



Of Shadows & Ash (Land of Shadows #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: They say I used to be someone else.

Someone powerful. Dangerous.

Now I'm just Felicity Forrest—journalist, sceptic, nobody. Until I kill a man...and the blood won't wash off.

One problem. He wasn't just a man. He was fae.

When a dark bargain rips away my identity and buries my past, I wake up in a world I don't recognise with magic I'm not supposed to have and a snarky familiar who insists I'm a Shadowborn Witch. The Veil between realms is thinning. The monsters are stirring. And the dangerously beautiful stranger who watches me with haunted onyx eyes? He swears I'm fated to destroy everything.

He might be right.

But I've never been good at playing by the rules. If I'm the harbinger of chaos, then maybe it's time the courts learned what happens when you back a witch into a corner.

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SHADE

October 31, four years ago

There's blood on my hands. Blood between my toes. Blood splattered in my hair. It's everywhere—splashed across my chest, streaking the kitchen tiles, and horrifyingly, it's smeared across my lips. The bitter, metallic taste sticks to my tongue, wrong no matter how justified this is. Guilt comes anyway, settling like a stone in my chest.

My kitchen looks like a butcher's slab, except I'm the one holding the knife or, in this case, the axe. And sprawled at my feet is the Dearg Sidhe assassin. I'd admire how far his blood sprayed if it weren't soaking into my jeans.

The adrenaline drains away, leaving me cold, clammy, and nauseous. My entire body trembles as I take a shaky step back, my bare feet sticking to the blood-slick floor. The broken beer bottle lies near his outstretched hand, the jagged edges smeared red. For a moment, I stare at him—the dean's son, of all people—lying there, motionless.

I killed him.

My boyfriend.

Dropping the axe, I drag in slow, shaky breaths, trying not to completely lose my shit.

I remember smashing the bottle against his face, the sharp crack of glass meeting bone as I fought to keep him from pinning me down. He'd staggered, his hands going to his face, and that brief moment was all I'd needed to shadow walk to my weapon.

The axe is heavier than it looks, now lying where I dropped it. Blood drips from the blade in slow, deliberate plinks onto the floor, pooling next to the mess that used to be his neck. The beer bottle hadn't stopped him—it had only slowed him down. Fae are stubborn like that. You can stab them, slice them, and leave them bleeding out, but unless you go for the kill—really go for it—they'll just keep coming.

There's no surviving that much blood loss, let alone losing his head, not even for a vampirish dark fae with his tricks. Hysteria bubbles up. I should check. Press my ear to his chest. Confirm that his blackened heart has stilled, but I can't.

Instead, I force myself to look at the boyfriend who tried to kill me. We've only been dating since the start of term. Freshman year. I shake my head. He seemed too good to be true, and surprise, surprise, he was. I should've seen it. The glamour, the cracks. But I was too busy pretending to be normal, trying to escape the shadow of my royal lineage. And now?

I'm soaked in blood. And I have no idea what to do.

My gaze flickers to the kitchen table where my English essay lies half-soaked in crimson. The A+ in the corner is smeared beyond recognition. Bleeding for literature. That's realism for you, I think, a laugh bubbling up. The hysterical sound is hollow and wildly inappropriate, but I can't stop it.

My stomach churns. I bolt for the sink, leaving bloody footprints on the tiled floor. Clearly, luck is on my side; I don't slip and break my neck. I scrub at my hands until they're raw, but the blood clings like it's mocking me. It's beneath my nails, streaking up my arms and matting the silver strands in my black hair. Fuck. It's not coming off.

Ash perches on the counter, licking blood off his black paw. He tilts his head, his lavender eyes watching me scrub blood off my hands as though I'm a kitten who

wandered into a wolf's den. His tail flicks once.

"Don't judge me," I mutter, voice cracking. "It's not like I meant to kill the dean's son."

"Judging you? No, darling. I'm admiring you. Who knew you had it in you?" He yawns, showing sharp teeth, as if murder is an everyday occurrence—a fitting expression for a glamoured as a domesticated house cat and all-around know-it-all familiar, who clearly believes himself the true mastermind of the household.

"What am I going to do?" I continue scrubbing my hands, but it's useless. There's blood everywhere. It's in Ash's fur...

"If you think this is bad, wait 'til his daddy finds out." He lets out a mocking purr that drips with schadenfreude.

"Fuuuuuuck," I scream.

"Oh, what's one dead dean's son when you're already the queen of darkness?" His eyes glint like he's enjoying this far more than he should.

I glance back at the body. It's lying there, unnervingly still. I tell myself he's not getting back up. I used blood manipulation to slow him down, a smashed beer bottle to his face, and my duskwrought axe to lop off his head.

Because what self-respecting university student doesn't keep an enchanted axe under her bed?

Dark humour is the only thing holding me together, but even that's wearing thin. I lean over the sink, clutching the edges as nausea rises. What the hell do I do now? Call the police? Sure, and say what? Hi, there's a dead fae assassin in my kitchen.

Oh, don't mind the decapitation. It's a cultural misunderstanding.

No. They'd never believe me. Not with the blood, the axe, or the fact that his father is the bloody dean. Fucking changeling. I can't explain this. I can't fix this.

"This is a mess," I mutter. I have an exam tomorrow. I should be studying.

"Killing is easy. Cleaning up? Now that's where the real art is," he says with infuriating amusement because he's clearly not about to help.

Ash leaps down from his perch, his paws landing silently on the blood-slick floor. He steps delicately around the pool of crimson, like that's going to matter, given the blood all over him. He pauses by the assassin's head, batting at it with one paw.

"Don't," I warn, voice shaking. "Just...don't. I'm going to get kicked out of school, I'm going to get arrested, I'm going to jail for the rest of my life. I don't know what to do!"

"Relax. A life sentence isn't truly the rest of your life. If you're really good, you'll get out in fifteen," he says with unbothered practicality, as though he's offering cooking tips. "And you do know what to do. You just don't want to call her."

He's right. I don't want to call her. We've got issues—not the garden-variety mother-daughter kind, either. Try, "Sorry, but you can never see the rest of your family again because of some stupid fae laws that say half-breeds like me are a cosmic no-no." Oh, sure, not everyone feels that way, but clearly enough do if my first university boyfriend is an assassin. And knowing her, she'd waltz in, take one look at this mess, critique my cleaning skills, and say something encouraging like, "You're too soft to be a proper Shadowborn Witch."

Classic Mum.

Except...

I sigh. I grab my mobile with shaking fingers and call the one person who might have an answer. Gods, I wish mindspeak was easier this far from the Veil. The phone rings twice before she picks up.

“Mum.” My voice is barely a breath.

“They’ve come for you,” she says, her voice cold as winter steel.

“Yes,” I whisper.

The line goes dead.

The shadows in the corner of the kitchen deepen, pooling like ink. They ripple and shift, and a figure steps through as though carved from the darkness. Her sharp eyes take in the scene—the blood, the body, the gore—with practised calm.

“Well,” she says, her lips quirking in dark amusement, “you certainly didn’t half-ass it, did you?”

“Mum!” I hiss, horrified.

Her grin fades. “It’s a body. Big deal.”

“That’s not helpful!” I snap.

Her expression softens. “Shade, listen to me. This is bad, yes, but it’s not the end. We’ll deal with it.”

I let out a shaky laugh. “Really? How exactly do we deal with a decapitated fae

assassin on the kitchen floor? Do we magic him alive again and pack him off to some faraway place with no idea who I am? Because I'd love to hear that plan."

Her jaw tightens. "Even I have limits. You don't undo death without consequences, and those consequences aren't ones I'm willing to risk. If I tried, I might end up the one lying dead on this floor. Is that what you want?"

I shake my head, swallowing the lump rising in my throat. "No. Of course not. But?—"

"There's a way out," she interrupts, her voice quieter now, almost gentle. "But it comes with a price."

My stomach twists, but I nod. "What do I have to do?"

She doesn't answer. She reaches into her coat and pulls out a coin. It glints silver in the dim light. My stomach lurches at the sight of it.

"Mum, no."

She meets my gaze. "We don't have a choice."

Mum trained me for this, for the inevitability of blood and betrayal my whole life. Now that it's come to this? I feel like I'm failing. Numbness washes over me. I nod.

She begins a chant in a lilting, ancient tongue. It feels like the room tilts sideways as the spell falls from her lips, and I know—deep in my bones—that this isn't something she does lightly. The air thickens, pressing against my skin. Shadows in the room come alive. They crawl across the floor, spilling over the tiles, and reach for the body like eager fingers.

The darkness condenses, folding in on itself until it forms the shape of a man. A deamhan who's tall, otherworldly, and breathtakingly beautiful in the way only something truly dangerous can be. He surveys the room, his chin tilting with clear disinterest.

"Leanan," my mother says, her voice tight.

"Talora." His lips curl into a sharp smile. "What a mess you've made. And you've dragged me into it. Again."

Sirens wail in the distance, growing louder with every passing second. That's when it hits me—just how much noise you make in a tiny flat when you're trying not to be murdered by a fae assassin hell-bent on spilling your blood. The neighbours—well-meaning, overly curious cunts that they are—must have called the police. Fuck.

My mother sighs. "We don't have time for this."

He makes a show of adjusting the cuffs of his finely tailored jacket before finally deigning to look at me.

"And who is this?" His voice drips with curiosity and condescension, like he's discovered a stray dog lounging on an antique settee. He pauses, his nostrils flaring delicately as he sniffs the air.

I freeze. The sensation is oddly intimate, like his scrutiny reaches deeper than the blood I've been scrubbing.

"Oh, my." He practically purrs, eyes widening in mock surprise. "You smell delicious . What are you?"

He sniffs again, and I suppress a shiver, unsettled by the way his gaze lingers, as if

he's dissecting me. "No, no...you're not fully fae. And I sense a touch of demon—" His gaze flits to the mess on the floor, one brow arching high. "—but I could be confusing that with this little bloodbath you've got going on. Honestly, darling, was the axe entirely necessary?"

I open my mouth, but he waves a hand with a flourish that sends the shadows swirling around him. "Talora," he says, turning to my mother with exaggerated delight, "your glamour on this creature is simply divine."

"She's not—" my mother begins, her tone sharp.

But Leanan barrels on, ignoring her. He takes a step closer to me, his hands perched on his hips as he looks me over like he's appraising a painting at an auction.

"Look at you! Bewitching little Shadow Witch, aren't you? Oh, I love it! The subtle power, the delightful undercurrent of barely restrained darkness. She must be your daughter. There's no denying the resemblance. You're both sharp as knives, with an aura of...latent destruction." He claps his hands together. "This will be fun !"

My mother's hands ball into fists. When she speaks, her voice is cold enough to frost the windows. "Enough!"

Leanan blinks, affronted, then places a hand over his heart. "I'm only trying to make the best of this deliciously messy situation you've dragged me out of retirement for." His gaze shifts to me, and his grin sharpens. "Really, the least you could do is introduce us properly. I'm dying to know if your daughter inherited your penchant for rebellion."

I swallow hard, glaring at the demon.

His grin grows sharper by the second. "Though, judging by the way she's scowling at

me, I suspect she's inherited more than your rebellious streak. This one has fire ! I adore her already."

"Are you done?" I snap, digging my fingernails into my palms to keep the hysteria from taking over. "Or do you need to sniff me again before you actually do something ?"

His brows shoot up, his grin widening. "Oh, she's got a mouth on her! You didn't warn me about this, Talora. I'm obsessed. Please tell me she's cursed too. It'll be the cherry on top."

"I'm not cursed," I grind out. "I'm covered in blood, there's a decapitated fae on my floor, and I'm out of options . So, unless you're here to help, just...just leave!"

Leanan lets out a theatrical gasp. "Leave? In the middle of such juicy family drama? Darling, that would be a crime in itself." He moves closer, his tone dropping into something silkier. "Now, what is it you really desire?"

I force myself to meet his eyes, ignoring the way his presence makes my skin crawl. "I need this gone. The body. The blood. His existence. All of it."

His dark eyes glint with mockery as if he's savoring some private joke. "And what will you give me, child?"

I falter. My mother steps forward, holding up the coin. "This," she says.

His lips curl into a slow, satisfied smirk as he takes it, the subtle shift in his posture radiating an almost predatory delight. "Ah, the coin of Ana. Such a precious thing, and you're handing it over. Just like that. How desperate you must be."

"Fix this," she snaps.

I stare at the coin. The silver gleams, but not like something new and polished. It's been worn smooth by hands that touched it before humans figured out fire.

And then—because apparently staring at an ancient coin isn't disorienting enough—I'm somewhere else. I'm a small child again, sitting on a library floor with sunlight falling in soft, dusty beams across my chubby little hands. Meadowsweet wafts from my Mamó Bee's tea, but before I can focus, the memory twists.

Now, I'm not a child anymore. I'm somewhere else entirely. Across a dark sea, high on a mountaintop with swirling purple clouds where the air feels so thin, and the sky stretches so far it could swallow me. There's power here, immense power, and without knowing how I know, this is the moment when time itself was discovered. Not invented. Discovered.

And yet, somehow, I'm still standing in the blood-soaked mess of my kitchen.

It's like the coin is dragging me through memories, pulling them out of order and shoving them back in all wrong. I can feel it sifting through them, prodding at the edges, lingering on the ones I hold most dear.

I shiver. It's not just invasive. It's intimate . Violating.

He hums, turning the coin in his fingers before slipping it into his coat. "As you wish."

Heat explodes at the base of my neck like the demon's claws are carving into my skin, yet he hasn't touched me. I grit my teeth as fire licks across my skin. Not fire. Ink. No—deeper than that. A brand that whispers in the back of my mind: The debt stands. It is seen. My vision swims, the edges darkening, and for half a second, I see something. A coin. Spinning. Falling. Gone. The searing sensation flares and then cools.

Stumbling, I clutch the edge of the table, and glance at the demon. Satisfaction drips from his shadowed features as if my pain is some kind of trophy.

“What did you do?” I rasp, my voice raw from the scream I couldn’t hold back.

“Marked you.” He shrugs like those two words didn’t seize my heart. “A promise, a bond, a warning. The Gloaming doesn’t like to be ignored.”

My hand trembles as my fingertips brush over the hot, tingling mark. The bastard branded my flesh, marking a bargain I can’t escape.

The demon steps closer. “Your mother’s little glamour is so immaculate, I think I’ll leave it be. Such a delicate touch—quite the artist, isn’t she? But you...” His gaze lingers on my neck. “We can’t have you strolling around with my mark on display for every demon, fae, witch, or wandering busybody to see, now, can we? My signature is very exclusive, darling. Unique, one might say. A little too desirable in certain circles. And I’ve got enough enemies who’d love to call on me without handing them an invitation. No, no, we’ll have to tidy that up.”

His fingers trace the air, a whispered incantation spilling from his lips. The mark on my neck burns, heat flaring beneath my skin as though the very blood in my veins is shifting. The sensation fades as quickly as it came. I use my reflection in the darkened kitchen window to find my neck is bare; smooth, untouched.

His smirk sharpens into something cold and ruthless. “You’re mine now.”

He waves a hand, draíocht rippling through the air. Blood vanishes in shimmering streaks. The body sinks through the floor, head rolling after, both dissolving into the tiles as if they’d never existed.

My memories of the assassin begin to dissipate, slipping away like the last threads of

a dream. The prick, then murmurs an incantation, his voice smooth and unhurried, like he has all the time in the world to undo the fabric of reality.

Ash snarls and darts between me and the demon, his eyes burning with defiance.

“Ash—” I start, but the plea gets stuck in my throat as the spell hits me.

His fur bristles, the lavender glow in his eyes flaring bright enough to rival the moon. He crouches low, his body poised to strike, but the magic sweeps through the room like a tidal wave.

Ash glares. Not at me but at the magic. At what it’s taking from us.

I’ll find you again. The whisper in my mind barely finishes before the magic grips me again. Something, no some one , I love just vanished.

My heart shatters, leaving a void so deep, I don’t think I’ll ever recover. Why? Who disappeared? The answer slips from my grip, taking with it the kind of love that feels irreplaceable.

The man, demon? locks his gaze on me. “Your name, heritage, family, and magic no longer exist.”

I flinch as he lists each item, despising how I can’t fight to hold on to myself. How I can’t remember exactly what I’ve lost.

“You will wake as Felicity,” he continues as if he hadn’t already shattered me, “a mere mortal with dead adoptive parents.”

My hand flies to my mouth to hold in the sob trying to fly free.

“And you, Talora.” He turns to the older woman. “The coin of Ana is not enough to cover your demand to break the sacred law of balance. The Ironlands will not tolerate your debt, therefore, you are banished to the Shrouded Moors. Forever. Never to return.”

Her breath hitches, then she lifts her chin. “Agreed.”

In the next blink, everything fades.

* * *

I wake up groggy, disoriented, and inexplicably stressed. I search for a reason, but nothing?—

“Alright, you annoying git. I hear you,” I groan at my screeching mobile alarm. I overslept. Again.

After jamming my head and arms through the first cleanish hoodie I find in my flat’s unholy mess, I race out the door with my backpack half-zipped and my hair still damp from the quickest shower of my life. The campus cafe near the university looms with the promise of salvation or coffee, which for me is one and the same because I don’t do mornings. If I can get caffeine into my system, maybe this day won’t kill me outright.

The queue is mercifully short, but as I’m stuffing coins into the payment tray, disaster strikes.

“Oh, whoops!” exclaims a male voice, entirely too loud and cheerful for the hour. A splash hits my sleeve and drips down to the hem of my hoodie.

I jerk back with a yelp. “Seriously?”

The idiot standing in front of me dares to grin. He's holding an enormous iced coffee with caramel drizzle that's now oozing down the front of his cargo pants. Honestly, he deserves it.

"Oh no," he says, his voice seeping with faux concern, as sickly sweet as his coffee abomination.

Did this tosser fling it at me as a pathetic excuse for a pick-up line?

"Did I get you? I'm so sorry. Here, let me help." He reaches out with a wad of napkins, aiming for my chest like I'm a child who spilt soup on herself.

I step back so fast I almost crash into the woman behind me. "Don't even think about it."

"Hey, relax." His smirk spreads, the kind that makes my fingers itch for something heavy to throw. "It's just coffee. No need to get all worked up. I'm Jay, by the way." He leans in, like I'm supposed to swoon because some plonker decided to ruin my morning with a sad introduction. "What's your name, beautiful?"

There's a moment where my brain freezes. A wave of nausea and confusion hits me before I shake it off. I lift my chin. I'm torn between fury and disbelief. Who is this guy? Before I can decide whether to scream or storm away, a sharp, no-nonsense voice prevents me from biting his head off.

"Oi! Leave her alone!"

The guy straightens, his smirk faltering.

I turn to see a woman stepping out of the queue behind me. She's tall, broad-shouldered, and effortlessly chic in a tailored blazer over a cropped jumper and wide-

legged trousers. Her shock of blonde hair falls in artfully tousled waves, catching the light in a way that seems almost intentional. She's striking. Maybe it's the glow of her skin, as if she walked out of a luxury skincare ad, or her vivid green eyes that look like they could belong to a forest sprite.

She moves with an effortless confidence, the kind that seems to shift the air around her, making people instinctively step aside. Her expression is a sharp blend of wicked amusement and barely concealed disdain, like she's a gale ready to send this tosser's dignity tumbling end over end.

She crosses her arms and raises an eyebrow. "Did you not learn basic decency at some point? Or do you just harass random women before nine a.m. because your mum didn't hug you enough?"

"I wasn't—" He flounders, but she doesn't let him finish.

"Mate," she says, her tone going from sharp to almost pitying, "she doesn't want your help, and she definitely doesn't want your phone number. Jog on."

He flushes, mutters something under his breath, and retreats, leaving a trail of caramel drizzle in his wake.

She turns to me, her lips quirking into a smirk. "You alright, or do I need to chase him down and pour that coffee over his head?"

I blink, stunned. "Uh, no. I mean, yeah, I'm fine. Thanks."

"Good," she says, grabbing a napkin from the counter and handing it to me. "You've got a bit of coffee—just there." She gestures vaguely toward my arm, and I realise I've been standing frozen with it sliding down my sleeve.

She extends a hand, her smile easy and open. “I’m Cyn. You looked like you could use a friend.”

There’s something about her, a warmth that seems almost out of place on a grimy university morning. When she steps closer, the faintest hint of sweetness, mountain air, and pine wafts through the air, like she’s been walking through a spring forest instead of a crowded campus.

I take her hand a bit hesitantly. “Felicity.”

“Nice to meet you, Felicity. Now, come on.” She jerks her head toward the counter. “Let’s get you a replacement before someone else decides to throw a drink at you.”

I manage a weak laugh, and for the first time all morning, I feel like the world isn’t actively trying to crush me. Until I catch my reflection in the cafe window, and something there doesn’t look quite right.

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FELICITY FORREST

“Heirs of the court must claim their lineage by blood oath by their twenty-fifth season or forever be forsaken.”

Decree of the Crimson Court, Edict VII

Four Years Later

My gaze drifts from the meandering ferry passengers to the open book as I lean against the railing: *The Other Crowd Guidebook for Mortals*. If anything, it reads like a diary with entries seemingly written by different authors. I run my finger over the copyright page:

Published by Those Who Remember What Humans Forgot

Tricksters, Tinkerers, Child-Stealers, Harbingers of Fortune, the God-folk, the Fair Folk, the Cunning Folk, etcetera, etcetera...

Originally Published in 1436, the sixth edition was updated whenever we felt like it. Figure it out.

Foreword by BS

‘To the foolish and fearless mortals who seek knowledge of us, beware. Curiosity and courage won’t save you. This guide may serve as a signpost, but don’t expect it to show you the way back.’

“You know what I’m saying, Flick?” My best friend Cyn’s question pauses my reading.

“Absolutely.” I have no idea what I just supported, but I’m not really needed in this part of the conversation. Cyn’s been talking about all the adventures she’s planning during this birthday celebration trip. I, uh, may have misled her about the reason we’re heading to Ireland. Yes, we’re celebrating her birthday, but I have another purpose I haven’t told her yet. I’m still trying to figure out the right time.

Flipping to a random page, I skim a passage. ‘The Shadowborn are bound by forbidden magic. It grants power but exacts a price that neither dark fae, deamhan , nor mortal can endure without consequence.’ The words blur, swimming in front of my eyes. A faint glow shimmers along the paper’s edges. It forms strange, shifting shapes. One coalesces into something almost recognisable, maybe a glyph, but it slips out of sight before I can focus on it.

Barely legible words appear as though scrawled in the margin by a ghostly hand:

A warning to humans and fae alike. ‘Beware of the hidden and the glamoured. They are not wholly of one world nor the other, but disrupt the balance of both.’ -Beatrice Blackthorn Shadowhart

I blink, shaking my head. Beatrice Blackthorn, where have I heard that name before? It doesn’t sound fae.

