cabin. As soon as she is stationary, she crouches down. Kian is the first off the dragon. He slides down, landing gracefully. Then he holds out a hand to me.

I take it and slide off the dragon, too. He catches me, holding on to me so that I don’t fall, then gently puts me on my feet. My legs are shaky from the flight. Perhaps I was using my thighs to hold on without even realizing it. Orion dismounts as well, patting Delphine’s side before turning to us.

“This is our home...at least for now.” He holds up his arms, gesturing around us. “It is safe. The valley is a natural safe haven. There are only a few places like it. The three of us bolstered a spell over the valley so that she can’t see us here,” he continues as we walk toward the cabin. The dragon leaps into the air and flies away toward one

of the snow, peaked mountains. “We can use magic freely, so don’t be alarmed if you see me start a fire or... I can’t do much...” He shrugs. “But we feel that it’s important to keep practicing. You wouldn’t understand, Kian, but using magic is like using a muscle; if you don’t use it, it gets weak. We have to practice.”

“That’s interesting,” Kian – I have to remember his actual name – says. He stops walking and reaches out to take my hand for a second to stop me. I do, giving him a quizzical look.

“We’ll be there in a moment,” he tells Orion. “I need a word with McColl.”

He’s right about that. I think he’s about to come clean with me about who he is, but only because he has no choice.

“Take all the time you need,” Orion says, already running for the cabin. He picks up one of the women, who is heavily pregnant. “I told you I’d be back in time,” he says as he kisses her softly on the lips.

One of the men holds up a hand in greeting. He has hair so light it is almost pure white. His eyes are a bright blue. I note that both women are human.

“I’ll be there shortly,” Kian tells him. “It’s good to see you, Damon.”

“You too, Kian,” Damon says as he puts an arm around the other woman.

Kian takes my hand and starts to lead me away. “I need to tell you something.”

“I think I know what that something is,” I say as we pick up the pace, heading out toward the lake and away from the house. I look back, and the others have gone into the cabin. “So, your real name is Kian.”

He nods. "Yes...and I'm...I..."

We keep walking. He is still holding my hand. I don't know if he has forgotten he has it, or if it is to keep me from running away when I hear whatever it is he wants to tell me.

Once we are far enough away, he lets me go and turns to face me. I can see that he is gathering his thoughts. He looks...nervous. His jaw is tight, and his eyes are narrowed.

"I wasn't going to tell you anything, but since we are out of harm's way and...well..." He's struggling.

"You're someone important, aren't you? That's why Queen Snow wants you captured so badly. So is Orion. I know that not just anyone can bond with and ride a dragon. At least, it is very rare. Dragons will only choose the strongest and noblest of the beastfae to tether with. According to my teachings, it mainly occurs with royalty. He called you friend, and he is more than likely..." I push out a breath, searching his face. "Xander, Damon, Orion... It can't be." I narrow my eyes, looking him square in the face. "You're one of them, aren't you? One of the lost kings. How? I don't understand." I shake my head as all the pieces fall into place.

"Yes, I am Kian of the Emptyfae Court."

I choke out a humorless laugh. "Don't lie to me, Alaric...Kian...whatever the hell your name is. You are not an emptyfae. I've seen with my own eyes how you can wield magic. Emptyfae have no access to their magic. You are very powerful. I've only ever seen such levels of magical ability in conjurers." I shake my head again. "Although I know the emptyfae king's name is indeed Kian." My eyes lift in thought. Confusion clouds my brain. "This makes no sense. How is it that you can wield magic, King Kian of the magicless fae?"

“Don’t call me that. After all we have been through, I’m just Kian.” He chuckles, the sound not holding much humor. “Just plain Kian. I’ve lost my throne. Hell’s teeth, for years and years, I didn’t even remember who I was. I thought I was the son of a fisherman. That I left my village because I didn’t want to follow in his footsteps.” Kian’s eyes have gone hazy with old memories. “I only made it as far as the next village, where I started work as a striker. I didn’t much like it, so I left and traveled some more, working odd jobs in each of the villages. When a band of mercenaries swept through a village I was working in at the time, I talked them into taking me on. I was later captured and taken to the Emptyfae Court to work in the mines. To think I missed the little village I grew up in, as well as my mother and father. I missed people who never existed. A part of me still does.” By now, his eyes are blazing. “It was all a lie, McColl. I never grew up in a fishing village. I’m not the son of a fisherman and his wife. None of it is real. I had an evil spell cast on me to make me believe all the false memories. The false identity. That I was human. I’m not, I never was.”

“You’re a king.”

He nods once. “I am...or will be once more when we defeat Snow. I swear that I never lied to you. It was black magic. We were hidden in plain sight. It explains so much. Like how I knew things...things I should never have known. Like how a regular, everyday smithy hammer would break the chain of your amulet. I knew I would survive the ordeal. I’ve learned over the years to trust my gut. That’s what I called it...my gut. I told myself that I had good instincts. It had nothing to do with good instincts. I knew because I had been taught, or had seen, or had experienced first-hand. It was never my gut; it was my suppressed memories coming to the fore in drips and drabs. A spell, no matter how intricately woven, will never fully dull all memories. It can’t. Only most of them.”

There is sincerity burning in his eyes, and I believe him.

Thinking back, I can still see the shock on his face when he realized who he was.  
When he realized that he was a fae.



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“How is it that you can wield magic?”

“How is it that you have access to more magic than you did before?” He lifts his brows.

“That’s different; you could never wield magic previously?”

He shakes his head. “No, definitely not, hence my struggle to control it and to actually do something with it.”

“You’ve done very well, considering that you’ve had no formal training.” I smile.

“This last time, fighting those fae... It felt out of control. There is no way I could hold a masking spell now.” He looks down at his hands. “I have power, but it’s...too much. That’s something I hope to change...with your help.”

