



A Court of Ravens (Land of Shadows #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I thought I was done with secrets.

But the past isn't finished with me yet.

The deeper I dig into a cursed island full of dead legends and living lies, the harder it is to deny what I am. Magic still pulses under my skin. Shadows still whisper my name, and one dangerously infuriating fae prince insists I belong to him.

He says I'm his ceangal. His fated match.

But I don't do fate. I don't do forever.

And I definitely don't fall for monsters.

Too bad my body—and whatever's left of my soul—didn't get the memo.

Between a prophecy I never agreed to, a bond I never wanted, and a man I can't stop thinking about, I'm falling headfirst into a war I was born to start...or end. The Veil is breaking. The courts are choosing sides. And I'm about to find out if love can survive the darkness or if it's the thing that burns us all.

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Chapter One

FELICITY FORREST

“Sidestepping a memory spell? It’s like a night out you’re going to pretend never happened. Resist the spell, but trust me, you’ll wake up wishing all you had was a headache.”

Aisling Talamhain, Revered Seer

My head is doing a drum solo in rhythm to Cyn’s snoring, which I can hear through the wall between our adjoining rooms. It’s courtesy of what feels like a hangover from hell, except I’m sure I only nursed a pint last night. Or did I? Maths were never my strong suit, especially not with a brain that currently feels like someone is stabbing me through the eyes with an ice pick. I don’t remember much from the night before, except a wild dream with him in it.

I groan, shoving my face under a pillow to block out Cyn. It’s like she’s competing with a freight train—and winning. There’s got to be a secret age where hangovers shift from slight headaches to near-death experiences. I must have crossed that threshold around pint number five...or was it six?

I remember sitting with Cyn, Father Cleary, and Jenna at the pub. I vaguely recall us chatting up two guys and Niall walking me back. But there is something off about Niall. Not in a bad way, but different. I can’t put my finger on it. Everything else? Blank. Every time I think of him, it’s like staring into an abyss. Beautiful, but you know you’ll never survive the fall. When I try to focus on him, sharp pain blooms

behind my eyes.

Why does he have me all twisted up? He has Cyn written all over him, yet I'm feeling all...whatever this is. Annoyed? Intrigued? Both? I don't remember anything beyond him walking me from the pub to Pier House.

I'm not looking for anything serious. Last night proves I haven't changed. It's easier to walk away. I wasn't ready to let go, but one more break would end me. Whatever tension sizzled between us? It was a game. I played it right back just to see if he'd flinch. He didn't. That's what makes him dangerous. But thinking about the way his gaze pinned me down and his fingertips brushing the pulse thrumming on my inner wrist is a slippery slope I'm not prepared to fall down. Not when I don't trust him or myself.

I squeeze the pillow tighter over my head to block out the racket outside my window.

Tap, tap, tap.

I peer from beneath the pillow and glance out the window. There's a bird outside, glaring at me like it's got a personal vendetta. I know the feeling, bird. I know the feeling.

With a long sigh, I finally give in to the daylight sneaking through and toss the pillow aside. Fuck.. Everything hurts. My phone starts ringing and buzzing. I fumble around on the nightstand until I find it.

"Hello?" I sound like I've swallowed a handful of sandpaper.

"You sound hungover, but Cyn must be worse because she's not even answering," Nathan says.

I have no idea how things went with Tomas after he and Cyn left the pub. I'm not about to spill any details about her possible late-night hook-up. Not my circus, not my...well, anyway. I'll hear all about her fun over breakfast.

"We had a late one. She's out cold. The priest introduced me to the woman who took the photo. Jenna Hall," I mutter, rubbing my eyes.

"And what's your take on it?" Nathan's voice is all business now. Thank fuck.

I hesitate for a second. "It's hard to say, but after breakfast, Jenna's taking me to the site where she snapped the picture. We'll check out the construction area where all the accidents are supposedly happening."

"Well, don't forget to blog your thoughts as you go along. You know how much the readers love following the case in real-time," Nathan says like that's the most important thing right now.

"Yeah, yeah. Tea and aspirin first, investigative work second."

"And make sure you update me if anything interesting pops up," Nathan adds, but I get what he's implying. I'm not giving him any info on Cyn.

I roll my eyes. "Sure thing. I'll call you tonight."

His voice softens a little. "One last thing before I go..."

"What?"

"Don't let her get too reckless. You know she needs someone to keep her...grounded."

Yeah, as if we're not in the middle of nowhere. The Aran Islands are practically a forgotten corner of the world, but I get it. He's doing what men do when they can't stand being left out—hovering, meddling, and pretending it's for someone else's good. And Nathan? He's not just in love with her; he's practically branded her in his head.

I know how much he cares for her—in his own clingy, borderline leechy way—but he has no idea what he's dealing with. He can ask all the questions he wants, drop as many hints as he likes, but I'm not selling Cyn out.

The only thing I'm focused on is tea, aspirin, and the dream I had last night. Something about horseback riding...but not the wholesome kind. No, this was dark, visceral, and a little too erotic for comfort. Definitely a conversation for Cyn, not Nathan.

“She'll be fine. Talk to you later.” I hang up and groan.

For half a second, I let myself sink into the mattress, the faint scent of detergent, starch, and regret clinging to the sheets. My brain has other plans. Images from last night creep in like smoke under a locked door, curling around my thoughts and refusing to be ignored.

Wild doesn't even begin to cover it. Disjointed fragments come rushing back. Shadows stretched, his voice curling low in my ear, and the way he looked at me, like I'm the only thing in the world that matters, and he doesn't know whether to end me or devour me. Whoa? Where did that come from? How do I know what the fuck he's thinking?

And then there's the rest. The part where he turned into a fucking horse with eyes like moonlight and a coat blacker than sin itself.

What the hell kind of dream is that? Except, it didn't feel like a dream. Not really. Too vivid. Too... solid .

The memory of riding him does things to me. My fingers tangled in his mane, my thighs clamped tight against his frame as he galloped through the darkness. It was wild, raw, and more intimate than anything I've let myself experience in far too long. I didn't just feel alive. I felt claimed.

My thighs ache at the thought. Heat flushes up my neck. I shove the pillow over my face again, as if that might smother the thoughts clawing through my brain.

Of course, it's probably my subconscious being a pervy weirdo. Exhaustion, stress, and whatever magic-infused air this island is pumping into my lungs. That's the logical explanation. I've been investigating a púca after all. It's only natural I dreamed he became one.

But logic feels paper-thin when I think about the rest. The way he shifted back—smooth, inhumanly graceful—and all sharp edges and onyx eyes shot through with amber. Naked. Gloriously, maddeningly naked.

I can still feel the way his lips crushed against mine, demanding, consuming. His hands roamed like he had a map to places I didn't even know I needed touched. For a moment, I gave in. Gave myself over.

And then I pushed him away.

Why? Hell if I know. Survival instinct? Fear? Stupidity? Take your pick.

Whatever the reason, I left him standing in that field—completely naked and more than a little pissed off. My cowardice nags at me.

But there's no time to wallow, not with everything else. The dream—or whatever the hell it was—has tangled itself into the investigation. First fae sighting. First púca sighting. Jenna's comment about a portal. It all feels connected, like a web tightening around me.

The Other Crowd Guidebook for Mortals is no help. Half of it reads like fairy tale nonsense and the rest? Shakespeare with a side of gossip. But then again, the thing has been weirdly accurate so far. And there's a part of me—a part I don't like admitting exists—that can feel it.

There's something here. Something big.

I should've paid more attention to the stories my adopted mum—no, someone—told me about the Shadowborn bloodline, about witches tied to things that don't belong in this world. Back then, I thought it was her way of keeping me from wandering off into the woods. Now? Not so much.

Outside, a sharp caw rips through my muddled thoughts. I groggily lift my head to see that stupid raven again, black as the secrets I'm chasing, perched on my windowsill. It's looking at me like it knows every damn thing. It tilts its head, then taps the glass with its beak, like it's come to deliver the morning paper.

“Well, aren't you just the feathered embodiment of curiosity killed the cat?” I mutter, half-expecting it to answer.

Tap, tap, tap...

Squawk.

That bird. I've definitely seen it before. It showed up last night, staring at me like it had a personal beef with my existence.

I wince at the throb in my skull. Maybe I'm imagining things. I was a little...not entirely sober last night, but the bird doesn't feel like a figment of my overactive brain. It feels like it's waiting for me to do something. Open the window? What, and let it in for tea? Ridiculous.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

The noise is so loud it jolts me upright, but before I can even gather my bearings, the door swings open. Cyn barrels in like a storm front. Her hair is a tangled disaster, like she got into a fight with the wind and lost. I glance back at the window. That bloody raven, the sneaky little menace, is gone.

-I think it's time we talked.- I look up at Cyn, but...hang on. That's not her voice. Did she actually say that? Or did I hear it in my head ?

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Chapter Two

NIALL O'LEARY

“The war between duty and desire is the fiercest battle any king will face. The legacy of our court does not rest solely on the might of our arms but on the courage to honour our duty, even when desire tempts us towards a different path.”

Fallon O'Leary, Advice to his Heir

I toss back the whiskey and set the book aside with a little more force than necessary. I'm clutching at anything that might slow the Aithreach Decline . My father doesn't know I know, and he doesn't need to. He's drowning in his own mess, and the court is circling like crows, all silk and ceremony, ready to dress it up as a fresh start. A new wife. A clean slate. As if that'll scrub the blood from Fallon's hands.

I know better.

I blame him for her death. If he hadn't been so godsdamned set on another son—an heir, or a spare, as he so charmingly put it—then my mum wouldn't have gambled her life bringing Darcy into the world. And she lost. We lost. And now he gets to sit in his grand hall, playing the grieving widower, while the rest of us pick up the shattered pieces.

The cottage is too quiet, the fire crackling faintly in the hearth, a poor distraction from the Sluagh waiting outside its walls. He hasn't spared a thought for his children or the court—at least, not one I can see. He's drowning in whiskey and duty, and

whatever game he's playing, I can't see the pieces yet. Only the old Gods know how long he's got left, but I'd wager he's not planning to leave this world without setting the board in his favour.

I stare at the whiskey for a second, then scoff. Too early for this, probably. But hell, I've done worse, right? I'm not exactly in a position to be picky. And really, it's not like I have anyone to impress.

That's laughable. I should know better than to think I'm not in control. I'm the heir to Fallon's seat. Clan chieftain-in-waiting. Groomed for this since birth, practically predestined for the role. A future leader of a court where 'no' doesn't apply to ambition. Rejection? Not in my vocabulary. It's for people who aren't me.

I stare off into the fire. Those damn lips. The memory of how she kissed me back. That kiss is going to be a problem. It doesn't fit anywhere in my neat little future. It doesn't belong in my plans.

Yet it's nagging at the back of my mind, and I'm still carrying around a semi from last night. Her lips? They consume me. It makes me think of long, languid nights spreading her out beside a slowly dying fire, heat on damp skin, wandering fingertips, wet tongues, her moaning my name.

Fuck. What in the seven hells? She smells like charred wood and honey, a scent that screams Obsidian Court. I only went there once. We attended talks to guarantee that the creatures in the Otherworld beyond the Obsidian Sea and the dark court that guards the passage will remain where they belong. I have my own ideas about keeping the monsters in check. Not that anyone listens. The deal is simple: confine the darkness to its designated corner of the Otherworld. We all have our pride, after all. But I'm not about to admit that she smells like them or that I like it. No.

I take another long drink, feeling the burn settle in my chest. The Obsidian Court.

They're supposed to be the ones guarding those twisted creatures that should never see the light of day. The Sluagh, the Gnáthmharfóirí, the whole damn mess. I've seen them here. They shouldn't be roaming the Ironlands. They lurk in the shadows, invisible unless the moon catches them right. The Gnáthmharfóirí. Ordinary Killers, they call them. Common, my ass. Not with eyes that reflect nothing but emptiness. They look and move like humans, but there's no soul in them. No heart. They don't care who they hurt, don't even notice when they do. Now, they can blend in with the very society they've learned to manipulate and drive your worst fears into hate, despair, or madness. The worst part? They're working with the Sluagh. Feeding off each other, pushing the boundary of what we've been trying to keep sealed away.

The Obsidian Court wards are supposed to hold them. Keep them locked away in the Otherworld, where they belong. Whatever is happening, it's more than a crack in the Veil. It's a goddamn breach. And I don't know if I can stop it in time or protect the woman I haven't stopped thinking about since last night.

My brows furrow deeper than before as I thumb the metal ring on my lip. My knees damn near buckled from the look she shot me over her shoulder as she walked away. When we kissed, I could feel the hunger and craving rolling off her like a storm. A beautiful and dangerous storm that I long to shipwreck inside. It killed me not to follow her and give her the release that would have her sleeping like a kitten. My beast, that vile creature, wanted to tie her to the bed, take her to the edge and deny her any relief to show her how completely depraved he could be. Toy with her for hours, have her hate me for the agony I could so easily inflict. Curse my name with her nails digging into bonds she can't escape and her teeth sinking into my flesh—with pleasure.

Enough of that, you masochistic bastard, I snap at my inner beast.

He huffs as if I'm the biggest idiot in the world. Did you think she'd disappear from your thoughts because you made her forget? Foolish, really.

I ignore him. If I'm supposed to haul some ceangal back, she's definitely the front-runner. And I know that's exactly what my damn stallion wants. Her curves? Yeah, he's already mapped them out. Her lips? After that taste, I'm starting to think maybe there's more to this ceangal business than I gave credit for.

But make no mistake, if I have to go through with this? It'll be with a script. A cold, lifeless script that makes sure there's no room for what I really want to do with her. Because Felicity is a temptation I can't afford. No matter how much my body wants to taste her again.

I pour another shot, my thoughts still tangled in the memory of her lips.

I wonder what the rest of her tastes like , my beast muses.

ENOUGH! I slam the glass down hard enough to make the table shake.

“Keep that up, and I'll toss you into the sea with a rock around your neck. You're acting like you've got no balls left.” Tomas pushes the door open wider, walking in with the disdain of a man who knows exactly how much you're suffering but doesn't give a fuck if you're going to wallow in it like a cunt. He grabs the chair across from mine, pulling it out with a scrape as he sits down. “I've seen better self-control from a rabid dog. You're acting like a child who can't get his toy. Go ahead, pour another one. Maybe it'll make you less of a miserable prick.”

Tomas looks like he's wrestled a bear and lost. “You've finally graced us with your presence. Did you learn anything enlightening while grilling Felicity's companion?”

“Felicity? Is she the woman who captured your attention and has you acting like a love-sick dog who's been kicked?” Tomas grins wickedly, even while feigning innocence, like he doesn't know exactly who she is.

He enjoys fucking with me. I'm not in the mood. "The lass at the pub last night—Felicity—does she pose a threat?"

"Aye, harmless, both of them. The shadows in the bar didn't feel dark. Cold, but neutral." His gaze narrows for a moment. "There's something about the blonde one. Cyn. Wouldn't surprise me if there's a bit of magic in her veins, even if she doesn't know it." He shrugs, dismissing the thought. "But like I said, harmless. Both of them." Then the bastard smirks. "Though I'm shocked you're remembering names now. What's next? Love songs like some fool bard? Gods help us all if you've gone soft."

His taunt scrapes against something raw inside me. Felicity. She's been dismantling me piece by piece since the moment I laid eyes on her. And now Tomas is twisting the knife.

It's not just her sharp tongue or the way her eyes flash when she dodges my questions with clever half-truths. It's those shadows. Dark and lingering, like they're a part of her.

I remember the Obsidian Court's cold stone and the quiet murmur of servants. I remember a little girl with wide, wary eyes, surrounded by shadows her mother held at bay with a single look. Her mother's eyes were sharp, too, full of warning. The way she pulled her daughter away when my father entered the room has never left me. And now, Felicity—her shadows, her secrets—feels like that girl grown up.

Untouchable. Dangerous. Hard to love. That we have in common.

It's not her defiance, but that does things to me I'd rather not admit. It's the sadness, that hollow, faraway look I caught when I asked about her mate. It hit something jagged.

Vicious and Kaida.

The names burn like acid. The sheer intensity of our shared darkness. Together, we were fire and shadow, an intricate knot of pain and pleasure...never meant to fall apart, never meant to be only two. The loss is a gaping wound bleeding beneath the surface. It's safer to keep the walls high and trust no one. Yet I'm haunted by memories I thought buried and shaken by a woman who sees far too much.

Every instinct I have screams to protect her, even if it's from me. The need is almost nauseating in its intensity. I've killed in ways that would make the bravest warrior piss himself, but that look on her face? That's the kind of pain I'd burn the whole damn world to ash to erase.

But I've seen what happens when I let myself feel too deeply. I won't let history repeat itself.

With a smirk, I lean back, keeping my tone light. "Soft? Hardly. Safeguarding the Veil doesn't leave much room for sentimentality."

Tomas grunts. "Aye, but it does seem to leave room for distractions. That lass has you twisted up like a damn knot, even if you won't admit it."

I shrug, a half-smile tugging at my lips. "Let's be real, I'm no hero. And if I happen to enjoy occasional distractions while I do my job, who's to say that's not part of the charm? The devil's in the details."

Tomas shifts in his chair, a sly smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Details. Fascinating. And her hair, what shade might that be?"

Raven black.

Of course, Tomas knows me better than I care to admit. It's irritating, really. "Why? Planning on taking up painting now? Or are you checking to see if I was actually sober last night?"

"Neither. I'm wondering if you've finally met a lass who's managed to tame your wandering eye, and perhaps something else," Tomas taunts, his grin widening like he's in on some delicious secret. "Seems she's carved herself a little deeper than the colour of her hair, hasn't she?"

I grab the whiskey bottle again, pouring myself another shot with the kind of precision that comes from too much practice. "Focus on the Veil, Tomas. Not my life. It's a hell of a lot less complicated, and far less dangerous for you."

Tomas chuckles, leaning in with that glint in his eye that says he's far too entertained. "So, did our intrepid journalist spill any secrets, or were you too distracted by her investigative techniques to notice?"

I throw back a shot. "Oh, we shared a drink, a laugh, and yes, I escorted her back to the inn. She's here for tales of fae lore, armed with nothing but her wit and a rather incriminating photo of you prancing about in your glorious equine form."

Sure, I conveniently left out the part where our moonlit jaunt turned into a solitary sprint—not just because she stopped, but because I realised I was on the brink of kicking off the prophecy, and I didn't give a damn as long as I had her. But what I want doesn't matter, does it?

Some find forever in our twilight existence, but not everyone gets a happy ending. And if I'm forced to put her on that path, well...I'm not sure which of us will survive the fallout.

"Aye, if she writes that story, it'll draw eyes to the island. The old believers, those

who've forgotten, might start remembering. That'd leave the Veil wide open, forcing us back to the old ways of constant vigil to keep the darker creatures in our world from crossing," Tomas speculates.

"She won't write it," I say, more to convince myself than him.

Tomas raises an eyebrow. "And you're sure of that, are ye? On what grounds?"

My mind can't help but drift back to the feel of her. Her body pressed so close to mine under the moonlight. She wants me, craves me, and I feel it in every stolen glance, every subtle shift when I'm near. And if she wants me, she won't let that story slip.

"I've got my methods," I reply, the corner of my mouth pulling up with an almost guilty pleasure.

Tomas leans in, mock innocence written all over his face. "And these methods are?"

"I've got more than one way to keep her mouth shut, and not all of them involve words," I say, smirking as I pour another shot. The arrogance fits like a second skin—natural, easy. Hell, I could have half this damn court naked and tied up in vines if I wanted to. The whiskey burns going down, but it's nothing compared to the fire she's already lit.

Tomas grunts. "Gods help us all if your dick's doing the talking again."

"Don't forget," I say, my voice dipping into something smooth and deadly, "this isn't just about her. If I don't take a ceangal, my sister's fate is as good as signed in blood." I let the silence stretch, letting Tomas scowl in his ignorance of my real intentions. He doesn't need to know. Transfer the Gloam mark to someone else. Perhaps Cyn. "But understand this," I add, my lips curling into a snarl. "I won't let

her fall to Madden. If that's the only option left, I'll burn this court to the ground and salt the ashes. And I'll do it with a smile."

Tomas gives me a look. "Your sister can handle herself."

"You think I'm protecting her because she's weak? She's the most dangerous one in this court. It's about what it'll cost her."

With a sneer, I grab my whiskey glass and toss it hard at the fireplace. The glass slams into the brick with a satisfying thud, and the impact cracks the brick before the glass shatters into pieces. That's how you make a point.

"I'll handle Felicity, too," I growl, my eyes never leaving Tomas. "I'll make damn sure she writes exactly what we want. And the secrets of the Veil? Not a word, not a whisper."

He pushes himself up slowly. "Aye, you think she'll fall in line? You can't cage something like her. Those shadows? And she chases monsters with a pen, but trust me, that's as dangerous as any weapon. You don't mind the pain, do you?" He shoots me a look, cruel and knowing. I open my mouth to retort, but he keeps goading me. "Because she'll wear you down before you ever get a sentence out of her. You won't even see it until you're too far gone." Tomas shakes his head and grabs his coat from the back of the chair. He pauses, sizing me up with a twisted grin. "But I'm sure you'll have a laugh trying. Don't worry, I'll make sure the crows get the first pick of your bones when she's done shredding you. Can't have 'em going hungry." Tomas shrugs on his coat. He heads toward the door, patting me on the back with far too much force. "Good luck with her, Niall. It's a brilliant plan."

And with that, he's gone, the door slamming behind him like a prison gate.

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Chapter Three

FELICITY FORREST

“I’m immune. So are the lucky ones, but because we won’t mix our blood, that nasty sickness has spread even worse through the Crimson Court. It messes with our heads, driving us mad. And when I say mad, I mean really mad, doing unspeakable things, even to the ones we love.”

Princess Liora remarked on Edict VII

I groan as Cyn crash-lands on my bed, hair flying in a wild halo. I lift my head from my pillow fortress just in time to catch her smirk. She doesn’t need an invitation. She barrels in like a one-woman storm.

I roll my eyes, but there’s a tug at the corner of my mouth that betrays me. She’s all fire and sass, every movement charged with some energy that feels like she could tear through the world, leaving nothing but high winds and broken promises in its wake. I’m not big on cosmic signs, but something about us just slots together. Like we’ve done this dance a thousand times before.

From the moment we met, it was like fate decided we’re perfect partners in crime. It’s not like there’s a grand, magical moment—no lightning bolts or angelic choirs, just the pull of something I can’t explain. Maybe I’m overthinking it. I usually am.

Cyn flops onto her back, her hair moving like there’s a breeze only she can feel. My heart does a weird little stutter. There’s a glint in her eyes, something playful yet

wild. She studies me like she's about to share a secret too dangerous to keep. "You're not going to believe last night."

"Judging by that smugness, I'm guessing you didn't have a boring night," I say, propping myself up with a pillow.

"Oh, it wasn't the worst," Cyn says, voice dripping with dark satisfaction like she's savouring the memory of something wicked. "Tomas hung onto every word like I was reciting Shakespeare. And honestly? While I'm more about actions than words, the way he listens...I might keep him around past breakfast."

"Wow, a whole meal? Tragic. You're practically domesticated," I deadpan.

She throws a pillow at me, landing it square in my face. I burst out laughing. "Laugh all you want, but there's something about him. He's different. Even held back on kissing me goodnight, acting all gentlemanly."

"And here I thought chivalry was dead. Buried under your 'one night only' policy."