A wry smile tugs at my lips. If we were fae, Cyn’s birthday wouldn’t be a crisis. It’d be a full-blown ritual. And knowing her, she’d turn it into an extravaganza. Good thing we’re only human, right? Except I’ve always had this stupid, aching need for something bigger than myself—like the world has an edge I need to find, but I don’t know if I’ll fall or fly when I get there.

Cyn's nervous voice pulls me from my thoughts. "They say it's all downhill from here." She never does well with change. "But you've still got time!"

At twenty-two, I'm a few years shy of catching up to her, but my milestone won't be anything close to Cyn's quarter-of-a-century "crisis." As an international model, Cyn faces relentless pressure to stay at the pinnacle of the fashion world, but she carries it with an effortless, almost unearthly grace.

I laugh until my gaze catches a reflection in the reinforced glass panel lining the ferry's passenger deck. A dark shape or shadow flies by, but when I blink, it's gone. Probably a seagull. Working at the magazine, *Everyday Supernatural*, sharpens my senses to the unusual. I keep that under wraps, even from Cyn—especially from Cyn.

But there's a prickling sensation. I try to shrug it off, but the itch at the base of my neck won't stop. Not a normal itch. This is deeper. Under the skin. I shift, rubbing the spot absently, but the sensation only gets worse. Like something waiting. Watching. My fingers brush over smooth skin. No raised lines. No mark. Just an irrational sense of wrongness slithering down my spine.

I close the book, pushing down the worry it stirs up. "So, bottomline," I interject myself back into the conversation, "we're celebrating with copious amounts of alcohol and regrettable decisions, right?"

"Oh, you know me well, Flick."

I force a laugh, even as part of me recoils. I'm not one for drunkenness, but I'd never ruin it for Cyn. Birthdays are the worst, and she knows it. Our history is full of university nights out and heart-to-hearts, but birthdays? They've never been kind to me. "I can't wait."

That prickle on the back of my neck won't let up. Maybe chasing ghosts for a living

is finally screwing with my head.

“I can tell you’re positively vibrating with barely-restrained glee,” Cyn teases.

Water slaps against the side of the boat.

“I am excited,” I say, louder than I should, but with all the conviction of a fat, domesticated cat on a windowsill trying to convince the neighbour’s dog it owns the block, even though it’s too lazy to chase mice. Meanwhile, my mind is on the fleeting shadow, on hills and hollows where nobody has the sense—or possibly the stupidity—to wander.

I hug the book tighter to my chest. A strange pull tugs at me, the thick cover almost warm beneath my touch. Protective, somehow. This so-called ‘guidebook,’ which I’m slogging through, reads like it was assembled by someone who, at no point, considered anyone might actually study it. It’s messy and rough, like private panic scrawled out in an absinthe-induced free-write, with occasional notes scribbled in the margins. Somehow, it skips the basic survival details in favour of cryptic observations and peculiar etiquette. The real fear isn’t in some polished monster but in the creeping certainty that I’ve stumbled onto something that should stay buried. Poorly edited? Absolutely, but in the same way a weathered, creaking house is poorly lit. Stupid, stupid paranoia. Stop it.

“So,” I ask, forcing the anxiety down, “how did Nathan take you turning him down to come with me instead?”

Cyn sighs, dragging a hand through her windswept hair. “Oh, about as well as you’d expect. I let him down easy, like always, but honestly, I wish he’d take a bloody hint. I wouldn’t ruin your job by sleeping with your boss any more than I’d wreck our friendship. Thai Tuesdays with you both are sacred.” She pauses, her gaze narrowing on me. “But seriously, Flick, when were you planning to tell me this trip isn’t a

holiday? That it's another one of your work adventures chasing a story?"

Dammit, Nathan . Of course he ratted me out and didn't have the balls to warn me. His massive crush on Cyn has him talking without thinking about the repercussions. "I'm sorry, Cyn. I'm committed to celebrating you, but...we've got a lead on a púca on Inis Mór. A local priest is stoking the fire right alongside some hotshot developer trying to build a golf resort. Trouble is that every time they break ground, something goes wrong. The locals? They're quick to blame a púca."

"A púca? Sounds exotic." One corner of her mouth twitches as though she's trying not to laugh. "Please tell me that's a kind of cocktail."

A wry grin tugs at my lips. "Not a cocktail. Or maybe it is but that's not what I'm talking about. It's a shapeshifting fae from Irish folklore."

She snorts, her gaze drifting out to the ocean where gulls wheel and scream. One swoops down to the ferry's deck, snatching up a fallen sandwich with the precision of a thief, while the girl who dropped it stares after it, stunned and empty-handed. "Only you would drag me to Ireland for a mythical creature. But I'm all ears if it gets me a drink named after it."

"That's the spirit!" I shift the book and snag a large-ish envelope out of my pocket. "There's a photo involved." Sliding the image free, I slap it on top of the guidebook. "It's a big deal, like cover-of-Vogue big, if Vogue did supernatural exposés."

"Really? Now, that's my language." She studies the picture. "A photoshoot with a fairy? Ireland is sounding better by the minute."

The glossy surface catches the light, revealing an image that practically hums with otherworldly energy. "What do you think?"

“I don’t know. Maybe it was touched up.” Cyn wrinkles her nose, leaning in for a closer look. “I’ve seen enough photo brushing in my line of work that . Not everything is as shiny as it seems.”

But I know púcas from the stories my adopted Mum used to tell. Not the cuddly kind, but the dark ones that make you think twice about what’s hiding in the shadows. She’d talk about the fae as if they lurked just out of sight. Back then, they felt more like lessons than tales, like things I should remember for my own good. And púcas? They’re the worst kind of fae. Shapeshifters with a twisted sense of humour. They’ll mess with you for fun, but sometimes, they don’t stop at messing.

I arch a brow. The image shows a creature that might resemble a horse—if a horse were a wraith with glowing red eyes that seem to pierce straight through the shadows. “Sure, because a glamourised fairy would absolutely need Photoshop.”

“Does this fae thing also shift into something else?” Her eyes narrow, scrutinising me like she’s debating whether or not to take me seriously. “Fox? Goat? Something nastier?”

The ferry rises and dips over a small swell. “Reports vary, but the consensus leans towards a horse, black as night, with eyes that glow like coals. You know how these stories go. Half the time, they’re an excuse for something else happening, but the accidents are real enough to spook the locals.”

Her jaw goes slack, lips parting slightly. “Accidents? The usual construction screw-ups, or are we talking something...weirder?”

I glance down at the fairy horse and exhale. Cyn always teases me for my ‘spidey senses,’ but she doesn’t know the half of it. An inexplicable pull tugs at me, like an invisible thread binding me to something, whispering in a language I can’t comprehend. A photo of a creature snapped in another photo. I squint at it. Real or

not? Hell if I know, but it's enough to pull me in. "Misplaced tools, equipment failure, or the occasional injury. Nothing fatal, but enough to grind progress to a halt and keep the rumours alive. It's as if someone—or something —doesn't want that resort on their land."

She presses her fingers to her temples, a groan escaping her lips, as if the sheer ridiculousness is giving her a headache. "That's nothing new. Isn't there always some dubious photo that surfaces?"

"Right, but Nathan can't prove it's fake after examining it. It's not the usual spectral blur or dubious shadows. There's something about it. And the priest is quite insistent about the local legend. I can't shake the feeling that we're onto something real."

I catch my reflection in the wide, salt-streaked windows encasing the cabin. Thick, dark waves are pulled into a loose ponytail and have strands of purple and silver woven through it. They're natural, like threads of twilight in the sunlight. I've stopped asking myself how or why they're there. The questions don't have answers. And honestly? I'm not sure I'd like them if they did. The usual smudge of fatigue circles my eyes, but then...something shifts. My eyes, normally dark grey, look...lavender? My skin, familiar but somehow different, is paler, with a smooth, glassy quality. I blink, frowning at this weird, stranger me staring back.

Before I can wrap my head around it, another face looms beside mine in the glass. Pale and hollow-cheeked, with eyes that look like they're painted with a shade called Soul-Eating Void flecked with amber. The gaze isn't unfriendly, just...off, like it isn't quite calibrated to normal human expectations. It tilts its head in an almost-polite angle, but it's a little too sharp like it read some manual on how to blend in with humans once and is determined to get the basics right.

The hum of roots beneath the seafloor and the whisper of god-folk buzz through my mind. A pull to the arcane woven with shadows and starlight, binding me to

something—or someone—I don't yet understand but can't deny the longing coursing through me.

The figure steps into the relaxed shuffle of passengers leaning against railings and staring at the waves. There's a hesitation, a strange lag as though they're translating it through some outdated info on human body language. I blink, and now it's an ordinary bloke in a black jacket, scrolling his mobile with the lifeless disinterest of someone perfectly at home in the monotonous rhythm of ferry life.

I blink again, and he's gone. The ferry continues to rise and fall against the relentless push of the ocean, but my pulse is thrumming against the current, my gaze glued to the glass as if expecting the Soul-Eating Void eyes to resurface. Nothing—except the steady hammering of my heart and the idle conversation of passengers, entirely ignorant of the reasonable assumption that I might be losing my mind. I try to dismiss it as a weird shadow, but my skin tingles like it knows better.

Nathan's words in our last conversation skitter down my spine. "You know how some stories just...vanish? One day, they're everywhere, and the next, it's like they never existed. What if someone is making them disappear? A whole history, a whole world, just wiped away..." His voice had faltered then, followed by a forced chuckle. "Never mind. It's probably stupid."

Nathan always rambles about shadowy forces meddling with our stories, erasing truths we're not meant to know. I used to laugh it off, but there are moments when the cracks in the world feel too real to ignore. Things happen that logic can't explain. And as much as I want to believe the world is exactly what we see on the surface, there's a gnawing worry that Nathan might be right. The world is full of cracks, and things slip through them all the time. Things we aren't meant to see.

"Hey?" Cyn breaks through my haze. "You spacing out on me again?"

I wince. “What were you saying?”

“I was saying that, real or not, this adventure is the perfect excuse to unplug. We’ll have drinks, sweaty dancing, and make questionable life choices.” There’s a slight hitch, a momentary pause before she continues. “Besides, how long has it been?”

“How long has what been?”

“When’s the last time someone actually made your toes curl?” She clicks her tongue.

“Toes curl? I don’t think anyone has ever made my toes curl,” I say, rolling my eyes. “But as a matter of fact, it was just the other night.” Cyn doesn’t need to know it was by my own hands.

“Sure.” Cyn snorts.

“Fine. It’s been a while. Since Will and I split. Satisfied?”

“No, and neither are you. We should remedy that this weekend.”

The thought of hooking up exhausts me. My ex always tore me down to feel bigger and I needed out before I lost myself completely. Better to be alone than let someone make me feel small.

“Felicity?”

I snap back to the present. “Sorry.”

“Stop thinking about that good-for-nothing shite that broke your heart. I swear I could kick him right in the teeth.”

At the moment, I'm glad my friend lacks a filter. "Then you'd be sitting in jail for your birthday, and what would be the fun in that?"

Cyn sighs. "If I see that man again?—"

"Let's not." I cut her off, avoiding more pain. I tap my gloved fingertips against the book, wincing as the ache from a long night hunched over my laptop flares up. The leather fingerless gloves Cyn made offers some relief. Chic support, as she calls it, is perfect for my loosey-goosey joints. They help, but not nearly enough.

"Yeah, but I could seriously teach him some manners. I've got a way with wild things." The air seems to hum with every satisfied syllable that drops from Cyn's mouth. It leaves me wondering—not for the first time—if she's joking, or if the next gust of wind might actually knock my ex flat on his ass if he weren't hundreds of kilometers away in London.

My laughter fades as movement near the railing catches my attention. A black cat sits perched beside a row of bolted, plastic seating, its fur so dark it practically absorbs the light around it. Well, except for the patch of white on its chest. Its eyes flicker, glowing... lavender?

The cat doesn't move, doesn't even blink. It stares at me like it's trying to look into my soul. My guidebook mentions that the cait-shith are fierce feline-like warriors that guard the gates to the Otherworld. Am I crazy to instantly wonder if this cat is fae?

Its tail flicks lazily before it melts into the shadows.

Nope. Just nope. I imagined the feline. Nothing disappeared. I rack my brain, trying to remember what Cyn just said. Right. Teaching my ex some manners. "Impressive. Do you offer classes?"

“Look, Flick, trust isn’t built on promises. It’s built on scars. The ones they see, the ones they don’t...” She adjusts her sunglasses with a casual push. “...and the ones they swear they’ll never cause.”

Cyn gave me that nickname because I’m always moving, chasing the next lead like a flame that won’t stay still, flickering, restless, and a little hard to handle. But honestly? That’s how I think of her too. She shifts like the wind. Impossible to pin down.

She has a habit of confusing love with other things like a good laugh, a clever flirtation, or a quick fling. No matter how much Nathan worships her from the sidelines, Cyn’s never seen him as more than a friend. I’ve tried to warn him, but he’s blind to it. Blinded by her spark, her charm, the way she lights up a room and never stays long enough for anyone to catch her.

I don’t think anyone will ever get under her skin. Not after what she’s been through. It left its mark, and she’s made damn sure no one gets close enough to leave another.

I press my lips together, tuning out the raucous laughter from a group of passing teens listening to the waves crash against the ferry. She’s not wrong, but hearing it out loud stings more than I’d like to admit. “Yeah, well...what happens when the scars are all you’ve got left?”

Cyn doesn’t answer right away. Instead, she takes my hand, like she’s daring the world to break me while she’s holding on. There’s nothing soft about her touch—it’s fierce, protective, and says everything. Delicate is not her style. She’s all sharp edges and quiet loyalty, the kind of person who makes you feel safe in a way that no armour ever could.

The ferry captain’s voice crackles over the loudspeaker. “Ladies and gentlemen, we’ll be docking shortly. Please gather your belongings and prepare to disembark.”

Then I hear it—soft, almost like wind chimes, but wrong. Not music, not quite. Nothing you'd hear drifting out of a pub late at night. No, this is different. It's too perfect, almost like each note is plucked straight from some dream. It has a pull to it that digs in, raising every hair on my body.

That prickling sense of being watched is back. My hands ball into fists as my tongue presses against the metallic tang in my mouth. Eyes on me, not human. Something out of place has slipped into the ordinary.

My gaze snaps up, catching a raven perched on the ferry's bridge roof, its dark eyes locked on mine. There's a sense of something shared, though I can't explain why. It's only a bird, but its black eyes are far too knowing. Its stare feels like a challenge or maybe a warning. Geez, what is it with animals today? First a cat, now a raven. Either way, it sits wrong in my gut.

I swallow it down, trying to tell myself it's nerves, but the chill sticks, settling into my bones. Maybe the fae are already watching.

Chapter Two

NIALL O'LEARY

“A single sacrifice can save a world if you have the will to make it.”

Aisling Talamhain, Revered Seer

I stretch, rolling my shoulders until I feel that satisfying pop. My hair tumbles forward in dark waves shot through with enough silver to displease my father. Every strand of silver represents the draíocht in my blood. I'll braid it before my sparring with Tomas later, but only so it doesn't get in my way, not to placate a king. If the old man had his way, I'd keep it braided and demure, as if that could hide who I am.

Sunlight streams through the arched window, warming my face and the metal at my lip—an even bigger affront to the court. Let them talk of rebellion burning in my veins and how I'll taint the throne with my reckless heart. They're not entirely wrong.

Beside me, a woman—I don't know her name, nor do I care to learn it—shifts on the silk sheets, the fabric whispering against our skin. Her nails trace the ink along my chest and down my stomach, lingering above the place where my marks dip beneath my navel—an intimate trail I usually keep hidden.

The Gloaming marks—delicate, curling lines etched into my skin—were once vibrant, pulsing with the power of promises kept. Now, half of them have dulled to grey, stark reminders of debts unpaid or vows shattered. They're bargains that refuse to die, each one an anchor, dragging me closer to a line I can't afford to cross.

In public, I keep them hidden beneath dark sleeves and a devious smile. No one needs to know how precarious my grip on power really is or how much of my control is already slipping through my fingers. Power is perception, and perception is survival.

As for my occasional dalliances? Let's just say I've perfected the art of discretion. A draíocht-bound contract ensures those lovely lips stay sealed and memories foggy. Talk about the marks, and you'll find the words caught in your throat, every whisper dissolving like ash in the wind. They leave with no answers and enough satisfaction to stop them from digging deeper.

It's not cruel. It's survival. And in my world, those two things often look the same.

Her touch moves higher, tracing the wards etched into my forearm—bloodline sigils woven into the intricate patterns that cover my skin. They glow faintly whenever my emotions slip, their light creeping along the dark ink that spans my arms, chest, and back. A map of my life, my court—all laid bare in ink and magic. Magic passed through generations that binds me to a court whose throne I've never taken. Each court holds its own unique power, and while that magic flows through my veins, I keep myself out of its politics. The markings stir under her fingers, energy prickling under her touch. My father's advisors want those wards on full display, proof that I'm the rightful heir. But if they flared with every treacherous thought I have, the court would string me up before the coronation. Best I keep my intentions well-guarded.

She looks at me with a hunger I know all too well. It's not me she craves, but the allure of the crown. She wants to discover my deepest secrets, to glimpse the void I carry within, as if understanding it might fill something empty in her. No one ever does, and no one ever comes away unscathed.

Her fingertips draw soft, insistent shapes like she believes she can map out my darkness with her touch. I almost pity her, but sympathy is dangerous. I've learned to lock away any genuine feeling before it can light a fuse I'm not prepared to detonate.

“Stay for breakfast?” I ask, though we both know I don’t mean it. It’s safer this way—keeping hearts and secrets locked behind walls of hollow courtesy. Gods know I already dance too close to the edge—between the father who demands perfection, the Gloaming that demands payment, and a prophecy that could devour us all if I let my guard down.

She hesitates, reading the distance in my eyes, then slips from the bed. Her wrap clings to her, half-draped in shimmering fabric that does more to highlight her bare skin than conceal it. She casts me a coy smile, adjusting the loose material so it barely covers her curves. “Don’t tempt me, Niall.”

The corner of my mouth quirks. Temptation is my specialty. I let my draíocht ripple through the room. Ivy snakes along the walls, responding to my magic in pulsing waves. A vine coils around her wrist, tethering her to the bedpost. The wrap slides off her shoulders and falls to the floor, pooling at her feet like liquid moonlight. She arches an eyebrow, a knowing smirk curving her lips.

We both want the same thing right now—a distraction from the betrayal and bloodshed outside my doors. I pull her close, lips grazing her neck, the cool touch of my lip ring drawing a shiver from her.

But my magic misfires.

I’m yanked from her warmth into a place that reeks of rust and saltwater. Shadows flicker at the edges of my vision, and my pulse stutters. A grimy passenger boat replaces my bed, and the woman before me isn’t the one sharing my sheets. She stands at the railing with her back turned, a battered leather bag hanging from her shoulder. She looks fragile under the overcast sunlight, but there’s tension in her stance, like she’s aware someone is lurking. Watching.

She turns her head. There’s a small mark just at the base of her neck. I know those

shapes. Ogham—old draíocht , dangerous magic—etched into her flesh. The sight of it sends something crawling up my ribs, something I do not like. A contract. A promise that never dies.

Fear claws its way up my throat, tangled with something possessive, as the shadows coil around her, hungry and ready to devour. I sense the darkness under my skin—my inner stallion, though there’s nothing graceful about the spiritual entity. It’s raw, predatory, more beastly than my fae form—snarls at the sight of those living shadows, itching to tear them apart.

The vision fades as quickly as it came, leaving my heart hammering. My bedchamber rushes back in, the smell of damp earth and fey-scented skin colliding with the memory of salt and concrete.

“Couldn’t keep it in check, my Prince?” my companion says, smug.

Her eyes glitter. She thinks she’s the reason I slipped—why I lost control of my magic. She’s not. The fae ceangal , that soul-sinking bond no other connection can touch, thrums with a power both beautiful and terrible. There’s nothing in the Ironlands that even comes close to it. It puts down roots and fills your veins like a bad habit you can’t quit. Romantic, maybe, if a soul-binding link with no regard for personal boundaries is your thing. I can’t get involved in that. Sacrifice, destruction, a future drenched in blood and shadows—Aisling’s vision is clear. If I bond, I’ll doom two worlds.

“Hardly,” I say, releasing her wrist from the vine with a flick of my hand.

She laughs softly, a low, musical sound and grabs her dress from the floor. “If you insist. Though, I think we both know better.” She tosses her hair over her shoulder with the confidence of someone who’s never heard the word “no,” but skids to a halt, clutching her gown to her chest as Maelíosa appears in the doorway, twirling her

dustwrought dagger with the sort of disinterested boredom most people reserve for alphabetizing scrolls. Sigils shimmer along its blade marking our vow to protect mortals of the Ironlands and keep the fae safe from the horrors prowling the void between the Otherworld.

“Leaving so soon?” my twin asks, spinning the dagger in a casual show of threat.

I wince.

My guest goes sheet-white, clutching her gown to her chest, like it might protect her from a banshee or Maelíosa, who is easily a thousand times scarier. My sister’s stare is as sharp as the dagger she’s twirling, with the calm focus you see in someone wondering exactly how close they can throw it without technically spilling blood. I almost feel sorry for her. Almost. If you’re going to mess around with royalty, you’d better be prepared for the occasional stabby sibling.

The poor lass bolts. Once she’s gone, Maelíosa slides the dagger away, levelling me with a glare that could peel paint. Thank the old gods our younger sister Darcy isn’t quite so murderously inclined.

“Killing time with distractions, I see.”

I shrug, forcing a lazy grin. “It’s called living. You should try it.”

She doesn’t take the bait. “The visions are getting worse, aren’t they?”

Ignoring the pointed question that’ll make me admit more than I’m ready for, I continue as if she hadn’t changed the subject. “Reality is overrated. I stick with denial. It’s the only thing keeping me sane these days.” I flash her a grin, but my chest tightens.

She's not having it. "You're not the only one dealing with fallout. Fallon's patience is wearing thin. He's demanding a formal audience. Something about your apparent disregard for duty."

I scoff. "Duty. Right. And you're the picture of compliance, sneaking off with Kieran to The Shade to let glimmers trick you into games that end with someone missing a finger or worse."

Maelíosa's jaw clenches. "It's not about my choices, it's about yours. Fall in line or pay the price. Fallon isn't summoning you for a chat. You know that."

Facing Fallon—AKA our father—is a lesson in patience. His wrath isn't like bickering over spilt dubh fíon, but we've all been on the receiving end of it. The beast in me stirs, thrashing in the confines of my mind. The dark stallion hates the idea of being caged, forced to follow a script. We both do.

Fate is only a cage if you let it be, it growls.

A cold, razor-thin smile stretches across my face. "As if he hasn't already written the lines for us all. Play the obedient heir, bond the right match, and keep the court from collapsing under its own secrets.