I laugh. “I had many years of hard training.”

“We don’t have nearly that long, but I’ll take what I can get. I’m not sure how it happened, only that it all changed when I broke the chain around your neck and was struck.”

“It changed for me, too.”

“Maybe it was also the eclipse.” He shrugs. “I don’t know. All I know is that I need your help to control it. I need some lessons while we are here. You heard Orion; the valley is a safe haven. It’s safe from her prying eyes. She can’t sense us here, even if

we use our magic.”

“I will help you.” I swallow thickly. “I owe you that much. What is the plan?”

“We rest up, and then we stick to the original plan. I will take you home.” He looks me in the eye. “But first, let me introduce you to the others.” He glances at the cabin.

“You want to stick to the original plan and take me back yourself?” I roll my eyes. “There’s only one thing better to a coven than killing a fae; it’s stringing up a fae king. The target on your back would be bigger than ever. You need to actually stay alive if you hope to defeat Snow.”

“Our only hope of winning this war is if everyone works together. Humans, fae...witches, too. I want a chance to talk to your people. To convince them that united we will rise, but apart...we will never hope to beat her.”

“Fae, humans, and witches, all on the same side?” I laugh. “Now that I would love to see.”

“It’s how it has to be. We fight side by side against a common enemy, McColl. United by the same goal.”

“You’re delusional, but I like it.” I smile at him. “So, you want to use me to get an audience with my people? I have to warn you: I don’t hold much clout. I would have very little say over what would happen to you once we got there.” I think of my mother. Of how hard she is. How unbending. “My mother is the leader of our coven.”

“Even better.”

“You don’t understand.” I shake my head. “I doubt that there is much I would be able to do for you.”

“Let me worry about winning them over. Your job would be to get me there and to stand up for me. The rest would be on me.”

“It’s your funeral pyre.”

“It will work out. You’ll see. Let’s go inside...” He turns back toward the cabin. “I don’t know about you, but I could use a hot meal.”

I groan. “That sounds good.”

We walk back to the cabin. I notice a large chicken coop just to the side of the barn. Chickens cluck and move around inside. There seem to be plenty of them. There’s a flourishing vegetable garden on the other side. I’m sure there is an orchard of fruit trees in the distance. I’m pretty sure a couple of them are bearing fruit.

It’s like we found a sliver of paradise.

As we draw nearer, I hear muted conversation from inside the cabin.

Kian knocks on the door to the cabin as we arrive, then he opens the door, standing back so that I can enter first.

The men stand as we enter, along with a tall, willowy woman who stands, too. Her dark hair flows freely about her shoulders. She’s very pretty, even though she is dressed like a man, in breeches and a tunic. She stands next to the male with the white hair, Damon. If memory serves, he is the Icefae King. We were expected to learn about all the different fae in school.

Know thy enemy.

I know of them all.

I remember my teachings.

Damon became the king when his brother was struck down by Snow's evil stepmother. It's when Snow became corrupted and turned into a tyrant.

The only person who remains sitting is the heavily pregnant woman; she has curly blonde hair and big, bright blue eyes. Her hands are resting on her enormous belly. She's dressed in a pretty yellow dress that flows to the ground.

"It's about time you woke up and joined us," Damon says as he walks up to Kian. They hug. It's over quickly. "This is my soon-to-be wife, Kyrie." His whole stance softens as he looks at the dark-haired beauty.

Kian shakes her outstretched hand.

"I've heard a lot about you." Her gaze moves to me. "I'm Kyrie."

"McColl. I'm...um...a...I'm a friend of Kian's." It feels weird to call myself his friend, and even weirder to say his actual name out loud.

"Good to meet you," Kyrie says. We briefly clasp hands.

"I'm Maya," the pregnant lady says. She is smiling broadly. "Excuse me, but I'll stay sitting. Is that okay?"

"Maya is my wife," Orion says, getting on his knees before the woman in question. He nuzzles his face into her belly. "And this is my unborn child. Due any day now."

“I certainly hope so,” Maya says, looking tired. “It feels like I have been pregnant for an age.” She rubs a lazy circle on her belly as soon as Orion gets back to his feet. I note how he keeps his hand on his wife’s shoulder. “It shouldn’t be long at all.” She gives Orion a stern look.

“I made it back, sweetheart.” He looks over at us. “My wife was afraid that I would miss the birth of our child if I rescued you two. We could sense where you were. It was long enough for me to find you. If I could find you, then so could she. I had no choice, love. It was a good thing I went, or they would have been captured.” He squeezes his wife’s shoulder.

“So, you almost left us to rot,” Kian says, his voice laced with good humor.

Orion smiles. “It was touch and go.”

“Looks like a lot has happened while I...was lost,” Kian says, looking at each of them in turn.

“Indeed,” Damon says.

“Where are my manners?” Kyrie says. “You must be starving.”

“Famished,” I say. “Wielding magic will do that to a person.” My stomach grumbles, and I put a hand on it.

Kyrie’s eyes narrow and then dart to my ears.

“McColl is a witch,” Kian says, sounding gruff. “She was captured by the emptyfae – same as me – who were using her to extract magic from my people. She is—”

“You’re a witch?” Kyrie says, her eyes still narrowed with suspicion.

“McColl helped me escape,” Kian says. “If we hadn’t worked together, I wouldn’t be here. I assure you that she is trustworthy and someone I am honored to call a friend.”

“A friend?” Orion says, a smile toying with the corners of his mouth. His eyes glint.

“Yes, a friend.” Kian’s eyes blaze. “I would appreciate it if you would accept her...that you welcome her without prejudice.”

“Very well. If she is a friend of yours, then we extend a welcome,” Kyrie concedes with a nod.

Damon still eyes me with suspicion.