Cyn pouts, mock-offended. "Hey, I can appreciate a slow burn. Seriously, it's like we've already...you know. I woke up feeling like I've been training for the Olympics on his hips."

I snicker, a sympathetic ache curling in my thighs because, let's be real, I'm sore in places I didn't know existed. "Maybe in another life, you two were gymnasts."

Her expression twists into something even more devilish, if that's even possible. Honestly, she could pull off the whole Victoria's Secret angel thing—wings and all—as long as she kept her mouth shut. But, of course, she doesn't. She's about to pull me into something I didn't sign up for. And yet, that's exactly why I love her.

“Enough about me, Flick,” she says, her tone dropping like she’s about to uncover a scandal. “How’d it go with Niall?”

I grimace, my mind filled with frustration and confusion, like it’s trying to pick between screaming or shutting down. “Let’s just say we shared a moment. But today is about work. I’ve got an article that won’t write itself.”

A shadow shifts by the window—too fast to be a trick of the light. The hair on the back of my neck prickles. I blink, convincing myself it’s nothing.

Cyn sighs dramatically, flopping back onto the bed. “You’re not even paying attention, are you? You and your work. You know, there’s this crazy concept called ‘fun.’ You should try it sometime.”

“And miss out on the thrill of deadlines? Never.”

She leans back, the corners of her lips tugging upwards. “Come on, it’s my birthday weekend. And you need a distraction. Besides...” Her eyes glitter with dangerous amusement. “Niall’s got that dark brooding vibe, like he’d ruin you in the best way and leave you begging for more. Might even throw your whole blog into a new...genre.”

Every step I take toward him feels like surrendering to the kind of trap you never want to escape. A trap with teeth, claws, and promises that bite. “Fine, but if this ends with me being the scandal of the century on my own blog, I’m coming for your smug ass.”

Cyn bursts into laughter, filling the room with her massive confidence. “Deal. But seriously, Felicity, let loose a little.”

I wince. Blood blooms in my memory. A crooked smile, one I trusted, fractured by

betrayal. I can't remember why. Can't piece together what I've done. But I know it's my fault, and the guilt tastes as bitter as the blood I can almost feel on my hands. Leaping headfirst into whatever this is? It feels like swapping one set of emotional handcuffs for another. "Right now, focusing on my work seems less like a choice and more like a survival strategy," I admit quietly.

Cyn narrows her eyes at me. "You're dodging. Cute. That's my thing. Since when did you become a pro at it?"

I shrug. "Since my heart decided it needed to dig graves for all the bloodstained mistakes I can't quite forget." Emotions suck.

Her sigh is heavy. "Come on, we're on vacation. Kind of. Don't make it a boring one. The only way to stop running is to take the damn plunge. And if you don't do it now, you'll regret it. Trust me."

"I guess I specialize in tragic romances," I mutter, trying to joke through the ache.

Cyn lifts her chin. "Maybe. Or maybe you just haven't found someone who's as much of a beautiful disaster as you are."

For a second, I let myself believe her. But the truth is, the ruin I bring destroys everything. It's the kind that leaves deep, ugly scars and wreckage smoldering in its ashes. There's a hollow void inside me I can't fix. It pulls people close only to push them away when it gets too real. If I could figure out the reason, maybe I could stop the ache in my chest and finally breathe again.

"You're stronger than you think. And way more badass." Cyn squeezes my hand, her gaze practically daring me to disagree.

I nod, sucking in a deep breath. "I know. Every time I think I'm over it, something

like this happens and it's like I'm stuck in the past." I wrinkle my nose. "It's like trying to walk off a broken leg."

"We'll get you a cast made of steel. And whiskey," Cyn adds, a grin tugging at her lips.

I smile. "Steel and whiskey. Sounds like the title of my autobiography."

But the damage? It's a wound as wide as Galway Bay. Suddenly, the scent of blood fills my nostrils. My hands are slick with it. His mouth is frozen in something between a scream and disbelief. The vision claws at me, but it blurs just as quickly.

I blink hard, the image twisting into the last guy I dated. His easy smile and the way he called me "trouble," like that's supposed to be a compliment. That's where the memory lands, safe and dull by comparison. My pulse steadies, the confusion in my head retreating into the dark corners where it hides.

"You okay?" Cyn asks, her brow raised in a way that says she already knows I'm not.

"Peachy," I deadpan. "Just revisiting my personal highlight reel of 'What the Hell Was I Thinking?' starring my ex. It's a lot to unpack."

Cyn snorts. "Emotions are fucking messy. But they're also what make you strong. And you? You're stronger than I've ever seen you. Come on, spill."

I let out a shaky laugh. Then drag a hand down my face, deciding whether to bury this under another layer of sarcasm. But Cyn's seen me at my lowest, and this? It's confusing. "It's not just that I've let things happen to me. It's like my life doesn't even feel like... mine. Like someone else has been pulling the strings all along, and I'm the one bleeding for it. The worst part?" My voice drops, quieter now. "I think I'm starting to remember who's been holding the strings. I know it sounds fucking

crazy.”

“Reflection is good. Drowning in it? Not so much. You know, for someone who’s kicked as much ass as you have, you’re really letting your inner badass gather dust.”

I can’t help but snicker. “My inner badass is on a sabbatical. Indefinite leave.”

“Well, she’s being called back to duty. Effective immediately.” Cyn raises an eyebrow, giving me her challenge. I notice the room suddenly feels warmer, almost as if the temperature is responding to her confidence. A few moments ago, the room was cool, but now, it feels like it’s been heated by a thousand candles. Her smile is calm and collected, like she’s somehow making the air bend to her will. I shake my head because that’s insane. “Bet you can’t jump back into the dating pool before we leave this island. The water’s fine. I promise.”

I shoot her my best I’m-not-buying-it look. “You’re betting me to get laid? That’s your grand plan for my emotional revival?”

“I’m suggesting you dip a toe. Or whatever else you feel like dipping.” She snickers. “I’ll even make it interesting. Bet you won’t seal the deal before I do.”

Her audacious challenge sparks a rebellious flame, wanting to prove her wrong and to myself that I’m not defined by the past. “You’re on, witch.”

Her laughter rings out. My shoulders relax, the tension melting away. There’s something about her presence, like a breath of fresh air. I forget about everything, even the gnawing ache of the past.

Cyn mock punches me in the shoulder. “That’s the spirit. The loser buys the winner a bottle of the good stuff.”

I smirk. “Prepare your wallet. You’re going down.”

“Ha! We’ll see about that. May the best slut win.”

I shake on it, grateful for her wild ways. I never imagined my recovery would start with a bet on lust. But with Cyn? Anything is possible.

She wraps me into a hug, her arms squeezing the air from my lungs. Suddenly, the room feels colder. I glance toward the window. For a split second, I’m sure I see someone levitating outside watching us. When I blink, they’re gone.

But then...that voice.

-Felicity, we need to talk. Viceeee will kiiiill you. You can’t wait to claaaaim your place. Meet me. Meeet meeeee at...-

It buzzes inside my mind, scraping the edges of my thoughts like nails on glass. The words aren’t mine. I want to fight it, shove it back into whatever dark corner it crawled out of.

The voice is louder now, like it’s pressing on the inside of my skull, trying to carve its way out. - I see you.-

I squint at the window, trying to focus on whatever I’m not seeing. The sky is grey. Empty. Nothing unusual. It makes me wonder if I’m losing it.

Cyn’s arms tighten around me, warm and solid. Real . The voice—whatever it was—flickers out, like a spark smothered too quickly to catch.

I exhale slowly, but it doesn’t feel like enough. The silence is too thick, too still, like something is out of reach, waiting for me to look away from the window.

-The fae can hear your thoughts. You need to get better at shielding. They've always known your secrets. And soon, you'll know ours, too.-

I push the voice out of my head, wrapping it in vines, suffocating it. That feeling lingers. It feels like someone has a hand at the back of my neck, cold and far too fucking familiar.

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Chapter Four

NIALL O'LEARY

“Every whisper about us tugs at the seams, loosening that fragile boundary. It’s all very dramatic, really. It’s a reminder of an ancient pact nobody quite remembers the terms of. And when the Veil finally gives, like a too-small dam giving way to a flood, the Otherworld folk start slipping through. Not that they ever wait politely.”

Book of Shadows (Tír na ScáilLost History), Forgotten Tomes Archive

A pulse. It thrums through me, setting the beast inside on edge. My teeth ache. The air tastes like salt and storm. This isn’t the first time I’ve felt this pull, this... wrongness . It dragged me to that pub last night. It’s led us to a construction site on a cliff, where the wind howls and the sea snarls.

Tomas is next to me, his massive frame hidden behind a stone wall. The damp seeps through my bones. I ignore it. Ahead, the man from the pub—one of the two the priest stopped to speak with—is locked in a heated argument with someone who looks like he stepped out of a boardroom.

Suitman , I decide. His shoes gleam, his hair slicked back like he’s auditioning for a role he’ll never land. There’s something off about him. It prickles at the edges of my awareness, like static in the air before a storm. His energy is... wrong . Not human. Not fae. Just wrong.

The Irishman jabs a finger into Suitman’s chest, spittle flying as he shouts about

sacred land and defilement. Suitman's composure cracks, but it's not fear in his eyes. It's colder. Calculated. If he tossed the Irishman over the cliff right now, I wouldn't be surprised. I might even applaud. The waves look ready for it. I can taste the violence in the air. And part of me hopes one of them goes over. It would save me the trouble. One less knave for me to follow.

But Suitman storms off to talk with one of the workers.

"Well," Tomas grunts, his voice like gravel. "Looks like we've got ourselves a prime suspect."

I don't bother looking at him. "Since when do humans have enough draíocht to mess with the Veil? It's not the Irishman."

"Must be a new trend we missed." His scarred face twists into something resembling a grin.

"How unfortunate for them."

The argument carries on the wind. I catch fragments of words like broken glass. Money. Greed. Corruption. It grates against my nerves. Sacred? I sympathise with the angry Irish lad, but...all land is sacred until someone slaps a price tag on it and carves it up. The irony isn't lost on me, though I doubt either of these fools would appreciate the lesson.

The island is a place that makes you forget time doesn't stop no matter how much we might want to return to a simpler life. Well, until something like this happens. The foundation is being laid, sticking out like a bruise on the landscape. It's an insult. I can't decide if I want to fix it or burn it all down.

The rhythms of the island are discordant. Humans glued to glowing rectangles and

endless chatter—it's all noise . It used to feel like home. Now, it's like a song out of tune. I can't shake the feeling that something is coming, and it's worse than the blight of construction welded in the name of progress.

I'm not the only one who thinks so. The man yelling stands rigid, fists clenched, glaring at the scaffolding like he's willing it to crumble. I share his desperate need to keep this place from being carved into something unrecognisable.

Gravel crunches. The priest and the woman from last night—Felicity and her friend—join him, voices low but loud enough to carry on the wind. My stallion's ears twitch.

Because she's here.

Felicity.

The ceangal sears through my chest, my veins, my bones. A wildfire, burning through every shred of control I've held together. The bond is a godsdamned curse—not arranged, not bound by duty or tradition, but by something far worse. Hunger. It hits so deep I want to tear the world apart to keep her safe.

And it's unbearable.

“This is my brother, Michael,” the priest says, gesturing to the angry man. “And this is Felicity Forrest. She's the writer sent here to research our púca legends.”

The priest has a brother. That's relevant.

Michael barely nods, still simmering. “Pleased to meet you. Your timing is impeccable. This resort? Sacred ground.”

“Do you ever wonder if maybe you’ve got too much time on your hands?” the priest mutters.

“We’re inviting a curse. That’s Tuatha Dé Danann land—their mark remains. They sank into the hills. That’s why you don’t touch it. You dig here, you’re disturbing them. And the fae? They take you . Turn your soul into a candle to light their halls forever. But sure, go ahead, build your fancy hotel. Don’t say I didn’t warn you when your workers start hearing the bean sídhe . I’m going to head on now.”

I snort. Sacred ground. The words sit wrong in my mouth, too clean for something so messy. Humans toss them around like zoning designations. Sacred Ground. Industrial District. Residential Subdivision. They forget the layers beneath. The land remembers, even when they don’t. They lay foundations with rebar and hubris, but if the ground is sacred, it doesn’t forget. And it sure as hell doesn’t forgive.

This isn’t about superstition or stones polished smooth by time. It’s about a pact as old as the first crossing between our worlds. Humans took our draíocht . Magic. They bled us for ambition. And we let them. Until it was too much.

They turned away from the land when the pact wasn’t enough to satisfy greed. Hatred for anything different. The Other Crowd. What came after was worse. Encampments. Experiments. Wing clippings. Blackthorn wood. Briar root yew. Iron. Beheadings. Until finally, we said enough. We saved ourselves—and them—from what lies below the Veil, beyond the sea, in the darkness of the Otherworld. They don’t know what’s out there. It slips through sometimes. Dark fairytales. Nightmares. Lore. There’s always a grain of truth.

Michael’s dramatics twist truth into tragedy, but there’s a kernel in it. The draíocht at the pub might not be from the priest. His brother is a better suspect.

I glance at the foundation stabbing into the earth like a wound. The restless hum

beneath my feet confirms it.

“Michael has always leaned into the old tales a bit heavily. Don’t mind him,” the priest says with a nervous laugh.

Felicity’s question cuts through the noise. “Are there others on the island who feel the same about this resort?”

Smart woman. Brains, curves, and questions that matter. A rare combination. She doesn’t dance around things, which I respect. These mortals, though—they’re poking a badger and expecting it not to bite.

Sure, resorts mean money, but it’s a funny thing, income. Doesn’t mean much when the land you’re standing on decides it’s had enough of you.

The priest shifts uncomfortably. “Aye, there’s a few that aren’t too fond of the idea. Believe me, I had to get used to the thought of relocating my church.”

“Why do you have to relocate?” Felicity asks, her voice snagging on the air.

She’s stronger than most fae I’ve met. It’s unsettling how easily she uses mindspeak, like it’s merely another tool in her arsenal.

The priest gestures at the stone church stubbornly clinging to the hillside. The building looks like it’s been here forever and will still be here long after the scaffolding has rusted into oblivion.

“Aye, the developers bought it, but they paid enough for me to build another.”

The priest and his brother? Are they the ones screwing with the Veil? Together or separately? I’m not sure which one I trust less, but maybe I’m wrong.

“This isn’t far from where Jenna took the picture of the púca,” Felicity says, nodding towards the woman. “We went there this morning. Nothing but fog and sheep.”

“The púca ride at night,” the priest says.

“Well, I’ll be going. I have to pack since I leave tomorrow. Good luck,” Jenna says with a wave.

I lean against the stone wall, concealed by its bulk. I guess some locals still remember a thing or two about the fae. Good for them, I think, a faint sneer twisting my mouth.

Daylight...always a trial. Shifting under the moon’s light isn’t merely easier. It’s almost a kindness compared to the searing agony daylight brings.

“I’d like a word with the owner,” Felicity murmurs to the priest, but I can hear them from here. Perks of being fae.

“With pleasure,” the priest says, leading the way to Suitman, who’s concluding a tête-à-tête with a worker.

My inner beast recoils. Suitman’s too-perfect polished finish feels like a mask stretched thin over something monstrous. His seemingly normal eyes hold a strange hollowness, making my skin crawl.

“What can I do for you?” Suitman asks, his shadow stretching long across the ancient stones.

The priest introduces Suitman to Felicity as one called Archer.

Felicity disarms him with a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. “My readers are dying to know what haunts your cranes and cement mixers.” Her pale hand waves toward

the site, impossibly ivory. Like moonlight made flesh.

Suitman flinches, guilt or discomfort, I can't tell which. But I note it, the way a predator stalks its prey.

Her hand lands on his sleeve. Territorial possessiveness twists in my chest.

Gods, I'm fucking obsessed with her. Every minute of every godsdamned day, every breath between heartbeats. I dream of her in the night, in waking visions that tear at my sanity. She. Is. Mine. The beast inside me bares its teeth, promising violence. I will rip his heart out and feed it to the tide.

Tomas's voice cuts through the red haze. "Planning to duel for her honour?" His tone drips with equal parts amusement and warning.

Bastard.

I turn my glare on him, voice dropping to a growl. "I need to talk to her."

Tomas grins. "Aye, I bet you do."

"Keep her friend entertained for a while."

Tomas shakes his head, sea spray glistening in his dark hair from his run earlier. "And how do ye propose I do that? She nearly jumped me last night. It was all I could do to fend her off."

"Take her to the beach. Willweave her, if you must." I wave dismissively. "How you do it doesn't matter. I've got business with her."

"I know it's been a while since you've gone beyond the Veil, but a woman could get

the wrong idea about a beach,” Tomas says drily.

“Stop being a pain in me hole. It’s a bunch of dirt,” I snarl, the beast pacing closer to the surface.

“‘Bunch of dirt,’” Tomas repeats with a snort-laugh. “Right. Maybe I should give her a box of candy while I’m at it?”

I ignore him, focusing on Felicity. The site’s shadows seem to reach for her, hungry things recognising their own. Wait... They stretch high above Archer, as if he’s a lodestone for darkness. But why?

Archer’s voice breaks through my haze. “Tools move. Messages carved into the foundation.”

“What kind of messages?” Felicity asks.

“‘Leave here. The fae will come for you.’ It’s harmless.” Archer smiles, but there’s a viciousness in the corners of his mouth. “Probably, someone trying to tell us they don’t want us here. They didn’t need to carve it for me to figure that out. Almost everyone has welcomed us.” Archer shifts his gaze to the priest when he says ‘almost.’ “This will expand tourism and bring revenue to the island.”

He could’ve meant the priest’s brother, Michael. They’d been at each other’s throats earlier. Felicity catches it, too—knowledge flashing across her face before she schools her features back to neutrality.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Archer,” she says, extending her hand.

“My pleasure,” he replies, taking it.

“Come on.” I move towards a gap in the ancient wall, stones worn by centuries of salt wind. “Be inventive. It’s not for the sake of small talk. I need to know more and she may have answers.”

“Don’t start any brawls over misplaced affections,” Tomas quips.

I ignore him, walking towards the group, boots crunching against the gravel. Felicity turns, her gaze catching on me. My beast perks up at her pulse quickening, a staccato beat enough to distract me.

She won’t remember our ride, that much I’ve made sure of, but at least she won’t be mad at me—for now. She may look soft, but the fire in her could leave a man singed if he steps too close. I see the spark, the potential for inferno, and a cruel impulse takes hold. I want to control that fire, to watch it dance at my will, even if it burns us both in the end.

And then, for a moment, I see them. Horns. Faint and shadowy, tips curling like indigo smoke before vanishing. What the fuck? My steps falter, the memory of the Obsidian Court pressing at the edges of my mind. It doesn’t make sense. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, the Other Crowd loves its secrets.

I swallow hard, brushing off the chill creeping up my spine. There’s no time to unpack what that means, not yet. The horns and shadows and mindspeak don’t belong, but the fire? Oh, that fucking fits. It’s a power I recognize, a game I intend to win.

Time to see if she can handle the heat of a fae—a púca—on her trail. And while she’s trsing to catch me, I’ll be busy claiming the prize. Her.

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Chapter Five

FELICITY FORREST

“Some truths are whispered directly to our souls, felt deeply and known without question.”

Queen Beatrice Blackthorn Shadowhart, Shadowborn Witch, Queen of the Obsidian Court (deceased)

The sun casts Niall in a glow that’s messing with my hormones. Seriously, the way the light plays on his hair, turning those waves into liquid embers? It’s illegal. It absolutely should be against some celestial law. And yeah, he’s breathtaking—like, annoyingly so—but the crow’s feet around his eyes, the kind that crinkles when he smiles? That’s what sends me. It’s like a tiny billboard saying, this man has seen some shit, but he’s still standing.

I’m deep in my Niall-centric spiral when Cyn jabs into my side hard enough to make me grunt.

“Pay attention,” she hisses, dragging me out of my shameless ogling.

The priest has been talking, but nope, I didn’t catch a word. I was way too busy mentally composing bad poetry about Niall’s hair.

Dammit. “Thank you for your time, Father. You’ve been very helpful.” My voice is a little breathless. His eyes are on me, devouring me, as he walks towards me, like he’s

coming to collect what's his.

"Aye, hope it's been a help for your story," he says with a warm smile. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting with a parishioner about our summer bake sale. We're trying to perfect the recipe for our rhubarb crumble—it's a closely guarded secret, ye know. You ladies have a good day, now." He gives a small, friendly nod.

As the priest moves away, I glance towards the ancient stone church, its Celtic cross gleaming in the sunlight, and there's a flash of black fur against the weathered grey of the building. My breath hitches. Half-hidden in the shadows, sits the cat. The same one with that infuriatingly intelligent, lavender gaze. It doesn't move or break eye contact. It's watching me with an intensity that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Ash? The thought flickers through my mind before I can shove it away. It can't be. I don't have a cat.

-You don't have a cat. I have a pet,- a snarky feline voice speaks inside my mind, - and I'm starting to think you need a leash.-

Oh gods. -Shut up. You're not real. I'm losing my mind.-

-I'm getting tired of your denial.- He licks his paw, staring at me knowingly.

I blink.

Cyn's elbow strikes again. Honestly, if elbowing me was an Olympic sport, she'd have a gold medal by now.

"Yeowch, Cyn," I hiss, rubbing my side. "What's with the assault?"

Her grin is all teeth. "Making sure our little bet hasn't slipped your mind."

My eyes narrow. “Oh, it’s on my radar, alright. And so is your defeat.”

She snickers, completely unbothered. “We’ll see, princess. We’ll see.”

Niall walks toward us. His scent—musk and something wilder , something other —floods my senses. The memory of his heat, the taste of him...a dream, maybe? But the feel of him, the raw power...He shifted. He kissed me, tried to erase it. Didn’t work. And now, the púca. Him. Or was it?

“Isn’t it a fine morning, a stór ?”

I frown. I don’t know what it means. It’s probably something insulting, knowing my luck. Internal me is peeved and wondering what the hell he’s doing here. External me manages, “Grand.” My eyes narrow. I’m one breath away from saying something mortifying, like I’m compelled to tell the truth or can’t lie or at least not easily, like my handy guidebook talks about the fae. I hate this . I hate him . And I hate that my brain apparently short-circuits whenever he’s within a ten-foot radius. “And what does a stór mean anyway?”

He moves in, his breath ghosting my ear. “Some things are best experienced, not explained.”

Oh, for fucks sake! The string linking me to him that I hoped I imagined in the pub last night tugs again, like a phantom limb aching for a connection I don’t understand and don’t want. The universe thinks it’s funny, doesn’t it? Throwing this... specimen ...in my path. The staring, the possessive air—it’s all so predictable. He thinks he’s got me pegged, a wide-eyed doe ripe for the taking. He’s wrong. So very wrong.

“Morning, Tomas. Sleep well?” Cyn purrs.

Tomas, bless him. He looks mentally prepared to swim the English Channel to

escape. “Aye, fine morning.”

“Walk with me, love.” Niall smiles wickedly, his hand reaching out to grasp mine. He brushes against my skin making my blood heat.

He exchanges a look with Tomas, some silent bro code in action.

Walking it is then . He didn’t ask, exactly, but whatever. It’s not like my legs are cooperating with any other plan anyway. Damn this... thing between us. It’s like my inner compass has decided he’s magnetic north. My inner eye-roll is epic. “You know, most people ask before they decide what we’re doing.”