She exhales, struggling to keep her composure. "Love and loyalty rarely make room for freedom in his eyes. You can't keep avoiding him or hiding from the future because you're afraid of what it might hold."

My sister has seen me slip up before, these waking dreams ripping through reality, but she doesn't know. Cold sweat beads on my skin at the memory of the Seer's warning, the portent I call my curse. A bond with destruction incarnate is my future. We will bear twins. One will bridge the realms. But the other? They will carry her gloom. Light and darkness. Our union will release the creatures the Obsidian Court

has fought to contain, breaking the one agreement that binds all the courts together. Perhaps the only thing we—the Wraithwind Court—has ever agreed on with that lot.

It's a death sentence, for her , for me...for everyone. If I dodge the ceangal , maybe we can all avoid annihilation. If that means I'm stuck alone forever? Fine. I'll manage. But when her image slides into my visions, that warning feels like chains around my throat, and I can't tell if I want to break free or give in.

The Seer keeps the prophecy from our father for a reason—because it implicates me. She's loyal to me, not the crown. She knows Fallon would sacrifice me to save the realm without a second thought and spawn another heir. His advisors twist the truth to suit power games. If she's hiding something this dangerous, it's because she believes they'll do more harm than good.

Aisling forewarns I can't escape fate, and my gut tells me the raven-dark haired beauty will be my end. Chaos waiting at the edge of the Veil, ready to devour everything.

And I'm at the centre of it, a ticking bomb.

Maelíosa studies me. "You're shaking."

"I'm fine," I snap. I can still smell brine and blood, and hear the thump of that woman's heartbeat. Why do I feel such a raw need to protect her? She's a stranger. Yet the pull is as plain as a pikestaff.

She softens a fraction. "You don't have to do this alone."

I bark out a laugh. "That's not what you said last time Fallon had me cornered. Remember your 'Say no' speech? Bold plan."

She shoots me an incredulous look. “Well, excuse me for trying something other than rolling over and letting him win.”

I let out a slow breath. “Why are you really here?”

She brushes a loose strand of dark, silver-streaked hair back. “Aisling is worried. And Fallon is not the type to ignore an omen, especially if it means a war no one’s ready to fight. You’re needed. Even if you’re determined to play the devil-may-care prince.”

My heart twists, a sudden longing for a simpler life. I’ve never truly been free. No matter how many lovers I take or how many nights I lose myself in illusions. The prophecy is always there. I can’t shake the visions. Always the same dark-haired woman, her face obscured, a pack slung over her shoulder. Sometimes, she’s clutching a book that feels vital. I drown the divination out with distractions. But every day, it digs in deeper, the curse, the visions... her .

My stallion snorts, his equine wit impossible to ignore. It’s your fate. You have the power to shape it. Not some fortune teller. We are the iron.

I set my feet on the floor, flinching as the cold shoots through my bones. Nothing like freezing stone to start the day. I reach for the fur draped over the chair, pulling it around my shoulders. A thought surfaces. Custom would dictate that a servant, not my sister, be sent to wake me. “Since when did you become the royal wake-up call?”

Her gaze holds a seriousness that sobers me. “The Veil is thinning earlier than it should. Something is clawing at it from the other side. You know what that means. Magic doesn’t stir without a price.

A chill settles in my chest, colder than the frost that follows my draíocht . I tell myself it’s the usual doom Fallon is always spouting, but the gnawing ache in my gut

doesn't believe it. The Veil does not thin this early, not before the world dips into the season of frost and firelight. And I feel it, a restless tug from the other side that pulls at the edges of our world. If the prophecy holds, the boundary between life and death is already too thin.

"Samhain hasn't even whispered its approach," I murmur.

"Aye, it isn't the only thing that's premature," Maelíosa says, her eyes flicking downward. "You should put some pants on. The chill in the air has affected a wee bit more than the Veil. Maybe trim that beard while you're at it. You're starting to look like you've been hiding out in the woods for weeks."

I rub a hand over my jaw, the short hairs are coarse beneath my fingers. "Jealous? It's called rugged charm, sister," I retort, already missing the warmth of my bed. With a huff, I pull on my leathers. -And let Father know I'll make an appearance.-

She acknowledges my mindspeak with a nod. "Don't keep us waiting."

I lift my chin. I'm a prince trained in duty, magic, and tradition, enough of it to crush a lesser fae. Once, we were respected, maybe even feared. That world is long gone, crumbling under scepticism and twisted tales that make us monsters. Humans forgot us, and we made damn sure they would. They always feared the Other Crowd. Too hard, too pale.

Bloodward sigils mark most of our skin, etched deep with the magic that flows through our bloodlines. The power is inked into every line and curve. We bear the sigils with pride, courtly proof of who we are and where we come from. Our magic isn't something we can always control, not when strong emotions claw to the surface, blazing through our composure and lighting up our sigils. It makes us easy to read, easy to use, and even easier to exploit.

Humanity gave up on finding common ground long before we slipped away. Better that than kill us for it. On that, at least, Maelíosa and I are in complete agreement.

My gaze flicks to the door she left swinging shut. As for the match Fallon lined up for her, he's not worthy of her fire, not by a long shot. And me? The ceangal might be written in blood and a bond only death can break, but I'm not ready to roll over and let fate win. Prophecies bind, Aisling says. But so does choice, doesn't it?

I can resist the curvy lass from the boat and every other vision. She means nothing. I let that thought settle, like armour buckling into place. The Veil is thinning, and with it comes frost, shadow, and all the creatures that think we're fair game. If the prophecy is right, the last of the Tuatha Dé Danann are in for one hell of a trial.

Mortals paint us as beasts or blessings, rarely understanding the truth. We are as bound by duty and sacrifice as they are, if not more. But the memory of that grimy boat and the woman bound by shadows won't leave me. The darkness in me howls for release and it's only a matter of time before it finds a reason to break free. I'm not certain which side of me—prince or beast—will be left standing when it breaks.

* * *

MAELÍOSA O'LEARY

I leave Niall behind, the hallway stretching on forever with gilded sconces flaring to life as I pass. My boots echo against the marble, the sound sharp and hollow, like the pit forming in my stomach. Father's summons hangs over me like a guillotine, and the raven he received from the Crimson Court—their messenger—might as well be the hand pulling the rope.

I know why it came.

Madden.

His name hits me like a brand. Hot. Unforgiving. It scorches through my veins, leaving nothing but heat and rage in its wake. My fists clench, nails biting into my palms, sharp enough to draw blood. It's the only thing keeping me grounded. Barely.

This has to be about the betrothal. It always comes back to that damned bargain. The timing couldn't be worse with the Veil thinning, tensions rising, and my temper already stretched to its breaking point.

He's always been shit at finding the right time or the right words. But this? This isn't clumsy. It's calculated. Deliberate. He knows exactly what he's doing every time. And gods, it always leaves me raw.

The memory of his hands on me, his gaze burning like he's seconds away from ruining me, claws its way to the surface. My breath hitches, heat flaring in my chest, twisting into something volatile. Fury. Lust. A poison that makes my core tighten and blood hum.

Fuck Madden. And fuck the hold he still has on me.

I will never be his. Not his pawn. Not his queen. He doesn't own me, no matter how much he thinks he does.

I clench and unclench my fists. Fucking bastard. It's impossible to think of him without remembering who he used to be. The boy with the easy grin that sneaked onto the Shrouded Moors with Finn, Niall, and me, hunting mischief. Back then, I believed we'd all remain thick as thieves.

But things change. Dresses I didn't want, roles I didn't choose. He started treating me like an enemy—or worse, like prey.

I don't want to think about him. But memories have their own rules.

The Crimson Court ball rises in my mind. I clench my teeth. That damned gown. My father forced it on me, and I should've known what it meant. Black raven feathers across the bodice shimmered in violet and emerald, catching the light with every turn. Beading framed the scandalously low neckline, whispering look at me. A sea of layered tulle and silk flared as I spun stupidly, its hem brushing marble like a secret I hadn't been told yet.

It made me look fierce and unapologetic. Like I belonged. But it was all a fucking lie.

I smirk, bitter at the memory. Even then, I strapped my duskwrought dagger to my thigh—my rebellion against Father's over-the-top frills and propriety. The ball wasn't just a dance. It was a stage for alliances. I was the centrepiece.

I drank too much dubh fíon and laughed too loud. And Madden? He watched me that night, his glare sharp enough to pierce through my false laughter. But it wasn't just anger in his eyes—there was something darker, hooded, like he wanted to devour me—or destroy me.

Tomas held Kieran back from confronting Madden right then and there because one scowl from him could've ended in spilt blood. Or worse.

At one point, Madden marched over to his cousin Vicious, who whispered something to King Cú Chulainn Darkraven, and in that moment, I saw a shift in Madden. Like he'd made a choice.

When he asked me to dance, I should've said no. For one reckless moment, I let the boy I trusted blind me to the man he'd become. We moved like shadows, his touch lingering too long, his voice too smooth.

“I thought you hated dancing,” I murmured, trying to keep my heart steady.

“Maybe I’ve been waiting for the right partner.”

Our fathers intervened, summoning us both to the library. I felt Madden’s hand drop from my waist so abruptly it made me shiver. We followed them out.

Neither father spoke. Mine poured a shimmering black liquid into two glasses and handed them to us without explanation.

“What is this?” I slurred, giggling a little from too much wine.

“This is necessary,” Father snapped.

Madden’s fingers flexed, but he didn’t speak. He only looked at me, a tortured conflict in his dark eyes.

He took the glass, his movements slow, methodical. Then he leaned in to whisper so only I could hear: “You’ll thank me for this one day, Ruthless.”

Ruthless. His nickname for me because I used to beat the boys in sparring without mercy.

I shrugged. I was barely sixteen, rebellious, and too damn naive. “Bottoms up.”

We clicked glasses and downed the bitter liquid. I barely had time to cough at the taste before Madden stepped behind me, his palm sliding against my bare shoulder blade. My breath caught.

“You’re trembling,” he says softly. He sounds almost...regretful.

And damn him, I am. I hated it. But his touch was hypnotic, freezing me in place. He brushed my hair aside, exposing the nape of my neck. That first press of his lips on my skin was both a shock and a spark. Lightning and thunder, all in one. Pain flared—sharp, searing—then faded into something hot and consuming.

Shadows swirled around me, weaving themselves into the shape of a raven at the front of my throat. Its talons sank deep into my flesh, claiming me.

But it wasn't just me. My gaze shifted to Madden as he staggered back, his hand clutching his chest. His shirt was shredded, and I saw it—a matching mark, dark and vivid, carved over his heart. The same raven, its wings stretching as though to tether us together. His eyes locked on mine, wild and conflicted, before something colder slid into place behind them.

That's when I understood. This was our fathers' twisted agreement, a betrothal approved by the king, sealed by dark magic. And I was the sacrificial bride.

My hand lifts to the Gloam mark on my neck, its raven claws sunk deep into my jugular. I hate the damn thing. Hate him.

But refusing him had consequences. The Crimson Court decreed he would take a new partner for political gain. Our Gloam marks twisted when he broke our bond to do it. I was sick, near death, while his new partner fell pregnant—and I felt every spark of life in my own mark flare painfully bright. Then I felt them both die, mother and the wee one. The magic that should have united us turned fetid instead, bound to death and decay.

Rumours say it nearly killed Madden, too. Everyone else believes he made a sacrifice to strengthen the Gloam mark and reassert control over me. All I know is that his power now feels darker than ever, and he's been wielding our bond like a weapon, forcing me to feel him, to come to him. It doesn't matter whether he orchestrated

those deaths or not. I'll never believe in him again.

The memory digs into me now, burning hotter as the Gloam mark thrums against my skin, pulsing in time with the one Madden carries.

Bastard. He's doing this—using the mark to reach me, pulling at my mind, dragging me into his orbit.

It starts low, a hum in my veins, spreading heat that makes my steps falter. By the time I reach my chamber door, my breath catches. My pulse pounds, and the mark sears against my skin like a brand.

Motherfucking, cocksucking son-of-a-bitch.

I fumble with the latch, shoving the door open. The moment it slams shut behind me, shadows seep through the cracks, curling around my wrists and ankles. The touch is cold, possessive, and it yanks me down before I can fight back.

“Madden,” I hiss through clenched teeth.

His voice slides into my mind like silk. - Submit, Ruthless. You're only making this harder.-

“Go to hell,” I snap, fighting the heat of his magic that licks my skin like a lover's touch.

-You already know that's where I'll take you. Willingly or not.- His mocking laughter sends prickles along my skin.

“Say it,” he purrs, his phantom form looming over me. In the gilded mirror across the room, his reflection flickers—grey eyes gleaming with predatory amusement. “Say

you'll come to me."

"Never," I rasp, forcing the word through clenched teeth, even as my body clenches with need.

He chuckles again, the sound dark as sin. "Then I'll make you beg."

The shadows tighten. They stroke and tease, sending shockwaves through my muscles. Pleasure skirts the line of pain, and I can't decide if I want to scream or give in. My breathing comes in ragged bursts as I try to hold on to my defiance, but he isn't letting up. He's ramping it higher, every nerve in my body sizzling like a live wire.

A whimper escapes me—betrayal from my own lips. His magic rides that sound, intensifying the sweet ache until I'm trembling, right at the razor's edge.

"Fine," I choke out, pride burning like acid in my throat. "Stop. I'm begging."

Triumph floods the tether between us. The shadows slither away, leaving me panting on the cold floor. My skin is damp with sweat. My heartbeat hammers like it's trying to break free of my chest.

His presence lingers—a victorious echo that brushes the edges of my mind. -You'll come to me, Ruthless. And when you do, you'll regret fighting so hard.-

I barely manage to drag myself upright, palms pressed against the floor for balance. My vision swims. I swallow down the lingering heat that coils low in my belly. Father is waiting. Niall, too. And I can't show up looking like I just had a magical tussle with my would-be fiancé.

I exhale, forcing my heartbeat to slow, then push to my feet. My clothes are rumpled,

my hair a mess, but I straighten my spine and let the anger crystallise in my eyes.

He might think he's won a little victory. Let him think that. I've got bigger weapons in my arsenal than he realises.

Brushing dust from my leathers, I arch an eyebrow at my reflection in the mirror. "Keep watching, Madden," I mutter, steadying my breathing. "Because next time, I'll make you beg."

And that's what I intend to do when I see him again.

Chapter Three

FALLON O'LEARY

“And so it is decreed that humans shall mingle with fae, a grim solution to a dire plight”

King Eiravel, Second King of the Wraithwind Court

The ale is bitter, a taste that mirrors my hollowness. I drink it not for solace, but for the distraction of the swirling amber depths. The empty seat beside me reminds me I had a wife, and now I don't. Saoirse. Freedom. A cruel jest. Stolen in the brutal charade of childbirth. A story whispered to smooth over the jagged edges of truth. No body. No grave. Her death is a performance in deception I've perfected.

And now, the court gossips buzzing with matchmaking schemes, but I'd sooner see them choked on insipid pronouncements than let them choose my next sacrifice. Court alliances are stronger than draíocht, but the oath we swore to leave the Ironlands is a stain that doesn't fade. It binds us tighter than any magic. We created a gilded cage, but it won't save us. Least of all me.

I grip the arm of the throne, its cold edges digging into my palm. I'm dying. The Aithreach Decline is a thief that takes slowly and cruelly. There's no cure. Only whispers of one in a book lost to time. They say it also holds the truths of our history, the forbidden Shadowborn spells. The magic we were warned never to use. I've sent our best to find it, but whether they'll succeed before the end is a gamble I've lost faith in.

No one knows about my impending death. Not Tomas, not my children. Only our healer, Ariel. I didn't keep it from them out of mercy but selfishness. Because once they know, this throne will shift, and I'm not ready to let it go.

Bonding—or even exchanging blood—might slow the rot. It might give me a little more time. But how much? A month? A year? And I've never been the sort to lean on hope.

When I'm gone, it'll be Niall who sits here. Reckless, sharp-tongued, grithling Niall. He doesn't see it yet, but he'll inherit all of it—the throne, the court, the rot seeping through its foundations. His tirocinium will be brutal, a trial by fire, and every decision full of risk. He'll have to choose: hold this court together or watch it splinter under his reign.

He's not ready. Not for this, not for what's coming. He needs someone. Someone who can push him, defy him, and still stand at his side when the shadows rise. Because they will rise. And if he's left to face them alone, it won't just be this court that falls.

I clench my jaw until it aches, then release it, only to find myself doing it again. Maelíosa doesn't care much for courtly traditions. She's got a spirit like the winds that tear through Tír na Scáil, winds drifting with old spells and lurking curses. Maelíosa has about as much interest in obeying orders as a Dearg Sidhe has in keeping its fangs to themselves. Can't say I blame her. She's got the same fire that drew me to her mother, and while I admire it, I'd rather it didn't burn down half the kingdom. I can't say I blame her.

My stallion lets out a scornful huff. Moping into your cups? Truly, your originality knows no bounds.

The corners of my mouth quirk up. Your empathy astounds me, I shoot back through

our bond. It's a channel for the draíocht that ties us together.

Empathy is for mortals. Action is for leaders. You've been wallowing in self-pity long enough. Time to climb out of the pit. His retort lands squarely on my ego, like a kick, but I probably deserve it.

Damn him. He's right. Sitting here won't stop it. My beast snaps me back to my duty, throwing a mountain on my shoulders. My bloodline wards flare, the tattoos shifting over my skin, broadcasting my emotions whether I like it or not. Every line and curve is a story, a war won, a pact sealed, a betrayal avenged, for anyone with eyes to see it. Humans get to keep intentions tucked neatly behind blank expressions. Me? I'm about as secretive as a tinte comhartha lighting a hilltop.

Meanwhile, mortals remain blissfully unaware, floating through life like nothing lurks out of sight. When the Veil thins, it's not just clueless humans stumbling into Tír na Scáil . No, it's worse. Things from the Otherworld—the kind that even fae don't whisper about—start eyeing the gaps. Creatures lurking beyond the Obsidian Sea, hoarding old grudges and darker magic than most of us can stomach, waiting for the cracks to open wide enough to slip through. And when they do, they're not coming for a friendly chat.

Queen Niamh Shadowhart doesn't rule with kindness or mercy. She rules with ironclad, ruthless honesty. Lawful evil, grey as a storm cloud, and sharp enough to keep the witches, demons, dragons, and all the other creatures lurking in the dark under her thumb. As long as the Veil holds, she's the force that keeps them in line. Her kind is almost extinct, making her both precious and vulnerable in a world that wants to consume any magic that's rare. Lucky for her, she wields a power that makes even the boldest predators hesitate.

I'm stuck protecting the clueless mortals from monsters that even other fae fear, except Niamh. Like I didn't learn the first time. Back when my people were gods to

them. They worshipped us. Until they got greedy. The bastards wanted what we had, tried to rip it out of us, take it for themselves. So, they shoved us into camps and cut us open, thinking they'd bleed the draíocht straight from our veins.

It would have worked if not for Badb, Macha, and Nemain. They terrify battlefields simply by showing up. The sisters—The Morrígan—made a choice when things went sideways, and humans started getting curious in that sharp, knife-like way. They poured out every last drop of power, every scrap of strength. All so that the rest of us could slip away, down to where humans wouldn't reach, through the Veil to Tír na Scáil . Creatures followed the darkest fae, slinking through the shadows beyond the Obsidian Sea to the Otherworld.

Together, we went underground, past the old roots and bones of things long forgotten. The sisters became more legend than flesh. Some say they're still watching, crows on the branches of trees that don't grow here anymore, making sure no one follows. Others say they're gone. We keep them in our memories with rites, calling to them to reinforce the Veil they died to create. It's tradition. It's survival. A sacrifice stitched to separate our worlds, and it's on us to keep that thread from unravelling.

Humans stay where they belong—out of our world—even though we need them. It's a double-edged sword if ever there was one. All they have now are the stories. Frayed, half-forgotten tales. I swore to keep it that way. To protect them, even though they'd tear me apart as easily as they do each other. And it worked, and kept us safe. Until now.

Fine , I tell my beast. I'll send Niall and Tomas above to the Ironlands. They'll get to the bottom of it and make sure no one stumbles into our world.

Footsteps echo off the stone, pulling me upright. Tomas crosses the threshold, the firelight highlights and shadows the burn scars on his face and hands. I'm sending him to the Ironlands, a task I wouldn't entrust to anyone else. And because he carries

my burdens, he'll carry this one too. He's the only one who knows Saoirse's fate, a truth he shares with one other, his ceangal whose sole purpose is to serve and protect it. And my youngest daughter, Darcy? Her future is mine to shape.

Tomas strides toward the throne—a massive etched structure made from dark wood, depicting the history of the Tuatha Dé Danann scorched into its back by fire draíocht . The armrests are shaped like coiled, shifting beasts, half horse, half something far wilder. Every curve of it is carved with blood from wars long past. This seat isn't about comfort. It's about control, forged and kept by the ones ruthless enough to sit here.

To anyone else, it might be a monstrosity or a masterpiece, but to me, it's a reminder. Power is always won, never given.

“The North Tower sends word,” Tomas begins.

My grip tightens around my cup. “The Veil?”

“Aye, it has thinned, but summer is hanging around like a guest who can't take a hint.” Tomas's sarcasm is thick enough to taste. He's only a decade older than my children, but he's my closest friend, the one I trust to guide my son's training. His counsel is the only one I'd stake my life on.

“We need to figure out what's behind it. I'm assigning you and Niall to investigate. But,” I pause, letting my next words sink in, “there's also something personal I need you to handle.”

Tomas tilts his head, a smirk tugging at his lips. “Oh? Sounds ominous, my king.”

“It is.” I scratch my jaw, futilely delaying my next words. “It's time I find another ceangal .” I ignore Tomas's rapid blinking. “The court's future depends on it, but I

can't show favouritism by picking from our own. And bonding with the Crimson Court? Or those two-faced Aerialis, dark-as-hell Obsidian, or backstabbing Uisce? Not a chance. I need you to cross the Veil and find someone suitable. A human, this time. Keep it quiet."

His disbelief ebbs into a frown. "You want me to find you a vessel? Snag a human and keep Niall in the dark about this little detour?"

"Yes. Your discretion—and your taste—are everything."

Tomas shifts his weight, giving me a look. "By the old gods' mercy, you know that's a mighty big ask, right?" He sighs. "But for you and Tír na Scáil, I'll brave the Ironlands and all its...quirks."

I suppress a grin. Dangerous? Incredibly. The Ironlands feel lifeless to fae, leaving us vulnerable and slow to heal. "That's why you're more than a warrior, Tomas. You're my friend. Watch yourself. The Ironlands aren't the world we left behind."

He grins back, hard-eyed. "Don't worry. I've faced stranger things. I'll find you one that breeds."