“Very well,” Orion says. “But know that my top priority is to keep my family safe. I won’t hesitate to—”

“None of that will be necessary,” Kian says, his jaw tight.

They don’t want me here. That much is clear. I don’t want to cause any trouble. “If you would prefer I leave, I can go. All I ask is for some—”

“No,” Kian says in a clipped tone. “You can stay. I need your help learning how to wield my newly accessible magic. Then I need your help with the other thing we discussed.”

## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

Getting him an audience with my coven.

“Magic?” Orion and Damon say together.

“You don’t have access to your magic?” Damon says, frowning. “Last I checked, you were an emptyfae.”

A horse whinnies, followed by another. Then there is the distinct sound of horse hooves and...something else. Sounds like a...cart.

“That would be Xander and his wife, Thesha,” Orion says. “I am sure he would also love to hear all about it.”

14

Kian

The sound of approaching horses grows louder, accompanied by the creaking of wheels and the jingle of harnesses. I look out the window and see a wagon approaching. It is being pulled by two sturdy draft horses and is making its way up the path to the cabin.

Orion looks over my shoulder. “They went to Trinity Orphanage to deliver supplies to the children.”

My chest tightens. Another piece of my past, another friend I thought I’d lost forever. We were close once, before Snow’s magic tore our lives apart. We were almost like

brothers. I feel a sharp pang.

The wagon pulls to a stop outside, and I watch through the window as two figures climb down. Xander looks exactly as I remember him, though perhaps more weathered. His long, dark hair is tied back, and even from here, I can see the vivid blue of his eyes. Beside him is a woman I don't recognize. She is clearly human, dressed in well-worn leathers, with multiple weapons strapped to her person. Her dark hair is tightly braided, and everything about her stance screams warrior.

All three of them are married or about to be. Everything has changed, and it feels like I was left behind.

"Are you sure you can wield magic?" Orion asks me for the second or third time.

"Very. I would show you, but I might just blow the roof off of this cabin."

"Don't do that," Damon grumbles.

Xander and his wife disappear for a while. I assume to tend to the beasts. We make small talk until the door to the cabin opens, and Xander steps inside, his blue eyes immediately finding mine. For a moment, neither of us moves. Then his face breaks into a grin that reveals those familiar fangs.

"Well, I'll be damned," he says, his voice exactly as I remember it. "Kian. I knew you had awoken, but I didn't know you were here. You're back."

Before I can respond, he's crossed the room and pulled me into a fierce embrace. The familiarity of it, the solid reality of having another piece of my past restored, threatens to overwhelm me.

"It's good to see you," I choke out.



“You too, brother,” he murmurs, using the term we’d always used for each other despite not sharing blood.

“It’s good to be back, although I wish it were under better circumstances,” I manage, my voice rough. I pat his back with the flat of my hand.

He pulls away, holding me at arm’s length to study my face. “You look like hell.” He laughs. “Are you growing a beard?” Then he turns serious. “You smell like you rolled around in a lit fire. Rough around the edges, but at least you’re alive. That’s what matters.”

The woman behind him clears her throat, and Xander turns, his entire demeanor softening as he looks at her.

“This is my wife, Thesha,” he says, pride evident in his voice. “Thesha, meet Kian. The King of the emptyfae and my dear friend.”

She steps forward, and I can see the assessment in her dark eyes as she looks me over. Everything about her radiates competence and danger, from the way she moves to the casual way her hand rests near one of her weapons.

We shake hands, and hers are the calloused hands of someone used to hard work and wielding a sword.

“It’s good to meet you, Kian,” she says with a slight nod, though there’s something formal and distant in her tone. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

“You too, Thesha, although I’m not sure what you saw in this rascal that made you want to marry him.” I glance at Xander, who grins.

“That’s not very nice.” Xander laughs.

“He’s good at one or two things,” Thesha says, winking at her husband.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“Spare us.” Orion laughs.

We all laugh, but the tension soon returns as Thesha’s gaze shifts to McColl, who’s been standing quietly beside me. I see the warrior woman’s eyes narrow slightly.

“I’m McColl,” she quickly says before I can introduce her. “I’m...um...a friend of Kian’s.”

The temperature in the room seems to drop several degrees. Thesha’s hand moves fractionally closer to her sword, and I see Xander’s nostrils flare slightly as he scents the air.

He must scent magic on her because he says, “A witch.” It’s not a question.

“Yes,” McColl says, lifting her chin a little.

“Not this again,” I mutter. “McColl is a friend and someone I trust with my life. She also happens to be a witch.”

“You trust her with your life,” Thesha says coolly. “How long have you known her?”

“That isn’t important. We’ve been through a lot...more than most in a whole lifetime. She’s proven to me that I can trust her, and that’s all that counts.”

The tension is thick enough to cut with a blade. Maya shifts uncomfortably in her chair, while Orion moves protectively closer to his wife. Damon and Kyrie exchange a meaningful look, which I don’t like much.

I can see that my earlier words haven't helped assuage the concern still reflected in both Thesha and Damon's gazes. The others, too, if I'm honest.

"McColl helped me escape," I say firmly. "Without her, I'd still be trapped in the Emptyfae Court, back in the mines, or dead. She risked her life to help me and has risked her life several times since," I try to spell it out.

The silence stretches uncomfortably. I can feel McColl's tension as she clenches her hands in her lap. I understand where they are coming from since we've all learned to be suspicious of anyone new, especially after what Snow has done to us.

"Why don't we sit, and I'll tell you everything that happened?" I suggest, hoping to defuse the situation. "Then you can judge for yourselves." I give McColl what I hope is a reassuring look.

She remains unreadable, although I can tell she's upset.

It takes a few long, awkward moments before Xander nods, giving me a tight smile. Thesha starts to argue, but he takes her hand, and she closes her mouth, nodding, too. It is clear that she doesn't like this at all.