Niall raises an eyebrow. His smile has a slow, predatory curve. I take his hand anyway. Masochist, I think, but the word is more of a purr than a reprimand. It makes me think of that damn cat, but I don’t know why. The heat radiating off him isn’t just intense. It’s filthy . It makes promises of pain and pleasure, of domination and surrender. It makes me want to crawl closer, even knowing I’m going to burn. And yeah, maybe I’ll end up a pile of ashes. But some things are worth dying for. And I have a feeling that with him, the experience will be... ruinous .

* * *

NIALL O’LEARY

Now that’s a look. The glare she gives Cyn could wither an entire field of wildflowers. It screams, I’m going to murder you. Cyn either doesn’t notice or is pretending she doesn’t. Honestly, it’s hard to tell. Some people are immune to the laws of social survival. The wheels turn like Felicity is debating whether walking with me is a good idea. It’s not, it’s a very bad idea. I’m full of them, but I can’t decide if she’s nervous because of me or because her friend seems hell-bent on throwing her to the wolves. Probably both. I catch the faintest twitch of her lips.

Irritation rolls off her, and it's all I can do not to grin.

Then her scent hits me. Warm. Wild. It wraps itself around my senses and yanks me off balance. My beast stirs. Ours, he growls. I have to fight the need to agree. She shouldn't have this pull on me. No one should, but I'm stupidly drawn to her. The bond is suffocating. I shouldn't even be looking at her. This thing between us can't go anywhere good. One wrong step or moment of weakness could destroy us both. Or worse.

Cyn brought up some wager before we headed over. Of course, I heard it. Fae hearing is rarely a blessing. A bet. On me. My jaw tightens. I have to push down the flare of heat in my chest. The beast in me doesn't take kindly to being treated like a game. Neither do I. Felicity makes me want to play along anyway.

Even so, when her eyes meet mine, it doesn't matter. My breath catches. She stands defiant, ready for anything. Human? Barely. Mindspeak? Impossible—I've said so myself. But she wields it anyway, oblivious to the boundaries she shatters. Prophecy, duty, my sister, Madden, the end of worlds, survival—gone. Just her.

Because she's devastating. A ghost of a smile touches her lips as she tilts her head. She's a theorem I'm obsessed with cracking, a viper coiled in velvet, a flame dancing on the edge of my control. A slow burn. Every second near her is exquisite torture, a study in restraint. I want to see how far I can push her before she pushes back. Then I'm going to dissect her, piece by delicious piece.

My gaze is a brand on her skin. Felicity fidgets, the flush staining her chest and neck a delicious crimson. She knows I see. The thought vibrates between us, a tangible tension. This isn't innocent flirtation. It's the bond. I should walk away. Always walk away. The logic is impeccable, the execution...impossible. The ceangal pulls me irresistibly toward her flame. And my need wars with a past I'm not ready to face. Not now. Maybe in a few centuries, a thousand years...whatever. Because losing

someone leaves a hole. A gaping, agonizing hole. No amount of magic, no whispered incantations, can ever fill it. Never. But gods...she's playing with fire. And I...I'm fascinated by the flames.

-Keep Cyn busy.- I command Tomas with mindspeak.

His mental groan is practically audible. -Fine, but you owe me. Big.-

“Have you been down to the beach, Cynthia?” Tomas asks.

“Not yet. Why don't you show me?” she says, hooking a hand through his arm.

Tomas peers down at Cyn. There's a flicker in his eyes, a shadow that vanishes as quickly as it appears before he smooths his features into an impassive mask. “Do you mind if I borrow your friend?”

Cyn nods her encouragement.

Felicity purses her lips. “Of course not. Have fun, you two.”

Her gaze avoids mine, clinging to Cyn and Tomas as if they're lifelines. A futile display of pretence. Her body tells a different story. The subtle tremor in her hand, the almost imperceptible quickening of her breath...that's an unintentional tell.

“And you? How was your night?” I ask.

“Fine,” she says, meeting my eyes, but the colour rising to her cheeks tells a different story. Her gaze darts away, like a cornered animal. It's not a reaction you expect from idle conversation. No, this is the look of someone wrestling with a memory they shouldn't have, a memory I stole.

Regret gnaws at me. She deserves a love that consumes her but doesn't hold her back. A life packed with adventure, the chance to face any damn challenge she chooses. Even a little danger...if she's that kind of reckless. Gods, not me. Not what last night almost became.

I can't tell if she's grasped at some sliver of the truth or if it's the guilt crawling under my skin, whispering that I've already let her get too close.

My gaze lands on the ocean. "Fine. Shall we walk a bit?"

She nods, her steps falling into rhythm with mine. We walk in silence, careful not to touch. The silence stretches between us, not empty but alive. Each glance pulls me closer to her.

She doesn't realise the power she wields. She doesn't know that every quiet moment like this only deepens my need to stay near her and learn the mysteries behind her guarded eyes.

I glance at her, watching how the sunlight catches the lines of her face. There's a tension in her shoulders, an edge to her movements, but she's softening, little by little. The silence should calm me, but my beast stirs beneath my skin. Restless. Ravenous. It's a battle to hold him back, to keep from doing something careless.

As we walk, a flash of black catches my eye. The cait-shìth again. That intelligent lavender gaze locks on me. Watching me. What's its game? I scan the shadows, searching for answers. It's following us.

She breaks the quiet, a glint in her eye. "Tell me something interesting. Something about your family. The messy parts."

"Two younger sisters. One's a pain in the arse, but what are you going to do? And my

da..." I trail off, watching her reaction closely. Obsidian Court. Shadows. Does she know?

She toys with a loose thread on her fingerless leather gloves, twisting it between her fingers like it might unravel something more. Then, as if catching herself, she shoves her hands into her pockets, locking away the fidgeting before it betrays her. "What about your mum?"

Sharing about my sisters and father is a carefully crafted illusion. My mother...a name I keep locked away, a secret I won't share for Darcy's sake. A shadow that whispers of his deal with the deep ones. A future with me? A strategic alliance, a game of power. Just like her. Distance. It's the only way to maintain my autonomy. The salt stings my eyes, even here.

"She died giving birth to my youngest sister," I say, my gaze drifting away. A closed door. No body. No ceremony. Whispers. Betrayal. And Darcy's eyes, so green, like polished jade. A shade I've only seen in... My thoughts trail off. A chill settles deep in my bones.

"I'm sorry, Niall," she says, her voice less guarded. She shifts slightly, the rigidness in her posture easing.

Her compassion cuts through me. It's gentler than I deserve. "Don't be. It was a long time ago."

She tilts her head, her brow furrowing. "It must have been hard growing up in a house with sisters."

A laugh slips out. "Aye, they can be a handful." I let the corner of my mouth lift. It's easier to talk about them. "Sometimes, though, you make sacrifices for family. And after a while, you realise it wasn't as much of a sacrifice as you thought."

Her eyes soften. “It’s sweet. You must love them very much.”

“Aye,” I say, meeting her gaze. It’s like she’s trying to look right through me, and for a second, I wonder what she’s hoping to find. Sadness flickers across her face. It’s gone so fast that it feels like I imagined it. Then comes the smile, polished enough to pass as genuine. It’s not. It’s armour. She doesn’t even know she’s wearing it, but I do.

Maybe she’s thinking about her parents again. She told me she lost them. It hits me harder than it should. Thank the old gods, I still have my twin and Darcy. The rest? A crown, a father, a court that feels more like a cage than a home? She’s got no one, but some days, I envy that.

But she doesn’t need anyone else. Not when I’m standing right here.

The thought should sit wrong. It doesn’t. My beast stirs. She wouldn’t have to keep patching herself together if I tore the armour off and did it for her. But what the hell do I have to offer? Violence? Obsession? A one-way ticket to everything I walked away from?

I’ve spent the last century and a half drinking too much dubh fíon , making reckless choices, and proving exactly why some bastards shouldn’t be left alone with their own thoughts. And now I’m supposed to pull back? For her? When I could drag her down, claim her, ruin her—even if she’s poison?

I should leave her alone. I fucking should.

But the ceangal isn’t a whisper; it’s a demand. It sinks into my marrow. Bond her. Mark her. Make her mine. Protect her. Worship her. Break her open and crawl inside her bones.

And gods help me, I would.

But fate has other plans. She could trigger the prophecy. Us? Together? Too dangerous. And yet, I fail to care about the consequences...

Which makes her the most exquisite sin I'll ever taste. Or smell.

I've only encountered this scent once before.

I was younger then, hiding behind my father's robes in the halls of the Obsidian Court. A witch came to see the king, shadows moving with them like they had minds of their own. Yet the queen...carried the same trace of something that didn't belong. Honey-sweet, dark as ruin. A warning and a promise all at once. That moment burned itself into me like my first brush with hellfire.

Felicity shouldn't have it.

But I saw the horns curling from the darkness on her head, indigo as the night sky, there and gone like a mirage. And she carries something that shouldn't be in the Ironlands.

If she's tied to the Obsidian Court, what the hell is she doing walking around unguarded—oblivious?

Except she's not just exposed. She doesn't know. And I know it because her body betrays her. Her scent shifts. Suppressed, but not deception. Confusion.

And that? That makes no sense.

The real question isn't why no one has noticed her. Her glamour is exquisite. It's why she hasn't noticed herself.

My gaze flicks to her hands, clenched tight at her sides like she's bracing for a blow. Something I said hit deep. Not my mother, but something else.

What are you afraid of, love? Me? Or is the truth clawing its way to the surface?

She searches my eyes like she thinks I have answers. I don't. "But it's just you and Tomas. Your family didn't come with you. You must miss them."

Right. I'm supposed to be on holiday, like her. Not out here playing undercover Veil-keeper and hunting down a ceangal like the world's least relaxed tourist. "Aye, but not when I'm with you, a stór."

Felicity bites back a smile, drawing my attention to her mouth. "So what do you do, Niall?"

She asked me something like this last night. Now I'm trying to remember the lie I fed her. Or was it a half-truth?

Land management—close enough. Realms. Land. Semantics.

Maybe she's testing me. Seeing if I'll trip over my own words.

Witchy little writer, isn't she?

For a heartbeat, her whole appearance shifts. Midnight-black hair streaked with silver falls around her face, her eyes glow like amethyst fire, and her ears taper into sharp, perfect points.

I blink, and it's gone. "Sorry, what was that?"

"I mean, what do you do when you're not on holiday? Where do you work?"

“Aye, I work for my father.”

Not much of a story, right? But with the fae, words are chains. We don't lie. Not outright. But the truth? That's the real game.

A lie burns like hellfire—sears your throat raw until you can't speak. Your sigils go dark, branding you a traitor for all to see. Screw up badly enough? The old gods take their pound of flesh.

They don't forgive. And the punishment doesn't follow rules. It might be pain. It could be ruin. It's always personal.

So we learn to play dirty. Twist the truth. Omit a detail. Bend the rules until they snap. That's what makes fae bargains deadly. What we say is truth.

What we don't say? That's the blade slipping between your ribs.

And then there's the Obsidian Court.

They don't bother with clever twists or sly smiles. They take the truth and drive it straight through your skull. Honesty isn't a game to them. It's a weapon. And anyone who plays it differently? Weak.

Me? I live somewhere between cruelty and cleverness. I've got enough Wraithwind Court wit to enjoy a game of misdirection. But outright cruelty? Not my style.

And with Felicity? I better watch my mouth.

“Doing what?” she asks.

I pause. Because what the hell am I supposed to say?

Oh, just hanging out. Being the crowned prince of the Wraithwind Court, ruler of a fae kingdom in Tír na Scáil. No big deal.

Yeah. That'd go over well.

So I go with a half-truth.

“Well, like I said last night, land management. But we also...” I search for the right lie. “We’re also into breeding.”

Her brows lift. “Breeding?”

“Horses,” I say quickly. Like that was the plan all along. It wasn’t.

Her face lights up, and I immediately regret my choice.

“I spent every summer in a stable until I went to university. I absolutely love to ride. Although I haven’t had much time for it lately. It must be wonderful working with animals. Are you in the thoroughbred breeding industry?”

If only she knew the half of it.

Fae prince. Shapeshifting stallion. A walking bag of mist and magic.

That’s who I am.

That’s who you’re hitching your wagon to if you stick with me.

I clear my throat, fighting to keep my poker face intact.

“Aye, my family has been at it for generations.”

And by “at it,” I mean ruling over chaos, deceiving mortals, and occasionally turning into a horse. But sure. Thoroughbreds. Let’s go with that.

The gravel road crunches underfoot as we walk, her hand brushing against mine.

It’s brief. Almost nothing. A stray flicker of contact.

But to me? It’s a brand pressed to my skin, searing hot and impossible to ignore.

I shouldn’t even be here. But her touch makes the world tilt sideways, and suddenly, everything else—the prophecy, the duty, the laws of magic—feels so damn distant.

And then there’s her lips. Cherry-glossed sin, wrecking my focus, flooding my mind with all the ways I could ruin us both.

The cottage looms ahead. We reach the gate, but I don’t notice the ground anymore. Just her . The wind catches strands of her hair, framing her face like some goddess sent to tempt me. Or end me. Probably both.

I stop walking. She stops, too, turning to face me. We’re close. Too close for someone with my level of self-control. Which is to say, none. Her lips are right there. Daring me.

She stands on her toes, tilting her face up, and I swear she knows exactly what she’s doing.

And me? I’m helpless. Doomed. I cup her face, leaning down to meet her halfway.

Her lips are softer than I remember, but there’s a new sharpness to her—teeth grazing my lower lip in a quick nip, a vicious tease that sends fire curling through my veins.

I growl. Low. Hungry. A warning—or maybe a promise. The world narrows to this kiss, this moment. As if nothing else exists. My title, the prophecy, the impossibility of us crumbles under the force of this raw, desperate need.

And then she pulls back. Her lips are swollen, and her breath is uneven. The air between us is charged. Buzzing. Reality slams into me like a hammer to the ribs. What the hell am I doing? She's not just some curiosity—not a puzzle to figure out. She's a light in the dark. A spark that could save me or burn me alive. I step back, running a hand through my hair as my stallion bucks inside me, furious at my hesitation.

That kiss wasn't enough. It'll never be enough. If I'm not careful, this will end in disaster for both of us.

She looks at me, confusion flickering across her face, her lips still glistening. "What's wrong?"

What's wrong? Everything. But I don't say that. Instead, I flash a wicked grin, because gods help me, I can't stop.

I dip my head and kiss her again.

* * *

Psst...I went a little feral for the next five chapters in protest of all the 'purity' nonsense and pearl clutching. If filthy, hot sex isn't your thing, you can skip it, but you're missing a key plot point and some of the best bits in my opinion.

SKIP AHEAD TO CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Chapter Six

FELICITY FORREST

“I burn for you. I would burn my kingdom to ash and stay with you forever if I could, but I need you both to live more than I need your love.”

King Cú Chulainn Darkraven to Talora

I melt into him. Not like butter—oh no, nothing so soft and sweet. It’s more like wax under a blowtorch. Melting, yes, but with the distinct possibility of combustion. My hands clutch his shirt, my pulse hammering hard enough that I swear I can feel it in my teeth.

His scent wraps around me—earth, musk, and something rugged, like a storm rolling in over dark woods. It drags up memories I shouldn’t be thinking about. The dream. The púca. The heat of something wilder than I should want.

But it’s the cedar and smoke that does me in.

Not like woodsmoke, bonfire smoke, thick and clinging, laced with the promise of ruin. It’s the scent of temptation—a hand at your throat, a whisper against your ear, a flame licking too close to bare skin.

I breathe him in like I’ve already surrendered. And like in the dream, the fire isn’t the thing that scares me. It’s the fact that I want to burn.

But now? Now it's less a dream and more like déjà vu .

My lips move against his, but my mind is racing—no, galloping —through fragments of memory. Wind tears through my hair. A sinfully dark mane beneath my fingers. A pounding heartbeat that isn't mine.

It's not possible. But damn if it doesn't feel like it is. It feels like... magic , like the kiss has cracked open something inside me.

His hand tightens around my throat, fingers pressing—not hard enough to hurt, but enough to test me. To see if I'll yield.

He kisses me like he already owns me. Like he knows I want to let him. And I do. Gods help me, I do.

Which is deeply concerning for someone who prides herself on independence, common sense, and the ability to walk away from things that cut too deep.

Apparently, I don't have that ability anymore.

I gasp, and he takes full advantage, his tongue sweeping in like he's conquering territory. He tastes like whiskey and sin—burning, intoxicating, and entirely too addictive.

Instinct takes over. I tilt my head, lips parting further, granting him exactly what he wants.

He devours the air in my lungs between stinging nips of his teeth.

This isn't a kiss. It's a claim. My knees buckle, but his arm snakes around my waist, pulling me closer. My body fits against his like we are made for this .

Maybe that's the real danger. Because Niall isn't the kind of man you walk away from unscathed. He's the storm, and I'm the reckless thing standing in the eye of it. A raw, aching need coils low as he kisses me with the confidence of a man who never hears no.

Then it hits me.

A soul-deep tug that makes me wonder if this is more than chemistry. More than lust. Older than either of us. Inevitable.

I don't want to name it. Because naming it makes it real .

I kiss him harder, like I can smother the thought between our lips, bury it under teeth and tongue and heat. Like if I let him take enough, I'll forget I was ever foolish enough to think this was only a kiss.

But nothing about this is simple.

His hands grip me like he's already made up his mind. Like he'd hunt me across this world and the next. Drag me back, kicking and screaming.

I'd let him.

Because with him, I don't have to choose. I can be strong and soft, fearless and fragile, brutal and honest—and somehow, I know he wouldn't see less of me for all the ways I never quite fit. I can take what I want. And want him without apology.

Because with him, I am not small. I'm powerful. Free. His. Darkness doesn't just call to darkness. It sets the world on fire.

The raw, aching need? It should terrify the fuck out of me.

It doesn't. I just want him to wreck me with it.

When he pulls away, it's not for air but to glare at me like I've personally offended him. "You're fucking torment, a stór ," he says, his voice trembling like a drawn bowstring.

His fingers flex at my waist, like he's debating whether to pull me back or push me away. His breath is ragged. Then his teeth graze my bottom lip. Sharp. Punishing.

I gasp. Heat floods through me so fast that I forget where I am. Forget who I am.

He pulls back, but the heat lingers. His chest heaves, his face shadowed by something darker than hunger. His eyes—those amber-flecked eyes—are almost completely onyx now, and they're fixed on me like I'm something sacred and profane all at once.

"What are you?" His voice is barely a whisper.

"A monster, if that's what you need me to be." My fingers trail up his chest, a wicked smile curving my lips. "I don't know what I am. But if you're the darkness, then I was born in it. "And all I know—" I exhale, my voice featherlight, like a secret meant just for him "—is that you feel like home. And that should scare the hell out of you."

And from the way his breath hitches, I know it does.

He thumbs my lip. Then the vow falls from his lips. " Mo chríoch agus mo thú. Bás fillte sa dorchadas. Más ollphéist thú, is amhlaidh atá mise. Níl aon domhan ann nach roghnóinn tusa. "

Gods, it sounds like poetry. And feels like a reckoning.

I shouldn't understand him. I shouldn't.

And yet the meaning sinks into my bones. I know these words. Not because I was taught them at university, but because they already live inside me.

My end and my beginning. Death wrapped in darkness. If you're a monster, so am I. There is no world I wouldn't choose you.

The translation isn't conscious. It's not thought—it's memory.

But that's... impossible .

He stiffens, like he's just let something slip its chains and now it's too late to shove it back in the dark.

I lift my chin. "I want this."

His gaze sharpens, heat flickering behind the amber sparks. "You don't know what this is."

"Then show me." I reach for him, but he stumbles back, like my touch might be the end of him.

He hesitates. He's trying to wrestle down the inevitable, but the ragged edge of his breathing betrays him. " Scriú é. I can't fight this anymore. Not with you. I need you. Now ."

I tilt my head, eyes locked on his. Slowly, I peel off my gloves, letting the cool air kiss my skin. "Then what do you suggest we do about that ?"

He exhales sharply, like I've just tipped him over the edge. "I've got a few ideas. None of them involve you walking straight tomorrow."

He drags me closer, and something shifts.

It feels like the world recalibrates around us. The breeze that had been stirring a moment ago? Gone. The sunlight filtering through the trees? Flickering, like the branches are moving, but they aren't. Even the shadows at our feet seem longer than they should be, stretching toward each other, entwining like grasping fingers.

His breath ghosts over my lips. "I need to feel you. Taste you. Hear you beg while I tear you apart and put you back together again."

I suck in air. His warm, spicy flavour still burns my lips. A shiver runs through me, a visceral response to a promise I didn't know I was waiting for. No one has ever spoken to me like this, not as if they wanted me, but as if I were the only thing they've ever needed. It's terrifying. It's a freefall with no guarantee of landing.

"We should head back to Pier House." My lie wobbles on shaky legs in a final, desperate stab at composure.

He groans, deep and guttural, and the sound does things to me. "No time. No need. My cottage is right here."

Of course, it is. Fate knows how to screw a girl over. Or maybe just screw her.

I'm standing on the edge of something reckless. The crossroads between common sense and...well, him. He's watching me, his gaze heavy enough to leave marks. His body is close enough that heat snakes beneath my skin. My heart pounds in my chest, my pulse racing like it's trying to outrun me, but there's nowhere to run.

"Yes." I don't look away or hesitate, even as his lips quirk into a smug smile that threatens to undo me.

“You sure about that, a stór ?” His voice is a slow drawl, like a blade dragged over silk. Like he’s giving me a chance to take it back.

I won’t. It’s too late.

“Don’t push your luck,” I snap, arching a brow. “I’m already breaking all my rules, so don’t make me regret it.”

His grin turns wicked. “Oh, mo chroí . You should know regret is the last thing I’ll leave you with.”

Fuck. The bastard knows exactly what he’s doing. He grabs my hand and pulls me through a wrought iron gate and up the stone path leading to his cottage. We’re lust-drunk, moving too fast for second thoughts.

Prickles of excitement and fear clash inside my head. He kicks the door shut behind us. We’re in a small, dimly lit foyer. A massive mirror framed in weathered driftwood hangs on the wall, its glass shimmering like water under moonlight. I catch a glimpse of us. Dishevelled, breathless, and tangled in each other’s gravity.

Before I can blink, he lifts me like I weigh nothing.

“I can walk, you know,” I protest, but there’s no heat in it.

“Mmm, doesn’t mean I’ll let you.” He carries me into the bedroom and sets me down, but his gaze pins me in place. The room falls silent except for our breathing.

I steady my fingers on the first button of my shirt. His gaze sharpens. I hear the faint hitch in his breath that sends a thrill racing down my spine. Slowly, I undo another button, then another, the fabric parting under my touch. His eyes follow every movement like I’m unwrapping a gift meant solely for him.

His lips part, his breath ragged. “Fuck. You’re wrecking me.”

And I believe him.

His eyes burn into mine, like I’m the answer to a question he’s never dared to ask. Like he’s holding his breath, waiting to see if I’ll break or bend.

And I do break—just a little.

Because wanting him isn’t enough.

I need him.

Like air. Like gravity. Like he’s the only thing keeping me from spinning straight into oblivion. We shouldn’t. Not when everything between us feels delicate, like lace stretched too thin over something sharp. But the stars don’t care about timing. Neither do I. There’s no going back. And maybe I don’t want to. Maybe I was always meant to fall.

I bite my lip to stop the breathy sigh threatening to slip free.

“Don’t.” He steps closer, his fingers trailing over my cheek before brushing my lips, easing my bitten lip free. “That’s mine .”

Heat pulses low in my belly. I could push back and make him work for it, but gods, I want to drag him under with me.