Moving forward is all I know. "Good. Find one who's already broken."

He sighs. "Right. Broken it is. Makes things...simpler, I suppose. Easy enough to find in the Ironlands."

"It shouldn't be too hard. The world is full of broken things," I add.

Immortality? Protection? Lies. Her agreement? A technicality. Deliciously irrelevant fine print. The potion...the birth...details. A son. That's all. A spare. A future. Mine. I'll do what I must. If she survives, her blood will buy me time, a reprieve from the

Aithreach Decline . A prison of her own desires awaits, a silken leash of wicked pleasure and absolute surrender. A bargain she won't refuse. She will beg.

Tomas nods. "Aye."

Nothing bonds family quite like dictating someone's future bride or bartering them off for a strategic alliance. Just as I've done. He'll protest, of course, spit venom, and scream about freedom or choice. Let him. He'll fall in line. He always does. The Veil is thinning, birth rates are plummeting, and the Aithreach Decline is carving its way through our lands like a slow, bitter rot. Niall will learn what I did, that duty doesn't care about your feelings. The Ironlands will bleed you dry if you hesitate. He doesn't have to like it. He just has to do it.

Niall steps into the hall with Maelíosa right behind him. She's all sharp eyes and sharper steel with a mind I've kept at the table more than once, even if her role is debated. Clad in a high-neck shirt and maroon leather that set her amber eyes alight, she's a force to be reckoned with. She's everything a púca daughter isn't supposed to be: fierce, blunt, and utterly disobedient. Though she is loyal. Well, to a point. I've come to rely on her fire. If things get ugly, she's my wildcard.

"You wanted to see—" Niall starts.

"You and Tomas are to investigate the Veil thinning," I say, cutting him off before he can even open his mouth. "And. It's time. Find a ceangal . Someone...robust. If she can survive you, she's strong enough to breed."

His jaw tightens, but I hold steady. This isn't about tradition. It's a duty. For us, it's ride or die—literally—for any woman tough enough to take on the fae.

Draíocht pulses from the markings lacing his arms as the knotwork blazes fiery red.

Let the battle of wills begin.

Chapter Four

NIALL O'LEARY

“A choice awaits in twilight’s embrace, light to mend, dark to separate.”

Aisling Talamhain, Revered Seer

I grind my jaw, a bad habit I picked up from the old man. My father’s decree hangs in the air like a guillotine, daring me to flinch. I’ll tear that contraption apart. Reason, wrapped in logic, is the smart play, but everything inside me demands I go in for the kill. That I fight to the death. If he’s as immovable as the stones, I’m the sledgehammer that shatters his command to pieces.

Tradition isn’t something I can break without bleeding for it. And I’m willing to slice us both. Repeatedly.

Shit. That mental image is a little too satisfying. I have to dial it back.

Where’s my beast? He never fails to chime in with a witty retort or calming words to talk me off the ledge. Silence isn’t his forte. Either he can’t be bothered to comment on this latest development or he’s waiting to see how badly I fuck up this conversation.

Bastard. I inhale, trying to force my red markings to dim.

“Sire.” My gritted teeth barely allow the feigned subservience through. “Surely my

duty lies in guarding the Veil. Isn't it wiser to wait until we find out why it's thinned?" It comes out more a statement than a question. Sorry, not sorry.

He stands, every movement slow and deliberate, his shadow stretching like a noose. Fuck. This might come down to an actual brawl.

"Aye, we protect the Veil, but our survival can't wait." His iron tone has no give in it. "This season, Niall, you will choose a ceangal."

Like hell. My mind conjures a set of prison bars slamming shut on me before bursting apart with a stream of terrifying creatures breaking free thanks to the godsdamned curse if I go through with this.

Fuck. That. "Why?" I snarl.

His lips thin. "Only two crepuscairs were born this spring. One didn't survive." His brows lower. "You want it spelled out? Fine. Either you bond, or your sister completes her bond to Madden. The Crimson Court is through with being patient."

Maelíosa's scream rips through the hall.

A growl erupts from deep in my chest. Son. Of. A. Bitch.

Alliances have inescapable, ironclad oaths and blood magic. Madden is a nasty piece of shit who'd destroy my loving-yet-willful sister. The idea of him becoming family? I'd rather swallow glass.

Her bloodline wards flare, sigils burning so bright they look ready to brand her from the inside out. The tattoos twist across her skin like they're alive—like they're fighting as hard as she is.

“Noooo,” she howls. “You can’t make me!”

But our fucking father can. He doesn’t care about her feelings. He’s ruthless enough to break her, to break all of us. My nails dig into my palms, sharp enough to draw blood.

And now, dear old Father thinks he’s got it all figured out. If I ceangal , she won’t have to finish the bond. The mark will fade, and she’ll be free. That’s the deal he’s offering. My sacrifice for her salvation. A clean trade. Except nothing about this is clean.

I drag in a slow, shaky breath, trying to ignore the hammering in my chest. Madden will never let her go. The Crimson Court doesn’t forgive debts. They hoard them like predators scenting blood. And Madden? He thrives on the twisted link chaining my sister to him. Father’s plan? Yeah, it’s total shite.

If Madden’s obsession with her spirals out of control, I might twist that desperation to force him to break the bond on his own. Gods know that’s a risky play. One wrong move, and I’ll be handing Madden the knife he’ll use to bleed us both dry.

There’s another way, though it’s no better. Transfer the mark to some other unfortunate mortal—willing or not—to take her place. The thought makes me want to hurl, but every Gloaming is a bargain, and every bargain has terms. If there’s a loophole in the original deal or some obscure clause we can exploit, we might break the bond without tearing her apart. Let Father and the rest believe I’m in on his game. Sometimes, the only way to win is to play along...at least for a while.

-I was a child!- Her voice blasts through my head, impossible to ignore. -I didn’t know what it meant. Don’t make me do this.-

The plea hits like a punch, so intense even my father flinches. She must be in his

head, too.

Tomas pulls Maelíosa into his arms. He's always been like a second brother to her, and the look he gives me over her head says more than I can heed. He doesn't understand the far reaching consequences if I give into to his silent demand.

She leans into him, broken and beaten. Fear, raw fear, laces her mental plea to me. - Don't let him do this. I can't bond with Madden. I can't-

It takes me two tries to unlock my jaw. "When did we start trading our own like cattle?"

My father straightens, his eyes narrowing. "Excuse me?"

"Madden is a sadistic bastard." My tattoos are flaring with so much red. "He has a grim list of casualties. Bodies he's buried with no remorse." My voice is steadily rising. "Last spring, a young girl and his own offspring died because he couldn't rein himself in."

"Rumors." My father swipes a hand.

"Bullshite." It echoes off the wall. "You're willing to sentence your daughter to that same fate because of some fucking promise two kings made years ago?"

He leans forward. "We do what's necessary for the court, Niall. It's about survival."

Snuffing out Maelíosa's rebellious spark, the thing that makes her her is necessary for the court ? Vines rip across the stone walls, spreading to encase everything they cross. Father's lucky I'm not burning this palace down.

"Survival?" The question sounds like I chewed gravel. "You mean keeping up

appearances. Last I checked, survival didn't mean chaining your daughter to a monster."

"Watch your tone, boy ." He grips the saber's handle strapped to his waist.

Vines full of lush leaves expand across the ceiling. "My tone?" He's lecturing me about my tone? I'm fighting for family and he's concentrating on my lack of decorum?

"Stop acting like a spoiled brat," Father thunders.

My magic answers my rage. Vines slither across the stone floor, razor-sharp leaves shooting towards his feet. Thorny, feral, and ready to draw blood. The green scent of rising power fills my lungs. For one wild second, I want the vines to do more than reach him. I want them to wrap around his feet, crawl up his legs, and make him choke on my power.

Let him see I'm not some fucking child to scold.

He doesn't even blink.

He raises a hand—slow, deliberate, condescending as hell. The temperature drops. Lantern lights flicker. Mist-laden air twists around him. Wraithwind draíocht. It moves like it has a mind of its own, curling and coiling as if it's waiting for a command.

And then he gives it.

With a single motion, he sweeps his hand in a tight arc. Air explodes forward, slicing through my vines like invisible blades. My magic screams in protest, cut off in a heartbeat. Vines crumble to ash at his feet, blackened and lifeless.

His cold eyes lock on mine. “Don’t confuse power with control,” he seethes, his voice quieter now but no less lethal. It’s the kind of calm that cuts deeper than a shout ever could. “If you can’t master what you create, I’ll destroy it for you.”

Adrenaline still pounds in my veins. The wraithwind hovers near him, twisting in lazy arcs like a loyal beast waiting for another order. The throne room feels drained, emptied of everything but his command. The vine remnants turn to dust against his boots, and a bitter taste fills my mouth.

I hate him. Gods, I hate him—for making it look so fucking easy, for reminding me how far I still have to go. Worse than that, I hate the part of me that still wants his approval. The part that wants him to see I’ll learn, that I’ll make him regret every time he’s ever looked at me like this.

I bury that part deep, shove it where it can’t escape, and force myself to meet his gaze. Because right now, he’s the king. I’m the heir who doesn’t want to sit on the throne and just lost control of his magic.

And that pisses me off more than anything else in this damn world.

Boots pound into the stone as Father marches down the steps. “You stand there full of piss and ideals but you don’t understand anything.”

“I understand plenty,” I retort, doing my best to keep my draiocht from lashing free again. “I understand that you’re sacrificing Maelíosa’s life for political convenience.”

He stops a meter from me. “Politics are the lifeblood of our world. Without them, we crumble.”

“Then let it!” I step closer, though I’ve no idea what I’ll actually do. I can barely see through the rage but I don’t want to actually fight him. “If our legacy is built on my

sister's tears, it's not one I want any part of."

"Idealism has no part in ruling a kingdom."

"Neither does cruelty." My heart is slamming against my ribcage. "You're so wrapped up in duty and tradition you've forgotten what it means to fight for family."

The silence is a battlefield strewn with history and unhealed wounds. My father cuts through it like ice. "Some debts don't end with death."

Niall frowns. "Meaning?"

"Meaning if someone owes the wrong kind of being a favour, it doesn't matter what lifetime they live. It finds them. You will do your part, Niall."

My hollow laugh echoes off the walls with a defiance that's bone-deep. "Of course." I fling a hand out. "The final word from our beloved king. But so you know, Father, chains are still chains, no matter how shiny they are. And I will not stand by while my sister is bound by them."

My father loses part of his rigid stance, looking worn down by his choices, but that doesn't make any of it easier to swallow.

I'm not taking the prophecy lightly. I can't. The whole thing scares me half to death, but there's one thing that trumps the terror and it's my twin. Fuuuuck . The rage tamps into a simmering anger.

She peers at me still curled into Tomas's chest.

Double fuck . If keeping her safe means setting the prophecy in motion? Fine. Let the world fall apart. I'd walk into any storm if it kept her out of Madden's reach.

Hopefully, it won't come to that. I'll find a mortal, drag her back, and dump my sister's Gloaming mark on her. Problem solved. Aisling will figure out the rest—she always does.

And if I can't keep my sister from being crushed by Madden, then what good is any of it? For her, I'd dare the foretold destruction and all its shadows. I'd do it with a smirk on my lips and rage in my heart.

I glare back at my father, jaw tight. "I'll go along with it, but not for you. If you're dead set on forcing this on Maelíosa, that's on you. I'm doing this for her, never you."

Maelíosa's bloodline wards dim, settling into a dull ember glow. My father clings to his throne like it's the only thing keeping him upright. It's hard to look at him and see anything other than a man who's already given up.

He's hoarding grudges older than dirt, the kind that's passed down like ugly family heirlooms nobody wants but can't throw out. He's too busy looking back at the Ironlands, clinging to who we used to be, instead of facing who we are now or who we could be if he'd let go of the past.

My father exhales, but his eyes are still like stone. "Bonding might not be the curse you think it is. You might even find some joy in it."

"Sure," I snort. "Joy. Like watching your own burial from a seat at the back. Sit there, hands folded, while someone shovels dirt over your head. Very uplifting."

With that, I turn on my heel and march away before I say anything else I can't take back. Our family is the sort where sarcasm and yelling are how we say good morning, but once we've said our piece—once we walk away—that's when you should really worry. Because that's when the real violence begins. The kind that pulls roots from

the ground and leaves the air crackling with a rage so sharp it could cut through iron.

When we're silent, we're dangerous. When we walk away, we're plotting. We can hold grudges so long that even the fae forget what started them. It's all gaslighting and re-writing history. It might be a hundred years before you hear from us again, and by then, you'll be lucky if we've forgiven the first offence. But when we come back? Gods help anyone standing in our path.

If my defiance triggers the curse, so be it. Let the world burn. Those creatures beyond the Obsidian Sea won't stay quiet. Dark forces will rise to claim Tír na Scáil if our hold slips. Not even Queen Niamh could keep them at bay. No one could.

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Chapter Five

FELICITY FORREST

When the heirs of Crimson Court draw near, the light shall dance in reverence and fear. For in their wake, the bond between our worlds grows thin. The Veil that separates day from night begins to dim.

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

Stepping off the ferry, the wind greets me with a slap strong enough to take the breath out of my lungs. Cyn is busy with her mobile looking for a place to eat when a faint sound like music drifts by, almost too quiet to catch. My ears tingle and itch. I swear I'm having some sort of allergic reaction to the island.

Two spots flare on top of my head as if they're on fire. I slap a hand over them, half-expecting smoke, and...hang on.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

My fingers brush over two small nubs. Solid. Hard. Reminiscent of the ones kids wear at Halloween. On. Top. Of my head. Panic rises, flooding my veins

The sound flits by again. I run a palm over my head again. What the... I practically rub my scalp raw. The nubs are gone. Poof, like they were never there to begin with, which is exactly the sort of thing you don't want to think about too hard when you're already in a place where the rocks look like they'd eat you if they got half a chance.

A delusion. A highly realistic delusion that has to signal an oncoming migraine—granted, I’ve never had a migraine before, but now is not time to quibble over details. A sudden and very sensible urge to flee hits me.

The guidebook in my bag mentions strange occurrences like this. Weird little quirks of the fae. They call it a glamour or disguise. Sounds are the “fae’s calling card,” a magical signal to remind you they’re watching, or worse, that the Otherworld has taken a particular interest. Some people get a shiver down their spine or feel watched, but nope, I get phantom horns. Brilliant. And, now I’m entertaining the notion I’m fae. Or maybe fae adjacent?

Cyn doesn’t notice, thank goodness. She’s already squinting at a map like it’s plotting against her. I’m half-tempted to ask if she packed aspirin or an exorcist. My stomach is adding its own opinion, which, at this point, sounds like it’s rooting for the exorcist.

“Cyn, forget the map for a sec. We need to go... now .”

“Chill, babe,” she says, giving me a look over the top of her sunglasses like I’m ruining her vibe. “Might as well stop and drink it in, yeah?” She gestures around like we’re on a luxury tour. “Mother Nature went all out in sculpting this place. Besides, what’s the rush? I don’t see anything lurking to eat us.”

A cat darts out of the shadows, all smoky black fur and a white patch on its chest...like the one on the ferry. I blink. No, it can’t be. But the resemblance is identical, right down to the way its eyes flash an eerie lavender when it looks at me. I tilt my head, narrowing my eyes. “Are you the same stowaway from earlier?”

The guidebook said cait-shìth can tear a soul to shreds if you so much as look at them wrong. But this one? Yeah, no. He’s about as intimidating as a sleepy house cat with delusions of grandeur. His tail flicks as he sits back on his haunches, staring at me

like I'm the one who needs to prove myself.

"Real ferocious," I mutter, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "Should I feel honoured? Or are you just here to make sure I don't screw up?"

He blinks, slow and deliberate, as if to say, Yes, obviously. And you're already fucking it up.

I crouch, keeping my distance, my hands hovering near the pouch strapped to my side. "You make me feel all witchy, like I've got my own personal familiar. Is that what you are?"

The cat yawns, then gives me the feline equivalent of an unimpressed shrug. He's not denying it, but he's not doing much guarding or offering familiar protection, either.

Wait...what am I doing? My head buzzes with the absurdity of the situation. I'm standing here, having a one-sided conversation with a cat like it's the most normal thing in the world. One that looks way too much like the one from the boat.

"You always talk to strays or is this a new hobby?" Cyn's voice cuts through the fog of my thoughts, her teasing tone pulling a startled laugh from my lips.

I glance over my shoulder to find her smirking at me, arms crossed.

"Careful," she says with a grin, "next thing you know, you'll be offering him a room and naming him."

I roll my eyes. "Don't tempt me. He's already got the attitude for it."

He licks his paw, staring with a scrunched-up, scowly face, if cats could scowl. Yeah, he's unimpressed by both of us. Typical.

Cyn grins before burying her nose back in her mobile.

I rub my hands up and down my legs to coax warmth into my bones. The summer sun hangs pale and shy above the horizon, peeking through the scattered clouds like it's deciding whether or not to commit to the day. A sharp breeze whips off the Atlantic, salty and cold enough to crawl under your skin. My fingerless gloves aren't ideal, but they're the best I've got. Cyn stitched in supports to keep my fingers from mutinying on the keyboard, a lifesaver given the mileage I put on these hands. At least I've got my Grenson boots. They're good and heavy to bear my weak ankles against rugged terrain.

The light glints off the limestone cliffs, too bright when it breaks through the overcast sky, but it does nothing to take the bite out of the wind. It smells like seaweed and salt here, wild and clean in a way that makes you feel too soft and out of place. I give a little shiver. This Irish island—Inis Mór—is beautiful, sure, but it's got that look, you know? Like it has teeth hiding somewhere in the landscape, sharp ones waiting for you to turn your back.

It's the biggest of the Aran Islands, all limestone and cliffs that look like they've been smacked around by the Atlantic for a few thousand years. Everything here feels like it's clinging on like the fishing village huddled against the coast, the rock walls tangled up like they were put there to confuse the sheep, and the grass, which honestly looks like it's giving the wind the finger just by being here. I feel something old and half-remembered, like I've dreamt of this place a hundred times before.

Which makes no sense, given I've never visited, and I'm getting the "you don't belong here" vibe. Locals pass by in thin jackets and sturdy shoes, skin weathered and poker-faced. Snatches of conversation about púca sightings run rampant. Honestly, if they weren't talking about some creepy shape-shifting fae lurking around Kilronan, I'd wonder if they were even paying attention.

“Our home away from home should be close.” Cyn scans the village. “Assuming, of course, we’re not kidnapped by fairies or something. Wait, is that it down there?” Cyn points, and I follow her gesture to a charming inn that blends seamlessly into the bay.

My attention shifts to the priest at the end of the pier. His face is as craggy as the stones lining this whole godforsaken island. He looks a touch like Liam Neeson, if the guy had taken vows instead of vengeance. I feel an odd little prickle. Not fear, exactly, but like something is rattling loose inside me, something I didn’t know was locked up in the first place. “I think we’re safe on that front. But that priest over there? He’s definitely here for us.”

Cyn raises an eyebrow, giving the priest a once-over with a wicked grin. “Now there’s a silver fox,” she murmurs, low enough that only I can hear. “I’m having thoughts that’ll get me excommunicated for thinking them. Do you think he’s the sort who’d forgive a sinner? Or maybe encourage it?”

I roll my eyes, hoist my bag onto my shoulder, and smile as we approach him. “Father Cleary?”

His grin is as warm as a wool blanket. “Ah, Felicity Forrest. Céad míle fáilte .”

I blink. “I’m sorry, my Irish is a bit rusty. As in, nonexistent.”

Oddly, I don’t think that’s true. Somehow, I already know the meaning of Father Cleary’s greeting because it’s echoing through my head.

He chuckles. “It means ‘a hundred thousand welcomes.’ The island’s way of saying we’re happy to have you.”

“I’m Cynthia Beckett. But please, call me Cyn. It’s easier to remember and...well,

more me.” She flashes a wink at Father Cleary, one that’s downright scandalous.

I bite my lip, remembering a line from my book about priests being immune to fae charms. A human batting her lashes probably won’t work if that’s true.

Father Cleary steps closer with that warm, unruffled smile. Cyn’s grin slips a little, and her hand drifts up to rub the back of her neck like maybe he’s not mixing well with her usual charms. But she powers through, smile back in place. “Besides, Cynthia sounds like I should be in a convent, and I’d hate to give you the wrong impression.”

His grin doesn’t waver, but his eyebrows do a quick hike up his forehead. “Cyn, you say? Well, I’m usually in the business of absolving sin, not greeting it at the docks. But, you know, it’s good to shake things up. After all, a sinner had the best seat at the Last Supper, so I suppose you’re in good company.”

“Let’s be honest, twelve lads and a bottle of wine? Sounds like a sinner’s dream, not just supper.” Cyn taps her chin, as if mulling it over. Her smirk is unmistakably wicked. “I do love good company.”

“Well, if I’m lucky, you might inspire some lads to show up for confession by the end of the week. Anything to get them through the door, right? Saints have to start somewhere, and if it’s with you, well...” He gives her a wink. “Your help is always appreciated.”

Then he leans in as if sharing a secret. “Though I’ll admit—I’d love nothing more than to indulge in a bit of sin myself, but I swore off pretty blondes when I took my vows. But I’m sure a few of the lads on the island would be more than willing to assist in that department. A helpful lot, they are. Just look out for the ones who don’t show up at mass come Sunday, eh?”

It's not often that Cyn is left speechless, but Father Cleary's comeback? That one lands like a slap she didn't see coming. Her mouth falls open, and she looks at him like he sprouted horns. I press my lips together to keep from laughing. Cyn is used to throwing out the barbs, not catching them. For once, she has no quick retort. She stares at Father Cleary, who's smiling back, polite as you please, like he didn't shipwreck her brilliant wit.

"Nathan gave me a heads-up about your arrival." Father Cleary nods toward their bags. "Thought I'd come down and lend a hand with those."

Cyn is quick to offload hers, grinning sheepishly. "Thanks!"

"Oh, I've got it," I say, hoisting my bag up again. "We're headed to Pier House, you know it?"

"Aye, it's this way. All the charms of modern convenience, they say. Smart TVs and Wi-Fi, even," Father Cleary replies, leading us along a worn path with the ease of someone who's walked it a thousand times.

I take in the stark beauty of the island. If this is what haunted looks like, sign me up. The weathered cliffs, the wild ocean stretching beyond, and that quiet, old feeling are a paranormal blogger's dream and not a bad setting for Cyn's birthday getaway.

"Wi-Fi? My kind of place," Cyn quips, but Father Cleary stops, turning to me with a gaze so direct it nearly pins me in place.

"Felicity, the island welcomes everyone, but beware. Not all that's hidden seeks to be found. This land is steeped in stories older than any of us. Remember, the deepest roots touch both dark and light."

My pulse quickens. "What do you mean?"