The fire dies down to embers as I recount our escape from the Emptyfae Court, our flight through the wasteland, the encounters with the guards, the conjurer, and finally, our rescue by Orion. I stick to the main facts, but I make sure they understand how crucial McColl's help was at every step.

McColl stays silent, and I can't say I blame her.

When I finish, the room is quiet except for Maya's soft breathing as she dozes in her chair, her hand still on her belly.

Outside the windows, night has fallen.

Kyrie jumps up to light a few candles and lanterns. Damon tosses a few logs onto the fire, stirring it up until it catches. I hadn't realized how dark it was until this moment.

"You've both been through hell." Xander looks at McColl and then back at me.

"And you can really access your magic now?" Damon asks, leaning forward. "I still don't understand how that's possible."

"Neither do I," I admit. "All I know is that when I broke the chain holding McColl's amulet during the eclipse, something changed. For both of us." I glance at McColl.

"The eclipse," Kyrie muses. "There are old stories about eclipses being times of great magical change when the barriers between realms are thin. Mother Trinity spoke of it a few times. We all thought them to be old wives' tales, but perhaps not."

"This lady you speak of is wise indeed. She was right," McColl says, her voice soft. "I'm sure the eclipse has something to do with it."

"Who knows for sure?" I add. "Whatever the cause, I'm grateful for it. If we can find out how it was done, perhaps it can be replicated."

"You mean to other emptyfae?" McColl asks, frowning.

I nod. "When the time comes, we're going to need every advantage we can get against Snow."

Thesha has been silent throughout my story, but now she stands abruptly. "Kian, Xander and I would like to speak with you...alone. No offense, McColl, but this is between us. I feel for you...I do, but I still can't fully trust you, and that's the long and

the short of it. I don't know you. Neither does Kian; not really."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“Don’t—” I start to say when McColl holds up her hand.

“It’s fine. I understand. The witch community has kept to itself since the beginning of time. We don’t mingle with humans...ever. We had an understanding with the fae before Snow’s rule, but we were never on great terms. Since Snow, we have become full-blown enemies. It must be strange for you to see a witch and a fae on good terms, but here we are.” She looks at me in a way that has warmth spreading in my chest. “Go and have your meeting. I will be fine,” she tells me before looking at the others. “I hope that in time, you will learn to trust me, but I understand that trust is earned. Sometimes it’s hard-earned...which is fine.”

Once again, I feel that warmth in my chest at her words.

“I’ll get you something to eat, McColl.” Kyrie gives McColl a tight smile. Perhaps my explanation won over one person, at least. Damon still doesn’t look convinced, but he doesn’t say anything.

Orion puts a blanket over his wife. It is clear that his focus is elsewhere.

Xander gets to his feet and goes to stand next to his wife, taking her hand in his. He is standing with her on this.

I sigh. Perhaps I can convince them. I hope that I can.

“We’ll be right back,” I tell McColl.

“Take your time,” she says, following Kyrie to the hearth. “But not too long, or I will

finish all the food.” She smiles, but it’s strained.

“Don’t you dare.” I smile back.

Thesha takes a lantern from the table, and we step outside into the cool evening air. We walk away, not getting far, when Xander’s wife turns to face me.

“I know you don’t know me, but...” She sighs. “You’re making a mistake trusting the likes of her.” She gestures toward the cabin. “I have had a few clashes with witches in my time, and none of them have been much fun. They are all evil b—”

“Thesha—” Xander starts, but she cuts him off with a sharp gesture.

“No, let me get this out.” She looks back at me. “I understand you’ve been through a traumatic experience, and we’re grateful this woman helped you escape. But you cannot let gratitude cloud your judgment.”

“My judgment is just fine,” I say, though I can feel my temper starting to rise.

“Is it?” She steps closer, her dark eyes boring into mine. “Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you’ve got wool pulled over your eyes. You’re attracted to the witch. This is more than just a friendship, and it’s clouding your judgment.”

The accusation hits me hard. “That’s ridiculous. You don’t even know me. We only just met.”

She snort-laughs. “I don’t need to know you to know it’s true. I have eyes.”

“Thesha’s right,” Xander says in a soft voice that’s filled with pity. “It’s clear as day every time you look at her, the way your voice changes when you talk about her. You’re protective of her in a way that goes beyond simple gratitude or friendship.



She is a beautiful woman, Kian. You would be blind not to notice.”

“She saved my life,” I say through gritted teeth.

“And conveniently gained access to three lost fae kings in the process,” Thesha fires back. “Do you have any idea what kind of information she could pass back to her kind? What kind of damage she could do?”

“She’s not working for Snow,” I insist. “She didn’t even know who I was when we agreed to help each other. You didn’t see what they were doing to her, how they were using her—”

“I’ve seen plenty of people being tortured and used as bait,” Thesha says coldly. “It’s an old trick, Kian. Break someone down, make them desperate, then position them perfectly to gain their trust in order to use them.”

“Thesha has a point, Kian,” Xander says. “Perhaps you are right, and she is exactly who you say she is...or maybe she’s not. We can’t afford to take chances. Not when we’re so close to having enough strength to challenge Snow. I don’t think we can afford to let a stranger in close, let alone a witch.”

“McColl isn’t a stranger,” I snap. “Not to me. You think I haven’t considered every possibility? McColl has had dozens of opportunities to betray me, to signal the guards, to use her magic against me instead of protecting me. She could have left me to die when that conjurer attacked us, but instead, she fought beside me.” I think of how she didn’t want anything to do with me as soon as she saw I was a fae. That isn’t someone with an ulterior motive.

No way.

No how.

“Or she could be playing a very long game,” Thesha says. “Witches are cunning, Kian. They’re natural enemies of the fae for a reason.”

“This witch is different. I’m beginning to think that as a community, they’re misunderstood.”