I meet his gaze, my pulse hammering in my throat. “Then take it.”

His thumb drags across my mouth, parting my lips just enough to tease before pulling away. “Cheana féin mianach, cibé acu a admhaíonn tú é nó nach admhaíonn.”

I don't just understand the words. I feel them. Again.

Already mine, whether you admit it or not.

Heat slithers up my spine, like sin tracing its way to my throat. I should step back. But I demand more. "Take it off."

"What, this?" He drags open the first button of his shirt—slow, teasing—making a show of each exposed inch of skin as his fingers move agonizingly down, button by button, revealing ink curling over muscle. "Or are you asking for everything?"

"Don't tease me, Niall." The demand slips out, breathless.

His fingers flex, like he's resisting the urge to grab me. "Oh, love. I haven't even started teasing you yet."

The shirt hits the floor.

I exhale, raking my eyes down his chest and his stomach—all hard muscle, skin marked in wicked ink, and a body built for late nights and bad decisions. I should look away, get control. But my fingers twitch.

He notices.

"Go on," he says, stepping closer until his bare skin brushes mine.

I drag my hands over him, fingers tracing each ridge of muscle, nails grazing over warm skin. His breath hitches when my hands slide lower. "You're overdressed."

His voice turns to smoke and sin. "Then fix it, a stór."

Challenge accepted.

I reach for his belt. But before I can undo it, he catches my wrist and brings it to his mouth—pressing an open-mouthed kiss to the inside of my wrist, a flick of his tongue over my skin.

His gaze flicks lower, tracking the way my thighs tighten in response. A wicked glint sparks in his eyes. He waits. Watches. Lets the tension build.

And then?

His hands slide down, grip my hips and turn me.

I barely have time to gasp before his knee slips between my thighs, pressing just enough to make me bite my lip.

Not rough. Not gentle. Just control.

Dark energy licks at my skin. A slow drag beneath the surface, curling deep in my ribs like a hand fisting tight. Shadows stretch, pooling at my feet, crawling up the walls like they're alive.

They don't belong to him...

But they reach for him.

A shiver prickles down my spine, but it's not fear. It's awareness. It pulls deep in my belly, as if the dark craves him the way I do. I inhale, my pulse thrumming. The heat between us thickens, sliding over my skin like a second touch. A second pair of hands.

I don't move.

The shadows do.

His fingers brush my jaw, tilting my face toward his. His grip is steady, but his eyes? Dark, wild, knowing.

I try to speak. Fail. Try again. "Niall?—"

My voice barely makes it past my lips before his mouth ghosts over my ear.

"If you want to play dirty, love..."

A slight shift in his stance. That's all it takes. His knee nudges higher, pressing right where I need it. Not enough to satisfy, but it's enough to wreck me with the lack of it. I inhale.

"...you'd better be ready to beg."

And the shadows?

They rush forward, licking at the edges of the light, mirroring the need twisting inside me.

Niall watches me, eyes burning. "They know what you want."

I lick my lips, throat dry. "And what's that?"

His fingers tighten on my hips.

"Me," he growls, dragging his teeth over my throat. "On your lips. Tasting your skin."

Until you beg me to never stop.”

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Chapter Seven

NIALL O'LEARY

“What we want becomes a whisper against the roar of what we must do, and sacrifice becomes our second nature. You have to take her.”

Queen Talora Blackthorn Shadowhart Forrest

My shirt is gone. A grave fucking injustice, considering she's still wearing that lacy contraption over her tits—the kind a man dreams of tearing apart with his teeth. If she doesn't take it off soon, I just might.

“Your turn,” I rasp, voice rough with hunger as I turn her and run my fingertip down her throat to the edge of the lace.

Her lavender eyes glint with mischief. Dangerous. Tempting. “Where should I start?”

Gods fucking help me.

“A shirt for a shirt seems fair,” I manage, even as my gaze locks onto the lace covering her like a taunt. “But that...” I gesture to it with a flick of my fingers, my jaw tight, my restraint thinner than a thread. “...needs to go too.”

She tilts her head, amusement curling her lips. Teasing. Testing. Then, with the kind of confidence that could bring kingdoms to their knees, she reaches behind her back. With a flick of her fingers, the lace falls away.

My breath fucking stalls. The delicate scrap of lace flutters to the ground at my feet, but I don't look down. I can't. Not when she moves, shedding the delicate barrier between us like they mean nothing. Like she knows exactly what she's doing to me.

She's bare. Bared to me. Like an offering. Like a fucking dare. Every inch of her exposed skin is a fucking masterpiece—soft curves, taut muscle, smooth, fucking mine.

And then—she steps back.

It's slight, barely a shift, but the hesitation slams into me like a fist to the ribs. My entire body is taut, every muscle coiled, straining toward her, but she stays just out of reach.

The space between us? Unbearable. I won't let it stay that way.

“Running from me?” My voice is a growl. A warning.

She barely gets out a shaky laugh before I grab her waist and haul her against me. Soft curves crash into hard muscle, her gasp swallowed by the heat sparking between us.

Fuck , she fits against me too perfectly. Like she was made for this. Made for me.

Her breath ghosts over my lips. “Only from my common sense.”

Common sense. A joke. A lie. Because she wants this. I can feel it in the way her body presses into mine, the tremor that runs through her as I drag my knuckles down her side—slow, deliberate. I watch her reaction like a predator watches prey. The sharp inhale. The way her fingers twitch, like she doesn't know whether to push me away or drag me deeper.

“Common sense is wildly overrated,” I murmur.

She exhales. Tension bleeds from her frame as my hands slide lower. Fingers grip the curve of her hips. Hold her there.

I press my forehead to hers, swallowing back the feral sound rising in my throat. My pulse is a punishing thrum in my veins, my control a fragile, fraying leash.

“Felicity...” Her name is a demand. A prayer.

She tilts her face up, lips parting, chest rising in shallow, ragged breaths.

I brush a lock of hair from her temple. Deceptively soft. A breath. A moment. The last sliver of restraint between us.

Her fingers drag over my chest, nails scraping just enough to make me suck in a breath.

Fuck. She knows what she’s doing.

“Don’t hold back,” she whispers.

My fingers tighten on her hips, heat licking up my spine. A slow, wicked smile curves my lips. “I will never hold back.”

“So what are you waiting for?” she taunts, her voice raw, hungry.

My teeth graze her jaw, scraping enough to make her shudder. Her breath catches.

“I need you,” I murmur against her skin. “Like a sickness. Like a curse. Like fate threw you at my feet to see how long I’d fight before I snapped.”

And then I do.

I'm on her, hands gripping, claiming, dragging her flush against me. She doesn't shrink from it. She meets me head-on, a fire I'll gladly burn for.

My mouth crashes against hers. Teeth, tongue, heat. The kind of kiss that burns. That brands. That fucking destroys.

Her nails bite into my skin, dragging down my back and over my shoulders. Marking me. Claiming me right back.

I groan into her mouth, my hands everywhere—gripping, mapping, taking.

She presses closer, heat and softness melting against my body, and it's not enough.

I need more. I nip her bottom lip, drawing a sharp inhale from her throat. "I love how you taste."

She laughs, breathless, dazed. "You're too good at this."

I brush my lips against her throat. "Too good at what?"

She presses a palm to my chest, right over my hammering heart. "Telling a woman exactly what she wants to hear."

I catch her wrist, dragging her hand lower.

Over my cock—where her hand fucking belongs, and fuck, I need her to feel that.

Her lips part. Her pupils blow wide.

“I don’t need words to tell you what I want, love.”

She shivers. A full-body tremor. Then she stands on her toes, brushing her lips along the shell of my ear. Her teeth catch for a heartbeat before she whispers, “Good. Because I don’t need words either.”

Fuck.

I press her against the nearest wall, caging her in with my body. My lips graze her throat, hot breath, sharp teeth, slow, teasing.

“You want to be craved,” I murmur, drinking in the way she trembles. “To be the reason a man loses control.”

She exhales a soft, shuddering breath.

I smile against her pulse.

She grabs my jaw, dragging my mouth back to hers. “Then shut up and show me.”

Fuck, I love a woman who gives orders. It’s a good thing I love breaking them even more. I lift her, pin her, claim her.

She gasps, grips my hair, and tightens her legs around me like spurs.

I toss her onto the bed. She bounces once, hair fanning out like a dark halo, a fucking goddess laid out for me.

I pause. Hover over her, my hands braced on either side of her head.

Her lips part. Her eyes hold mine. Then she smiles. Wicked. Wanting.

I reach for the drawer beside the bed, fumbling for the foil packet Tomas insisted I use. “Do it right,” he’d said. “Humans have rituals, too.”

Before I can grab it, her hand closes over mine.

“You don’t have to,” she murmurs.

I freeze. My body is on fire, strung tight, but my brain kicks back into gear at her words.

Her gaze is steady. “I can’t have kids. You’re clean, right?”

Everything in me stills. Tomas drilled safe sex into my head like a battle strategy, but nothing prepared me for this.

“How do you know?”

Her brow furrows. “Fibroids. My doctor said it’s unlikely.”

Unlikely. A fragile human word. A false certainty wrapped in medicine and absolutes.

My jaw clenches. “Unlikely isn’t impossible.”

Her lips press into a thin line. “University. Years. And nothing ever happened.”

Her voice is steady, but the weight behind it sits heavy between us. No children. No risk.

It should feel like an escape, a free pass from the noose fate tied around my neck. Instead, it coils tighter. I don’t know what I was expecting. A slap of reality, maybe.

Some kind of warning to slow down.

Instead, she reaches for me—fingers trailing over my jaw, down my chest, right over the frantic thrum of my heart. Her nails curl against my skin, the faint drag of them like fire licking up my spine.

“This is madness,” I murmur.

She tilts her head, lips curving in a smile so sinful that it could make the devil jealous.

“Madness,” she breathes, voice a dangerous caress, “feels an awful lot like this.”

She seizes my hand, dragging it up her body like she’s daring me to stop her.

My palm curves over the soft swell of her breast, and fuck, I don’t just hold—I take. I roll her nipple between my fingers, a slow, punishing tease, and her breath stutters. Her nails dig into my thigh. I pinch. Harder than I should. She hisses through her teeth, her back arching like she fucking loves it.

I growl, my other hand snapping to her jaw, tilting her face up. Her lips part, a gasp escaping right before I take her mouth. The kiss isn’t soft. It isn’t sweet. It’s a fucking war.

I devour her, sweep my tongue into her mouth, letting her feel exactly what she does to me. How fucking crazy she makes me.

She moans into me, meeting me, matching me, her own desperation spilling over. Her hand strokes up my thigh, making me groan into her mouth as she drags her fingers over my cock.

I bite down on her lip hard enough to sting, and she fucking breaks.

Her teeth clash against mine, our kiss turning messy, brutal, a battle for dominance that she is going to lose.

I tear my mouth away, panting against her skin, lips trailing down her throat. I find her pulse. I bite.

She doesn't hesitate. She doesn't second-guess. She just fucking moves.

And I lose my fucking mind.

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Chapter Eight

FELICITY FORREST

“Fae do not love as mortals do. They claim, they consume, and if you’re not careful, they will leave you hollowed out and wanting.”

Book of Shadows (Tír na Scáil Lost History), Forgotten Tomes Archive

His mouth is everywhere. His hands are fire. Niall presses me into the mattress, pinning me down, his hips grinding into mine like he’s already inside me. My legs tighten around him, keeping him exactly where I want him. I shift, trying to ignore the friction, my clit throbbing at the pressure.

A moan slips from my lips, swallowed by his, and fuck, I want more. There’s nothing tentative in the way I drag him closer, nothing shy in the way I kiss him, hard, deep, like I plan to ruin him just as much as he wants to ruin me.

His hands roam, mapping my body, claiming every inch of bare skin he can reach. The scrape of his beard against my neck sends a sharp shiver down my spine, adding a delicious edge to the heat pooling low in my stomach. I arch under him, rubbing against the hard length of his cock, just to hear him groan.

“Felicity,” he growls, voice raw.

I fucking love how he says my name. Like it’s a prayer and a curse. I want to go slow, to take my time, to savour him, but I need him too much. Since the moment I

met him, I've wanted this to happen.

I drag my nails down his back, biting his lower lip as I pull back enough to speak. The cool metal of his lip ring scrapes against my mouth, sending a thrill straight through me. "You gonna keep talking, or are you finally going to do something about it?"

His sharp inhale is all the warning I get before he shifts, pinning my wrists above my head with one hand, his body pressing me into the mattress.

His other hand snaps to my jeans, undoing them in a single, rough motion before dragging them down my legs. He's not teasing now. He's claiming. Taking.

My pulse pounds. Cool air kisses my thighs, and his gaze darkens. Predatory. Possessive.

I smirk, licking my lips. "Fair's fair. You need to ditch yours too."

His grin is wicked, his eyes dark with intent. "I'm going to bury my face between your thighs and feast on you until you're dripping down my chin, until you can't take another fucking second of my tongue in your pussy. You'll beg me to stop—then I'll make you beg for my cock."

His filthy mouth shouldn't turn me on this much, but gods, it fucking does. And he doesn't waste time. He releases my wrists and his pants hit the floor. My gaze drops?—

Oh. Fuck.

My smirk falters for half a second before I recover, dragging my tongue across my lower lip. "Damn. No wonder you're so cocky. Definitely should've stretched first."

His grin is slow and knowing. “Aye, but let’s see how well you take it.”

Arrogant bastard. And I fucking love it.

I move forward, fisting his hair, pulling him into a kiss that’s nothing but heat and hunger and the sharp edge of teeth. His beard rasps against my skin, his groan rumbling against my lips as he pushes me back down, spreading me out beneath him, his hands gripping my thighs.

His fingers hook into the thin fabric still between us. He doesn’t rip them off—no dramatics. Just a slow pull that drags the lace down my thighs, over my calves, until he tosses them aside like he’s already forgotten they existed.

And now there’s nothing between us.

I spread my legs, revelling in the way his pupils blow wide as he takes in every inch of me. He grips my legs, pulling them farther apart so he can look at my pussy as if he’s memorising it.

“Gods be damned, love,” he mutters, voice thick. “Magnificent.”

I arch my back, reaching up to drag my nails down his chest. “Touch me like you’re already inside me.”

The moment his fingers slide lower, teasing along the slick, aching heat between my thighs, I gasp, hips jerking into his touch. He groans, head dipping to my throat, his lip ring catching on my skin as his teeth scrape against my pulse. Then he pushes one thick finger inside me. Then another.

Slow. Deliberate. Fucking torturous.

“Gods, you’re so wet for me,” he growls against my skin. “So fucking needy.”

I roll my hips into him, taking his fingers deeper. “Then do something about it.”

His answering laugh is wicked. “Oh, love. You have no idea what you just asked for. Aingeal nó diabhal , you’ll be screaming for me just the same.”

He moves down, lips trailing over my ribs, my stomach, lower. His hands grip my thighs, spreading me wider, and then?—

His mouth is on me.

Heat. Wet. The slow, sinful drag of his tongue against my clit, the cool press of his lip ring. Oh, how fucking good it feels.

“You taste fucking delicious, ” he murmurs against me.

He’s lying between my thighs, his tongue lapping casually at my cunt.

I bite my lip, trying to slow the powerful orgasm building inside me. But he speeds up his pace, his tongue flicking mercilessly against my swollen clit.

I cry out, fisting the sheets, writhing beneath him as he devours me.

He doesn’t let up. Doesn’t slow down. He holds me open and keeps me pinned beneath his mouth, his growl vibrating against my slick, pulsing heat.

I grind into him, desperate for more, and his fingers sink inside me, stretching, curling, hitting just the right spot.

“Fuck, Niall?—”

His beard rubs against the sensitive skin of my inner thighs, his lips wrap around my clit, sucking hard enough to send sharp pleasure rocketing through me.

My body tightens, a slow, torturous build, heat pooling low, tension coiling tighter with every flick of his tongue. My breath shatters, a broken sound spilling from my lips as pressure peaks, threatening to consume me.

Then—release.

It tears through me, ripping a moan from my throat as my thighs clamp his head, my pussy tightening on his fingers. Pleasure crashes over me again and again. My chest arches up as my eyes squeeze closed, one hand fisting in his hair, the other gripping the sheets as I cry out his name. My thighs quake against his shoulders, his deep, satisfied growl vibrating through me, prolonging every pulsing aftershock.

I release my grip on his hair, trying to hold myself together, but I can't. The world tilts, shifts, and suddenly, I swear I'm not even touching the sheets. I'm adrift in the haze of him, floating in the afterglow. And when I finally come back down, gasping, boneless, he licks his lips, eyes dark with hunger.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, voice rough. He rears up, a satisfied smirk curling his glistening lips. He licks his fingers clean as I watch, and I can't take it anymore. “Now, let's see how many times I can make you say my name.”

And then he goes back for more.

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Chapter Nine

NIALL O'LEARY

“Pleasure is the oldest form of power, and the most dangerous when wielded by the wrong hands.”

Queen Beatrice Blackthorn Shadowhart, Shadowborn Witch, Queen of the Obsidian Court (deceased)

F uck. This woman is pure madness. She didn't even know she was floating, levitating above the bed, not even when I tugged her back down. Gods, my devilish eyes study her reactions as I lick her through the orgasm.

Her skin glows, her body trembling, her breaths shaky as my tongue works her over again. Her thighs are shaking, wrapped tight around my head. I grip her with a possessive strength.

The sounds she makes? Sinful. Gasps, moans, and soft whimpers that shoot straight through me.

My hands hold her thighs open as my tongue claims her over and over. I let the taste of her consume me, every lazy drag of my tongue driving her closer to the edge.

Her body thrashes beneath me, hands twisting in the sheets, her back arching like she's trying to escape the pleasure. There's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide from what I'm doing to her. Her thighs shake around my head, her legs digging into my

muscled shoulders with each stroke of my tongue.

It's fucking glorious. Beautiful to watch. And I? I'm lost, drunk on her, my every thought erased by her wet heat, her scent, the pulse of her need against my lips.

She's mine. Every gasp, every shiver— mine. There's only sucking and moaning. It draws me into a dark space where only she and I exist. I commit every whimper and shudder to memory. I want to savour this, to make sure her pleasure eclipses anything that came before my claiming her.

Dark tendrils of shadow ripple over her skin, coiling like smoke, drawn to me like a force I can't explain. Her magic pulses, responding to the pleasure, and fuck, it makes me harder. She doesn't even realise what she's doing or how powerful she is when she comes undone beneath me. And gods help me, I want to make her come again. And again.

I slide my hands up her body, my thumb brushing over her nipple as I trail a path across her stomach. Her hand grabs at the nightstand, fingers scrambling for something to hold onto. They brush against the smooth hilt. Her breath stutters as her gaze flicks to the dagger resting there, the one I always sleep with.

An intricate thing, with sigils etched along the blade like secrets. Dangerous. Ancient. She shivers. A wicked thought curls through my mind as I pluck it from its resting place, pressing the flat of the blade against her stomach. The metal is cool against her fevered skin, and she gasps, arching into it.

Her eyes meet mine, wild, curious, wanting.

“You trust me, don't you?” I murmur, dragging the hilt down her body slowly enough that she feels every inch of it. The weight of it and its threat.

She nods, barely breathing. “Yes.”

I smirk. “Good.”

Then I press the hilt against her clit, watching the way her body shudders. She moans, thighs parting wider, wordlessly offering herself up to my control. Fuck , she likes it. My cock twitches at the sight. At the power I have over her.

I circle the hilt against her clit, teasing, rubbing, letting the cold steel contrast with the molten heat of her body. Her hips jerk, a sharp inhale tearing from her throat.

“Gods,” she gasps. “Niall?—”

A growl rumbles deep in my chest as I slide the hilt inside her, just an inch, but enough to make her whimper. Her breath stutters, her muscles tensing, her body gripping the intrusion like she doesn’t know whether to fight it or pull it deeper. Her eyes darken as they meet mine. She pushes against the hilt, letting it sink into her even more. Her back arches, her hands fisting in the sheets.

“You look so fucking perfect like this,” I murmur, watching every twitch, every tremble. I slide the hilt deeper, my free hand gripping her thigh, holding her in place. Holding her open for me.

She moans, writhing, and I know she’s close again. So fucking close. I twist the hilt, dragging it against her sweetest, most sensitive spot, my tongue flicking over my lip ring as I watch her fall apart.

“You like that, don’t you, love?” I taunt, pressing a kiss to the inside of her thigh—a soft, deceptive thing before I sink my teeth into the tender flesh.

She cries out, hands flying to my hair, nails digging into my scalp.

Mine.

I bite again, this time on her hip, where no one will see. A secret between us. Something to ache every time she moves tomorrow, every time she thinks of this moment.

She's shaking, thighs trembling, caught between pain and pleasure. I don't fucking stop. I slide the hilt almost all the way out before thrusting it back in, slow, relentless, keeping her on the very edge but never letting her fall over.

"Niall," she gasps, voice wrecked. "Please?—"

A wicked grin curves my lips. "Not yet."

She groans, twisting against the sheets, desperate, her body fighting me for control. I fucking love it.

I hold her down, pinning her with my weight, dragging the hilt against her sweet spot until she's shaking, every muscle locking up. I can feel it—she's there, right there, begging for release.

Then I stop.

Her eyes snap open, but I don't move, holding the hilt right fucking there, letting her body hover on the razor's edge of pleasure. Her breathing is ragged, her thighs trembling, her nails biting into my scalp like she might try to force me to move.

I chuckle darkly, licking her inner thigh, my beard rasping over her overheated skin. "You'll take what I give you, love."

She whimpers, struggling, fighting the pleasure. Another heartbeat. Another. Then I

move. I twist the hilt, dragging it over that spot, my tongue flicking her clit as I finally let her break apart. She shatters, body bowing, screaming my name as pleasure wracks her.

I pull the hilt from inside her slowly. Gods. So devastating. I lap at her, drinking down every shudder, every convulsion of her body as she falls into madness, pleasure, me.

I move up her body, capturing her lips, letting her taste herself on my tongue. She groans, pulling me deeper, licking into my mouth like she's trying to devour me.

I grab her jaw, tilting her head back, watching her flushed, wrecked expression. "Taste yourself on me," I command, my voice nothing but gravel and lust.

I slide two fingers into her mouth, pressing against her tongue, and she sucks them in, moaning, tasting herself. My cock throbs painfully at the sight, at the fucking obscene way she does it, like she knows exactly what she's doing to me.

"Gods-fucking-damned," I rasp, pulling my fingers from her mouth and replacing them with my lips.

She's still shaking, still on the edge.

But I'm not stopping.

I drag my cock through her wetness, letting her feel how fucking ready I am, how much I need this.

A dark grin curves my lips. "You asked for this." I press a bruising kiss to her throat, sliding my hands down to pin her hips beneath me. "You're going to take every inch like a good girl."

And then I bury myself inside hers.

Chapter Ten

FELICITY FORREST

“The strength to conquer worlds lies in the whisper of our bond.”

King Cú Chulainn Darkraven, Crimson Court, to Talora

The world narrows to the stretch, the overwhelming fullness as Niall sinks into me, inch by devastating inch. My gasp is swallowed by his mouth, his lips claiming mine in a kiss that’s as much a brand as it is a warning.

I claw at his back, my nails digging into his shoulders, needing something to anchor me. He’s too much—too big, too deep, too fucking perfect. My body clenches around him, and he groans, the sound rough, almost guttural.

“Fuck,” he grits out, his forehead pressed to mine. His lip ring brushes my bottom lip, a teasing contrast to the raw stretch of him inside me. “You feel like fucking heaven.”