He offers a small, knowing smile that suggests he's privy to secrets far beyond my understanding. "The fairy folk are part of the land. Mind where you tread, lass. Some paths are meant only for certain feet."

His warning skates goosebumps across my skin. And then, like a flicker of candlelight, a memory surfaces—except it's not mine. Or is it? A little girl, barefoot, runs laughing through a grove thick with moonlight, her feet sure on the soft earth. Someone else is there too, out of sight, laughter mingling with hers, a warm, familiar sound that makes my chest ache. It's one of those memories that's both foreign and somehow so deeply embedded it might as well be etched in my bones.

I shake it off, hoping I don't look half as spooked as I feel, and look to Father Cleary. "Fae? Like in the stories?"

"Aye. And remember, Miss Forrest, stories don't come from nowhere. Keep that heart and mind open. Who knows, you might get more than you bargained for."

"What do you mean by 'more than I bargained for'?" I tilt my head, trying to catch his eyes. "Is that a general warning, or are you talking about something specific?"

Father Cleary's smile falters as he looks out over the cliffs and crags like he's staring into some memory nobody should have. "The fairy folk are not the gentle sort..." he says, voice dropping to something barely above a whisper. "The land remembers every slight, every betrayal. It might let you set foot here, but it doesn't promise safe passage."

Reading about old fae grudges in a dusty book is one thing. It's another to feel them seething under your boots. I glance out at the jagged cliffs. "Don't worry, Father. I'll be careful. Whatever it remembers, I'll try to make sure it doesn't hold anything new against me."

Cyn throws me a look, one eyebrow shooting up. I manage a grin, hiding the weird knot of confusion that's creeping in.

Father Cleary motions for us to follow him, turning briskly down the dock. Cyn shoots me a look that clearly says, we should be getting back on that ferry right about now. I don't disagree, but I've chased enough stories like this to know dramatic locals are part of the package.

At least he's not dressed like he's auditioning for a gothic horror film. No sweeping cassock or ominous relics—only a plain clerical shirt with a Roman collar paired with a well-worn jacket that looks like it's seen its fair share of Atlantic wind. He's practical, like he might bless the parish's sheep and patch a hole in the roof without changing clothes.

Still, there's something about him. Cyn must feel it too because she slows her pace, muttering, "You sure this isn't how horror movies start?"

"Fairly sure priests don't star as the villains. Local colour, that's all," I whisper back, though I'm not entirely convinced. It's unusual to listen to a Christian priest wax on about fairies.

As we head toward Pier House, Father Cleary's words still circle in my mind. This island has a pull like it's got hooks sunk deep into me. It's like a story half-told but with too many missing pieces to make sense of it.

When we get to Pier House, he hands Cyn's bag back with a small bow, making even that look slightly ominous. "This is where I'll leave you. Once you're settled, there's someone I'd like you to meet."

My curiosity spikes. "We'll be quick. Where can we find you?"

Cyn interjects like the end is nigh. “Can we focus on food first? Seriously, I’ll eat my own hand if we don’t.”

Father Cleary laughs, nodding at her. “Tí Joe Watty’s for supper. Unpack, then come. You’ll have time to settle in and stop Cyn from gnawing her hand off.”

“Alright. See you there.” But my mind is already running in circles, wondering who this mysterious person could be.

I push open the door, stepping into the hotel’s lobby with its modern flair merging seamless with the Irish charm. Cyn practically treads on my shadow. Nathan nailed it with this one. Cosy enough to feel local but with enough creature comforts to keep Cyn from running for the nearest five-star on the mainland. The woman at the front desk greets us with a warm smile before whisking us to our adjoining rooms.

I barely drop my bag onto the floor when Cyn pops up in my doorway, arms crossed, smirking. “Combining my birthday with one of your supernatural ‘adventures’? Nice one, Flick. This place is well posh.”

“Adventures,” as Cyn calls them, are the bread and butter of Everyday Supernatural . What started as a magazine for ghost stories and oddities has become a haven for the curious and my sanity. Writing about mysteries keeps me from dwelling on the past, on what life would’ve been if I’d stayed chained to my ex’s dull idea of a future. But no, I’ve moved on. Or at least, that’s what I tell myself.

Cyn interrupts my thoughts. “But I’ll be here alone while you’re off chasing shadows. I might end up the next big mystery, or worse, a damsel in distress to Nathan’s knight-in-awkward armour.”

I snort. “Nathan’s made his intentions pretty obvious. He reckons one big romantic gesture will have you falling at his feet. And yeah, the magazine covered the trip, but

I'm pretty sure he picked somewhere this fancy because of you—probably felt guilty about your birthday getting interrupted, even if you did knock him back.”

She rolls her eyes, but there's a flicker of softness there. “The guy's a saint, and I don't break hearts lightly.”

“What's so bad about dating Nathan, then?”

“It's not him. It's me,” she says, shrugging.

I sigh. Heart matters are more complicated than any ghost hunt. “Promise you'll keep an open mind. Who knows? Maybe Ireland has some magic left to cast on you.”

She laughs. “Only if that magic includes tips on how to handle your overly enthusiastic boss.”

Cyn's love life has always been her Achilles' heel—broody bad boys with ‘I'll hurt you’ practically stamped on their foreheads. It's like a hobby for her, one that never ends well. And behind it all, there's a reason. A messed-up college date that left scars deeper than any breakup. I was there for the fallout, drinks in hand, ready with every pep talk I had.

She's not the only one. Watching her navigate love with a constant guard up taught me a thing or two. Love, real love, shouldn't feel like a gamble on your self-worth. My experience with my ex taught me that not all disasters come with warning signs—some just stroll into your life, smile, and ruin your favorite bookstore forever.

“One of these days, Cyn, that silver tongue of yours is gonna write a cheque your charm can't cash,” I warn with a smirk.

She scoffs, tossing her hair with her usual defiance. “Please.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “I’d pay to watch the day you actually fall for a guy. I’ll be front row, popcorn ready.”

“Fall for someone? Please.” She arches an eyebrow. “If anyone’s falling, I’ll be leaping over them.”

“Big talk,” I grin. “But the day you do, it’ll be a twist of fate where you’re not the heartbreaker, but the one picking up the pieces.”

She shrugs. “Highly doubt it.”

Grabbing my hairbrush to wrestle my unruly hair, I move toward the mirror. “Let’s get that food, hear Father Cleary’s gossip, and meet this mystery guest.”

The overhead lights flicker, casting shadows that stretch and waver with a life of their own. A faint, melodic chime hums at the edge of my hearing—too high-pitched, too unnatural to belong to anything human. That strange feeling slides down my spine, cold as a winter draught sneaking under the door. I catch my reflection in the smudged glass over the dresser, my pulse quickening.

My eyes. They’re lavender again.

I blink, and they’re back to dark grey.

“Do you hear that?” I murmur, not really sure if it’s a sound or something that slithering through my thoughts like an aftertaste of a nightmare.

Cyn glances up, nonchalant. “Hear what? Probably the island giving us a warm, spooky welcome. Besides, I thought you liked creepy ambience?”

I can’t bring myself to laugh this time. Something doesn’t feel right. It’s that whisper,

a soft, gnawing thing, burrowing into my mind.

Viceeee . Viceeee will kill...

Chapter Six

NIALL O'LEARY

“Mortals graced with eternity totems are bound to serve as our eyes among their kind. Faithfulness is an oath—betrayal, an undoing.”

Wraithwind Accords, Article IV

I don't want to be here. Bitterness twists in my chest, the byproduct of the autopsy of a parental relationship long since decayed. This morning's magic duel in the throne room with my king still hums beneath my skin, an electric itch I can't quite shake. He used my love for Maelíosa like a blade. I'll be damned if I let him carve me up with it.

My breaths come sharp and shallow because the visions are stronger on this cursed island. I press my back against the cottage wall, forcing myself to steady the ragged rhythm. I don't want to be in the Ironlands, but what I want doesn't matter anymore.

I'm not going to ceangal because he demands it, thinking he can twist my life to suit his grand plans. No. I'll save Maelíosa on my terms. I'll find the first mortal that catches my eye, drag her through the Veil, and transfer the Gloaming mark. A stranger for my sister's freedom. It's ugly and cruel, but it's the only way. And if it spits in my father's face in the process? All the better.

Too much of our magic and history has been lost since the Book of Shadows disappeared. If we truly understood where Gloaming marks came from, maybe we

could remove them without hurting anyone—but we don't. Father's half-baked idea to form a deal with Madden might be our only opening. That, or at least earn a private audience so I can slit his throat myself.

The Veil is thinning, magic stretching too thin to hold it together. But first, I'll deal with the mark. A winsome human to appeal to Madden and shoulder my sister's burden. Even as the thought solidifies, draíocht stirs under my skin. Its power makes my sigils burn. The magic in my veins twists like a serpentine, coiling with a hunger I don't yet understand.

But if I ceangal ? I'll be Madden's next target. Letting Maelíosa slip free would make me the new leash he can jerk at will, a weakness he can exploit the moment I try to dismantle the Gloam.

Fuck . I close my eyes. Another vision presses hard, fragments of someone else's life bleeding into mine. I shove it down, but it slithers back. I steady myself, leaning into the wall for support.

The Meadowsweet stalk tastes bitter on my tongue. All I care about is her . Beautiful wild land stretches ahead of me but I only see her . She's somewhere else, and there's this pull, this impossible, magic-saturated heaviness in my chest, dragging me toward her.

Her dark hair lifts in a breeze I can't feel. Lavender eyes—impossible and otherworldly, meeting mine through the haze of the vision. They shouldn't feel familiar, but they do, like they've been carved into the edges of my soul long before I ever saw them. I'm in love with her—if this intense connection could be called something as trite as love—which is absurd because I don't even know her. I'm far too old for such indulgences and as Father helpfully pointed out, unable to entertain that kind of relation. Yet, the hollowness in my heart disagrees. It feels like she's siphoning my magic, leaving nothing but this dull, empty ache.

I can't shake the vision. Her face is blurred, like peering through murky water. I can't make out many details, but those lavender eyes hold me as if they know me. She's brushing her hair, her brow furrowed, frowning at her reflection as though it's a stranger looking back.

Her hand stops. Her eyes lift, locking on mine as if she sees me, too. And for a second, the surface ripples, like I could step through, reach right out?—

“Niall.” A hand clamps around my arm.

I blink. The vision fades like smoke, replaced by Caitlin's face. She jerks her fingers free but doesn't look away.

“Settling in alright, then?” Caitlin asks, calm and polite, but her sharp gaze doesn't miss a thing. “I thought I'd see if you needed anything before I head to my shift at the pub,” she adds, nodding toward the village path. She's plain, and twice as stubborn than her aunt, but she comes from a line that knows its place. As long as she does her job, she'll be rewarded. Anything more? Not my problem.

I spit out the Meadowsweet, its taste suddenly gone stale. “Still following the Court's orders like a good little servant?”

My stallion stirs. Don't trust her, he mutters.

She raises an eyebrow. “Takes one to know one, doesn't it?”

I give her a slow grin, hiding how she hit too close to home. I may be here on my father's orders, but I don't owe her an explanation. “I've got my own reasons, but they don't involve cleaning up after anyone.”

Caitlin huffs a laugh like she knows something I don't. Then she turns and heads

down the path without another word.

My lips press into a hard line. She's stuck here because of a twisted family legacy, bound to the court by a contract keeping her years ticking along well past due. Fae magic. Glyphanna beo agus totemanna , granted for loyalty, allowing extended life for mortals that serve us. A life dragged out longer than it should be, a duty she didn't ask for, full of secrets I'll never pry loose.

Her footsteps fade. My stallion huffs again. She's trouble, he grumbles, and I find myself chewing over his reservations longer than I'd like.

With a grunt, I push open the cottage door. Peat and old wood wrap around me. I step inside, shutting out the wind, the visions, and whatever Caitlin is scheming. But that same image flickers behind my eyes, a flash of dark hair and eyes that hold shadows as deep as the night.

Tomas sits as solidly as a mountain next to the fire. I stretch out on the rug in front of the fireplace. Crackling flames settle over me, but don't soothe my vexation. All I see are those lavender eyes brimming with something too complicated to name. Returning to the island feels like stepping into a trap rather than a homecoming. Avoiding this place was intentional, a choice I'd stuck to—until now. Bonding with a human? I never wanted to risk the curse or bring pain to a mortal. She's dragging me back to a world I swore I'd left behind, one I'd buried, but those haunting eyes won't fucking let me go. A place where fear runs deep and hate poisons everything. I can feel its ache like an old wound that never healed. And yet...

Do you think you can change the world? my stallion intrudes. Stop the universe in its tracks? It's all they know.

I ignore him, mostly because he's probably right. The older fae—like my father—are too damn set in their ways to believe the Ironlands can change. Centuries of pain and

bloodshed don't open people to the idea of progress. And sometimes, I'm afraid he's right. Fear doesn't solve anything, so I'll shove my beast aside and throw on a mask before we head into Kilronan. A cocky grin, a bit of irreverence, and enough sarcasm to keep everyone guessing. It's easier than answering questions from mortals, especially with the curse muttering promises of doom and ruin. Every choice will tear me apart, but nothing like a little annihilation cataclysm for motivation.

Great pep talk.

This island is one of our last connections to the Ironlands. It's a bridge built on old, forgotten truces. Caretakers live longer than they should, guarding the bones of that bridge as if that'll stop it from crumbling. Every time I come here, I'm reminded that immortality isn't all it's cracked up to be. Infinite rules and duty don't inspire swells of gratitude.

I keep my eyes shut, but I can feel Tomas staring, probably cataloguing every one of my flaws for later use. He's seen me at my worst and fought beside me through hell and back. He hasn't blinked once at any of the horror along the way. Part of me thinks he deserves to know about the prophecy, Aisling's warning, and all the bad shit that'll affect everyone's lives. But my throat remains tight. Each time I try, the enormity of inescapable fate squeezes the air out of any truth I might give him, so, I let the silence stretch between us.

Tomas is still staring. Bastard. It's not a 'grab your weapons, let's go kill something' stare. No, it's a 'spill your soul, and I'll bring the tissues' kind of stare. Fuck that.

I'd rather face down a Gnáthmharfóirí, one of those hollow-eyed creatures with teeth like broken glass and skin that shifts to look like people until they get close enough to strike. They blend in, mimicking human gestures until they decide to tear you apart. They slip through like shadows, driving fear and despair wherever they go. They're smart enough to leverage the Sluagh, bending them like pawns in a game none of us

want to play, or so the stories go.

At least with a Gnáthmharfóirí , you know where you stand—squarely on the menu. My stomach growls.

“Going to keep me in suspense,” I ask, finally, because the anticipation is gnawing on me, “or are you waiting for divine inspiration to say whatever’s got you fixated on me?”

“It’s been a long time since we were here,” he muses. “Back when I was still navigating bachelorhood.”

I crack one eye open, squinting at him. “So the grand plan is to hound me into matrimonial bliss, is it? Because there’s nothing quite like being pestered into lifelong submission.”

“Mock if you want, but I was once as sceptical as you.” A faint smile creeps over Tomas’s face. “Then I met my bond. It was like breathing for the first time.”

My stallion, who I swear exists purely to torment me, releases a mental snort. More like wrapping a noose around our neck, let’s be honest.

“Breathing is overrated,” I mutter, staring into the fire. “Especially if it involves hitching yourself to another soul with a connection that...” Will set a curse in motion that ends two worlds . I exhale sharply. “...feels like an iron chain.”

“Chains, eh?” Tomas raises an eyebrow. “More like a tether. And before you go on about how fae are better off untethered, most of us wouldn’t last two centuries alone. The years get to you. Always have. And don’t forget about the Decline.”

He’s not wrong about the Aithreach Decline . That rot started long before my father

took the throne, and it's on us. Our own damn doing. We chose isolation—we tore ourselves from the Ironlands, from mortals—and now we're paying the price.

The Decline creeps in, subtle and insidious. First, it's the magic—misfiring spells, dimmed auras, the kind of weakness that gets under your skin and stays there. Then it's the land—its magic faltering, losing its colour and vibrancy as if it, too, feels the absence of humans. And eventually, it's us. Generations born with thinner veins of power and a growing emptiness that eats away at what made us fae in the first place.

But how could we not isolate? After the cages, after the camps? After they drained our magic, siphoning it from our veins like we were nothing more than vessels to be emptied? They experimented on us, dissected us, and broke us just to see what made us tick. They feared us, and that fear turned into cruelty. So we made them forget. We ripped ourselves from their world and sealed the Veil shut.

And now we're dying for it.

Lowering the Veil is a fool's dream. We remember the cages too well to ever make that mistake twice. And Father, the truly fucked part, doesn't see beyond his own shadow. He's so preoccupied with manipulating my sister and me into bonding for the sake of the court, he's blind to the Veil tearing at the seams. If we snap the Gloaming with desperate spells, we risk tearing it further. Then it won't be just Maelíosa we lose, but everything.

I throw him a sidelong look. "I'd rather rot in the Crimson Court bastille."

His scarred face catches the firelight in a way that makes the burned tissue look almost molten. "You say that now, but the ceangal is relentless. Like a starving wolf that's caught your scent."

A bitter laugh escapes my throat. "Always with the beast metaphors. The ceangal

isn't some mindless predator stalking the courts."

Yet I feel its magic trying to sink its claws into my carefully constructed world, flooding my senses with visions that fracture my control. The sinful curve of her hip beneath my palm, dark hair spilling across silk sheets, the phantom taste of her skin on my tongue that promises addiction. My fingers flex involuntarily, imagining the sweet pressure of gripping her waist, claiming what the magic whispers is already mine. It's a need that burns through my veins like liquid iron, sharper than bloodlust and twice as dangerous.

I inhale sharply, forcing myself to focus on the rough-hewn walls of the cottage, the firelight catching on Tomas's scars, the bite of my nails into my palms—anything to ground myself in the here and now, not on the shadowy promise of someone I haven't met, someone I definitely shouldn't want with this consuming hunger that makes the ancient magic in my blood sing with dark possibilities.

Tomas snorts. "No, not for precious royal blood like yours. The ceangal doesn't like to bother with your gilded cages and arranged alliances, all very neat and tidy." He leans forward, and I inhale the scent of steel and woodsmoke that always clings to him. "But for the rest of us?" He shrugs. "The ceangal sometimes chooses for you."

"Chooses?" I repeat, arching an eyebrow.

He gives me a look that screams, how are you this dense? I resist reminding him that I'm still his prince, scarred hands and battle wisdom be damned.

"Like fate's own blade. It carves into your soul without permission or mercy. One moment you're free, the next—" He snaps his fingers, the sound sharp as breaking bone. "—you're bound to someone who turns your whole existence upside down."

"Speaking from experience?" I croak, my voice rough like I've been gargling gravel

or regret. “I can’t afford to let magic shape a bond that will be the foundation of our court. There has to be another way. What would you have me do?”

“Use your father’s ultimatum. Stop fighting it, maybe the magic will run its course. You might be shocked by its gifts. Or its price.” His lips twist into something between a smirk and a grimace. “And when it hits, trust me, you won’t see it coming.”

“Let’s hope it aims for someone else,” I mutter, trying to ignore the prickles sliding up my spine. Is the island listening to every damned word?

I draw in a slow breath, catching the faint tang of magic on the back of my tongue. A dark current, one that crackles with raw power and a hint of menace.

Tomas straightens. “What are you picking up?”

I hesitate. The connection with my stallion flares with warning. “There’s magic here. Old magic. And under it, something darker. Something...wrong.”

I’m halfway out the door with Tomas on my heels. His shadow merges with mine as we speed through the night. Magic in the Ironlands may be faint, its human kind twisted and corrupting, but these islands are alive, potent, brimming with inviting power so near to the Veil’s edge. But whatever is pulling me feels like a thousand-year-old heartbeat.

We’re close to Kilronan when something flickers at the edge of my vision. The magic in my veins turns arctic cold. Almost paralysing. A warning that something ancient and deadly has slipped through the Veil.

The creature moves between the trees like a liquid shadow, its grace too smooth, too calculated to be anything natural. Darkness pools around it, twisting and curling in its

wake like it's part of the damn thing.

It spreads its wings. They're jagged and cruel, hook-tipped like shards of obsidian, spanning wider than any earthly bird. Predator. Every instinct I've honed over the years screams it, but nothing prepares me for the dread that slams into me like a punch to the chest.

It moves with impossible silence. When it glides overhead, its form cuts against the moon like a wound in the night sky. Its sharp angles and void-dark feathers seem to drink in what little light remains.

The copper tang of old blood and grave soil thickens in the air, choking out every breath, every thought. And underneath it, faint but indisputable, are the whispers. A chorus of the dead trails behind it, like the bastard's got an audience from hell itself.

The Sluagh drops back into the canopy, gliding through branches like a nightmare out of tales told to me as a wee lad. I thought they were bedtime stories, creatures driven out of the Ironlands to the far reaches of the Otherworld. But one is flying like some ancient warning brought to life.

I tear after it, ignoring Tomas's shout to stop. I don't know what I'll do when, or if, I catch it, only that something like this could sweep through a village in a matter of days, spreading fear and darkness. The Sluagh slides deeper into the shadows, vanishing as swiftly as it appeared, leaving lingering dread behind.

Magic dances over my skin as we slow our run into a walk at the edge of the village. Moving steadily along the road, I see him; a priest entering Tí Joe Watty's. To anyone without magic, the man appears ordinary. To me, the air around him shimmers like it's cloaked in something otherworldly. Sluagh can shift their forms, imitating mortals seamlessly, until you catch the wrong glint in their eyes or the unnatural way their shadows move. Or Sluagh can jack a human body, riding shotgun

in their head until they're nothing but a meat suit waiting to drop.

If Sluagh are nearby, you can bet the Gnáthmharfóirí aren't far behind. They look normal enough—until you notice the dead, empty eyes that reflect nothing back. They've learned to play human better than humans do, climbing their way into power and spreading despair like it's an art form.

You see them on the telly all the time—politicians smiling through their teeth as they spin lies, counter-protesters frothing at the mouth as they scream at peaceful marchers, police pulling the trigger on the innocent and calling it justice. Every move is calculated, every outrage another spark tossed onto the pyre, feeding the fear, the anger, the slow, creeping rot. Until one day, the Ironlands boil over, and the people beg for someone—anyone—to take control. And that's when the Gnáthmharfóirí step in, all too happy to oblige, ready to rule from a throne of managed decline. Convenient, isn't it?

They're hard to kill, and the only thing keeping them in check is purity, kindness, and the Shadowborn. The last is in short supply these days. Seems Aisling's stories weren't for scaring us kids. They were warnings, and I'm starting to believe I've become a main character in one.

“Gnáthmharfóirí?” I murmur to Tomas, who falls into step beside me.

He nods. “You feel it?”

I nod. “Aye. Like a wire about to snap.”