“You think she’s different? If I had a gold coin for every man who said that about a woman, I would be rich,” Thesha says with bitter amusement. “You’ll think that right up until she drives a blade between your ribs while riding your cock. Witches are not to be trusted...every last one of them.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“There is a reason that they are known as the sirens of the land,” Xander says.

“Sirens of the land? Are you serious right now?” I ask him with more than a hint of frustration in my tone.

“Yes. They use their beauty...their sexual prowess to snare you...to destroy you. I’ve only just found you. I don’t want to see that happen to you, Kian. We need you.”

The words sting more than they should, probably because there’s something there I don’t want to acknowledge. Am I attracted to McColl? Absolutely. Just the thought of her smile, the fierce determination in her eyes when she’s casting spells. I think of how her lips felt against mine, the taste of her, the swell of her breasts against me. Her eyes, those eyes alone, are enough to floor a man.

I’m attracted to her and then some.

“Even if I am attracted to McColl,” I say finally, “it doesn’t change the facts. She’s proven herself trustworthy to me, and I need her help. I’m still learning to control my magic, and she’s the only one around here qualified to teach me. Orion said something about it being safe for us to wield magic in the valley?”

Xander nods. “Yes, it is.”

“Well, I need to learn, and it needs to be McColl who teaches me. Your magic works differently,” I tell Xander. “So do Damon and Orion’s abilities. I need her, at least for a few days, and then I will make sure she returns to Regana, to Witch Mountain. I will not act on my attraction, I swear. I will keep a level head. I think she would cut

out my heart if I tried anything, anyway.”

Thesha snort-laughes.

“Famous last words,” Xander mutters.

“I’m not so sure you know what you are talking about,” Thesha adds. “She might use your attraction to her advantage. That’s what they do.”

“I doubt that she—”

“Once again, my wife is right,” Xander says. “You need to tread carefully, my friend. Use the witch, but don’t get too close. Don’t let your guard down. If not for yourself, then for the good of the realm.”

“I will tread carefully. I am.” I run a hand through my hair, feeling frustrated.

“If she stays,” Thesha says, folding her arms, “you need to keep her under guard at all times. Limit what information she has access to. Watch her closely for any signs of deception.”

“Like a prisoner.”

“Like a potential threat. I’m sorry I’m coming down so hard on you, especially since we only just met, but there are vulnerable individuals in that cabin. Think of Maya and her unborn child...even Kyrie. If anything happened...”

The words hang in the air between us. In the distance, I can hear the soft snorts of one of the horses and the hoot of an owl. Normal, peaceful sounds that seem to belong to a different world than the one we are discussing.

“I get where you’re coming from. I rate your loyalty highly...I do, but I refuse to treat McColl like a prisoner,” I say finally. “Not after all we have been through.” I shake my head.

“Then you’re a fool,” Thesha snaps. “And your foolishness could get us all killed.”

Xander puts a restraining hand on his wife’s arm. “That’s enough, love. We’ve made our concerns known. The decision is ultimately Kian’s to make.”

“Is it?” Thesha asks. “Because last I checked, we were all in this together. We all have a say in who we trust with our lives. I’m sorry to say, Kian, but I am sticking with my original assessment; your judgment is compromised. I don’t and will never trust a witch.”

Unfortunately, that I don’t have much knowledge of the covens. We never had dealings with them. They kept to themselves. Thesha might be right. It sounds like she knows what she is talking about. But she’s wrong about McColl, although, at the same time, I understand her concern. How can I not? Yet, the thought of McColl being treated with suspicion and hostility, of seeing that guarded look in her eyes, makes something twist painfully in my chest.

Maybe they are right about my feelings. Maybe I am compromised.

But that doesn’t change what I know to be true about McColl. It just doesn’t!

“She stays,” I say firmly. “And she’s treated as a guest, not a prisoner. I will not act on my attraction to her. I will keep a close eye on her at all times. If you don’t like it, we will leave...together. I will take her back to Witch Mountain myself before returning here. I won’t stay if she is going to be mistreated. She doesn’t deserve that because of what she is.”

I don't want to leave this place right away. We need to rest and recuperate. Besides, I don't want to lose the companionship of my oldest friends. But I won't abandon McColl, and I won't see her mistreated. I made some promises I intend to keep. I also believe that the witches could be powerful allies, which means I need McColl to achieve that.

Xander and Thesha exchange a long look, having one of those silent conversations that only married couples have mastered. I saw my parents give each other such a look and on more than one occasion. I feel a pang at the thought of them, already long in their graves. Thank Kakara they don't have to live through this.

"Fine," Thesha says finally. "She can stay. But I'll be watching her, Kian. And if she gives me even the slightest reason to doubt her intentions, I won't hesitate to act. You need to understand that." She touches the hilt of her sword to make herself clear.

"Fine," I say, though I doubt McColl will appreciate being under constant scrutiny.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“Be careful, brother,” Xander adds, his voice softer now. “We can’t afford to lose you again...not when we’ve just found you. Or to have valuable information leaked to Snow.”

I nod, understanding the fear beneath his words. We’ve all lost too much already. I wonder if we will ever be able to right the wrongs.

We have to try.

For now, I have to respect my friends and keep a clear head where McColl is concerned. I am certain they are wrong. Hopefully, they will see that in time.

McColl is my friend...not my enemy.

I only wish I wasn’t so damned attracted to her. It would certainly make things easier.

15

McColl

I cut a piece of roast chicken and put it in my mouth. It tastes delicious. I only wish that my stomach wasn’t so tied in knots.

The only sounds around the table are of cutlery against crockery. Or of a glass being put down.

I know this stilted silence is all because of me.