My thighs tighten around his hips, locking him in place. “Fuck me like you mean it.”

A low, feral laugh rumbles through him, his beard scraping against my jaw as he drags his lips along my skin. “So fucking impatient.”

His mouth crashes against mine, all heat and hunger and filthy fucking intent. The taste of him seeps into my veins, a drug I can’t come down from. His beard scrapes my skin, rough and possessive, his lip ring cool against my burning mouth.

I whimper into him, needy, desperate for more, for everything. He's a predator, dangerous, wild, and yet, somehow, I've never felt safer. If I died like this—with his body caging mine—I'd do it with his name as my last breath and his hands as my last touch. I tighten my grip on him, holding him like I could make this last forever.

When I think I can't survive another second without air, he pulls back, his forehead pressed against mine. His breath is ragged. "If I'm to break, let it be by your hands."

Gasping for air, I push myself up. "You're not the only one who's afraid of breaking, you know."

He's on me in an instant, pinning me to the mattress with a pressure that feels as sinful as it does safe. My fingers thread into his hair, pulling him closer. He smells earthy. Animalistic. Male. It's unmistakably him. A scent with no place outside this moment, outside Niall.

His hands grip my hips, fingers digging deep enough to leave bruises as he pulls back, just enough to make me whimper at the loss before he slams back in, seating himself to the hilt. I cry out, the sound swallowed by his mouth as he sets a punishing rhythm, each thrust sending shocks of pleasure through my body.

My magic rises with it, a raw force that crackles against my skin. Shadows flow from my fingertips, curling around his arms, clinging to him as if they need him as much as I do. They pulse like they're drawn to the connection between us, to the power twisting between our bodies.

"Look at you," he groans, his voice thick with something almost reverent. "Fucking beautiful."

I dig my nails into his shoulders, my body tightening with every rough, desperate thrust. "Don't you dare stop."

His answering grin is wicked. “Not a fucking chance, love.”

He grips my wrists, pinning them above my head as his pace quickens. Every thrust drives me higher and sends pleasure licking through me in waves so intense they border on pain. His beard abrades my skin, his lip ring dragging against my neck as he kisses, bites and marks me.

Ceanglaíonn ár gcroíthe leis an tsolas agus leis an dorchadas , a vow of hearts intertwined with light and darkness. I hear the words as clearly as if he’d whispered them against my skin. I don’t know how I know what this is. I only know that I was born for it. The bond—the ceangal —comes alive between us.

Threads of light and shadow twist together in a connection far older than us. They leave a mark on our skin. A raven’s wings stretch over my heart, its ink-black lines glowing silver, pulsing like a second heartbeat. Below it, a wraith-like púca rears up on its hind legs. A perfect mirror of the raven inks itself along his neck.

The room shifts.

Spectral beings wrapped in mist, their gazes heavy with judgment and approval. A horned god looms at the edge of my vision, his red eyes blazing as he lifts a hand in silent benediction. Beside him, a queen draped in shadows nods once, as if to say, Yes, this is how it must be.

The ethereal witnesses fade as the headboard slams against the wall. The bed shakes beneath us, the air thick with the scent of sweat and sex and magic. His name is a broken prayer on my lips, a plea, a demand.

“Say it again,” he growls, his teeth grazing my throat. “Say my fucking name.”

“Niall.” It’s a gasp, a moan, a confession.

He releases my wrists and rewards me with a brutal thrust, his cock hitting that spot inside me that makes my vision go white. “That’s my good fucking girl.”

Our sweat-slick bodies grind together, every thrust driving me further into the fire. I move my hands over my head to wrap around the brass rungs and circle my legs around his hips. Over and over again, he hammers into me. The marks on our skin pulse in time with the rhythm of his hips, the energy between us growing stronger and hotter until it feels like the world might break apart.

“You feel this?” he whispers against my lips, his breath hot and unsteady. “This is what it means to be mine.”

“Yes,” I gasp. I’m acutely aware of every single spot where our bodies meet. I sheathe him to the hilt, my body stretching to take every inch of him. The burn is exquisite. My legs wrap around his hips, heels digging into his back, pulling him deeper. Harder. His hands grip my thighs, fingers digging into my flesh.

“Fuck,” he growls, his voice a low, gravelly rumble that does very bad things to me. “You take me so perfectly.”

Oh, fuck. Those filthy, possessive words spark something feral in me. I arch against him, my nails dragging down his back, leaving angry red trails. His hips snap against mine, driving deeper with each thrust, each movement a deliberate act of dominance.

“Oh, god! Ohhhhmygod!” My breathless moans only encourage him to move faster as I grab the headboard and tilt my hips to meet each stroke.

Power thrums between us. It’s alive, a pulse that syncs with my own. It threads through my mind, binding thought and sensation until I’m no longer sure where he ends, and I begin. It’s overwhelming, intoxicating. I can’t think, I can’t move. All I can do is feel—everything. Him. Us. This.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he groans, his voice rough with strain. “Do you have any idea what you do to me, love?”

Heat coils low in my belly, winding tight, every nerve sparking as he pushes me closer to the edge. His fingers slip between us, finding my clit, and I shatter. The orgasm crashes over me, my magic snapping free in the wake of it. Shadows explode from my body, racing up the walls.

I ride my release against his fingers and his dick, but the fucking apocalypse has decided to detour straight into this bedroom. The walls don’t just tremble. They riot. A mirror cracks clean down the middle, its fractured surface catching the madness in shards of refracted light and shadow. Our writhing bodies turn into a kaleidoscope of destruction. So vivid and surreal.

The curtains whip around violently. One rips free entirely, wrapping itself around the ceiling fan. The fan spins erratically, groaning in protest before snapping off its base with a sound like thunder as it hits a wall.

What the fuck? What even is this?

A picture frame jerks off the nightstand like it’s had enough of this shit and smashes itself mid-air, shards of glass spinning lazily before raining down onto the floor. The dresser joins the rebellion, its drawers flinging themselves open, one tearing loose from its tracks and tumbling to the floor.

Niall doesn’t stop, doesn’t even flinch. If anything, he doubles down, thrusting harder. A low growl rumbles in his chest, vibrating against my skin. The bed rocks beneath us, and honestly, I think we’re about two thrusts away from a structural engineer’s worst nightmare. Tendrils of wraith-like energy weave around us, shielding us from the destruction, while the actual room looks like a battle zone.

And me? I'm holding on for dear life. I'm clutching him, clawing at him, biting my own damn lip to keep from crying out his name like I'm about to write it on a bathroom wall. The whole scene is absurdly hot, dangerously magical, and a little bit funny if I survive to think about it later.

His laugh is low, dark, entirely too satisfied, like he's not ploughing into me while the entire room decides gravity is optional.

"Fuuuuuuck," I yell as the headboard slams against the wall and a decorative vase keels over in the corner like it's had enough. Peace, I'm out.

The room might not survive. I'm pretty sure I won't either. As if it agrees with me, the bedframe gives an ominous creak. Then one leg snaps clean off, sending the mattress listing at an absurd angle. We slide toward the fallen end, but don't stop. The bed will have to deal.

My breathing grows rapid, my chest heaving against him. Energy crackles as our mouths collide in a kiss that feels like fire and destiny. The power thrumming between us is relentless, too much, too dark. Like blood and death, ravens and shadowed moons. It's everything I shouldn't want and everything I do.

The shadows converge, a dark tide crashing over us. The jolt of energy is so intense it feels like the world might shatter. But wrapped in his arms, I'm untouchable. I'm shielded by something stronger than magic, more potent than fate.

The scream rips out of me as we crest together. Niall groans, his pace faltering, his grip on my hips tightening as he buries himself deep, his release tearing through him.

One final thrust and the room erupts in a shockwave. The bed quakes. The air crackles. Everything is a blinding light and searing sound. Ruinous. Sacred. And fucking perfect.

His body shakes, his breath ragged against my skin as he collapses onto his elbows, pinning me beneath him.

The shadows retreat. The room stills. The silence that follows is heavy with something neither of us can name.

He drags his lips over my temple, his voice rough when he speaks. “I’ve got you, Shadow Witch. You’re mine. And gods help anyone who dares try to take you from me.”

I don’t argue. I don’t think I could even if I wanted to. Instead, I wrap my arms around him, pulling him closer—because the truth is terrifying in its simplicity.

Chapter Eleven

FELICITY FORREST

“Some magic binds the willing. The oldest kind takes without asking, without mercy, and without regret.”

The Unwritten Laws of the Fae Courts, as told by Ariel O’Sullivan

Shadow Witch. The nickname isn’t playful or offhand. It’s a claim burning into me like a mark that says there’s no way out. No escape. No undoing what just happened.

My fingers are still digging into his shoulders, my nails embedded in the hard muscle. I glance down, catching sight of the little crescent moons I’ve etched into his skin. A laugh bubbles up—half disbelief, half hysteria. I won the bet with Cyn, but at what cost?

I’m a mess. A hot, sweaty, post-apocalyptic bedroom mess. My skin hums, my body still thrumming from the aftershocks, but my pulse refuses to settle.

Niall doesn’t give me a second to catch my breath. Doesn’t give me space to second-guess. Instead, he kisses me like he’s trying to map my soul, one slow brush of his lips at a time. My forehead. My cheeks. My eyelids.

Each kiss carries a message I’m not ready to hear. I’m in too deep. Too far gone.

He rolls onto his side, pulling me with him, keeping me caged against the solid heat

of his body. His arm hooks around my waist, his grip firm, possessive, grounding. I tuck my head under his chin, letting his scent wrap around me—earth and smoke and something inherently him. It should be calming.

It isn't.

Every time I blink, I see it. The flashes of what happened. The shadows twisting like living things. The way our marks burned bright, searing a truth onto my skin I'm not ready to face.

The air is thick with its finality. The marks on his skin. The marks on mine. The raw heat still licking through my veins. The shadows linger in the corners of the room, refusing to completely fade.

It's proof. Proof that we started something bigger than the two of us. Something I don't understand. Something I might not be able to stop.

I shift, pressing closer to him, as if his heartbeat might hold the answers I can't bring myself to say aloud. My fingers drift over his skin, trailing along his neck until they brush against the mark there.

It's still warm. Still pulsing like a second heartbeat. I trace the intricate lines, feeling them glow faintly beneath my fingertips—like an ember that refuses to burn out.

“What just happened, Niall?” My voice is barely above a whisper, heavy with meaning and everything I'm too afraid to ask outright.

His chest rises in a slow breath, like he's been waiting for this question but still isn't sure how to answer.

“We're bound.” His voice is quiet, but there's no mistaking the finality in it.

I go still. “Bound?”

His fingers brush over mine, pressing my hand flat against his mark. “That seal is a ward. It ties us together in ways you don’t understand yet.”

My fingers freeze over the glowing symbol. My throat tightens. “You mean...forever?”

His eyes are molten. Unreadable. “Through lifetimes.”

I pull back slightly, lifting my head, needing to see the truth in his face.

My chest tightens. “But I’m...” I hardly know what I am anymore. My voice cracks. “How is that even possible?”

A shadow of a smile ghosts over his lips, but there’s no humour in it.

“That’s the thing about the fae,” he murmurs. “We don’t play by the same rules.”

I swallow hard. “So, what—you’re telling me this bond just...happened? Like fate tied a nice little bow around us and decided we’re stuck with each other?”

His gaze sharpens. “The bond chose us.”

I scoff, shaking my head. “You keep saying that, but what the fuck does it mean ?”

His hand cups my face, thumb ghosting over my cheekbone. “I don’t have all the answers, love.” He trails his fingers down, brushing the mark above my heart. It pulses under his touch. “But this ? This is proof. Proof that we belong to each other.”

The word slams into me like a wrecking ball. Belong. Panic claws up my throat. My

heart kicks into overdrive.

“I didn’t ask for this.” My voice shakes, my breath coming faster. Fear wraps itself around my ribs, tightening. Squeezing.

“Breathe, love?—”

“No!” I shove away from him, scrambling to my feet. “You can’t just drop this on me and expect me to be fine with it!”

A candle flares to life beside the bed. The flame flickers, twisting like it’s listening.

“What kind of fae parlour trick is this?” My voice is sharp, too sharp, but I can’t rein it in.

He watches me carefully. “It’s not a trick. It’s ancient magic. Older than the courts, older than the standing stones.” His jaw tightens. “It doesn’t give a damn about what we want.”

I take a step back, shaking my head. “Like hell it doesn’t.”

“The bond chooses.” His voice is steady. “It binds.”

The room feels too small. The walls too close. My chest hurts. And I feel like I’m dying.

I press my fingers to my temple, trying to breathe through the rising panic. “I didn’t ask for this, Niall. I don’t want to belong to anyone, and I sure as hell don’t need some cosmic fae joke deciding my life for me.”

His entire body goes still. Then, slowly, he rises. The movement is liquid. Predatory.

His voice is sharp as a blade. “Do you think I wanted this?”

The words are a slap.

“You think I woke up one day and thought, ‘You know what would be fun? A bond with a mortal who doesn’t even know what she is?’”

His frustration crackles in the air. The raw, brutal honesty of it steals the breath from my lungs.

I open my mouth to fire back, but the room shifts. The temperature drops.

A shadow slithers along the far wall, stretching unnaturally. The air turns heavy. Thick with something I don’t understand.

Whispers curl into the edges of my mind.

A cold voice slithers in. “You’re not enough.”

A second voice, low and cruel. “You’re adopted. No one loves you. No one ever will.”

A shiver racks my spine. My breath stutters. No. No, this isn’t real.

Another whisper, closer. “Niall will cheat on you. Everyone leaves you.”

My stomach lurches. The shadows pulse, stretching toward me, whispering things I don’t want to hear.

“Stop,” I whisper, clutching my head. “Stop it.”

Niall moves in an instant. Steps between me and the dark. His voice is like a whipcrack. “Sluagh.”

I go rigid. The word shakes something loose inside me. Sluagh. A deep, primal memory stirs. Half-formed. Half-remembered. But there’s no time to process. The shadows lunge. The whispers become screams.

And Niall? He draws his dagger. His body locks into something ancient and ruthless. His head turns just enough to catch my eyes, and the storm in them is terrifying. “Stay behind me.”

“Make it stop!” I scream.

“It’s feeding.” Niall’s voice snaps me out of the spiral. His arms spread wide, wraith-like tendrils reaching out to combat the darkness.

“They won’t stop!” My voice trembles as the whispers coil tighter, suffocating me.

“The mark,” he says sharply, his amber eyes locking onto mine. “It’s more than a brand. It’s a ward—bloodline magic, but this one marks our bond. Call it. Let it protect you.”

“I don’t know how!”

“Yes, you do.” His voice softens, steady as an anchor. “You’ve always known. Trust me, Shadow Witch. Trust yourself.”

The Sluagh close in, shadows stretching toward me like jagged claws of despair. My knees buckle. I drop to the floor, clutching the mark over my heart. Its warmth pulses faintly. I close my eyes, blocking out everything but that heat, the connection between us, when I let myself trust him.

The mark flares suddenly, a burst of searing light that sends the Sluagh skittering back like an insect exposed to the sun. The whispers fade, replaced by an eerie silence as the shadows shrink and retreat.

Niall kneels, his hands gentle as they cup my face. His gaze searches mine. “Are you okay?”

“What the hell was that ?” My voice shakes as I try to catch my breath.

He helps me to my feet, steadying me as the reality of what just happened sinks in. “I told you. Sluagh. They are drawn to fear, doubt. They’re relentless. And this—” his eyes drift to the window where the light streams faintly through the glass— “this is only the beginning.”

I swallow hard, dread curling in my stomach. “The beginning of what?”

“The end,” he says, his voice heavy with something deeper than fear.

Chapter Twelve

NIALL O'LEARY

“Defying the wisdom of ancestors can be a path to ruin.”

Aisling Talamhain, Revered Clan Seer

T wilight wraps Inis Mór in its dusky embrace as I walk Felicity back to Pier House. She's ahead of me, her strides clipped, her shoulders drawn tight like she's trying to outrun something she can't quite name.

I feel the tangled mess of emotions she's too stubborn to admit thrumming through the ceangal . Confusion. Frustration. Fear. It slams into me like a riptide, dragging me under with her. She wants to pretend none of this happened, to shove it into some neat little box where she can ignore it, but the bond won't let her. I won't let her.

“So, what's got you running?” I ask, my tone deliberately light.

She doesn't stop walking. Doesn't even look back. “I'm not running.”

“Sure, and I'm not fae.” I flash a smirk she can't see, but I know it'll piss her off anyway. “You always storm off when you're totally fine?”

Finally, she stops. Turns around when we reach Pier House. “I need a shower. I need to check in with Cyn. Not everything's about you, you know.”

I step closer, slow and deliberate. She could gut you with a look and leave you bleeding just to make a point and then some, especially if those shadows that trashed the bedroom at the cottage are any indication. “Oh, love, this isn’t about me. It’s about us.”

Her jaw tightens, her gaze darting away like she’s trying to find an escape route. Smart. She should run. Hell, I should let her, but that’s not really an option, now is it? I wait. Because if there’s one thing I’ve learned, Felicity doesn’t like being cornered.

She closes her eyes and mutters something under her breath, like she’s counting to ten to keep from throttling me. It shouldn’t be endearing. It shouldn’t claw through centuries of perfectly constructed walls, but it does. This pull—this goddamn hunger—it’s the ceangal . Twisting, tightening, locking us together in ways I don’t even understand yet.

When she looks up at me, her eyes glinting in the half-light, she pins me in place like she’s about to set my entire world on fire. “Tell me I’m not crazy,” she whispers, her voice barely audible over the wind. “Tell me I’m not the only one who feels whatever this is.”

It’s a crack in her defences, and for a second, I see the fear she’s trying to bury. “You’re not crazy. And you’re not imagining it either. It’s real. It’s dangerous.”

Her brow furrows. “Dangerous, how?”

“Has anything like the shadows—what happened tonight—ever happened to you before?” I ask, lowering my voice. If she’s encountered this before, it could mean something I’m not ready to say aloud.

She hesitates, her hand rising instinctively to touch the mark on her chest. “Not exactly,” she admits, her voice strained. “But there’s been other things. Things I can’t

explain. Why? Is that not normal for—” She falters, her gaze snapping to mine. “For whatever the hell is happening between us?”

It’s the answer I expected but still hits like a punch to the gut. She doesn’t realise it yet—the enormity of what she’s just admitted—but I do. It confirms something I’ve been trying to push aside, and it’s worse than I thought.

“It’s not common,” I say, keeping my tone level, careful not to spook her. “Not among my court.”

What I don’t tell her is that my people can wield mist and wraith-like tendrils—illusions meant to trick, ensnare, and drive men to madness—but we are far from limited to them. We twist nature to our will—vines that strangle, frost that burns, illusions that whisper lies until they become truth. We are tricksters given flesh, shapeshifters honed for deception and war. But whatever crawled out of her skin tonight? That wasn’t ours. That reeked of the Crimson Court. Or maybe even the Obsidian.

Our marks should match. She marked me, branding me as hers, but mine should have been ours—her raven and my púca, together. Just like the one over her heart.

Which means Felicity is no ordinary mortal. She might not even be human. How she doesn’t already know that? That’s a mystery in itself.

“There’s something about you,” I say, stepping closer. Her breath hitches, but she doesn’t back away. “Something powerful. We need to figure it out before it’s too late.”

Her gaze locks on mine, fierce despite the flicker of uncertainty I catch in her eyes. “Before it’s too late for what? You keep saying things like that, like this is all some cosmic disaster waiting to happen. But you’re not telling me anything I can actually

use. If there's something wrong with me, if I'm not..." She hesitates, her voice catching. "If I'm not who I think I am, then you need to stop dancing around it and tell me. What's so powerful about me, Niall? Because I don't feel powerful. I feel like I'm drowning in a sea of shit I didn't ask for, and you're the only one with answers. So spill it."

She stirs a fierce protectiveness I haven't felt in my life for any lover. Whatever is happening to her, whatever the hell she is, it's not something she has to face alone. She doesn't realise it yet, but we're bound in ways deeper than magic. Her well-being is more than a concern for me now. It's my ass on the line too. And I'll be damned if I let her drown in shadows and secrets without me.

I move in, until there's no space left to steal. "You want answers? Fine. You're not some mortal caught up in fae bullshit. That mark on your chest? We're bound, and it doesn't affect only you. Those shadows? The magic that's been clawing at you from the inside out? It's a part of you ." I pause, letting the words sink in. "And it's not going anywhere. Not until we figure out what you are and why every dark thing in this world is starting to notice."

Her breath hitches, but she doesn't back down. Not my Felicity. Instead of breaking, I see the flicker of determination in her eyes. She's not running from this, even if it terrifies her.

"And I'll stand with you," I add, softer this time. "No matter how dark this gets. We'll figure it out. Together."

"This scares the hell out of me," she admits, her voice barely above a whisper. "But so do the shadows. And if you're saying we can face them together, then...I need you to mean it. Don't say it if you don't."

Lie to her? That's not so easy, not with that damn bond humming between us like a

live wire. “I don’t say things I don’t mean, Shadow Witch.”

Her breath catches. She looks at me like I’m some kind of lifeline she doesn’t want to grab but can’t help reaching for. Her hand moves almost on its own, brushing against my chest.

“Good,” she says, and then she grabs the front of my shirt, pulling me toward her. Then, with a shaky breath, she rises on her toes, her hands sliding up to my shoulders as her lips brush mine. Soft, tentative, like she’s testing the waters of something she can’t undo.

I don’t hesitate. My arms wrap around her, one hand threading into her hair while the other grips her waist. The kiss is wild and everything I didn’t know I needed until now. Her nails scrape against my chest, and I feel our bond flare.

Shadows flicker at the edges of my vision. They’re not subtle. She’s not mortal, not entirely. Beneath that fragile exterior lies a power that could tip the scales between light and dark, and I’m the fool who pulled the trigger by getting close to her.

By connecting, we woke up something in her. Power that’s connected to the fae that’s only starting to stir. The bond between us is a loaded gun, and I’ve got no clue where it’s aimed.

Time? That’s a luxury I don’t have. Not when every second brings us closer to something I can’t name but feel in my bones. It feels like I’ve been here before. Whatever this is, whatever we are, it’s bigger than us. And it’s only a matter of time before it all comes crashing down.

When she finally breaks away, her forehead resting against mine, she exhales. “You’re the most frustrating man I’ve ever met.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “And you’re the most stubborn godsdamned woman I’ve ever known.”

Her laugh is soft, almost bitter. “Guess that makes us a terrible idea.”

“Or the best one.” I pull her a little closer. “But I don’t care about the odds, love. I’m all in. Shadows and all.”

She exhales a soft laugh, her resolve slipping into something more vulnerable.

“I want to see you tonight,” I say, my tone light despite the weight pressing on my chest. “Join me for dinner.”

The flicker of hesitation across her features cuts deeper than I care to admit. “Like a date?”

I’m out of my depth. Fae don’t date. Not like this. But for her, I would rewrite every rule. “Aye. A date.”

Her smile is slow, reluctant, but real. “Seven?”

“Seven.”

She leans up, brushing her lips to mine. The kiss is soft at first, hesitant—then it burns. My hand moves to the small of her back, pulling her closer as I taste her, letting her taste me. Her body melts into mine, and it’s all I can do to keep my beast leashed. She becomes mine every second I touch her, deeper than any bond or mark could capture. I draw her bottom lip into my mouth, teasing her until she moans softly against me.