The priest vanishes inside, leaving a thread of magic that practically dares us to follow. I glance at Tomas. “Fancy a pint?”

Tomas snorts. “Because we'll look so inconspicuous, won't we?”

With a muttered word, I cast a quick glamour to hide my pointed ears. Tomas follows, pulling his hat low, and together, we step inside. My senses are instantly overloaded. Smells, sounds, and conflicting energy war to dominate my attention.

“Focus,” Tomas murmurs, settling into a seat at the closest empty table. “We’re just two lads settling in to enjoy a pint.”

My chair’s legs scrape across the scarred floor, causing a few patrons to glance my way. I attempt to offer them a smile, but I doubt it looks genuine since I’m still battling to dampen the influx, agitating my senses. Settling onto the hard seat, my gaze aimlessly wanders across the crowded room, then freezes. It’s her. Holy fuck. She’s sitting beside a woman I can’t really see and across from the priest with a smile on her beautiful face. Two realities rub together; one where she belongs and the other where she absolutely doesn’t. The pub fades into nothing as I gape. A magnetic potency exudes from her, drawing me in and begging me to touch even though I know I’ll burn.

This connection isn’t as simple as attraction. It’s deeper, more profound. No time to brace for impact. The invisible rope wrapped around my chest knots in a way I’ll never untie. I swear it feels like I’ve known her for a lifetime. Which again, absurd if I said it out loud. I wish I knew to prepare to have my fucking world upended twice today. Seeing her—physically seeing her—outside of my visions...I can’t even describe it to myself. Every cell within me has a reaction ranging from elation to disbelief to life-altering terror.

Her gaze shifts to mine. I brace for the flash of lavender from my visions. But, no. Her eyes are now a dark grey. Why do they make her seem even more...risky?

I swallow, taking a slow, steady breath. Recognition thrums deep in my bones, and my stallion feels it, too. I clench my fists, pushing away the pain from the fingernail marks digging into my skin.

For a second, the thought strikes: maybe this isn't my king's punishment but something far worse—her. My stallion shifts, his usual lazy arrogance replaced with instinct that makes his muscles coil like springs about to snap. It's a warning I can't ignore, even as I try to deny the implications twisting in my gut. The truth burns like iron against fae skin. She could be the match that sets our whole world on fire. The first domino in a line that ends with our world in ruins.

Except magic doesn't care about destruction or consequences. It pulses through me with dark, greedy promises of claiming her against rough stone walls and marking that delicate throat with my teeth, of letting the bond between us take everything—pride, reason, sanity—and grind it down to raw need. Politics, survival, none of it matters to the connection. It only craves completion, and gods help me. It's starving.

Ceangal...

That single word reverberates with a power that reshapes everything. My stallion's muscles bunch like he can taste its gravity. His mind screams against mine, desperate to remind me of the blood-soaked promise I made in the aftermath of Kaida and Vicious—a promise written in ash and bone and grief that I've spent forever trying to forget.

I shove the memory down, but my beast's presence pushes forward, dragging some half-dead ember back to life. There's nothing concrete in the sensation, just heat behind my ribs that burns like fire. It spreads through my chest with the inevitability of fate, refusing to fade no matter how hard I try to smother it with logic and duty and the thousand reasons I should turn back now.

How much longer can Maelíosa fight her Gloaming mark before she's lost forever? How much of her has to die before the rest of us realise there's no going back? If I fail, if this new ceangal to replace my sister shatters beneath Madden's wrath, then

our attempts to break the Gloaming could rip the Veil wide open. And Father still won't see the bigger picture—he'll expect me to fix it all, never mind the cost.

Another memory rises through my mental shields, foreign yet aching familiar—like trying to catch starlight between my fingers. It's hers, it has to be, this fragment of someone else's soul bleeding into mine. The scent of wildflowers after a storm floods my senses, carrying with it feminine laughter that makes you remember why the ancient fae courts worshipped wicked things that danced beneath midnight moons. It might even make an immortal believe in gods and goddesses again, even after watching them turn their backs on us all.

And then it hits me, sharp and cold like a dagger pressed to my throat. The ceangal wasn't some clever strategy to save my sister—it's already formed. With her.

My stallion gives a little snort. Mocking me. Brilliant. But that word—ceangal—embeds itself in my thoughts like a splinter. I inhale, tasting magic and possibility on my tongue, and remind myself that we are the iron that holds the courts together. We're the shadow that keeps the darkness at bay. Some bonds transcend the petty games of politics, duty, or even that dangerous thing called love. They're the threads that stitch you back together when everything else has burned to ash. And they'll find you, ruthless and inevitable as death, whether you've armoured your heart or not.

They don't care about plans or bargains. I was going to drag back some unsuspecting mortal to transfer the Gloaming mark and take my sister's place. Simple. Clean. But the joke is on me. The bond doesn't just call me out. It sinks its claws into my soul, shreds my plans to ribbons, and leaves me with one truth. Her. She's mine in ways I can't ignore, can't deny, no matter how hard I try. And now? Now I have to fight the bond's pull, find another mortal to carry the mark...because this one? She's untouchable. Off-limits. And gods help me, I'll destroy anyone who tries to change that.

My tattoos buzz against my skin like angry wasps, the draíocht in my blood flaring hot. My stallion quiets. His earlier mockery is replaced by a bone-deep stillness that speaks of predators scenting something worse in the dark.

Shadows now kiss her skin, weaving themselves into her very being. They writhe and twist like living things, darker than the spaces between stars and hungry in a way that makes my power recoil.

Not human.

She can't be. The truth of it hits like a blade between the ribs. Whatever she is, the ceangal has already chosen, leaving me no choice but to work out this wreck. I need to get close to her and figure out what it means. The stakes of failure remind me that being too late often means being dead—or worse.

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Chapter Seven

FELICITY FORREST

“Breeding with mortals is forbidden. Mortal blood shall not dilute ours. Offspring of such unions, born of revelry and recklessness, shall be purged. It’s decreed that such lineage heralds our ruin.”

Decree of the Crimson Court, Edict II

“We seem to be the source of gossip,” I say, glancing around the bar. Weathered wooden beams and snug alcoves make it the perfect blend of rustic charm and lived-in comfort. The walls, adorned with local art and mementos, seem to hum with stories, and the laughter and music spilling out of the doors carry the soul of the island itself. It’s the kind of pub where secrets are shared and fights are settled.

Father Cleary laughs. “Aye, the craic around town has been all about the journalist who’s come to write about the púca. We haven’t had a fae visit us since I was a wee lad.”

I keep my face neutral. “Really? And what makes you think that it’s a púca?”

“Did you see the photo I sent your boss?” Father Cleary asks.

I’m not about to tell the priest the photo doesn’t prove anything. I want to see where he’s going with this. I dig it out of my bag and slide it across the table. The shot looks like it might have been taken at night, and whatever it is, it’s moving way too fast to

make out. The blur could be from the motion. There's this strange overlay, almost like lace or...no, more like a Veil.

What's clear is the background. A stone tower looms in the distance, eerie as hell, and at the very top, a man with glowing eyes stands there, staring straight through the haze like he's looking right at me. Nathan keeps saying it's not a trick of photo editing, but I've insisted otherwise. Now? I'm not so sure.

"Aye, then you can see why we believe it's a púca. The only thing I don't understand is why it's causing so much trouble. When I was a lad, the fae were a blessing."

The whole "púca as a blessing" thing has me stumped. Everything I found last night boiled down to "Sometimes they're helpful, and sometimes they ruin your life." Which, frankly, could describe half the people I've ever met. Still, I can't shake the feeling he knows something I don't. Or worse, that he thinks I know something I don't.

"Father, what do you mean that they're a blessing?" I ask.

"Our island has always been bleak. We've relied on the púca to bless the crops. According to local legend, our relationship with their race dates back to before Christianity came to the Inishmore."

I purse my lips together. "I see."

It's hard to wrap my head around a priest pinning the island's problems on a mythical race. Isn't that the sort of thing priests are supposed to frown on? Like, "No, child, it's not fairies. It's sin, and also, don't forget to tithe"?

The waitress returns with our drinks, but a prickling at the back of my neck has me glancing around the room. Someone is watching me. I make the movement casual,

like I'm just taking in the pub, but my gaze catches on a man seated at a table across the room.

His stare is steady and far too intimate for someone I don't know. Heat rises up my neck, impossible to ignore. His hair spills over his collar and gathers into a braid thick enough to tie up a ship. His face is all sharp angles, striking and impossible to look away from. The beard is a nice touch—neatly trimmed but unruly enough to suggest he's no stranger to trouble. And then there's the piercing on his lower lip, off-centre, like he flipped a coin to decide which side to pierce and lost on purpose.

The shadows around him seem to pulse with energy, having nothing to do with the pub's dim lighting and everything to do with the kind of power that makes lesser men give him a wide berth. He sits with the coiled tension of a predator about to strike, one hand wrapped around his glass in a grip that suggests he's imagining it's someone's throat.

When a drunk patron stumbles too close to my table, his onyx eyes, flecked with shards of amber, flash with a promise of violence so immediate and absolute that the temperature in the room seems to drop. The message is as clear as blood on snow. Approach her and die. It's the kind of threat that comes with practice at making good on dark promises, and suddenly, I'm not sure which is more dangerous. The way he's looking at me or how my body responds to that look with a shiver that has nothing to do with fear.

There's a pull deep in my chest. It wraps around my soul like barbed silk, each breath drawing the threads tighter until they threaten to pierce the skin. Tension pulses between us like a living thing, hungry and demanding. It whispers of pleasure sharp enough to draw blood. My fingers twitch against the table. It's more than attraction. It's destiny with fangs.

My stomach lurches, reality tilting sideways as the magnetism grows stronger.

Looking away feels like fighting gravity, but I force myself. Even if he looks like he walked straight out of the old legends—the dark ones, where fae lords stole mortal women and left trails of bodies in their wake—all deadly grace and predatory beauty that makes my mouth water. Not that I’d admit that. But someone might. Probably Cyn.

The pull yanks at my soul again, demanding I look at him. When our eyes meet, the corner of his mouth lifts into a smile that belongs in sin itself, like he can taste my surrender in the air and plans to savour every moment of it. His gaze burns over my skin, heavy with promises of the exquisitely filthy things he intends to do to me, each one more wicked than the last.

I turn determinedly to Father Cleary, fighting the heat pooling low in my belly. Arousal that definitely shouldn’t happen in a priest’s presence, especially when it involves fantasies that would make a succubus blush. But the connection pulses again, my body responding to its call like it’s found its other half in the darkness. Each breath feels like foreplay, my skin too tight, my blood singing with a need that threatens to consume everything I am. Holy thoughts are impossible when every cell in my body is screaming for the kind of satisfaction that could get me excommunicated just for thinking about it.

He’s a walking bad decision, and I’m already halfway to making it.

I clear my throat. “You really believe that, Father?”

“That’s the history of our land, and I can’t argue with the evidence. But don’t take my word for it,” he says as he motions to someone sitting by the bar.

A slender woman with sharp features and a confident stride approaches the table, her auburn hair catching the light as it falls loose over her shoulders. Father Cleary introduces her. “This is Jenna Hall. She’s an American photographer and artist

staying on the island. And she's the one who saw the púca."

Jenna sits on the chair beside him. "It's true. I didn't want to believe it, but I was going for my morning walk when I saw that thing ." She points to the picture.

"But the photo looks dark," Cyn says.

"Tell them what you told me," Father Cleary says.

"You're going to think it sounds crazy." Jenna hesitates, her fingers brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. Her cheeks pinken as she glances between us. "I have no way to explain what I saw logically. If I hadn't photographed it, I wouldn't believe it myself. Cameras don't lie," Jenna says.

Cameras capture what's there, but they don't always tell the whole truth. People? They lie far too often. "Go on..."

"What looked like a portal to another land opened in front of me." She gestures with her hands, tracing its size in the air. "The air shimmered, like heat waves rising off asphalt, but thicker. Almost like looking through a watery mirror. It was oval-shaped, taller than me and much wider. Night-time on the other side or maybe darker because of the portal distorting the view, but it was right after sunrise here." She pauses, swallowing hard. "There was a stone tower. It was the scariest and most extraordinary thing I've ever seen in my life. So, of course, I had to take a picture of it, or no one would believe me." Jenna looks away, biting her lip as if deciding whether to continue. "I hardly believe it myself. But as I took the picture, a horse appeared on the other side of the portal. It spoke to me."

Cyn nearly spews a mouthful of beer, choking back laughter too late to stop the spray. A few droplets splatter on her arm and the edge of her phone. "Shit!" She grabs a napkin, hurriedly dabbing at the mess while trying—and failing—not to laugh

harder. “I’m sorry. What...?”

Awareness prickles across my skin. My gaze flicks toward the bar, and there he is again. Only now, he’s closer, sitting at a table with his friend like he just casually decided to move. Yeah, right.

His eyes lock on mine. It’s like getting hit by a freight train. Dark, merciless, and entirely too confident. This shameless compulsion twists and burns and makes me want to find out just how much trouble he really is.

He radiates danger, the kind that hums in your chest and promises to ruin you in all the wrong ways. And I can’t look away, no matter how badly I want to pretend I’m not affected.

I force myself to blink, dragging my attention back to the table. “You’re telling me the horse spoke to you.” My voice is surprisingly steady despite the heat still thrumming under my skin.

Her story should sound bananas, ridiculous even. It hit all the marks with impossible events, strange coincidences, and a heavy dose of drama, but Jenna herself seems so normal. No wild eyes, no nervous twitching, not even a hint of the manic energy you’d expect from someone spinning a story like this one. Her calm, level-headed delivery somehow makes the whole thing worse.

“I know...it’s crazy, right? I mean, the whole talking horse thing reminded me of Mister Ed.”

“Right, you are. Nuts,” Cyn says and takes a sip of beer.

I ignore her sarcasm. “Mister Ed?”

“Oh, sorry. It’s this old American TV show with a talking horse.”

Cyn chokes on her beer this time, but at least she manages to keep it in her mouth.

I try not to crack a smile. Serves you right for being a smart ass. “What did it say?”

“It told me not to come any closer. Not in a menacing way, but it sounded like a warning. It said I’d be trapped forever if I went any further. That was enough for me, so I backed away. Then it disappeared. The horse, the tower, the portal, poof , it was there, and then it wasn’t.” Jenna snaps her fingers. “Just like that.”

“Just like that?” I refrain from snapping my fingers, instead, turning to the priest. “And how did you get involved?”

“Aye, five days ago, Jenna came into the pub,” Father Cleary says, pausing to sip his beer. “She was having a chat with the bartender about that photo. After seeing something like that, I needed a drink, too. It wasn’t long before all of Kilronan heard her story about the púca. Someone who reads that tabloid of yours contacted your boss and put him in touch with me. He asked about the story and if I had any evidence to back it up. Jenna let me send him that evidence. And here we are...”

Something about it spikes adrenaline through me. It’s a rush I haven’t felt in a while. I glance down at the picture, my stomach doing a slow roll. Maybe there’s more to this than I thought. When Nathan told me about the case, I figured it was the usual prickly local trying to keep the resort from being built. I’ve been at this long enough to know how these stories go. Nine times out of ten, it’s a hoax, and I go in with my scepticism cranked up to eleven.

I always know when someone’s feeding me a rehearsed line like they’re auditioning for a part in a ghost hunt reality telly special. It’s practically my superpower. Jenna’s not doing that. She’s not playing up the drama or leaning on the old superstitions that

float around places like this island. She's telling the truth or at least her truth. It rattles me. "I see. Jenna, could you show me where you took this photo?"

Father Cleary answers before Jenna has a chance. "Aye, we'll take you tomorrow. It's not far from where the resort is being built. But it's best to be heading back before midnight."

Cyn grins. "Oh, we're not afraid of the dark, Father."

He gives her a stern look. "It's not the dark, but what lurks in it. The púca are known to ride at night."

Jenna coughs. "I'd be happy to show you tomorrow."

The waitress reappears. "Can I get you anything else?"

Father Cleary rises from the table. "I'm gonna head on."

"I should be going too," Jenna says as she follows his lead. "See you tomorrow."

I nod. "We'll meet up with you after breakfast." And a bit of Internet research. "Does eleven-thirty work?"

"Sure," Jenna says.

"We'll stop by Pier House," Father Cleary says as he and Jenna leave the table.

"Well, I'm ready to order some food," Cyn says. "I'll have fish and chips."

"Anything for you?" the waitress asks, barely looking up from her pad.

I run my finger down the menu, picking the first item that grabs my attention. “I’d like the chicken ciabatta and chips, please.”

The waitress takes our menus, heading off to the kitchen. Cyn chatters away, her voice bright and animated as she recounts her latest photoshoot. I nod along, but my attention is caught up in everything Jenna told us.

Before I can get too lost in thought, a sandy-haired local with a mischievous grin stops by our table. He leans in slightly, his gaze fixed on Cyn. “You’ve got a touch of the wild in you, don’t you? Like the wind couldn’t catch you if it tried.”

Cyn raises an eyebrow, her lips curving into an amused smile. “Flattery, huh? And here I thought I’d be blending in for once.”

“Blending in?” He snorts softly. “Not a chance, love. Someone like you? The world notices whether you like it or not.”

They exchange a few playful quips, and I take the opportunity to retreat into my thoughts while Cyn basks in the attention.

Our food arrives not long after, the rich, savoury smell wafting up from the plates, and the lad flirting with Cyn gives up. It should make my stomach growl, but Jenna’s story steals my appetite.

The tower and the glowing-eyed figure pull me deeper into something I’m not sure I want to touch. Maybe it’s a trick of the camera, a bad angle, and some weird lighting. Or maybe...it’s not?

I look up, mulling over the thought, and that’s when I see that Viking sex god still knocking back drinks with his friend. He looks up. When our eyes meet, his gaze is predatory, charged with a raw intensity that promises nothing but trouble. And I’m

tempted to see just how much.

Crap. This time, I'm the one caught staring. Heat flares low in my belly.

His slow, delicious grin hits me deep in my belly and lower. It promises so much wicked sin. Then he stands like he's about to walk over. That's when I see it. A faint shimmer around him, like heat waves off the asphalt, only darker. My heart stutters. Whatever he is, Viking, mercenary, time-travelling bard, he's not some random guy in a pub.

I drop the photo and reach for my glass, trying to act normal, but my hand shakes. It's not the photograph I need to worry about anymore. It's him .

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Chapter Eight

NIALL O'LEARY

“You might as well try to outswim the tide as ignore the call of the ceangal. It'll nae do you a feckin' bit of good.”

Ariel O'Sullivan, Healer, Wraithwind Court

Moments Before While Trying Not To Look Like A Murderous Stalker (And Failing Miserably)...

The drunk staggers too close to her table, his stumble setting my teeth on edge. Before I even register it, my draíocht rises as cold as winter's bite. It curls around the room like a warning. The bastard freezes mid-step, swaying as his reddened eyes shift to me. The message I shoot to him is clear: Get too close to her, and you'll bleed for it.

Her gaze slides toward mine, catching the sharp edge of my glare meant for the drunk. For a moment, her lips part, and the softest flush blooms across her cheeks before she quickly focuses back on the priest, as though pretending she hadn't seen the hunger in my eyes or the way it made her react.

But I can smell it. That sweet, sinful scent of her arousal wraps around me, subtle but impossible to miss. And I know that decadent essence is hers like I know my lungs process air. It stirs the feral part of me. She's fire and temptation rolled into one dangerous package. And me? I'm already fucking lost.

The drunk stumbles, misplacing his foot and dragging my attention away from her. I lean forward. His glazed eyes widen like he's just realised he's stepped straight into the wolf's den, and I'm the wolf. He throws his hands up in a sloppy, half-arsed apology but manages to smack the bottom of a woman's purse. It swings, thudding against the table and drawing a glare from her partner.

He retreats like a guilty kid caught stealing sweets, swaying so hard he nearly topples before crashing into his seat at a table of equally wrecked lads. They erupt in laughter, one of them slapping his back like he's just won a prize for being the clumsiest bastard in the room.

But I'm already done with him. My gaze snaps back to her. She's radiant, and—gods help me—I'm ready to tear apart this pub, brick by brick, for reasons I can't explain.

My feet are already moving, instinct overriding thought. Tomas is right behind me, muttering something I don't catch as we grab a table closer to hers—the previous occupants scurrying to vacate after one look from me. The placement isn't accidental. It puts us squarely between her and the large table full of rowdy drunks.

Tomas drops onto a gouged wooden chair, then casually leans back with his whiskey. “If looks could kill, mate. You might as well carve mine into her chair and piss on it while you're at it.”

I don't answer. Not because he's wrong. This reckless, possessive pull makes my pulse hammer. But, I've already made my choice. I'm not leaving until I know exactly why she's here and what those shadows around her mean.

I try to look relaxed, but inside? I'm fucking wrecked. Every instinct I've got is clawing to the surface, like a beast scenting blood for the first time. My hands itch to move, to touch, to do something. My fists clench so tight my knuckles ache.

She doesn't see it—how my gaze snags on the curve of her neck, the way her pulse flutters just beneath the skin. Or how her voice sends a jolt of something savage straight through me, leaving me aching for more. I force my expression to stay blank, my posture loose, but—fuck me—I'm one wrong move away from snapping.

The shadows cling to her, curling around her as though she belongs to them or them to her. I can't decide which is worse. It's the way they react to her, like they're part of her, or worse, feeding off her.

Shadows don't move like that. Not without a reason.

I can feel the draíocht in the room shifting, bending toward her like she's some kind of magnet. Those shadows are familiar in a way that sets my teeth on edge. They move just like the ones from the Void in-between or the Obsidian Court. Hungry. Waiting.

But the Void doesn't let anyone go. Ever.

And yet she's here, walking free. Why? How?

Her gaze cuts to mine. The bond buzzes like a live wire snapping between us. Its pull is so intense it leaves every nerve in my body vibrating, humming with awareness. The connection burns, demanding more, driving toward something I don't fully understand. But those shadows...they twist around her. Dark. Possessive. They don't belong to the ceangal . They're something else entirely. Something far more dangerous.

And they shouldn't exist outside the Veil, but they're here in the Ironlands, writhing and pulsing with hunger. A predatory tension that crawls along my skin, daring me to come closer. What if they're not just attached to her but tied to something worse?

The thought gnaws at me. If the shadows are hers, what does that mean? Is she a threat? A victim? Both? The answer hides in the dark space between her soul and mine, and I have to know.

Tomas follows my conflicted gaze straight to her. “What’s the plan? Because if it involves staring contests, I think you’re winning.”

“I’m assessing the situation,” I refute, my focus remaining locked on her.

Tomas grunts, his scarred face twisting between a smile and a sneer. “Aye, looks more like you’re ready to drag her behind the pub, shove her against the wall, and sink your teeth into her neck. Always were a greedy bastard when something caught your eye.”