It's clear that Xander and Thesha – particularly his wife – do not trust me. I suppose it was to be expected. I am a witch. We are not welcomed outside of the Regana Mountains, just like we don't welcome others. I'm not sure why I expected it to be any different just because Kian and I have struck up an understanding...a friendship of sorts.

Kian has been decidedly quiet since returning from his conversation with Thesha and Xander. Since then, there have been quiet whispers between them. Kian is caught in between.

I swallow down the tender chicken, taking a sip of my water to clear my dry throat. It's nerves.

“So...um...Maya...” I attempt a smile. “Do you think you're having a boy or a girl?” I glance over at Orion, who keeps his eyes on his food.

“I have absolutely no idea.” She shakes her head, smiling wistfully. “It's going to be a surprise. Orion and I don't mind either way. Isn't that right, darling?”

Orion makes a noise of agreement around his food.

We sit in silence for a while. I concentrate on my food, trying hard to enjoy it despite the growing tension.

I hate this.

“So, McColl,” Maya says, shifting in her chair and placing a protective hand over her swollen belly, “what is your favorite color?” She lifts her brows like she's truly interested.

It's the second or third such question she's asked me. I know she's trying to make



conversation, just like I am, too. I'm grateful and throw her a smile.

"It has to be yellow, for the sun. I pray to the goddess for a day when it shines again."

I catch Thesha rolling her eyes but ignore it.

"I agree." Kyrie nods, cutting a slice off her chicken breast. "The moon, too. Oh, how I long to see the stars."

"That would be amazing," Maya adds, taking a drink of her water.

"I heard that the land sickness has not affected Witch Mountain, where you live. Is that true?" Thesha asks in a way that is almost accusing. She stabs her fork into a piece of chicken.

I nod. "We use magic to keep the sickness at bay; the haze above, too."

"So, you're not affected like we are?" she asks, taking a sip of her wine.

"Not in the same way, no, but we are affected...all of us are affected, Thesha. Make no mistake about that. Even the fae." I take a bite of my roast potato, tasting nothing. I may as well be eating dirt at this point. It's the first time Thesha has spoken since the three of them returned.

"More wine, anyone?" Kyrie asks, holding up the bottle. I am grateful for the change of subject. She seems to be trying to keep the peace as well, and I'm grateful to her, too.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

Everyone declines, so Kyrie trickles a little into her glass. So little that it's clear she didn't want a refill; she was helping me out.

Damon's jaw tightens visibly when I reach for the water pitcher, filling my own glass. Thesha's dark eyes never leave my face, calculating and cold. Each time our gazes meet, she doesn't look away or try to hide her suspicion. If anything, she seems to want me to know I'm being evaluated and found wanting.

I'm used to it, but it still stings.

Maya tries to include me again, asking about the different types of magic I've studied, but even her kindness feels strained, careful. I can tell she's torn between wanting to be welcoming and wanting to side with her friends...her husband, too.

Kian's shoulders grow more rigid as the evening progresses. "This is delicious, Kyrie." His voice is clipped. His plate is also still half-full, even though it feels like we've been eating for an age. Despite my gnawing hunger when we arrived, I have to work to finish the food on my plate, not wanting to waste anything.

As soon as I push away my empty plate, I practically leap at the chance to escape outside.

"If no one minds, I'd like to go and clean my teeth before bed," I say, not meeting anyone's eyes as I stand, picking up my plate and glass.

"Of course we don't mind," Kian says. "Leave those. I'll wash up." He gives me a tight smile.

“Thanks.” I leave the dishes, then head out before anyone can stop me. I’m tired. I need some rest. I’m sure things will be better come morning. They usually are.

I take a lantern as I leave and walk down to the lake. It’s quiet out. The night air is crisp and clean, a blessed relief after the suffocating atmosphere inside. I make my way down to the water, grateful for the solitude. The water is cold but refreshing as I splash it on my face and hands, washing away the grime of travel.

Above me, the sky is black. I know that the thick haze is there, even though I can’t see it. It blocks out everything. Then again, I crane my neck, seeing what looks like a blink of a single star. There for a few moments and then gone. I smile. Here, in this pocket of preserved life, even the night sky seems more alive than usual. I hope that the lost kings can bring the realm back to life and take down the queen. I will do everything in my power to help them, even if they don’t trust me.

I take my time, reluctant to return to the cabin and more awkward conversation. But eventually, the cold drives me back, my damp hair clinging to my shoulders.

The main room is empty except for Kian. I sigh in relief. He has changed into fresh clothes, which comprise clean brown breeches and a cream-colored tunic that emphasizes the breadth of his shoulders and the defined muscles of his chest. His blond hair is damp from washing, and he is freshly shaven, revealing the strong line of his jaw.

My breath catches in my throat. Kakara preserve me, but he’s handsome. I’ve been trying not to notice, trying to focus on survival and getting home, but here in the warm lamplight, he’s...striking. The way the tunic clings to his frame, the casual way he runs a hand through his golden hair, the vivid green of his eyes when they meet mine. I would have to be blind not to see it.

I want to take him in some more but force myself to look away before he catches me

staring. I pretend to look out of the window, even though there is nothing to see but pitch blackness.

“The others have retired for the evening,” he says, his voice carefully neutral. “That isn’t a barn outside but rather their sleeping quarters.”

I turn to face him. The cabin suddenly feels very small with just the two of us here.

“Kyrie left these for you.” He gestures to a pile of folded garments on the table. “A dress and a clean chemise. She thought they might fit.”

My heart warms when I look at the clothing. Moreover, at the color of the dress. It is a beautiful pale yellow, my favorite color. Perhaps I am not as unwanted as I thought. Maya and Kyrie are trying; that much is clear.

“That is very kind of her.” I touch a hand to my neck, absently feeling for the amulet that is no longer there. I wore it for so long that it almost became a part of me. Then I lift the simple dress, which looks to be about my size. The smock is made from clean linen, soft to the touch. After days in my torn and muddy clothes, the prospect of something clean and whole is almost overwhelming.