The sound sets my blood on fire, but the shadows at the edge of my vision twist and

writhe, a reminder of everything bigger than us. Bigger than this moment. It's me who pulls back, breaking the kiss even though I'd give my last breath to keep her here.

She stares up at me, breathless, her cheeks flushed. "I should go. It's Cyn's birthday weekend. She's going to wonder where I got off to."

"Aye, you could tell her you got off with me," I suggest, grinning.

"Incorrigible," she accuses, but there's a spark of amusement in her eyes.

"And you love it," I shoot back. My chest tightens because part of me hopes it's true.

Her gaze dips, a wicked smile curving her lips as her eyes flick back up to mine.

"Well, I'll leave you to keep your pants on and your hands to yourself. For now."

"You're going to be the death of me, Shadow Witch."

Her laughter lingers as she turns and walks toward Pier House. The setting sun paints her in an ethereal glow, and I swear, for a moment, she doesn't look mortal at all. No, she's looks like a goddess.

The door closes behind her, and I exhale, running a hand through my hair. The shadows stretch and coil in my periphery, the whispers of my ancestors clawing at the edge of my mind.

They've never interfered before.

The warning is clear: She is neither fully human nor fully ours. Shadowborn Witches belong to the in-between, where even we cannot go.

Shadowborn Witches. The name is a ghost of a memory, a whisper from the dark corners of my ancestors' tales. I thought they had died out. When we sealed ourselves away from the Ironlands, the last of them fled deep into the Obsidian Court, claiming the shadows as a refuge.

A handful stayed behind, clinging to some misguided belief that humans could be redeemed, that we could live in harmony. Fools. The bloodlines faded into obscurity, diluted and forgotten by time. Or so I thought.

Felicity is a living contradiction to history, to everything I've been taught. The shadows cling to her, respond to her, as if they've been waiting for her all along. If her power ties her to the Shadowborn, then she is part of the prophecy, she will bear the one destined to heal and destroy our worlds.

I glance at the door where Felicity disappeared moments ago. If she's tied to the Shadowborn Witches, then there's no escaping what's coming.

The in-between. A place of neither light nor dark, where nothing is what it seems. If Felicity belongs there, I fear we've awakened something far worse than shadows.

And it's coming for us all.

Chapter Thirteen

FELICITY FORREST

“Every heart holds both light and shadow. True magic awakens when we dare to embrace the balance between them.”

The Othercrowd Guidebook For Mortals

I collapse onto the bed at Pier House, my body still humming with the aftermath of Niall. The look in his eyes, like I’m both his salvation and his undoing, makes me shiver. I close my eyes, and his voice repeats in my head. You know what would be fun? A bond with a mortal who doesn’t even know what she is. I huff out a laugh, sharp and bitter.

“I know who I am,” I mutter to the empty room. Don’t I?

I press my palms against my face, trying to smother the fear creeping into my chest. My adoptive parents were the only family I’ve ever known. Earthy, free-spirited hippies who believed in the power of crystals, sage, and tarot cards. The metaphysical shop they owned smelled like incense and hope, but their shared love for me never wavered, even if it wasn’t always conventional.

They’re gone now, taken from this world without warning. Thinking about them still feels like swallowing glass. If it hadn’t been for Cyn and her family swooping in with holiday dinners and unconditional love, I don’t know who I’d be now or if I’d still be standing.

And yet, Niall's taunt churns in my mind, digging up shadows I didn't know existed. He cracks me open, exposing something raw and terrifying inside me. Something I've spent years locking away.

The shadows...I don't understand them, not even a little. But I remember his voice, steady and sure. I don't care about the odds, love. I'm all in. Shadows and all.

I wish I could believe that, not only in him but in myself. Because whatever this is between us, it's not just his kisses, though they linger like wildfire on my lips. It's how he looks at me, like he's daring me to step into the storm, even if it destroys me.

I let out a long, shaky breath, staring at the ceiling as if it holds answers. Niall's right about one thing. There's something inside me that I don't understand. Something powerful and broken and hungry. And if he's all in, then I have to be too. Because if I can't figure out why I am the way I am, this bond—this thing—might be the end of both of us.

And yet...I run my tongue over my lips, still tasting him, still wanting more.

My phone buzzes with a missed call notification blinking with Nathan's name. My boss. There's a text too. Chat about the meeting at the construction site? Yeah, no thanks. I've got bigger questions in my head, like, what the hell am I? And why do shadows seem to follow me like a lost puppy with a bad attitude? The last thing I care about is work logistics.

The scent of sex and magic sticks to my skin, and all I want is a hot bath to wash away the ache in my muscles. Every sore spot feels like a trophy from an afternoon that left me reeling, starving, and full of more questions than answers. My stomach growls in protest over the skipped lunch, but the memory of room-wrecking pleasure shoves it to the backseat.

As I muster the will to peel myself off the bed, the door swings open, and Cyn storms in, irritation rolling off her like smoke.

Of course, it's Cyn, and Tomas is probably the reason for the storm cloud over her head. I don't need to ask to know if the latest chapter in her work-in-progress romance isn't exactly fluffy or light. Cyn is more like a dark romance. My inner sceptic bet on this disaster from day one, and judging by the fire in her eyes, I hit the jackpot.

She flops onto the bed beside me with a huff. "Well, don't just lay there looking all post-coital and glowing. I need vodka or answers. Preferably both."

I prop myself up on an elbow, fighting a smirk. "You first."

"He's gay," she announces, like this is a universal truth and not pure speculation because her ego is wounded. "That's the only explanation. He has to be gay."

Suppressing the laughter bubbling in my throat, I raise an eyebrow. "Okay, what happened?"

She throws her hands in the air. "It started fine. Great, even. The beach was perfect. He seemed interested in me, like, really interested. Asking all the questions about my family, my work, even my exes. Which, fine, was a little weird because no guy actually wants to hear about other men. But whatever, I went with it."

"So, what's the problem? Sounds like he's into you."

"The problem," she says, her voice rising in pitch, "is that when I went in for the kiss—like, full-on, swoop-in-with-a-bang kind of kiss—he offered me a handshake. Like we were sealing some corporate merger. Who the fuck does that?"

That's it. I lose it, laughter spilling out before I can stop it. The mental image alone is enough to wreck me. Cyn—international model Cyn—being snubbed? It's absurd. She's a walking goddess, all curves and confidence and the kind of beauty that should require its own warning label. Men don't turn her down.

"A handshake?" I wheeze. "Oh, Cyn..."

She crosses her arms, glaring daggers at me. "It's not funny."

"It's a little funny."

"No, it's maddening," she fumes. "One second he's attentive and hanging on my every word, and the next he's retreating like I'm trying to sell him a timeshare. The man's a damn Rubik's Cube, and I don't have the patience to solve him."

"Maybe it's time to cut your losses?" I suggest, though the thought makes my stomach twist. There's something about Tomas that's connected to Niall, and it's giving me an itch I can't scratch. I should tell her, warn her, but how do I tell her what's happening without sounding bananas?

Her grin turns sharp and wicked. "Oh, there's no way I'm letting you off that easily, Flick. A bet's a bet, and I am banging him before we go home. Tonight, actually."

I open my mouth. I should come clean, lay it all out there about Niall, the shadows, the bond that's wrapped itself around me like a vice. But how do I explain it when I don't even understand? How do I tell her about the sex that felt like the universe cracked open, or about the ceangal— whatever the hell that means—has me connected to him in ways I can't fathom?

"You're right. A bet is a bet. And speaking of bets..." I start, easing into it.

Cyn narrows her eyes, instantly suspicious. “Wait. No. Don’t tell me.”

I hesitate, trying to pick the least insane version of the truth. “I won the bet with Niall this afternoon.”

Her brow arches, and her mouth drops open in mock horror. “Shut up. You bloody little liar.”

Heat rushes to my face as the memory floods back. “No, really. I did. He’s different, Cyn. I didn’t know what I was missing until him.

Her lips quirk into a sly grin. “Well then, don’t hold back the details. What’s he like?”

She leans in, all ears, hungry for gossip. I feel like I’m walking a tightrope. Too much truth, and I’ll scare her off, or worse, have her questioning my sanity. Too little, and she’ll know I’m holding back. How do I explain that when Niall and I had sex, the entire room practically imploded in a storm of shadows?

I pick out parts of my narrative that I can share carefully. “Niall...he opened my eyes. To so many things.”

Her eyes narrow, teasing. “Like?”

I hesitate, my mind spinning with images of the cottage bedroom we destroyed. The sex was groundbreaking in every sense of the word. But the shadows, the destruction...what does it mean? Are we dangerous together? Am I?

I force a smirk, shrugging like it’s no big deal. “He’s demanding. Filthy. And fuck, the way he talks to me...” My face burns—not with embarrassment, but with the memory of every filthy promise he made and kept. My voice drops, husky, betraying

me. "...it wrecks me. And he really knows what he's doing."

Cyn raises a perfectly sculpted brow. "Sounds like a keeper."

I laugh. "I don't know what it means yet."

Her grin turns knowing. "It can be anything you want it to be. Don't label it. Enjoy it while you can." She pauses, her gaze softening. "But remember one thing—what you think you want isn't always what you really need."

I nod, not ready to unpack the emotions threatening to crush me. I'm caught between wanting him and the ice-cold fear clutching my heart. The man I'm falling for might be the key to unlocking a version of myself I never even knew existed. I'm equal parts excited and terrified.

Cyn seems to sense the shift in my mood and changes gears, bless her. "So, what do you plan to do about it?"

My cheeks flush at the memory of his head between my legs, his tongue lapping at my sex. I bite my lip. "I don't know yet, but he's very skilled with his tongue."

Cyn's snort is anything but ladylike. "Come on, I want all the details. Surely he's good at more than that. What's he like?"

"Well, we walked to his cottage and talked about his family..."

Cyn groans. "I knew you'd chicken out. If you can't give me any real details, I'm calling it now. You didn't do it. Chicken." She makes a ridiculous squawking sound, flapping her arms for emphasis, and I burst into laughter.

"You're terrible, " I say, though I'm grinning. "Go ahead and bait me all you want,

but it was...gods there aren't words. We talked about his family—he has two sisters—and when we didn't talk, it wasn't uncomfortable. And the sex was..." I pause, the words catching in my throat. It was amazing. But it was also mind-bending and downright terrifying. If we keep breaking shit every time, how do we even—? I definitely can't tell her that, so I leave it at, "It was more than I expected."

"More? You mean he's well-hung." Her grin is all mischief.

"Cyn!" I yelp, throwing a pillow at her. She dodges it, cackling, and the tension in my chest loosens a little.

"It's good to see you finally moving on. It's about bloody time you got back out there. I'm happy for you. Really, I am," Cyn says, her voice quieter than usual, like she means it for once without the sarcasm.

Her encouragement lands softly, but there's a tremor in my voice when I admit, "I feel alive with him. Like, really alive. But also like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff."

Cyn doesn't miss a beat. "So, are you going to see him again?"

I can't help but smile, and it feels too wide, but I don't care. "I'm meeting him tonight for dinner."

"Good. Dinner is a step in the right direction. Might mean he's looking for more."

I swallow hard, forcing myself to keep my expression neutral. "Maybe."

Cyn's tone shifts, her teasing dropping away. "What do you want? Forget what's right or safe or whatever. What do you actually want from this?"

What do I want? It sounds insane, but from the moment I met Niall, I've felt something, like I know him on a soul-deep level. I don't believe in soulmates or fate or any of that crap, but the bond is impossible to ignore.

"I don't know."

Cyn scoffs. "Oh, Flick, come on. You're an absolutely shit liar. I've never heard you talk about anyone like this—not since the day I met you and that absolute muppet lobbed an iced coffee at you." She arches a brow, all smug amusement. "You like him. Just admit it."

I laugh, a little self-conscious, but her bluntness pulls the truth from me. "Fine. Yes, I like him. Ever since I met him, it's like...I don't know. I feel more me than I've ever felt. I've never been the type to stop a room with my looks—not like you—but with him, that doesn't matter. He sees me. And in his eyes, I find a version of myself that I actually like. It's crazy and fucking terrifying. Who feels like that? Like they're flying just because someone else sees them?"

Cyn shrugs. "Not me, love. You know relationships aren't my thing. But if it works for you, then I'm happy for you. You deserve it. Especially after what that maggot put you through."

I snort, shaking my head. "You certainly don't mince words. This is why I bloody love you."

"I know." Cyn grins, but her edges soften as I wrap her in a hug.

"Okay, let's not get carried away here." She pushes me back with mock disgust. "Just know, if he hurts you, I'll kick his ass. Hard."

"I'd expect nothing less."

Cyn wrinkles her nose, giving me a once-over. “And take a shower. You reek of sex.”

I roll my eyes, hopping off the bed. “So, does this mean you’re giving up on Tomas?”

Her scowl is instantaneous. “It’s still my bloody birthday. Forget the bet—I refuse to be snubbed. I’m going to fuck him. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

Poor Tomas. He doesn’t stand a chance.

The lights flicker. Not the lazy kind you’d blame on old wiring. This feels intentional, like the island is reaching out to me. My stomach knots as the shadows shift, stretching like they’re alive.

It’s not the first time. The cold wraps around me, dragging me back to the apartment above my parents’ shop. Most kids imagine monsters under the bed. I didn’t have to imagine. I knew they were real.

The shadows would come at night, curling around the edges of my bed like ink spreading through water. They didn’t growl. No, they whispered. *Scáth Cailleach*, come and play with us. They’d trail along my skin, tickling my feet. Teasing. Coaxing. I’d burrow under the blankets, holding my breath like it might save me.

When I screamed, my mum came running. Warm hugs, soft reassurances, the closet checked, the bed searched. “See? No monsters,” she’d say, leaving the light on to chase them away. It worked—for a while.

But the whispers always came back. Softer. Closer. I’d lie there, frozen, praying sleep would find me before they did.

The lights flicker again, dragging me back to the present. My heart races as the air turns colder. The shadows press closer, breathing along the edges of the room.

Cyn doesn't even notice. She waves it off like it's nothing. "Man, I hope they've got a backup generator. I need a shower, too."

She's gone before I can answer. I manage a nod, but my attention is locked on the way the darkness shifts. The room feels smaller. The air is heavier, like the shadows are waiting. Watching.

The lights stutter once more as I step toward the bathroom, my pulse pounding. It's not electrical. It's never the wiring. Whatever this is, I swear it's been hunting me forever.

And now, it's done waiting.

Chapter Fourteen

NIALL O'LEARY

“The Sluagh are always hungry.”

The Other Crowd Guidebook for Mortals

The beach stretches, quiet except for the waves clawing at the shore. I keep my pace slow, letting the sea air cool my heated thoughts. Felicity. Her name alone sends a fresh wave of dread through me. She's more than I bargained for. Shadows dance to her heartbeat. That's not something I can ignore.

The wind picks up, biting through my shirt. My stallion snorts in the back of my mind. Restless. Impatient. He wants answers as much as I do.

“Easy, boy,” I mutter. Not that he listens.

Bonding was never about desire. I learned that the hard way with Kaida. Vicious never lets me forget how well that ended. It was always about obligation. My sister. The survival of our kind. I resigned myself to the role long ago, burying any hope of wanting more beneath prophecy and guilt.

And then Felicity came along—her maddening laugh, her impossible shadows—shattering every plan I ever made.

The gravel path crunches underfoot as I near the cottage. I hear voices. Tomas. My

father. Shit. I murmur an incantation and trace a symbol in the air, throwing a glamour over the mark on my neck. I open the cottage door. The driftwood mirror in the foyer glows faintly, and sure enough, his image wavers in the glass when I step through the door. Tomas is already leaning against the wall like he hasn't got a care in the world. The two stop talking immediately.

“Niall,” my father greets, his tone sharp enough to draw blood. “Have you found a ceangal?”

Straight to the point, then. Typical Fallon. “I believe so...” I keep my voice even, though tension coils in my gut. I'm holding back because I don't know what the hell to do about my sister. My plan went to hell the second I bonded with Felicity. And now? Madden will never let her go unless I deliver another human in her place. “...But we've got bigger problems. The Veil is thinning, and there's a priest sniffing around where he shouldn't be.”

“Tomas briefed me.” My father's tone is as dry as the Skyreach Mountains. “But the Veil isn't only a human problem. A villager nearly crossed into Tír na Scáil. Do you understand what that means?”

“When the photograph was taken,” Tomas adds, sotto voce.

I can't help but push back. “Of course I do. But what if thinning before Samhain isn't a curse? What if it's an opportunity?”

My father's laugh rumbles through the room like a landslide. “You're a fool if you think the Ironlands want us back. Humans moved on, Niall. Stories of fae are entertainment now.”

“But—”

His gaze hardens. “No buts. This isn’t your decision to make. And the reporter—deal with her before she becomes a bigger problem.”

“With all due respect, sire, have we even tried? Yes, we wanted them to forget. And they did. But if we stay forgotten forever, how do we survive?”

Because if we don’t? The traditions that once tied us to the land and its people will vanish. We’re already seeing it. Aithreach Decline is taking root. The Crimson Court is suffering the most, clinging to purity while they wither. The Decline isn’t about numbers or strength. It’s about severing the lifeline that feeds us. It’s about losing our connection to the earth and its magic.

He scowls. “And what? Do you think they’d welcome us with open arms? ‘Oh, you need our daughters to continue your race? Sure, take them.’”

He has a point. The few who might accept us won’t outnumber the masses armed with fear and Internet access. I’ve finally figured out the meaning of this marvellous human invention.

Yet, each Samhain whispers of the Old Ways breathe life into our fading magic.

“They’d hunt us again,” Tomas says, locking eyes with mine in the portal’s reflection. “Fear turns to hatred, hatred to violence. It’s the way of the world.”

I groan. “So, we hide? Forever?”

“Time is running out,” my father says, his voice like iron grinding against stone. “When you sit where I am, you’ll understand. These choices saved us once. I won’t undo decisions made by men wiser than us.”

With that, he speaks— Go n-éirí leat —and the portal ripples before going dark,

leaving only my reflection staring back at me.

I hesitate, my gaze locked on the shimmering surface. Time is running out.

Of course, it is, but the way my father said it wasn't about the Veil or the priest. It sounded like a man bracing himself for the moment something breaks. Like he's holding back, and I'm the poor bastard who will find out the hard way.

I run a hand through my hair, moving to stand in front of the fireplace. Firelight dances across the walls, shadows twisting like they're alive. It pulls me back to the destruction Felicity left behind, the wreckage she caused. And beneath that memory lies the dark stories whispered to me as a child about the Sluagh and its insidious hunger. Hunger that devours everything in its path.

And then there's the priest.

He knew the fae would rage over the construction. Worse, it feels like he twists things to suit his audience, stirring the pot enough to keep everyone on edge while keeping his own hands clean. He's always there, meddling, playing the righteous saviour while the Veil thins under his very nose. Maybe he knows exactly what he's doing. Or maybe not.

I can't ignore the signs, how fear seeps through the village, how whispers of despair cling to the air. It reeks of Gnáthmharfóirí . The way they weave into human lives, infecting communities with doubt and hatred, makes it seem like they're clearing a path for the Sluagh to feast.

But I can't prove it.

My father wouldn't see the nuance. He'd demand immediate action, and if I told him everything I suspect—Felicity's connection to the shadows, the priest's potential

Gnáthmharfóirí origins—it would be a disaster. His solution would be swift and absolute, disregarding collateral damage. The risk to Felicity would be too great. I'm not handing her over to him like some pawn in his survival game.

Not when the bond grows stronger every time I touch her.

I grip the edge of the mantle. The Sluagh are terrifying enough on their own, but if Gnáthmharfóirí learned to use them, to leverage that hunger...

I take a deep breath. This isn't just about Felicity or the Veil. It's about the balance between worlds, the fragile line we walk to keep ours hidden. If Gnáthmharfóirí infiltrated the village, I need to deal with them. Quietly. Without my father.

And without dragging Felicity into it. At least, not until I figure out what the hell she is.

Tomas pushes off the wall. "You didn't tell him about Felicity. Gods, I know I should have, but I figured I'd gauge your intentions before giving him half-cocked intelligence."

"No," I admit, sinking onto the nearest chair. "And I won't. Not yet."

"You know you have to tell her."

I nod. Felicity deserves to know what she's stepping into. But how do I explain that she might be the reason the Veil is thinning? That her very existence could tip the scales of our world?

"Think she'll run?" I ask, swirling the whiskey in the bottle before taking another pull.

Tomas leans back in his chair, twirling his knife like a fidget toy. “Probably. But if she’s still standing after everything you’ve thrown at her, she might surprise you. Or stab you.”

“Comforting,” I mutter.

Tomas snorts, eyes narrowing like he’s looking straight through me. “Oh, spare me the shite. You think I wouldn’t notice the fresh magic stitched into your skin? The Gloaming doesn’t let me ignore what I’m sworn to protect, and right now, it’s screaming her name. Glamour or not, even a blind, halfwit drunk could see you’re bound to her. Fuck, the way you look at her, I’m surprised you ain’t already on your knees, worshipping the ground she walks on like some lovesick cunt.”

I grunt, the whiskey burning down my throat. “Fuck off. I just don’t want to cock it up. So if you’re done taking the piss, you could be useful and tell me how I don’t fuck this up. Any pointers, oh wise and jaded one?”

“Not a bloody one,” Tomas says with a smug and useless shrug.

“That’s what I need to hear before tonight’s ‘date.’”

He pauses mid-twirl, an eyebrow creeping up. “A human date?”

“Is there another kind?”

His laugh is a rough bark. “Fascinating.”

“You’re a bastard. You didn’t have to jump through hoops with your bond because she was bloody gift-wrapped for you.”

Tomas flashes a wolfish grin, all teeth and no sympathy. “Aye, and she was a vision.

Ready and waiting.”

“Must be nice.” I stand and pace the room, the stone floors unforgiving underfoot.

“All you had to do was stand for the ceremony and claim her.”

Meanwhile, I’m juggling mortal expectations and a bond that could destroy worlds, but I keep that last bit to myself.

“Boo-fucking-hoo,” Tomas says, examining the blade of his knife. “It’s dinner. Don’t be such a whiny cunt.”

I stop pacing and glare at him. “It’s not just dinner. I have to tell her the truth.”

“Oh, aye, that you trot around on four legs sometimes?”

Or that bonding with me could kick-start the apocalypse? I think as I stare into the fire.

He arches a brow. “Sure, lead with that. It’s a real panty-dropper.”

“I hate you,” I mutter, taking another swig of whiskey.

Tomas smirks. “You love me.”

“Do you ever shut up?”

“Nope.”

I plop back onto the chair opposite him, the firelight casting flickering shadows between us. “So, what do humans even do on dates?”

His grin widens, a feral thing that makes me regret asking. “Apparently, you bring flowers.”

I arch a brow. “And how would you know?”

“I consulted the Internet on human courting rituals when our king decided to throw down the gauntlet on you bonding with an Ironlands lass.” He flips the knife once more, then stabs it into the table with a dull thunk . “So give her some overpriced bouquet that does fuck all. Fucking waste if you ask me, but be done with it.”

“Flowers?” I repeat, incredulous.

“Aye. They like those.”

I snort. “Flowers won’t fix this, Tomas.”

Not when I’m about to tell her our union could either bridge worlds or burn them down.

Tomas yanks the knife free with a twist, barely glancing at it before setting it spinning between his fingers again, the motion effortless, idle. “And they wear puffy white dresses for mating ceremonies. Looks like a sheep’s arse if you ask me.”

“Ridiculous.” We wear kilts, after all.