My stallion snickers, but I don’t need the jabbing right now, not from either of them. She looks like trouble. The fun kind.

“Shut it,” I mutter, a bit too loudly. Tomas raises an eyebrow. “Not you,” I add quickly, “arguing with my beast.”

Tomas chuckles. “Your beast is drawn to her, but maybe the lass is a mite more distraction than we need while staking out the priest.”

My stallion chimes in. Distraction? Oh, we’re well past that, mate.

I shake my head. My goal is simple. Keep my sister out of the Madden’s claws. But I can’t ignore this fucking pull towards her .

Caitlin slides over with her tray littered with dirty glasses. “Refill?”

“Whiskey, neat,” I say, hoping alcohol will cut through the tightness in my chest.

Tomas barely spares her a glance. “Same here.”

Caitlin moves off again, her steps confident, like someone who knows every inch of this place.

“There’s something off about the magic here,” I say, my voice low.

Tomas leans forward, his scarred face unreadable. “Walk me through your thoughts.”

My gaze skims over the jaunty green twinkle lights still strung above the gouged-up bar even though St. Patrick’s Day is long gone. The usual hum of conversation flows through the pub, mingling with the clink of glass on wood, but magic slithers beneath it, shimmering with potential.

Bright, buzzy, and headier than any overpriced cocktail they serve the tourists. I inhale, taking a whiff of it. Green. Nature-based. And something a touch... airy . A lineage I can trace back to the druids in Ireland. My attention zeroes in on the table where she sits with her friend, the magic flickering around them in gentle waves.

But that’s not the only thing I taste in the air. I breathe in deeper, my skin tingling as I pick through the sensory overload. Beneath that fresh, crisp forest energy is a darker shade of magic, the truly dangerous shit that can backfire. Hard. And judging by the prickle running down my spine, someone here is more than comfortable wielding it.

“The shimmer I saw around the priest earlier is gone.” My fingers drum on the sticky tabletop. “Magic like that doesn’t vanish without cause. If it’s cloaked by glamour, it’s not your run-of-the-mill variety.”

“Agreed.” Tomas assesses the four people and glances around the pub. “There’s old, dark power that doesn’t belong in a place like this.”

I close my eyes, letting the pub noise dissolve into the background. My focus narrows. The priest. Tension coils tight, like a string about to snap. I open my eyes and frown, staring at the priest as if I can peel back the layers of him with sheer stubbornness.

The silence in my head is wrong. Normally, the beast is quick to snarl, growl, or hiss out a warning. But now? Nothing. It could mean the priest might be one of the good ones. Gods preserve us. “The priest doesn’t feel like the source.”

“Aye,” Tomas draws out. “He’s not the origin.” He gestures toward the table with a tilt of his head. “Her? She’s a different story?”

I nod, eyes narrowing. “The power feels thick, deliberate. Wielded by someone old. And strong. It doesn’t feel cold or malicious. More like a glamour.”

“Even the best glammers crack eventually,” Tomas murmurs. “Lose their edge. Like a mask under too much strain.”

“But the magic?” I glance at him, jaw tightening. “It’s still here. Dark. Suffocating. The kind that doesn’t belong in a place like this.”

Tomas’s expression hardens. “You think it’s human?”

“No. That’s not human magic. And whatever it is, it’s not supposed to be here.”

Tomas exhales, his hand hovering near the blade at his side. “So, what the hell is she hiding?”

“That’s exactly what we’re going to find out.”

Tomas narrows his eyes, one corner of his mouth twitching. “Your beast picking up

anything useful or just rattling on about her hips?”

A little of both. “No, it’s different.”

His gaze drifts back to the woman. “You’re drawn to her, not by duty, but something deeper. The ceangal , perhaps?”

My jaw tightens.

It doesn’t matter what I want. Warmth spreads to my gut, primal and maddening. The heat carries her emotions, her confusion, her goddamn presence . I hate it on principle. The bond doesn’t ask. It demands. It’s binding, consuming, and as subtle as a fist to the gut. And my stallion? He’s smug as hell about it.

It yanks me closer every time I try to breathe past it. And to make sure I get the message loud and clear? The draíocht slams into me with a single truth. She isn’t just another mortal. She’s mine now.

Mine. Whether I like it or not.

Which means no one else can have her. Not Madden, not anyone. I can’t let a beast like him sink his claws into her, twist her into something dark and broken. But claiming her? It doesn’t exactly save my sister, now does it? Fuuuuuck. Every choice pulls tighter, the noose closing in, and I’m the one who put my head through the loop.

I squeeze my empty glass, forcing myself to stay rooted in place because the alternative? Storming over there, dragging her out of this pub, and letting every bastard here know exactly who she belongs to? That’s not an option. But I can already feel her heartbeat thrumming through my veins, tangled with mine like it’s always been there.

“I’m here to keep my sister out of the Crimson Court’s claws, nothing more,” I snap, pretending the woman means nothing. Pretending because the alternative—letting this bond take root—is a curse I can’t afford. I need to know if she’s tied to the reason the Veil is fraying. Beyond that, I need to stick to the plan—find someone else to whet Madden’s appetite so he doesn’t kill me while we figure out how to transfer the Gloaming mark. That’s why I came here. Even if every bone in my body is screaming to mark the dark-haired witch as mine. “I have a plan.”

Tomas jerks his head to the side with a sharp, dismissive movement.

Caitlin sets our drinks down, but her eyes stick to Tomas like a cat watching a bird. She doesn’t bother with subtlety, letting her gaze linger before sauntering off to serve someone else. Tomas, of course, either doesn’t notice or pretends not to because he’s bonded and the universe would crack in half before he acknowledged being ogled.

I nod. “I think she likes you.”

Tomas grunts. “Doesn’t matter. I’ve got a woman. You should be more worried about going home empty-handed. Your da won’t give a shite about excuses when you show up without a woman.”

I snort. “I’ll pick someone. She doesn’t have to like me. She just needs a pulse.”

Tomas shoots me a look that says he’s questioning my intelligence and life choices again. Then smirks. “You think so little of yourself, Niall. Some women like a man with a face like he’s chewing on a nettle. Sure, she’ll be willing, but staying that way? That’s where you’ll cock it up.”

I groan but let it slide, keeping my plan to myself. Tomas might be too close to my father for comfort, and I’m not about to risk laying it all out for someone who might decide to side with him instead of me. “It’s a low bar. Even a goat is willing if you

wave enough grain in front of it. It's hard to know where obligation ends and where I begin anymore."

"Look, Niall," he growls, his lip curling enough to make it clear he thinks I'm a self-indulgent idiot. "I know you've got orders to follow, but don't lose the man under the crown. The court has already got enough soulless bastards."

Before I can answer, I catch the word *púca* from the priest's table. Are they talking about us? I listen in on the witchy lass with midnight-black hair shot through with silver, and hips that could make a sensible fae stupid. My beast stiffens, but even with my hearing, the conversation is muffled.

The priest rises with one of the women, leading her to the door. She steps into the night without looking back, but he doesn't follow—someone catches his arm. He stops, speaking with two men, and the air in front of them shivers like liquid glass, their voices swallowed by a glamour. My jaw tightens, instincts sharpening. The question isn't if they're hiding something. It's which one of them is pulling the strings.

Tomas nudges me. "What's the plan?"

"We stick around," I mutter. "Find out why she's here."

Caitlin appears at my side, as quiet as a shadow. I've known her for years, but knowing Caitlin is like dodging a blade. Her sharp eyes and even sharper tongue never miss a thing. According to her aunt, she wants off this rock and isn't exactly thrilled with the so-called honour of the generational task of serving us. Not that I blame her, but that doesn't mean I trust her.

Especially not with the way she sidles too close, cataloguing my every move like she's preparing for some future trial. One where the winning argument involves a

blackthorn stake through my chest, followed by a quick, precise decapitation—executed, of course, with perfect posture and a twisted little grin.

Caitlin smiles. “Can I get you two more whiskey?”

“Aye,” Tomas says, gesturing toward the table by the hearth. “You don’t happen to know those two women?”

Her expression shifts, lips tightening with enough miffed energy to suggest she’d much rather he ask about her. “That one over there...” She nods to the woman who has my beast ready to go, even if I’m not. “...is here to investigate you .”

With that ominous declaration, Caitlin marches off to serve a guy waving her down.

I stare at the woman. Shadows still coil around her, threading through her dark hair and skimming her form with a possessive touch. Her stormy grey eyes burn with defiance, seemingly blind to the danger curling at her edges. I know nothing about her, and looks can be deceiving. Maybe I’m hoping she’s not a bigger complication.

My heart lurches. I gaze through the window, half-expecting to spot a Sluagh or Gnáthmharfóirí slinking through the night. Darkness and nothing more. I don’t know if she has anything to do with the Veil. Maybe she’s another mortal passing through. I don’t need this distraction from my course, no matter how much I want her. But none of this seems to sway my beast. She’s looking at you , he all but sings in my head. Go to her.

I glance up. Sure enough, she’s staring right at me.

I grab the battered tumbler in front of Tomas and down the last of his whiskey in one gulp. It burns as I down it, and for a moment, I imagine it can burn this pull right out of me. But no, it’s still there. Her. Staring right through me like she already knows

I'm fucking trouble. Which I am. For her, for me, for everyone.

I push back my chair, standing slowly. This is a bad idea. The kind that ends in flames and broken bones.

And yet...

My feet are already moving.

Chapter Nine

FELICITY FORREST

“The rule has always been ride or die. Even in my time, when the ceangal calls, you’re tossed onto his back whilst in stallion form. If his stallion rejects you, it almost always marks your death.”

Queen Orla, Fourth Queen of the Wraithwind Court

Heat climbs up my neck, and I’m pretty sure I’m about to combust spontaneously. Dammit. He catches me staring. Again. The guy beside him says something under his breath, and they laugh. Am I part of a joke? Then he throws back a shot and starts moving through the packed tables toward us, like he’s some predator and I’m the prey.

I square my shoulders, ignoring the heat crawling up my neck. No way am I letting him —walking sin wrapped in danger—see how much he’s gotten under my skin.

“Crap,” I mutter under my breath.

“What’s with you?” Cyn asks, cutting through my panic. Before I can think of something remotely plausible to say, her eyes follow mine.

“Oh. Yum,” she breathes. “He’s a feast for the eyes.”

“Which one?” I ask, because seriously—how does one choose between a tiger and a

lion? It's like picking a favourite way to be devoured. One's quick and savage, the other? The other makes you beg for more, maybe even share the feast with a friend. But of course, that sounds a lot more like Cyn than me.

"They're both hot, but I've got a thing for tall, dark, and brooding with scars to match," Cyn says, nodding toward the man a step behind mine. Mine? Mine? What the fuck?

He continues to stalk toward me—us—and his amber-flecked, mischievous eyes lock on mine, but there's nothing casual about the intent in his gaze. My breath hitches, and oh no...this is not a safe place.

There's something about how he moves—all muscle and power. Maybe it's how his shoulders stretch his shirt, or how he looks at me like he's already figured me out, and I can't help feeling like a rabbit in front of a very well-groomed wolf.

I have to remind myself that I'm not in the market for that kind of trouble. Let him chat me up. Let Cyn play with his friend. I'll show a little interest and keep it light. Fun. My life is full of things—writing, friends, my morbid humour. I will not let myself fall into a hole because some guy's too damn attractive for his own good. But there's something about him that crawls under my skin and sinks in deep, like a hook I didn't see coming. It's not normal. Hell, it's not even rational. The air shifts when he's near, pulling at me like I'm some puppet on a string. And the worst part? I don't even know why.

I try to muster a smile, but it feels hollow, like a mask slipping. There's something deeper at work, something I can't control. My body leans toward him, caught in the invisible web that seems to wrap around us both. He navigates through the crowded pub like he owns the place. Hell, maybe he does. Or maybe he owns every heartbeat of every woman he passes. Including mine, apparently.

“I can manage a conversation,” I mutter to myself, more of a pep talk than anything, because, honestly, my only real defence against the man is a fortress made of sarcasm and cynicism.

Cyn grins. “Don’t look now, Flick. They’re closing in and that one hasn’t blinked since he saw you.”

I roll my eyes. “Lovely. A stalker with good bone structure.”

And then he’s there, and oh, he’s there . His friend stops beside him, all scars and quiet menace. My pulse trips over itself, and I hate how this feels inevitable, like they were always meant to end up here. It’s enough to make the hairs on my arms stand at attention. Is it him or my damn nerves spinning this tension so thick it feels like the world might split open?

“Looks like you’ve got room.” he says, already sliding into the priest’s vacated seat without waiting for an answer.

His accent slides into my brain and snags somewhere far lower. And all I can think is...I’m so screwed. His friend hesitates for a moment, before pulling out the chair beside him and sitting down like he’s reluctantly following orders.

My heart starts racing, and my palms turn into mini sweat factories. I’m suddenly hyper-aware of the space between us and how much of it he’s claiming just by being in the same room. How, if I stare at him for one second longer, I’ll melt into something unsettling, like a pool of demon blood. Then blurt something stupid about how my insides don’t quite match what’s on the outside because that’s the sort of weird shit my brain likes to offer up when it’s panicking. Instead, I hold his gaze, daring him to keep staring. If he wants to look, fine. But if he’s looking for someone to bow, he’s in the wrong fucking room. My gaze drops to his mouth, traitorous as ever. Full lips, carved for sin, and all I can think about is how they’ll feel against

mine. How they'll taste. I lick my lips, and there's that sound again—a faint, haunting melody that no one else seems to notice, like a siren's call that sets my nerves on edge. This isn't normal. Hell, this isn't human. But do I look away? No, of course not. I stare at his mouth and think of all the filthy things he can do with it.

My best friend, mercifully, jumps in. "I'm Cyn," she says, all sweetness and a touch of mystery. "And this is Felicity."

He doesn't look at her. His eyes remain on me, as though I'm the only thing in the room worth looking at. "I'm Niall." He gestures toward the other man. "Tomas."

The world seems to shrink around us. I wasn't expecting the shift—how could I?—but suddenly, his presence is like a storm rolling in. I'm not shy, not even close, but something about how Niall watches me with that intense focus, sends my thoughts scattering. It's as if the rules changed mid-game, and I've got seconds to figure out my next move.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, love," Niall says. "What brings you to my island?"

"We're on holiday," I say, keeping it simple. No need to mention that hunting down the unknown is usually how I spend my time. Something about the way he says 'my island' tells me I should keep that part to myself.

"You look like you could use a drink." His voice drips with authority, not a suggestion, but a command dressed in charm.

I nod. God, yes. But for the love of all that's holy, stop calling me love. If he keeps looking at me like that and talking all...all...Irish and whatnot, I'm going to combust.

Niall raises a hand, catching the waitress's attention with a sharp, deliberate motion.

She stops at our table, not quite smiling, but polite enough to pass for friendly. “What’ll it be, then?”

“Tom Crean,” Niall says, his tone smooth, confident, and final.

Tomas grunts, echoing the same order, then glances back at the band playing in the corner.

“I’ll have the same,” I say, even though I’m not sure I could swallow a drop right now. My attention keeps slipping back to Niall, and it’s turning my brain into static.

Cyn orders something fruity and colourful.

The waitress jots everything down and slips away, her footsteps lost under the rising tune of the fiddle. That’s when I catch the glance Niall and Tomas share—barely a flicker, but thick with meaning. Tomas nods once.

Whatever they’ve decided, Niall pushes to his feet.

“Excuse me,” he says, in a tone that suggests he’s done explaining himself. His gaze meets mine for a heartbeat. Then he turns and makes his way toward the back of the pub, his shoulders broad, his stride confident.

Cyn lifts an eyebrow at me, but I ignore her, resting my hand on the satchel by my side. The weight of the Other Crowd Guidebook for Mortals presses against my palm, steady and oddly comforting. I’m not pulling it out—heaven knows I’m not about to flip through folktales in front of everyone—but something about having it close settles me.

Not that it does much to explain why these ancient stories suddenly feel closer than the fiddler on the rough wooden stage. Could Niall be one of them? My chest

tightens. A connection hums with a force that refuses to be named. Maybe it's chemistry, but there's a tug there. Something that has my instincts screaming danger even as the rest of me aches to chase him down.

Cyn and Tomas strike up a conversation. I catch bits about her family and his scars—it must be personal if he's sharing. But the pub's noise swells, and soon the fiddle drowns out their chatter.

Niall strides back into view, pausing to speak quietly with the waitress. She nods, placing her hand on his arm like she has every right. Possession flares inside me like a flame doused in petrol. Mine. The thought tears through me and hits somewhere deep.

What is wrong with me?

He's a stranger. A dangerously handsome stranger with a sinful mouth and enough raw magnetism to make me want to do terrible, dirty things. But still a stranger. I came here to chase a story and nothing more.

He says something else and her fingers linger on his arm like she can't help herself. And I want to rip her hand off of him. A pang sears through my chest.

Jealousy? Oh, for fuck's sake. That's ridiculous. This isn't me.

Then his gaze snaps to mine, pinning me to my seat. The corner of his mouth curves like he knows exactly where my head has gone. A challenge, daring me to admit it.

Cyn nudges my elbow. "You good, Flick?"

"Fine," I lie, forcing my spine to straighten.

Niall closes the distance between us as he walks back to the table. It feels like the pub shrinks. Everything else fades to background noise, all fiddles and laughter and clinking glasses. He's all I see, all I feel, heat radiating off him in waves.

"Caught you staring again," he murmurs, voice as dark and smooth as the stout behind the bar. He plants one palm on the table, leaning in close enough that I smell the salty tang of the sea air on his skin. Close enough to feel the heat radiating off him. Close enough to ruin me.

"I wasn't—" but I choke on the lie when he arches an eyebrow. The spark in his eyes says he won't buy a word of it. And damn him, I don't want to finish the sentence anyway.

His lips curl into a smirk that's pure sin. "You can lie to me, a stór ," he says, the endearment sliding under my skin like a brand, "but not to yourself."

I want to snarl at him for using words like that. I want to yank him closer and make him regret teasing me. Hell, I want a lot of contradictory things right now.

Tomas laughs at something Cyn says, pulling my attention for a heartbeat. They're either oblivious or ignoring the crackling energy between me and this man. That memory of the waitress's fingers on his arm slams back into my mind, striking a chord of territorial jealousy I didn't know I possessed.

Niall catches the flicker in my eyes and leans in, closer still. "Jealous already, are we?"

Heat floods my cheeks, whether from anger or wanting, I can't decide. "In your dreams."

He dips his gaze to my mouth like he's picturing exactly how it would taste. "Every

night,” he murmurs, and the promise in his tone makes the floor tilt. “But you’re wrong, you know.”

“About what?” I ask, half-breathless, clinging to the last shred of control I have.

“That waitress?” His smirk deepens, and the raw confidence in his eyes makes me shudder. “She knows her place. And you...” His voice drops to a low rasp. “...already know how this ends. You’ve been mine since the moment I saw you.”

Red flags should be waving. Any other time, Cyn and I would’ve given each other the signal and bailed faster than you can say “bad idea.” But the possessiveness in his words wraps around me like a dark promise. And gods help me. Instead of fighting, I sit here, my pulse hammering like I’m caught in a web I can’t escape. My breath stutters as his gaze bores into me. I don’t run, and I don’t deny it. I just wait, heart pounding, already bracing for the damage he’s about to do.

I should correct him. Tell him I’m not anyone’s. But the words don’t come. My body hums with anticipation, and the thought of him claiming me—whatever that means—sends a delicious tension tightening in my core.

I force myself to remove my tongue from the roof of my mouth. “I didn’t realise men still said things like that without irony.”

Niall grins as he slides back into his seat with the kind of predatory grace that makes my pulse jump. His fingers tap once against the edge of the table, drawing my attention like he knows I’m hanging on his every move.

I bite my bottom lip.

“Other than being on holiday,” he says, his tone low and edged with amusement, “what are you doing here, sitting with a priest? Not that I mind, but a woman

checking me out while thinking...unholy thoughts? While seeking counsel on being devout?" His smirk deepens, his voice dropping to a sinful rasp. "That's a confession I'd love to hear."

Heat floods my cheeks. I hate that he knows exactly how to get under my skin. He leans back, his confidence a palpable force, like he's already claimed the upper hand—and me. He's laughing at me with his eyes. I clench my jaw. This one may make me forget why I swore off men in the first place. Breathe. Gods, I'm a walking disaster, and the last thing I need is to get tangled up with some local hottie who hasn't figured out that I'm a cautionary tale.

"He's not my priest. I'm on holiday, remember? And no, actually, I brought Cyn with me because it's her birthday, and I was interviewing him for a story."

My pulse thrums in my ears, and there's this strange, electric buzz under my skin, like my body is trying to tell me something my brain can't process. He's looking at me like he could devour me, or I'm a riddle he's dying to solve, and for some stupid reason, I want him to solve it.

The energy inside me stirs, louder, insistent, a drumbeat I can't ignore. It pushes at my chest, whispering things I don't understand but can feel down to my marrow. Make him yours. The thought slams into me. My whole body reacts to it, heat curling low in my stomach.

I shouldn't be feeling this. I shouldn't be letting it overwhelm me, but I can't seem to stop. It's like I'm on the edge of a cliff, the pull of gravity stronger than my will to stay grounded. Letting anyone get this close is a terrible idea. I know that.

I came here to do a job, not get distracted. But gods help me. Every fibre of my being wants to claim this man like he's already mine.

His mouth curves. “Might I ask what it is you do besides staring at men in bars?”

Cocky bastard. “I could ask you the same, Niall. Seems like you’re quite skilled at it, too.”

Niall leans back. “Guilty as charged, but only when the view is worth it. As for work, let’s say I’m in the business of land management.”

“Real estate?” I ask, mentally filing that away.

His gaze flickers for a split second. I catch a tiny hesitation, a brief tightening of his jaw. It’s so quick that if I blinked, I might have missed it. “Duty comes first in my family...but sometimes it’s the unexpected moments in my country that keep me busy,” Niall explains.

I laugh, though I don’t know why. Nerves, I guess. “Your country? Like you own it?”

He smirks. “And you, a stór, what brings you here to interview a priest?”

I roll my eyes, deciding to play along with his teasing, even though he dodged my question. “Well, I’m a writer. I cover...travel and local legends. This island’s folklore is too tempting to pass up. And who knows? Maybe I’ll find a story about a charming local who ensnares unsuspecting tourists.”

His eyes darken. “Be careful. Some legends might be more real than you expect.” His expression clears. “This charming local might be compelling enough to write a whole book about him. What do you think, Tomas? Should we give them a story worth writing about?”

He grins. “Only if we’re the heroes.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Well, first of all, I never said that you and your friend were charming.” But I can’t help but laugh, the tension easing from my shoulders. I shrug. “I suppose every writer needs a hero at the heart of their story. But be warned, I’m known for my creative liberties.”

Niall leans in, the heat of him setting every nerve on fire. “Let me give you something worth writing about, a stór .”