Kian turns his back to me, facing the wall. “Go ahead and change. I won’t look, I promise.”

I hesitate for a moment, then quickly strip out of my soiled clothes and into the fresh ones. The dress fits well, if a bit loose in places where I’ve lost weight during our ordeal. The fabric is soft against my skin, and I have to bite back a sigh of relief.

“You can turn around now.”

He does as I say, his eyes raking over me from head to toe. I get this weird feeling in

the pit of my stomach.

He swallows and looks away.

“Where are we sleeping?” I ask to diffuse the tension that has crept into the room, making the air thick and my undergarments prickly against my skin.

His gaze moves to mine, and he gets this look.

“That’s the thing,” Kian says. “The sleeping arrangements are...they’re...a bit of a problem. There’s only one pallet here in the cabin,” he gestures to the bed, “since the others are using the barn, and...” He trails off.

“And?” I urge him on, even though I know exactly where this is going.

There is definite conflict written across his features. “We’ll have to share the cabin. There’s nowhere else except the chicken coop.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

I laugh. “The coop?” I shake my head. “I don’t think that will work.”

“Me neither, which means we have to share, McColl.”

My heart does something strange in my chest. Share a cabin. With him. Alone.

“I can sleep on the floor,” he says quickly, as if reading my thoughts. “I’ll take a blanket, and...I’ll be just fine.”

I frown. “Don’t be ridiculous.” The words come out sharper than I intended. I soften my tone. “We’ve been sleeping rough for days. There’s no need for either of us to be uncomfortable when there’s a perfectly good bed right there.”

His eyes widen slightly. “McColl, I don’t think that’s—”

“What’s the big deal?” I shrug. “I mean, we’re both adults.” By the goddess, it feels like my cheeks are on fire. “We can share a bed without anything...improper happening.”

He looks like he wants to argue, like he’s wrestling with some internal battle. His jaw works silently for a long moment, and I can see the tension in his shoulders.

“I can trust you, can’t I? Not to—”

“Of course,” he snaps, giving a small snort.

“You can trust me, too. We’re friends...that’s all.” I don’t think friends are supposed

to notice each other like I notice him...but I'm running with it. "Kian?" I prompt when he doesn't respond.

"Of course, you're absolutely right...friends," he says finally, but his reluctance is clear. "If you're sure, then I'm fine with it, too."

I'm not sure of anything, but I nod anyway. "I'm sure."

We prepare for bed in awkward silence. I braid my damp hair while he banks the fire and checks that the door is secured. The pallet is narrow – barely wide enough for two people – and I can't help but think about how close we'll be lying together.

It will be fine. I'm being silly.

When there is nothing left to do but sleep, we approach the bed from opposite sides. Kian hesitates at the edge, and for a moment, I think he's going to change his mind and take the floor after all.

But then he lies down, careful to stay as far to his side as possible. I do the same, leaving as much space between us as the narrow mattress allows.

It's not enough.

Even with the gap between us, I can feel the warmth radiating from his body. His scent is of clean male with a hint of wood smoke, which fills my nostrils with every breath. I'm acutely aware of every small movement he makes, every shift and sigh.

This was a terrible idea.

I stare up at the ceiling, my body rigid with the effort of staying as far away from him as I can. I can hear his breathing, steady but not quite relaxed. He's as affected by this

as I am, but perhaps not in the same way.

My skin feels too tight, too warm. Every nerve ending seems to be reaching toward him, drawn by some invisible force I can't control or understand.

"McColl?" His voice is deep and yet quiet in the darkness.

"Yes?" I whisper.

"Are you alright? You seem...tense."

I almost laugh at the understatement. "I'm fine. Just...it's been a long day."

"It has." A pause. "I'm sorry about...the others. They're normally not so..." He stops talking. I think he's trying to find the right word to use.

"Suspicious? Hostile?" I say, smiling, even though it isn't something to smile about.

He pushes out a heavy breath. "I would go with protective," he says carefully. I think he might be smiling too. "We've all lost so much. It's made us wary of trusting anyone new, especially..." He lets the sentence trail off.

"A witch?"



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

“Someone different. I happen to like different.” He’s definitely smiling.

I smile, too. “I really do understand.” And I do, even if it stings. “I’ve never fit in. Not even with my own people...I’ve never been powerful enough, I guess.” I’m going off in a different direction and veer back on track. “They care about you. I can see that, and it’s a good thing.”

“They do. But that doesn’t excuse their treatment of you.” There’s a hint of anger in his voice now. It warms me that he wants to stick up for me.

“They don’t know me,” I say softly. “All they see is a witch. An enemy. I can’t blame them for that.”

“I can.” His voice is fierce. “I wish they would listen to me. If they can’t trust you, they should trust me, but they say that my judgment is clouded.”

“Why would your judgment be clouded?” I frown.

“Because we went through a lot. When two people are put in the tough situations we had to face, it brings them together. They say I’m blinded by that.”

It feels like he’s keeping something from me, but I don’t push.

“They’re wrong, though,” he adds when I don’t say anything.

“Like I said, you can’t blame them for being suspicious of a witch,” I say instead.

“I guess, as long as you know they’re good people, they just need time to see what I see in you.”

And what do you see? I want to ask, but I don’t dare.

The silence stretches between us again, heavy with things we’re not saying. I can feel him breathing beside me, feel the mattress dip slightly with his weight.

“It’s up to me to change their minds through my actions,” I tell him. “Let’s get some sleep.”

“Good night, McColl.”

“Good night,” I reply as I turn onto my side, facing away from him. I wish I weren’t so aware of him. Of the curve of his body so close to mine, the warmth of his breath stirring the air near my neck.

Sleep, I tell myself firmly.