“Aye. But there’s whiskey at the end. They call it a reception.”

“Well, as long as there’s whiskey, I’ll fucking endure,” I mutter, rolling my shoulders like I can shake off the ridiculousness, but the thought of my little Shadow Witch wrapped in silk and corseted up like some delicate thing meant for display sends a strange heat curling in my gut. “If she expects me to prance around like some love-

struck idiot, she's in for a rude awakening."

Human courtship is an exercise in absurdity—empty gestures, pretty lies wrapped in ribbons and bows. Flowers won't change the way I want to claim her, mark her, and own her in ways no polite ritual can capture. There's nothing civilised about what's between us. Nothing soft or simple. Bonding makes much more sense. No pomp, no pretence, just raw need seared into flesh and soul. My beast rumbles its agreement, satisfied by the certainty of it.

Tomas laughs. "You're already halfway there, mate."

I take another pull from the bottle. "Yeah, because discussing my ability to gallop faster than her car is first-date material."

"Better to tell her before she finds out the hard way."

"Been there, done that. Didn't end well." I grimace at the memory.

"Dessert, then. Drop the bomb after she's had some fucking cake."

"Great plan, genius." I glare at him. "What's next? Offer her a bloody gift basket?"

"Couldn't hurt. Better than a bunch of dying plants." He shrugs, tone flat. "But you're overthinking it. She's either in, or she's not. Nothing you say will change that."

He has a point. "I'll be my charming self and impress her. I can handle that much."

Tomas grins, eyes glinting with pure fucking delight. "Aye, remember the time you thought juggling flaming, enchanted swords in front of that noble lass would get you in her skirts? Instead, you torched her father's priceless family tapestry—an heirloom almost as legendary as your cock-ups—panicked, and hit it with a spell that turned

the flames into a flock of fire-breathing pigeons. Which, might I add, then proceeded to shit all over the high table and all the guests while setting half the hall on fire.” He shakes his head, laughing under his breath. “Real smooth, that one.”

I’d forgotten about the pigeons. Probably a good thing that we’d been in the Uisce Court, every square inch surrounded by water and fucking fountains big enough to swim in at every turn. I take another swig of whiskey. “Better than your ‘kidnapped’ love story.”

Tomas grunts. “A proper courtship should always start with a well-executed ambush.”

I shake my head. “Keep Cyn distracted tonight. I don’t need her poking around.”

Tomas nods, his expression turning serious. “Aye. I’ve got it handled. You’d better hope the lass is tougher than she looks. Because if this goes tits up, it won’t just be you who pays the price.”

I stand. “Good talk, Tomas.”

He grins. “Go ruin her for any other poor bastard who dares look at her.”

“I’ll fuck her so deep, she’ll taste me every time she swallows—long after I’ve salted the earth with the blood of any bastard who so much as breathes in her direction,” I mutter.

Tomas actually barks out a laugh, shaking his head. “Sick, depraved bastard.”

I roll my shoulders, muttering a curse as I head for the kitchen, his laughter following me down the hall like the smug prick he is.

Chapter Fifteen

FELICITY FORREST

“The Shadowborn don’t fight for the light or the dark. They fight to keep the balance. And sometimes, that means becoming the very monsters they are meant to stop.”

Talora Blackthorn Shadowhart Forrest (Banished Queen)

The bed is buried under a mountain of rejected outfits, casualties of my war against indecision. Another dress flies across the room, landing in a heap of fabric, mocking me for daring to think I could pull off perfect date attire.

Cyn would’ve whipped me into something effortlessly stunning by now with a well-placed snarky comment about my chronic jeans-and-tee addiction. She’s getting ready for her date with Tomas. So I’m stuck floundering between who I’ve always been and whoever the hell I’m becoming. My pulse is racing, though whether it’s from nerves over Niall or the questions brewing inside me, I can’t quite say. Probably both.

I send another dress sailing through the air, landing in the growing pile of ‘absolutely not’ outfits. The sharp rap of something striking glass cuts through my frustrated muttering. I freeze, turning to the window. A raven sits there, its feathers so black they seem to devour the light. Its eyes, twin beads of onyx, are fixed on me with unsettling intensity.

“Seriously? Not now,” I snap, waving a hand to shoo it away.

It doesn't budge. It cocks its head to the side, the movement somehow both curious and condescending.

"Fine. Be my judgmental audience," I huff, returning to my wardrobe mess.

The raven doesn't move, and something about its unflinching stare crawls a shiver down my spine.

I don't spare it more thought. I send another dress flying across the room, rejected without mercy. Thank fuck for rolling everything tight and packing this suitcase to the absolute limit. The raven keeps tapping at the window.

"Not now," I mutter, holding up a blue and white sundress for inspection. It's simple, flirty, and casual enough to keep this date from feeling like a life-or-death negotiation. The neckline is high enough to cover the mark. I grab a white sweater for the evening chill and drape the outfit over the chair. "That'll do."

The raven taps again, louder this time. Persistent little bastard. I shoot it a glare but still don't open the window. "Be my guest. Judge away," I snap before heading for the shower.

Hot water streams over me, but it does nothing to wash away the nerves prickling under my skin. Niall. He's not someone I can walk away from.

Our connection is magnetic, powerful, and downright terrifying. Part of me wants to lean into it. The other part? That part of me clings to the scars of past breakups, the ache of losing my parents. But as the thought settles, a strange image flickers at the edges of my mind.

A woman's face, which is oddly familiar, surfaces in my thoughts. Not my mum. I know that. I remember that. She's there anyway, her gaze sharp with a tough-love

kind of compassion. A no-bullshit presence. The type of woman who would have told me to stop running from the truth and face it head-on.

I shake my head, swallowing hard. My memories are clear. They have to be. I was adopted. My parents are gone. That's the truth. It has to be. Cyn is my only anchor. Trusting anyone else, especially someone like Niall, feels stupid. So why does it feel like something beneath the surface is shifting, like a puzzle I didn't know I was solving is missing too many pieces?

I turn off the water, step into the cold air, and wrap myself in a towel. The bathroom mirror fogs over as I stare at my reflection. I crack open the window to dispel the mist. Water clings to my skin like a lover's caress. It's not comforting, not with so many questions clawing at my mind.

I pull the sundress on, its soft fabric brushing against my skin, and slide into the matching underwear I always save for moments like this. The kind that says I'm ready even when I'm not. I pull my hair back into a loose ponytail and swipe on enough makeup to look like I haven't been losing my mind all day.

I'm almost done swiping on mascara when the flutter of wings and a heavy thud jerk my attention to the dresser. A sleek raven is perched on it. Before I can blink, it flits towards the bed in a swirl of shadows.

What's left standing there isn't a bird.

It's a woman.

Rock-goth vibes radiate off her in waves. Black leather moulds to her like a second skin, her long, dark hair cascading over one shoulder with a practised flick. But her eyes—purple-blue and endless, like the night sky—pin me in place.

“Shade! Why didn’t you meet me?” she demands.

I blink, the mascara wand still poised in my hand. “Meet you? Shade? You must have me mistaken for someone else. I don’t even know who you are.”

Her smirk is pure trouble. “Liora Darkraven. Princess Liora Darkraven, if you’re into titles. You can call me Liora. I’m your half-sister.”

Half-sister. The word punches me in the gut, rattling around my brain without sticking. She must see the disbelief written all over my face because her smirk widens.

“A pleasure, I’m sure,” I say, lowering the wand and letting sarcasm seep into my tone. “And how exactly does a raven decide to crash into my hotel room for a family reunion?”

Liora laughs. “Let’s just say our family tree has more twists than most. And you, dear sister, are about to get thrown into the deep end. I was hoping for more time, but we’re already playing catch-up.”

I stare at her like she’s sprouted another head. “Catch-up? Yeah, no thanks. I’m not playing your game, but I’ll add it to my to-do list, right under ‘lose my mind’ and ‘call a shrink.’”

Her grin sharpens. “Oh, you’re more than in the game, darling. You’re practically holding the rulebook, whether you like it or not.”

“Rulebook?” I narrow my eyes, my chest tightening. “What the hell are you talking about?”

She tilts her head, looking far too pleased with herself. “Heritage. Power. Shadows.

Take your pick, Felicity. But make it quick. Things are about to get messy.”

I shake my head, trying to keep my temper. “Explain. Slowly. Pretend I’m two.”

Liora raises an eyebrow, but she obliges. “Thanks to your mum, you’re part Shadowborn Witch and part demon. Shadowborn are meant to travel between the Ironlands (that’s your world), our world, then the in-between, and the Otherworld. Hunt dark fae and demons who step out of line, keeping everything neatly contained where it belongs. You’re one of the last.” She crosses her arms, her leather creaking. “And thanks to your Mum’s little dalliance with our dear old Dad, you’ve got Crimson Court blood for extra royal flair. Vampirish dark fae, specialising in shadows, shifting, and blood magic. Let’s just say you’re not exactly the girl next door.”

My jaw drops. Steam from the shower clings to the room, mingling with the scent of leather from Liora’s outfit. The grounding smell does nothing to steady me. “You’re telling me I’m basically a creature feature in a horror movie marathon?”

“Spot on, but with better hair,” Liora quips, grinning. Her humour fades as her tone turns grave. “I didn’t know you existed until recently, or I’d have come sooner. You were hidden with humans, wrapped in glamour to keep you safe. Blending in. But it wasn’t enough. When an assassin found you anyway, your Mum struck a deal.”

I let out a sharp laugh. “And what, pray tell, does a princess want with me? I thought I was just some girl from London. So, what’s the catch? Do I have powers? A kingdom to save?”

Liora nods. “The catch is, you’re more powerful than you know. An impossible combination no one’s ever seen before. But your humanity makes you an abomination to the Crimson Court, even if you’re technically the heir.”

I flop down on the bed, head spinning. “Right. So my life is a lie. I’m a walking, talking supernatural cocktail. Fantastic.”

Liora perches on the edge of the bed, her expression softening. “Not a lie. Let’s call it a strategic omission. You’re Shadow’s Choice, touched with humanity. It’s what makes you special and powerful. And royally complicated. You hold royal titles in more than one court.”

“Brilliant.” I run a hand through my damp hair, half-expecting to wake up. “When do I get my crown and sceptre? Do they come with a handbook, or do I just wing it and hope for the best?”

Liora leans forward to comfort me, but she hesitates when I flinch. “No handbook. But you’ve got me. And believe me, being a mutt has its perks.”

“Perks?” I repeat, my voice laced with sarcasm. “Oh, yeah, I can’t wait to show potential boyfriends the family photo album. That’ll go over well.”

Liora shakes her head. “We don’t have time for this. Your powers, your bloodline , it’s all coming to a head. This isn’t a family reunion. You’re in danger, and there’s more at stake than you know.”

Liora’s head snaps up, her features sharpening as if she’s heard something I can’t. “Someone is coming. We’ll talk again. Be ready.”

Her cold voice slips inside my head. -Oh, and by the way, mating with Niall? Not a smart move.-

My stomach twists as I glare at her retreating figure. “Well, that ship has already sailed. Or burned to ash,” I mutter. What the hell does that even mean for us? For me?

Liora's lips curve slightly, as if my frustration amuses her, but she doesn't reply. Her form shimmers, shrinking and collapsing into a sleek black raven.

"Wait." My brows knit together as I stare at the bird. "Why did you call me Shade?"

She tilts her head in one final, knowing look before leaping into the air, wings slicing through the lingering steam. The window rattles as she vanishes into the twilight.

The door crashes open behind me. Cyn strides in, grabbing her phone from the nightstand. "Left this," she mutters, then pauses, giving me a once-over. "What's with you? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Bird watching," I blurt out. Seriously, Felicity? Bird watching?

Cyn squints, doubtful but clearly deciding not to dig into my weirdness. "Right. Well, Tomas and I are heading out. Don't wait up!" She flashes a grin and disappears as quickly as she arrives, leaving the door swinging shut behind her.

I suck in a shaky breath. My life is an unholy nightmare. Shadowborn Witch. Demon. Fae princess. And human, apparently, though I'm struggling to feel anything close to normal right now. Oh, and let's not forget the date looming over me. Niall, who's somehow as caught in this madness as I am.

I sink onto the edge of the bed, staring blankly at the wall. Princess Liora Darkraven. My half-sister. A raven who dropped life-shattering truth bombs on me like it was just another Tuesday. I thought tonight would be about making sense of my relationship with Niall, but now it's about piecing together an identity I never asked for and can barely comprehend.

Her warning is like a splinter burrowing deeper with each passing second. Mating with Niall? She made it sound like a death sentence. Or worse. Is this connection I

feel for him some twisted family curse?

I glance at the mirror, my reflection almost unrecognisable. The same face, but the hazy lavender shadows behind the eyes? That's new. And it feels more dangerous. I take a slow, deep breath, grounding myself, even as the lights in the room flicker ominously. A little too on-brand for my newfound identity.

I grab my sweater, slipping it over my shoulders as I head for the door. Whatever this is, this bond, I have to see it through. I have to survive dinner with Niall without spiralling into questions I can't answer.

The lights flicker again as I step outside, the cool evening air biting my skin. The magic in my blood hums. Liora's admission leaves me raw. I need more answers. Soon. Thank fuck, I've got a date with a man who might know more about my heritage than he's letting on. If I don't shatter us both, I plan on finding out.

* * *

NIALL O'LEARY

Felicity steps into Tí Joe Watty's like she owns the place, and every head in the pub turns. She's not even trying, and still, she's magnetic. That sundress clings to her curves just enough to make my thoughts go straight to sin. Hell, even my stallion stops pacing in my head to take notice.

I push back my chair, watching as she strides toward me with all the confidence of a woman who knows exactly what she's doing. I have no doubt half the bastards in this place are already wondering what it'd take to get burned.

She stops in front of me, head tilted, lips curving in that slow, wicked way that makes my blood burn. "See something you like?"

I stand, letting my gaze drag over her, slow and deliberate. “Aye, love.” My voice dips lower now that she’s close enough to hear it. “You’re a fucking vision. Walking temptation.”

She smiles, and it’s so sexy and a little evil that I actually shudder. Fuck. “Flattery already? I thought you’d at least wait until after the first drink.”

I pull out her chair because I might as well commit to this courting nonsense Tomas keeps going on about. She raises a brow but doesn’t argue, sinking into the seat with an effortless grace.

“Oh, so you do know how to behave in public.” she teases. “Look at you, all refined.”

I lean in far enough to catch the scent of her. “Let’s not get carried away. I’m just softening you up for later, but you keep taunting me like that? It’s taking every ounce of restraint not to bend you over this table.”

She laughs, the sound curling through me like a goddamn spell. “Mmmm...What if I want to skip to the good part?”

Gods, this woman is torture. “That’s a dangerous game to play with me, a stór . You might not be able to walk out of here if we do.”

Then she shrugs off her sweater, draping it across the back of the chair, and I swear the pub gets quieter. The neckline of her dress dips low, teasing just enough to make me want to drag her out of here and back to my bed. My gaze flicks to the men around us. A few steal appreciative glances. It takes everything I have not to bare my teeth at them like a vampirish dark fae from the Crimson Court.

She belongs to us, my stallion growls, his voice dark and possessive. For once, I don’t argue.

Felicity doesn't fidget. She doesn't shrink. She meets my stare head-on, her lips curving in a way that's almost challenging. "You gonna keep looking, or do you plan on feeding me first?"

I chuckle. "Oh, I plan on feeding you, love. Question is—" I lean in, dropping my voice just for her, "—are you ready for what's on the menu?"

Her smirk doesn't waver. "Starving."

"Aye, I can't imagine what worked up such an appetite, Shadow Witch," I tease, letting my voice dip enough to make her feel it.

She tilts her head, dragging a single finger down my arm. "I'm sure you have theories, but I'll let you wonder."

Fecking hell, I love this woman.

I drag my gaze over her, slow and deliberate. "I'd rather hear you say it. Preferably in that sweet little voice you use when you're begging."

Her lips part, her tongue running briefly over her bottom lip before she leans in enough to make me insane. "Aww, did that little voice do things to you? Poor thing."

Shite. I laugh, shaking my head. "You're enjoying this, but you're terrified, aren't you?"

But just as I think she's about to hit me with another sharp retort, her fingers drift to the chain around her neck, toying with the pendant like she's trying to ground herself. The shift is subtle, but I catch it—the way her breath hitches, the flicker of hesitation in her eyes.

Not the kind of nerves that come with danger. I'm pretty sure she knows how to handle that. No, this is something else.

She exhales, straightening her spine like she's bracing for battle. "I'm shit at this," she admits. "Dating. Whatever the fuck this is. It's been a long time since I've even tried."

I blink. My voice is gentler but still laced with that teasing edge. "If it makes you feel better, this is uncharted territory for me too."

She tilts her head, studying me like she's trying to decide if I'm lying, not knowing I can't without spectacularly uncomfortable consequences and the bond would probably give me away. "Really?"

I grin. "Aye, being on a date with a beautiful woman like you isn't something I usually do."

Her eyes widen. "I don't believe that."

A frown tugs at my lips. Felicity has no idea how she's gotten under my skin, how every little smile makes me feel like I've won something precious. "You think I make a habit of wining and dining women?"

She shrugs, giving me a once-over. "You're not exactly hard on the eyes. I'd be shocked if you weren't in high demand. I'm sure women throw themselves at you."

I raise an eyebrow. "Aye, but I usually don't date them. I take what I want. I've never wanted anything like this."

Her lips twitch upward, a small victory I'll take any day.

Caitlin interrupts, dropping menus onto the table. Felicity glances at me, her gaze still holding a hint of curiosity. “What can I get you to drink?” the waitress asks.

“Tom Crean Irish Lager,” I reply without looking away from Felicity.

“And you, miss?”

“Water, please,” she says, her voice steady despite the faint blush staining her cheeks.

The waitress leaves. Felicity’s gaze sharpens, catching me off guard.

“So,” she begins, leaning forward slightly, her finger tracing the edge of the menu. “Where exactly are you from, Niall?”

Her question is innocent enough, but there’s a flicker of curiosity and something sharper. Suspicion, maybe. She’s fishing. I’m not keen on being caught. “You wouldn’t believe me even if I told you.”

Her brow arches, a slight smirk tugging at her lips. “Oh, you’d be surprised what I’m willing to believe these days.”

Damn, she’s good. Too good. I might find her persistence annoying if she weren’t so gorgeous. Instead, it’s compelling. I lower my voice to a conspiratorial murmur. “It’s a place that’s more myth than map.”

Her smirk deepens. “That’s not an answer.”

I hesitate, deciding how much to share. “The short version? Tír na Scáil is a barrier, a world built on magic to keep ours divided from your Ironlands. Keeps the monsters where they belong, stops the past from coming back to bite us all in the arse. Beyond that, there’s the In-Between and the Otherworld. Shadows and endless trouble. And

then, of course, there's the delightful mindfield of fae politics. Seven courts, seven headaches. There used to be eight."

She crosses her arms, narrowing her eyes. "And you? Which court do you play politics for?"

"Wraithwind. But if you're imagining ballrooms and politicking, you're way off."

Her eyes search mine, and she bites her lip. "And these courts you mentioned? What are they like?"

I chuckle. "Now you're digging for the juicy bits. Mine is full of tricksters, púca shapeshifters who'll charm you blind and laugh while you try to figure out what's real. Then there's the Crimson Court. Imagine vampire fae with wings and a thirst for blood magic. Delightful lot."

Her brows knit, a flicker of something I can't place crosses her features until she schools her expression. "You sound like you don't trust them."

"I trust them to look out for themselves, which is why I keep my distance. The Obsidian Court, though? They're in a league of their own. Shadowborn witches and demons, ruling the darker corners with an iron will and zero patience for lies. They're not ones to cross."

Her lips press into a thin line as she studies me. "And the others?"

She'll find out soon enough. No point sugarcoating it. "The Aerialis Court? Sylphs. They've got angelic wings and magic that could light up the darkest soul, but don't let that fool you. We haven't exactly patched things up with them. The Uisce Court? Naiads from the lake and merrows from the sea, constantly at each other's throats. The Shade is home to the Glimmers, who live for mischief. And then there are the

reapers from Dreadmist Isle. Banshees, harbingers of death. They're not all bad, but trust me, you don't want to piss them off." I keep my tone casual, but my eyes lock on hers, daring her to flinch. "That's the short version, Shadow Witch. Welcome to my world."

Her lips quirk into a hesitant smile. "You make it sound like some kind of soap opera."

My grin is all teeth. "Oh, love, it's far worse than that. Soap operas at least pretend to have endings."

Tomas—the fae who once tore someone's head off because he 'didn't like his mouth breathing'—introduced me to human entertainment on the telly back at the cottage. He makes dark fae weep with a single glare and now spends his evenings glued to *Bridgerton*. And I mean glued. He's got theories about Lady Whistledown, refuses to forgive Anthony for screwing things up with Kate, and once hurled a tankard across the room shouting, 'NOT HER BANGS!'

And the shipping. Gods, the shipping. I still don't fully understand it, but Tomas will gleefully discuss why Daphne and Simon are endgame while sharpening his knife. Crazy bastard.

I sigh. "In our world? The drama never ends. It boils over into blood feuds and eternal grudges. It makes your soap operas look like nursery rhymes."

Her expression softens into something more thoughtful. "So it's all grudges and betrayals. But the Shadowborn—where do they fit in the picture?"

My smile slips, replaced by something colder. I hate talking about the Shadowborn. Not because they scare me, though they damn well should, but because the story always ends the same. Badly.

“They’re not just part of the picture,” I say, leaning closer. “They paint it. There was a Shadowborn Witch pulling the strings for every power play and betrayal. Dark fae hunters, loyal to no one but their purpose. They no longer hunt, and for all I know, they’re nothing more than ghosts.”

Felicity tilts her head, her expression a careful mask, but the glint in her eyes gives her away. “So they were enforcers? Keeping the big, bad fae from running amok?”

I bark a laugh, low and humourless. “Not enforcers. Leashes. They kept the monsters, the creatures, and the darkest parts of us from spilling into the rest of the world. Some say the shadows chose gifted mortal witches to serve the Obsidian Court. Others whisper that it was obsidian magic that made them.”

She shifts in her seat, her fingers tapping against her thigh like she’s trying to piece together a puzzle. “And those whispers? What do you believe?”

“I believe the myth, like most fae elders.” My voice drops, quieter now, more deliberate. “The story of Badb, Macha, and Nemain, calling on the shadows in one last desperate act to create a hybrid race strong enough to bridge all realms. Those three? The Morrígan? Not exactly around to confirm or deny, and the book that holds the truth? Still lost.”

Her gaze locks on mine. “But they’re gone, right? No one’s seen one in—what?”

I nod. “The Shadowborn don’t exist anymore. Haven’t for ages. But here’s the thing about shadows, they never really leave. And the places they live? The In-Between. Grey. The spaces where all the dangerous things love to hide.”

Her brow furrows, tension lining her jaw. “If they’re gone, why does it feel like you’re waiting for the other shoe to drop?”

I almost smile. Almost. “Because the question you should be asking isn’t whether they exist. It’s what might crawl out of the dark to replace them.”

The pub door creaks open, letting in a gust of cold wind that snakes around the room like it’s looking for something or someone. It’s subtle, but the chill sinks deep, dragging a foreboding that tastes too much like home.

My beast shifts. He feels it, too. And this? This is more than a storm rolling in. My gaze flicks to the window in time to catch a shadow slipping past. Too fast, too deliberate. Too other.

Shit.

Someone from my world is here.

My chest restricts as the implications hit, the danger it brings to Felicity. They wouldn’t come here without a damn good reason or unless they were looking for something or someone.

Felicity notices. Fucking hell. She’s too damn smart for her own good. Her eyes narrow as she glances between me and the window, her fingers tightening around the menu. “Niall, what’s wrong?”

What’s wrong? Everything. The whole house of cards I’ve been building could come crashing down if whoever is out there decides to stroll in and pick a fight. I can’t tell her that. Not until I know what, or who, I’m dealing with.

I paste on a casual smile, like my nerves aren’t wound tighter than a bowstring. I offer her a half-truth. “Nothing. Thought I saw someone I knew.”

Her expression doesn’t shift, but her eyes give her away. A flicker of doubt, sharp

and assessing. She sees right through me but doesn't call me out. She lifts her menu, like she's suddenly deciding between a burger and fish and chips.

Her lips curve, but it's all for show. The smile doesn't touch her eyes.

I should say something to keep her from asking the questions she's already turning over in her mind. The truth is, I'm too busy listening. The magic surrounding us hums with the promise of violence.

And whoever's out there? They're not leaving. They're watching us.

Chapter Sixteen

FELICITY FORREST

“Lies of omission are the silent betrayals of truth.”

Queen Niamh Shadowhart

As we eat our meals, I pretend not to notice his voice soften when Niall talks about his family. Stories of ruthless sisters with fire in their veins and a father whose love is suffocating, a chain forged in politics and blood. He doesn't say it outright, but a duty that chokes out everything else is implied. And my stupid heart? It laps it all up like it's starving.

My life? A princess of lands I've only seen in dreams, trying to piece together what the hell that even means. My half-sister turns into a raven, but sure, let's keep that bit to myself. At least until I figure out why Liora warned me to shut my mouth.

Magic has always been the background hum in my life. My adoptive parents were...New Age? Hell, I don't even know if that's true anymore. And now? It's louder, darker, and messier. I'm barely holding it together, and he started grilling me about my day job like it's the most fascinating thing in the world.

“You sure you're not looking for career advice?” I tease, sliding my plate aside while the knot in my stomach tightens. His interest isn't casual. It's calculated. And I can't decide if I'm the puzzle he wants to solve or the prey he's about to pounce on. “I write about ghosts, Loch Ness, and let's call them unusually talkative stallions. Not

exactly a résumé for anything practical.”

Niall’s smirk deepens. “Talkative stallions, you say.”

“Usually, this is the part where people fake a phone call and bolt for the door,” I quip.

He stays locked on me. Either he’s really polite, or there’s a lot more about this bond of ours that he’s not saying. I sip my drink, letting the Irish music in the background fill the silence.

Then his hand brushes mine, his intent clear. “Dance with me, Shadow Witch.”

I blink at him, suddenly hyper-aware of my two left feet. “I don’t even know what they’re doing .”

“It’s a céilí ,” he says, already pulling me up with a confidence I wish I could steal. “Follow my lead.”

Against all odds, I do. And shockingly, I don’t hate it. Niall’s hand on my back guides me through spins and steps I didn’t know I could pull off.

“This isn’t so bad,” I say, breathless from spinning, laughing, and the joy of letting go.

His grin is impossible to resist. “You look surprised.”

“Not when I’m with you,” I admit.

His expression softens for a fleeting moment, but then the air shifts. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

I raise a brow, masking my apprehension with a crooked smile. “Please don’t say it’s a secret wife stashed away somewhere.”

He chuckles. “No, nothing like that.”

“Then what?”

“Maybe it’s better if I show you. Will you walk with me?” Niall asks, his eyes searching mine.

Despite the warmth of the pub and the flush in my cheeks from dancing, a chill snakes down my spine. Liora’s warnings resurface, but I nod. “Sure. Let’s walk.”

As we weave through the crowded room, Niall leads the way to pay the tab. The music cuts off abruptly, and all conversation halts as the pub door swings open. Everyone stares at the construction worker I saw earlier talking to Mr. Archer, who stumbles through the crowd, his head gushing blood. His face is streaked with more blood and panic.

“We’re plagued by the púca,” he cries, setting off a wave of whispers and hurried exits.

Superstition takes hold of the room. A few fearful locals say it’s a dark omen. I hear it then, a whisper in the back of my mind. Gnáthmharfóirí. The syllables are foreign, but the meaning...I can feel it. Something is wrong .

Niall’s hand tightens around mine in a silent agreement to dig deeper. We cross the room together, every step heavy with purpose.

“What happened?” I ask, my voice steady, though my instincts are already on edge.

The man slumps into a chair, his bloodied hand trembling as he grabs a napkin. “I was working at the site when a púca charged me. Then it spoke and threatened me.”

I tilt my head, reaching for the notepad in my bag. “A talking púca, huh? You’re sure it wasn’t just a horse?”

“Horses don’t talk,” Niall deadpans, his tone as sharp as the tension crackling between us.

“What exactly did it say?” I press.

The man dabs at his wound, his gaze flickering nervously. “I...I don’t remember. Just that it threatened me. Then I tripped and hit my head.”

“A púca threatened you?” Niall repeats, his scepticism as blatant as mine.

The man shifts in his seat, his story cracking at the edges. “Aye. Then he charged me. There was nothing I could do.”

“And yet, you don’t remember its threat?” I ask, keeping my face neutral.

His silence stretches too long. He’s lying. I can feel it.

Niall crosses his arms. “Funny thing about púcas,” he says, his voice like velvet laced with steel. “They only show themselves when they have a reason. So what’s yours?”

The man’s eyes dart away, guilt scrawled across his blood-streaked face. Whatever he’s hiding, it’s something big. Something dangerous.

“He mentioned sacred land,” the man blurts, finally tossing us a scrap of something that might have been useful—if his credibility hadn’t packed its bags and skipped

town. “Aye, that’s what he said to me.”

Niall’s gaze sharpens. “And how exactly do you know the púca was a he ?”

Great question. I was about to ask the same thing. We’re practically in sync now with our interrogation. It’s bloody scary, but in a good way.

The man shifts, shoving his hands into his pockets like they’ll hide whatever he’s not telling us. “Aye, everyone knows the púca are stallions. They pillage the village at night.”

Niall snorts. “You’ve got a hell of an imagination, mate.”

“And what did this púca look like?” I ask, though I’m already bracing for the absurdity of his answer.

“It was a stallion,” he insists, his voice dropping to a hushed reverence. “Black as midnight...”

“Of course it was,” Niall says, his tone as dry as the Irish whiskey behind the bar. “Well, if your memory clears up, Felicity would love to hear all about it.”

Doubtful, but I nod, playing along. The island’s magic and tonight’s revelations already have my head spinning more than Niall’s dancing ever could. “If you remember anything else, don’t hesitate to stop by Pier House and ask for Felicity Forrest.”

It’s my go-to line for supernatural witnesses, but this guy? Not buying it. The site’s not exactly nearby, and if I’d been jumped and left bleeding like that, I’d beeline for soap and stitches—not a pint.

Okay, maybe a pint. But only after I stopped leaking.

Niall slaps cash on the bar, and we leave the buzzing whispers behind. The night greets us with a briny chill.

“So,” I say, pulling my sweater tighter. “What is it you wanted to show me?”

He glances at me, his eyes dark. Unreadable. “It’s complicated.”

“Great,” I mutter, though my curiosity has already latched on and isn’t letting go.

We walk in silence, the crunch of gravel underfoot the only sound between us. I can’t help but wonder what this complication of his might be. Something to confirm what I suspect? Or something that flips everything on its head?

Either way, I can’t shake my newfound half-sister’s warning about Niall.

Chapter Seventeen

FELICITY FORREST

“Aithreach Decline steals our magic and withers our connection to the world. Even the brightest light fades into oblivion.”

Book of Shadows (Tír na ScáilLost History), Forgotten Tomes Archive

Niall doesn't say a word, just tightens his grip and hauls me toward the stone cottage like it's the last safe place on earth. My chest goes tight. I don't know what's coming, but the dread curling in my gut says it's going to be a bombshell.

We reach the door. He pauses, his hand braced against the weathered wood. “You're not going to like this.”

I scoff. “That's not exactly breaking news. Maybe just tattoo it on your forehead and save us both some time.”

He pushes the door open. The warm scent of earth and wood smoke greets us. It's cosy, if not for the tension radiating off him.

I step in hesitantly, my sweater suddenly not enough to stop the chill seeping into my bones. The driftwood mirror by the door catches my eye, its surface gleaming like water under moonlight. I shiver, pulling my sweater tighter around me.

Niall shuts the door with a soft click and turns to face me. “I need you to listen.

Really listen. What I'm about to say?—”

“Is going to piss me off. Got it.” I cross my arms, steeling myself. “Rip the bandage off.”

He closes the distance between us, his hands brushing my shoulders. His gaze softens. I hate that it makes me want to forgive him before I even know what he's done.

“I shouldn't have used willweaving on you,” he grits out, like a confession he's forced to drag out.

“Willweaving?” My voice sharpens, and my arms drop to my sides. “What the hell is that?”

“It's...a kind of persuasion,” he admits, his fingers trailing down my arms to grip my wrists. “I didn't mean to. It was instinct. I was trying to protect you.”

I yank my hands free, the worn leather of my fingerless gloves dragging against my skin. “You messed with my head ?”

“It wasn't like that?—”

“Bullshit!” I snap, taking a step back. “You don't get to decide what I can or can't handle, Niall. You don't get to rewrite my mind like some kind of?—”

“I regret it, a stór . I do, but I can't change it. All I can do is explain.”

“Oh, this should be good.” I gesture for him to continue, my anger boiling below the surface, ready to explode worse than it already is.

His jaw tightens, but he doesn't look away. “You saw me that night. Truly saw me.

As a púca. I thought it would terrify you, so I?—”

“You made me forget ,” I finish for him, my voice shaking. “You violated my mind, Niall. You had no right.”

“You’re right,” he says, surprising me. “I didn’t. And I’ll never do it again. But you need to understand that there’s more at stake here than us .”

Ceangal. It rings through my mind.

“Close your eyes,” Niall demands.

I eye him sceptically. “Why?”

“Do you trust me, Shadow Witch?”

I pause. Well, I did trust Niall. Despite what my half-sister said, I wanted so badly to believe everything would work out. I sigh. “Fine, whatever.”

Niall smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “You still haven’t closed your eyes.”

“Right.” I inhale, reluctantly closing my eyes.

When I do, his fingers wrap around my wrist, his thumb brushing the pulse point. His touch is gentle. My heart kicks against my ribs, and the bastard’s thumb presses down, tracing the rhythm like it’s a song only he can hear.

It hits me hard and fast. Images flash through my mind. Niall shifts before my eyes. His body twists into a dark stallion with magic in his veins. I’m on his back, clutching him like my life depends on it as we tear through the night. Town streets blur, fields stretch endlessly, and the world tilts as we reach a stone wall.

It's raw. Wild. Dangerous. His lips crash against mine in the next flash, searing and unapologetic. It feels like the end of everything. The thought in my head—was it mine? Or his? It's all-consuming. I hate how much I want it.

And then I'm walking away. Leaving him. Standing there in the field, bare as the night around him. My eyes snap open, breath ragged, chest tight like I've run miles. "You..."

Niall, damn him, stands there, calm as ever like he doesn't have my world falling apart at his feet. "I'm not sorry. I'd be lying if I said I was. You don't have to forgive me, but we need to work together like the world depends on it because it does."

"Of course it does," I shout, holding back the urge to break things or hit someone, mainly him. "Let me guess. The fate of your magical Narnia hangs in the balance?"

His lips twitch. "Again. It's called Tír na Scáil . And yes, there's a prophecy. Our bond?—"

I throw up my hands. "Oh, fantastic. I'm the key to saving your world? Or do I get to play the sacrificial lamb?"

"Felicity," he says, stepping closer, his voice dropping. "It's not only my world. It's about yours, too. The balance between them is fragile. And our bond?—"

"Could destroy everything," I finish bitterly. "What a surprise."

"It could also save it," he says, gaze locking onto mine. "If we figure this out together ."

Our bond could save everything. It's suffocating. Then I see the fear in his eyes. His hands tremble ever so slightly. He's as terrified as I am.

I take a shaky breath, my anger giving way. “So what do we do?”

Niall exhales. “We start by trusting each other.”

Trust. It’s a loaded word, wrapped in barbed wire, but right now, it feels like the only rope keeping me from drowning. “Are there more secrets you haven’t told me?”

“There’s something you don’t know about the courts,” Niall says, his voice careful, like he’s stepping over broken glass. “They weren’t always seven.”

I blink. “What?”

“There used to be eight.”

A cold shiver works its way down my spine, an instinct deeper than fear. “And what happened to the eighth?”

“No one knows,” he says, but there’s something tight in his voice. Like he does know. Or at least, he has a damn good guess. “Or no one will admit to it. Their magic vanished. Their lands became the in-between. Some say they were slaughtered in the last great war. Others whisper that they went into hiding.” His gaze sharpens, locking onto mine. “The magic that crawled out of your skin, the shadows that wrecked that bedroom? That wasn’t just Crimson Court. I’ve fought their kind. I know the feel of it. Yours isn’t just bending to your will—it’s claiming space, taking what it wants. Your draíocht is older.”

A lump forms in my throat. “So what are you saying?”

He doesn’t look away. “I think you might be a descendant. And if that’s true? Then we have bigger problems than the bond, a stór .”

“Like?” I whisper.

His fingers trace my collarbone, then drag lower, his touch grazing the mark above my heart. It burns—not painfully, but like a whisper of something ancient that recognizes his touch and answers. Niall frowns, rubbing his thumb over it like he’s trying to read it. “This?” His voice is rough, like he doesn’t quite believe what he’s about to say. Then he pushes back his hair, exposing the ink curling over his throat.

I stare. A raven, ink-black with silver edges, its wings curling over his skin.

Something about it makes my pulse stutter. “What does that mean?”

Niall doesn’t answer at first. His jaw works, his fingers pressing harder against my mark like he’s trying to undo it. “That’s not—” He cuts off, exhaling sharply through his nose. “That’s not how it’s supposed to work.”

A sharp prickle crawls down my spine. “What’s not?”

“The bond.” His voice drops lower, and something in his expression flickers between disbelief and vulnerability. “When we claim a mate, our mark appears on them. But this?” His fingers brush his throat again, his lips pressing into a thin line. “This is your mark.”

I go still. “That’s...bad, isn’t it?”

His silence is answer enough.

I swallow. Hard. “Okay. Say I am some lost descendant of the eighth court. Say that’s why the bond isn’t working the way it should. What the hell does that mean, Niall?”

His amber eyes darken. “It means you’re not just bound to me. You marked me back.”

The air shifts, heavier, charged with something I don’t understand but feel all the way

to my bones.

“And if that’s possible,” he continues, voice rough, “then we don’t just have a bond.” His fingers tighten slightly on my skin. “We have a war coming.”

I can’t help but wonder how my half-sister fits into this twisted encyclopedia of the enchanted, or worse, what my family might have known and kept from me. “And what? I’m supposed to accept that you’re some fae prince and if we don’t play nice, the world goes up in flames?”

He sighs, dragging a hand through his hair in a way that would be annoyingly attractive if I weren’t already pissed. “My world is real. And it’s falling apart.”

I swallow hard. “So, what? I’m a...what, a key to Armageddon?”

Niall steps closer, his amber eyes locked on mine. “It’s bigger than you or me. This is about the survival of the fae, the Ironlands, and the fragile balance between our worlds.”

The room tilts, and I grip the back of a chair to steady myself. “No pressure.”

His grimace is almost apologetic, but not quite. “I believe there’s more to you than meets the eye, Shadow Witch. I know I’ve broken your trust, but we need to figure this out together.”

“More than meets the eye?” I echo, the words tasting bitter on my tongue.

Niall doesn’t flinch. “Your connection to the shadows says you’re one of us, or at least part of you is. If you let me, I can help you find out the truth.”

Curiosity claws at me, battling with my frustration and the sting of betrayal. I can’t help myself. “Fine. But if you ever pull that memory-wipe stunt again, we’re going to

have words. Loud, magical words. I may not know how to use my shadows unless I'm...y'know, very happy, but once I do, I'll make you regret it."

Niall laughs darkly, raising his hands in mock surrender. "Understood."

The fight in me fizzles out when another thought hits. "But you're not the one who attacked Mr. Archer's worker," I say, my voice wary, laced with suspicion.

"It wasn't me. We were alerted beyond the Veil when it lifted prematurely. We don't interfere with the human world until Samhain. I was sent here to find out why."

I chew on that for a moment, staring down at my sandals like they might have the answers. Niall wasn't supposed to be part of my investigation. He was supposed to be a distraction. Now, somehow, I'm part of his mess. "Why do you think the Veil thinned early?"

"The people here used to believe in us," he says, his voice soft but edged with frustration. "Now they don't. The Veil only lifts once a year, but something has changed. The construction site, the superstitions, and people talking about us again are all connected. I just don't know how yet."

I narrow my eyes. "So you're saying the Veil lifted because people believed again?"

Niall shrugs. "It's possible. But there's one thing I do know..."

"And that is?"

His eyes hold mine. "You can't write the truth."

I blink. "Excuse me? Why the hell not?" My voice comes out sharper than I intend, fueled by indignation. This is my job. People might dismiss our magazine as a tabloid, but I take my cases seriously. I find the truth. I write about it. That's what I

do.

“You’re not ready for the consequences. Your readers aren’t ready either. If you publish the truth, the Ironlands won’t be the only place in danger.”

I scoff, crossing my arms over my chest. “You’re asking me to...sit on this?”

“Maybe not forever. Let me show you. There’s someone I want you to meet.”

Before I can ask who, or why the hell I should trust him after everything, Niall turns to the mirror. He mutters something in Irish, his voice low and lilting, like he’s coaxing a spell from the air itself. “Beannachtaí mo chara. Maelíosa...”

The mirror ripples like water, a sight so strange I almost step back. Then, a young woman appears, her face framed in the sort of effortless beauty that probably makes flowers wilt out of jealousy. Behind her, the tower from the photograph looms, looking every bit as ominous as you’d expect from a fae backdrop.

“This is my twin sister, Maelíosa,” Niall says, his tone softer than I’ve ever heard it.

“Pleased to meet you,” I manage, defaulting to politeness because that’s what you do when a mirror starts introducing people.

Maelíosa grins, the kind that promises both kindness and trouble. “And you as well. It’s good to see my brother has finally found someone willing to put up with him.” She leans closer to the glass, as if sharing a secret. “And don’t worry, I have many embarrassing stories about Niall. When you visit, we’ll have a proper chat.”

Despite the absolute absurdity of the situation, I laugh. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Niall groans, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Can we focus, Maelíosa?”

“Oh, come now, brother. Let me have some fun. You deserve?—”

Niall cuts her off. “Felicity needs to know the truth about us.”

“We’re almost extinct,” a male figure with pointy ears steps into view and announces, more excited and peppy for saying such a thing than he should be.

Before he can say anything else, another male fae appears and clocks him on the back of the head with enough force to make me wince. “Shut it, Finn.”

Finn whirls around, murder in his eyes. “Do that again, Kieran, and I’ll introduce your ribs to my dagger.”

“Try it,” Kieran snaps, flipping a blade into his hand so fast I barely catch it. “I’ll carve ‘Extinct’ on your tombstone myself.”

“Enough!” Maelíosa snaps. She doesn’t even look at them. She waves a hand like she’s swatting flies. “If you two can’t behave, I’ll send you both through the Veil and let the humans sort it out. Now, shut up and let me finish.”

The two men glare at each other like they’re one insult away from redecorating the room with blood, but they back off. Barely.

“Apologies,” Maelíosa says, as though this level of conflict is completely normal. “We’re close to losing everything.”

My lips part. “Losing everything?”

“Humans stopped believing in us long ago,” she says, matter-of-fact. “Without belief, we’ve grown weaker. Each generation loses a little more. We’re fading. Soon, there won’t be anything left of us.”

I open my mouth, then close it again. “But surely you can’t...fade away?”

Maelíosa’s gaze hardens. “It’s called Aithreach Decline . A fae illness caused by disconnection from your world. Physical symptoms first, then fatigue, frailty, and loss of the glow in our skin. Then comes the rest, infertility, memory loss, madness.”

Niall’s voice is quieter now. “It’s not a kind way to go.”

“Isolation was supposed to protect us from the Ironlands,” Maelíosa continues, her voice sharp as a knife, “but it’s killing us. Slowly. And yet, what else can we do? Come out to humans who’d sooner put us in cages than try to understand? You’re a creative people, I’ll give you that, but not particularly gentle when faced with things you fear.”

I flinch. She’s not wrong. But still. “You think hiding is better? Pretending the world doesn’t exist?”

“We tried,” Niall says, his voice heavy. “It didn’t end well.”

My mouth is running ahead of my brain, fueled by sheer disbelief. “So what, you’re telling me is that you’re fading out of existence because we—what? Don’t clap hard enough like in Peter Pan ?”

Niall chuckles, though there’s no humour in it. “Not quite. But close enough.”

Maelíosa sighs, brushing her hair back from her face. “It’s not only about belief. It’s a connection. Our magic is tied to yours, whether you like it or not. Without humans, we lose our anchor to this realm. And without us...” She trails off, her eyes darkening. “Let’s just say there are creatures on our side of the Veil you don’t want crossing over.”

“And yet you protect us,” I say, my voice quieter now.

Maelíosa gives me a tired smile. “Because that’s what we do. Even when it costs us everything.”

My mind races. My half-sister. My parents. The bond with Niall I didn’t choose. How the hell do I fit into this mess?

“I have to go,” Maelíosa says suddenly. “Go n-éirí leat,” she murmurs something in Irish that sounds both like a blessing and a warning. Then she’s gone. The mirror stills, returning to an ordinary pane of glass.

I stare at it, trying to make sense of what happened. “Your sister speaks Irish.”

“Aye,” Niall says, as if this explains anything. “We brought the language here. It spread throughout Ireland.”

“Of course you did,” I mutter, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “You’re welcome for all the Guinness ads, by the way.”

His lips twitch, but he doesn’t rise to the bait. “You have to understand. What you write...it matters. It could draw attention we can’t afford.”

“And you waited until now to tell me this because?” My tone is too clipped, but I’m too overwhelmed to care.

“Because I didn’t think it mattered.” He steps closer, his voice softening. “Not until I met you. You made me care, Shadow Witch. For the first time in longer than I can remember.”

My breath catches. I hate myself a little for it. “I need space. Time to think.”

He doesn’t argue, but his eyes stay on me. “Don’t take too much time, love.”

“Stop calling me that,” I snap because it’s easier than admitting how much it hurts. “I can’t do this right now.”

-I need your help. We need your help.- He nudges me with his mind.

-Get out of my head!- I scream at him mentally.

He nods, stepping back. “Whatever you decide, know this, our worlds are tied together. If one falls, the other won’t be far behind.”

A raven lands with a heavy thunk on the tree branch outside the window. Its beady eyes lock onto mine through the glass, and I swear it leans forward like it’s trying to figure out how many secrets I’m carrying and whether they’d make a good snack. It hasn’t blinked once. It doesn’t feel like Liora. Her feathers are midnight black but hold an almost iridescent blue-purple quality.

-Ravens are usually Crimson Court business. But if it’s watching you that closely, I’d say it’s personal.- Niall gently touches me with his mind this time.

Everything feels connected. I don’t know what scares me more, the decisions I’ll have to make or the fact that I’m starting to think I belong in this madness.

* * *

To be continued...

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