Just go to sleep!

But sleep is a long time coming. I lie there in the darkness, listening to the soft sounds of his breathing. Trying not to acknowledge the growing certainty that what I feel for this fae king is far more dangerous than any enemy I’ve ever faced.

I like him.

I like him more than I should, and it could get me into trouble. A witch and a fae are like oil and water. We don’t belong together, and we never will.

Thankfully, despite my muddled thoughts, I finally drift off.

Kian

The sound of someone clearing their throat cuts through the haze of sleep like a blade through silk. My eyes snap open, and for a moment, I'm disoriented by the warmth pressed against me and the sweet scent that fills my nostrils. It's of honey and wildflowers mingled with a hint of magic.

Kakara's cat!

My eyes open wide.

My arms are wrapped around her slight frame, holding her against my chest as if she belongs there. Her dark hair spills across my shoulder, and I can feel the soft puff of her breath against my neck. She fits perfectly in my arms, curves molding to my body in ways that make me forget...everything outside of this bed. Outside of us.

Then I remember that we're not alone and that I most definitely should not be holding McColl like this. I look up straight into the bemused expression on Kyrie's face.

The gods be damned, I'm a fool!

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:58 am*

I jolt upright so quickly I nearly topple off the narrow pallet, my sudden movement causing McColl to startle awake with a gasp. She clutches the covers to her chest, her dark eyes wide and confused as she blinks up at me and then at Kyrie.

“Good morning, you two.” Kyrie’s voice is filled with barely contained amusement. There is a steaming mug in her hands and a knowing smile on her lips. “Would either of you like some rosehip tea?”

Heat floods my face. “Um...that...I...” I scramble for words, running a hand through my disheveled hair. “We were...I...” I need to get it together. “We were just sleeping,” I finally settle on. I’m sure I must look like a naughty child. I certainly feel like one.

“Mmm-hmm.” Kyrie’s smile widens.

McColl looks like a startled deer. Her cheeks are flushed pink, and she won’t meet my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I stammer, though I’m not entirely sure who I’m apologizing to – McColl, Kyrie, or myself. “I didn’t mean to—” I look down at Kyrie, who finally locks eyes with me.

“It’s fine,” McColl says quickly, her voice slightly hoarse from disuse. “We were asleep. The pallet is small.” She shrugs. “It’s not a big deal.”

I need to get out of this cabin. Now.

“Would you look at that? Night has already lifted. We should start those magic lessons,” I say abruptly, already moving toward my pack to grab fresh clothes. “Right now, in fact. I’ll meet you outside in a few minutes?” It’s thinly veiled as a question, but I leave without waiting for a response. I practically run out of there like my tail is on fire.

The cool morning air hits my face as I stride toward the lake, my heart still pounding from more than just embarrassment. I can’t stop thinking about how right it felt to wake up with McCollin my arms, how perfectly she’d fit against me, how her scent had made me want to bury my face in her hair.

Xander and Thesha’s warnings echo in my mind. They think my judgment is compromised, that I’m letting attraction cloud my thinking. Maybe they’re right.

I strip off my rumpled tunic and splash into the lake’s edge, cupping the cold water in my hands to wash my face and chest. The shock of it helps clear my head, at least temporarily. I scrub my teeth with my finger and then take a long drink of water.

I need to get myself together. I made a promise I wouldn’t act on my attraction. I also promised McColl that I would help her get home. I want to meet with her family, with the leaders of her coven. There is a bigger picture at stake here, and I can’t ruin it by thinking with what’s between my legs instead of what’s on my shoulders.

I hear footsteps and turn to see McColl heading this way. The yellow dress Kyrie gave her brings out the warm undertones in her dark hair and makes her skin glow in the filtered morning light. She looks beautiful, and for a moment, I forget how to breathe. I look out over the lake because I’m sure I’m staring.

“Ready for your lesson?” she asks, and her voice is carefully neutral, professional even.

“As ready as I will ever be,” I say, turning to face her. Her eyes drop to my chest,

where they linger on the elaborate marking that covers the left side of my torso, and I see genuine curiosity replace the careful distance in her expression. Her eyes move over the intricate lines of my marking.

“That’s beautiful,” she says softly, stepping closer. “What does it represent? Does it mean anything?”

I glance down at the mark I’ve carried since my coronation – a tree with spreading branches and deep roots, rendered in black ink shot through with streaks of gold and emerald green.

“It’s the royal mark of the Emptyfae Court,” I explain, suddenly self-conscious about her scrutiny. “It is the ancient symbol of my Court. The roots represent our connection to the earth, the branches our reach toward the heavens. The gold marks me as royalty.” I run my hand over it.

“Do all the kings have marks like this?”

I nod. “They do indeed, but each one is unique. Each Court has its own symbol. Xander’s is a heart in red and gold – the bloodfae mark of passion and loyalty. Orion bears a dragon, plus the bonding mark he received when he tethered with Delphine. Damon’s is of intricate ice crystals, representing the precision and beauty of the icefae. All with gold threaded through them for royalty.”

McColl’s eyes continue to rove over the lines of my mark; her fingers twitch as if she wants to trace them, and my skin burns under her scrutiny. She’s just interested in the royal markings, nothing more. It’s academic curiosity. She is, after all, quite the scholar.

“We should start the lesson,” I say, pulling my tunic back over my head.

“It’s such a lovely day for it.” McColl looks up at the sky and then across the valley.

“It is, indeed.”

The day is turning out to be unusually pleasant, with actual hints of sunlight burning through the perpetual haze. The warmth on my skin feels like a gift after the last few cold, gray days.

“All right,” McColl says, all business now. “Let’s start with the basics.”

“I must warn you that my magic feels like it has been growing since I gained access to it.”

“It’s more than likely that you have more access than when you first received your well.”

I nod.