His taunt slides into my mind like thick, sweet honey, making me crave all the ways he’d— Stop. He’s baiting you . The thought snaps like a whip. I steel myself, forcing the flutter in my chest to quiet, the heat in my veins to cool. He’s good at this—too good—and I can’t afford to be caught off guard.

My mouth goes dry. I trace my finger over a knot on the wooden table, grounding myself in its rough texture, anything to avoid looking into those onyx and amber eyes and letting Niall see the soft spots I’d rather keep hidden.

When I think I’ve got a hold on myself, his voice drops lower, “You sure you’re not hiding something?”

And for one horrifying, heart-stopping moment, I wonder if he can see something I can’t.

Chapter Ten

NIALL O'LEARY

“The art of bending reality to one’s desire through sheer force of will is a powerful tool, but there are limitations to this magic. One, it requires not only skill but deep belief in one’s intentions and desires. The weave will unravel without complete conviction. Two, attempts to willweave won’t work when ancient wards or spells protect. Three, the most formidable among us possess a natural immunity to willweaving. It proves their strength and standing within the fae hierarchy, rendering them impervious to the whims of willweavers.”

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

She gives this little smile. Too quick, too polished like she’s practised it in the mirror. “I’m not hiding anything. I’m here to write a story. That’s it.”

Liar.

I should be angry. Suspicious. But I’m curious. She fidgets, her fingertip tracing the knot in the table. A calculated move to avoid meeting my eyes. Every instinct screams that woman is dangerous. She hasn’t proven herself. Until she does, I’ll bait her and dig for the truth. My inner stallion? He’s far less refined. Feral instincts. And gods help me, they’re tempting.

My beast laughs. She’s pulling you under. The world is already fucked. Let the darkness descend. If she’s the end, at least it’ll be a damn good one.

The worst part? The bastard means it.

Everyone feels the temptation of that voice inside telling us to quit. That deceptively sly bastard that promises you there's an easy way out. That's the trick. Apathy isn't loud or monstrous. It sneaks in with glamour and illusion. We fall for it. Surrender to the hate and darkness. Then pretend like we didn't see it coming and act surprised when the flames rise. The Gnáthmharfóirí and the Sluagh are always waiting. Always ready to scoop up the tired, the broken, or the ones too tempted to fight back.

I won't give up. If she's a threat to the Veil, I've got to know. My stallion grumbles, but falls quiet. I arch a brow. "Story?"

Before Felicity can answer, Cyn leans in with a smirk. "Ghosts, treasure, or witches? That's usually how these stories go, isn't it, Flick?"

Felicity shoots her a glare, but Cyn grins wider.

Tomas raises an eyebrow. "Not every story is meant to entertain. Some have teeth."

Cyn snorts. "Yeah, and some people still think the earth is flat. What's your point?"

Felicity can't hold back, the corners of her mouth lift.

"Why Flick?" Tomas asks.

"She never slows down. Always chasing the next story. And, well, you know how writer types are. Always flicking their pens like they're scribbling down the meaning of life." Cyn shrugs.

Felicity rolls her eyes. "You're impossible."

I lean back, watching her. Watching her , not her lips or the way her fingers twitch like she's about to bolt. "So what's this story about?"

"I'm writing about a local legend," Felicity says, her gaze sharp as she sizes me up. "I work for a magazine."

And you're holding back. "There's more to this legend, isn't there?"

Felicity laughs. "Depends on how much you believe the stories going around."

My gaze locks onto her lips, curled into that teasing half-smile that dares me to cross a line. "Try me."

Her fingertip glides over the knot on the table. "Do you think there are things in this world that logic can't explain?"

Something tells me she's testing me. "Aye, I do."

Felicity takes a slow sip of her ale. "It's my job to remain sceptical. I look for evidence, follow the facts wherever they lead me. Science explains most things. I believe in what I can see. Real, tangible evidence, not some doctored photograph or vague rumor."

I grin, leaning back in my chair as a cover to keep digging. "And what kind of evidence are you looking for?"

She shrugs, but there's a glint in her eyes. "This town is supposedly haunted. I need to prove whether or not it's true."

"Haunted by what?" I ask, my tone teasing. I enjoy this— her —far too much.

“Púca.” Felicity deadpans.

Tomas stiffens beside me. A second passes before he coughs and pushes back his chair. “I think it’s time I walk Miss Beckett back to Pier House.”

- You’re going to see if she knows anything, right? - His mindspeak cuts through.

- Aye, - I reply, my gaze lingering on Felicity, who’s eyeing him with growing suspicion. - But listen, just because I stepped out earlier and lost that lad I thought was a Gnáthmharfóirí doesn’t mean he’s not still around. Keep your guard up. Caitlin should’ve told you what the town’s whispering. -

Tomas nods tightly, his thoughts brushing mine with a faint hum of irritation. - Caitlin was vague, but I’ll press her. Focus on your end. I’ll keep Cyn occupied. -

Cyn grins as she rises. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Flick.”

Felicity gives Cyn a pointed look before sipping her drink. “Be good.”

She snorts. “I’m always good .”

They head out, leaving the pub. He’ll scan every shadow between here and Pier House. It’s a shame for Cyn who’s about as subtle as a wolf politely knocking at the sheepfold door with her interest in fucking Tomas. Despite his habit of smiling like he’s daring someone to test him, his hands will stay to himself. He’ll ask the questions, get the answers, and leave no room for doubt, all while remaining completely faithful to his woman.

Felicity stiffens the moment it’s the two of us. I can’t decide if she’s pissed that Cyn left her alone with me or if she’s just realising what that means. It’s a subtle shift, but it’s there, like the cracks in the pub’s floorboards.

“She’ll be all right, love. He’s my best mate. I’ve known him all my life. Trust me, she’s in good hands.”

Felicity laughs. “It’s not her I’m worried about.”

“What is it then?”

Felicity sighs. “Cyn likes having fun, but that’s all it is. I’d feel bad for your mate if he’s looking for more. I bloody love her, but that’s her MO.”

Her fingers fidget with the seams of her fingerless gloves like she doesn’t trust herself to keep her hands still or off of me. The ceangal hums between us. Dark. Electric. Her scent, the soft catch in her breath, or the way her eyes darken when they meet mine is impossible to ignore. A pull that promises trouble, and gods help me, I want to see just how much.

“Why do you keep staring at me?” her voice wavers.

“Because you’re hard to look away from. It’s like the rest of the world doesn’t matter when you’re in the room,” I murmur, my eyes never leaving hers.

She bites her lip. “Don’t say that.”

“Why not?”

Felicity glances away, but a small smile tugs at her lips. It doesn’t reach her eyes. That flicker of darkness beneath her surface? Tightens something in my chest. Fuck. It twists deeper with every second that I look at her. It demands I claim her enemies, turn them into mine, and carve her pain into every one of them until they’re nothing but screams and ash.

“Cyn lights up the room. Me? I’m...the background noise.” She shrugs a little defensively.

“Background noise?” I scoff, letting my gaze rake over her like I’m stripping her bare. “You’re the sound that drowns everything else out—the one that makes men lose their fucking minds. You don’t fade into the room. You take it, whether you mean to or not.”

I catch the sharp inhale, her pulse fluttering at the edge of her throat. My fingers brush the edge of her gloves, tracing the seams. Then they slip over her hand to graze her bare skin on the inside of her wrist. Her lips part. The walls she’s so carefully built begin to crack. I see it in her eyes, something she doesn’t want to admit, but she’s feeling the ceangal as bad as me.

“I should go. I’ve got an early morning meeting with the priest.” Her body betrays her when she doesn’t move her arm.

“Are you sure, love?” I ask, the question hanging like a dare.

Her lips press into a thin line. But I can see the pull, the way her body leans ever so slightly towards mine, her hand trembling just enough for me to notice.

Gods, I’ve done some evil shit in my life. Stepped on others. Killed. Destroyed lives without a second thought. Maybe not with Fallon’s cruelty, but my hands are drenched in more blood than she could ever dream. And I’d do it all again. For them. For Maelíosa. For Finn, Kieran, Vicious, and Kaida once. And gods help me, I’ll ruin myself to keep Felicity safe and protect them all.

So what will I do for her?

Everything.

This bond makes me weak in ways I never thought possible. It's stripping me bare, tearing down every wall I've built. I crave her—her heat, her body, her mind. I want her shadows and secrets, her darkness. Every jagged, broken piece of her. I want to bury myself in it, lose myself in her, even though I know it will destroy me.

She can't ever know how close I am to losing control, how fragile the leash I have on myself is. I hold it back through sheer fucking will, clench my fist against the pull of the ceangal . The magic pulses in my veins, daring me to give in, but I can't. Not when we'll all burn for it. I smother the hunger. Shove it so deep inside that it feels like carving out a piece of my soul.

"You should," I murmur, my thumb brushing against the soft skin of her wrist. Her breath hitches, her lashes fluttering as the smallest tremor rolls through her.

She leans forward, letting her breath ghost across my skin. "But that doesn't mean I will."

I cling to self-control with every fucking thing I have. "This isn't...it's just the drinks messing with our heads."

Her eyes narrow, but there's no bite in her glare. "Is it?"

I let my finger glide higher, just enough to test the razor edge of my resistance. Her breathing goes shallow, her chest rising and falling in quick bursts. I should stop. Walk away. But gods, I can't. The ceangal tugs harder, its whispers growing louder, more insistent. Claim her. Keep her. Protect her. The thoughts crash into me, searing through my mind like wildfire.

I lean in, my voice dropping to a rough whisper. "Say the word, love. Say you want me to let go, and I will."

Her hesitation is a spark, and the fire roars to life between us. She doesn't pull away. "Well, I guess you should walk me back. If there's a púca causing trouble, I shouldn't go alone, right?"

My mouth goes dry. "Aye, if there's a púca."

She lifts an eyebrow, something unreadable flashing through her gaze. "So you were paying attention."

I shrug, forcing a casualness I don't feel. "Maybe. I'm curious what you've heard."

I don't bother explaining that I know damn well what a púca is—I am one. Let her think I'm a clueless local, despite all the chatter.

"Let me pay our tab," I say, pulling away before she can argue.

She watches me cross the room, her expression less guarded, like she's wondering which of us took that step first. I settle the bill. When I stride toward her, something soft shimmers in her eyes, gone in an instant. Everything inside me screams to claim her, but I draw a deep breath and offer her my hand instead.

She hesitates, a small smile tugging at her lips. "Alright."

"Aye, reckon that's a good idea," I say, hating how ragged my voice sounds. "Wouldn't want a púca to run off with you."

We leave Tí Joe Watty's, the cold air slapping me out of the fog of warmth and firelight. It's sharp, fresh, cutting through the lingering buzz in my veins. She falls silent. She's all don't-get-too-close vibes. For the love of the old gods, it's frustrating. I'm usually the one who can read people, who dodges the bullshit and keeps control of the game. But with her? She's dealing a different hand, tight-lipped and

unreadable. And damn it, I can't decide if I want to tear down her walls or keep letting her surprise me.

Movement draws my eye to the edge of the path. A sleek black cat—too big to be normal—slips into view, moonlight catching on the sharp white patch at its chest. A cait-shith . Its glowing lavender eyes cut between us, like it's deciding whether we're worth its attention or maybe it's pissed she's walking with me. Its tail flicks before it melts back into the shadows, leaving a faint trail of magic in its wake. It lingers there, like a nosy chaperone, making sure I don't get too close.

I break the silence. "So tell me more about this story you're writing. Must be pretty compelling if they sent you all the way here."

Felicity shrugs. "Not much to tell yet. We got a tip about a naughty fae causing trouble. My boss sent me to investigate a photograph."

I tense at the mention of a photo. "A photograph?"

She reaches into her bag, pulling out a slightly crumpled picture. "See for yourself. It's supposedly a púca, but half the time these are photoshopped or hoaxes."

The image is clear enough for me. My vision is sharper than a human's. It's Tomas, all right, standing guard near the North Tower. My jaw tightens, rage bubbling up from the pit of my stomach. That bastard. He didn't tell me.

I hand the photo back, forcing my face into something resembling indifference. "Doesn't look like much to me."

Inside, though? I'm cursing Tomas up and down. This is another reminder of where his loyalties lie—with my father, not with me. He's not here because he cares. He's here because he's been ordered to babysit me. To train me, guide me, and make sure I

don't get myself killed in some spectacularly stupid way. And gods forbid I ever forget that his real purpose is to carry out my father's bidding.

And yet, I keep telling myself he's a friend. That I can trust him. That somewhere, buried under the dutiful facade, he gives a damn about more than orders. But gods help me, there are moments—like this one—when I wonder. Does he play both sides of the fence, hedging his bets to serve his own ends? Is his loyalty as he'd have me believe, or is it a convenient mask? The doubts gnaw at me.

It's not like I haven't known for years what Tomas really is. My father's perfect soldier, his ever-loyal hound. And me? I'm the arrogant idiot who needs constant supervision, apparently. The thought makes me want to punch something—preferably him. But no, I can't. Because then I'd be proving him right, wouldn't I? That I'm too impulsive, too emotional, too damn reckless to be trusted.

My teeth grind, but I keep my expression neutral, like the photo doesn't mean a damn thing. Even though it's one more chain keeping me leashed to the shadow of my father's throne.

“Right.” She stuffs it into her coat pocket.

“Your job sounds...interesting.”

She laughs softly. “‘Everyday Supernatural,’ is a magazine and blog. We make out pretty well with ad money—curiosity pays. Our readers will eat it up, whether it's real or fake. They love the process, the mystery.”

I grunt in acknowledgment, not wanting to sound too clueless. But the Ironlands have changed, and I'm behind on all these inventions and networks she calls ‘the Internet.’

She glances sidelong at me. “So, are you on holiday?”

“You could say that.”

“Do you have family here?”

I hesitate. “Aye, my family’s always been rooted to this island, but it’s only me and Tomas.”

Felicity nods. “I’ve just got Cyn, really. My adoptive parents died my freshman year of college.”

Sympathy tugs at me in a way I’m not used to. My beast hates the sadness in her voice. “I’m sorry.”

She smiles. “I guess we’re both on our own here.”

I wonder if there’s a man in her life. The thought rips open a deep and ugly wound in my chest. “You don’t have a mate, do you?” I murmur, my voice laced with dark heat, every syllable dripping with the promise of what I’d do if she were mine . My fingers twitch with the need to touch her, to stake my claim in ways that no one could ever fucking doubt, but I need to keep it in check.

Sadness clouds her eyes. It hits me hard. I don’t like it. “I had a boyfriend if that’s what you mean. We’re not together anymore.”

We reach Pier House. A trace of magic clings to the space where it doesn’t belong, threaded with a power potent enough to stain reality long after it’s gone. Obsidian magic. Not just any—Niamh’s. I’d know it anywhere, etched into my bones from every summit at The Commons, seared into every veiled warning she’s ever made.

My jaw tightens, muscles locking down on the instinct to hunt, to chase, but then Felicity’s scent crashes into me, drowning out everything else. It’s all I can fucking

breathe, her heat curling around me like a challenge, daring me to lose control. My beast snarls, restless, clawing at the edges of my restraint, demanding I stop pretending and take what's already mine.

I step closer, towering over her. "You deserve better than the boy you've wasted your time on. You deserve someone who sees you. Who takes you. Who keeps you. And gods help us both, I don't think I can walk away without proving it."

Whatever she's about to say dies in her throat. Instead, she takes a deliberate step back, turning away to face the ocean. The moonlight catches the curve of her jaw as she stares out at the waves, arms wrapped tightly around herself like she's holding something in, something she doesn't trust herself to let out.

Then, slowly, she tilts her head, her gaze dropping to my mouth before darting back to my eyes. "That's...dangerous, what you just said. I should go," she murmurs, but her feet stay planted. "Thanks for walking me back."

I want to close the gap, let my beast have what it wants. But I hesitate, not sure I'm strong enough for the fallout. That hunger in my chest burns hot, reckless, tempting me toward something I know will wreck us both.

I force myself to step back. Barely. "You never told me your surname, love."

"Forrest," she says quietly, gaze flickering over me. "Felicity Forrest."

"Goodnight, a stór," I manage, ignoring how my pulse thunders in my ears.

She turns toward the door but hesitates, glancing back at me like she's caught between running and staying forever. "Goodnight."

But she doesn't go inside. Doesn't even reach the door. Our eyes lock, and I can see

the questions swirling behind those dark-grey irises—too many answers I’m not ready to give. My damn beast rages under my skin, fighting for dominance. It doesn’t care about my hesitation or my self-control. It wants her. And my shirt begins to tighten across my chest.

No. Not now. I fight it, but it’s a losing battle.

“Aye, fuck,” I say, my voice cracking as I try to hold back the inevitable.

My stallion snorts.

The shift rips through me, muscles twisting and lengthening. Pain shoots up my spine as I change. My legs elongate, my feet twist, and my hooves hit the ground before I can stop it. The sensation is always the same. It’s sharp, brutal, and a pain I know by heart.

She sees it. Her eyes widen. I hear the soft shuffle of her feet and her backing away from me.

No. I can’t let her leave.

“Stay with me,” I rasp, sounding weak. The body is slipping further away, swallowed by the beast inside me.

The shifting isn’t clean. It never is. My skin turns sleek and dark, like midnight. My hair grows thick and long, a wild mane that brushes the back of my neck. Her jaw drops. I grind my teeth to hold onto the last thread of control, but my stallion takes over, my heart racing as my senses sharpen. She’s right there, so close I can taste her air, her heat. I need her. We need her.

Felicity steps back, panic flashing across her face. My body thrums with need. My

beast's growl rumbles deep in my chest as I force myself to stay put.

It's not enough. I need her on my back.

I need her to feel the power of us.

Chapter Eleven

FELICITY FORREST

“Mastering the ability to athrú crutha is a mark of skill and maturity. The involuntary loss of control over one’s shift is a rare and deeply significant phenomenon and evidence of fated bonds. Losing control is not a weakness. It’s the most telling sign of the deep, intrinsic connection shared with your partner.”

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

W hat. The. Actual. Fuck. If someone told me earlier that I’d be standing face-to-face with a man-turned-stallion, I’d have laughed, flipped them off, and told them to take their meds. Now? There’s no room for laughter—just this stifling awareness that my entire world has tilted on its axis.

I’ve investigated ghosts, poltergeists, and the odd demon or two, but this? This is something else. He’s huge—easily a hand taller than any normal horse I’ve ever seen, with lean muscle rippling beneath a coat so black it could swallow the moonlight. His mane spills down like ink-made flesh, rustling over powerful shoulders that look capable of trampling a car if he so desired. And those eyes...they’re still his. Onyx with amber, predatory, boring into me like he can read every frantic thought skittering through my head.

A strangled laugh slips out. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

My instincts say I should be running, screaming, but to where? It’s not like I can

outrun him. Not when he could cross the distance in a few strides of those hooves. And the truth is—part of me doesn't want to run. I'm too fascinated. Too...enthralled.

The stories I've dug up, the rumours I've chased—they never felt this real. They warned, Never trust the fae. Never show them your fear. But none of those dusty tomes described standing in front of a púca as a midnight-black stallion with a gaze that pins you like prey. My pulse hammers in my ears, and I force myself to breathe.

“Alright,” I mutter, voice cracking around the edges. “It's fine. Totally fine. I've seen weirder, right?” A lie, obviously. But...acknowledging that I'm dealing with a centuries-old fae asshole (well, probably, but I'm not going to ask about his birthday because that's rude, right?), and he decided a horse body would be a fun party trick to make my head explode. Yeah, no.

He shifts, moonlight rippling over his sleek flank. A ripple of raw power courses through him. Heat rolls off his body, colliding with the night's chill until I feel like I'm caught between two extremes. A bond—or whatever the hell this pull is—presses in on me, a silent force that makes my skin prickle.

I take another small step back, swallowing a snide remark about how I didn't exactly sign up for Bestiality 101. “So what now?” I manage with an impressive amount of poise given the what-the-fuckery that just happened. “You gonna trample me? Or are you waiting for me to saddle up and ride off into some fucked-up fairytale?”

His breath ghosts over my face in a hot cloud, and I catch a hint of cedar and smoke. It's disturbingly inviting—like stepping into a bonfire you know will burn you alive but not caring because the flames look so damn good. My gut clenches. He's waiting. That's the maddening part. Waiting for what? Permission? Curiosity? Fear?

I let out a sharp, bitter laugh, one that scratches against the silence. “This is

ridiculous,” I say, more to myself than him. “I’ve made a career out of finding shit like you and now I’m just standing here. Brilliant.”

He exhales again, ears flicking forward, amber-flecked eyes never leaving mine. There’s a challenge in that gaze. Something that says I could destroy you, but I won’t—yet.

My heart thuds painfully. If I had any sense, I’d run. I close the gap by a single step. A suicidal move, but I’m compelled. My fingers twitch at my sides, itching to verify this isn’t a booze-fuelled hallucination. I reach out, letting my fingertips brush the edge of his mane.

It’s impossibly soft—like black velvet spun from nightmares. A tremor races up my arm, sparking adrenaline that sets my nerves alight. I can practically feel the magic coiled beneath his skin, vibrating against my touch.

“What are you waiting for?” I murmur, forcing steel into my voice. My hand lingers on his mane, a dare if ever there was one. “If you’ve got a grand reveal tucked away, just fucking show me. I’m not about to keel over from shock.”

Not yet, anyway.

He shifts again, muscles rippling under his glossy hide. Something hungry flashes in his gaze—a reminder that the man inside this beast might still be there, deciding my fate. The power radiating off him is suffocating, terrifying, and weirdly exhilarating.

My throat is as dry as a desert. “Christ,” I whisper. “You’re actually real.”

If horses could smirk, this one does. His head dips, the motion almost...human. My stomach twists, my brain screaming that I’m in way over my head. But I can’t bring myself to regret stepping into the deep end.

“Right,” I say, half to him, half to myself. “So what’s the plan, oh mighty nightmare stallion? Because I’m all out of clever ideas, and I’d rather not end up trampled to death tonight.”

Silence. The wind picks up, carrying a biting chill off the water, and for a moment, I notice how small I am in his shadow. He’s a creature of legends I’ve spent years chasing—a lethal, living myth that could tear me apart.

And gods help me, I don’t know if I’m terrified or enthralled. Because the worst part? I want to know. I want to touch him again and feel that impossible heat. I want to see just how far I can push this. Maybe it’s adrenaline, or maybe I’m every bit as crazy as my friends have always said.

But if he wants me to run, he’s going to be disappointed. I’ve come too far, dug up too many graves—sometimes literally—to baulk now.

I square my shoulders, meeting his onyx gaze head-on. “Alright, then,” I whisper, my voice a thread in the dark. “I’m here. You’re here. Show me what else you’ve got.”

Because for better or worse, I’m committed. And if this is how I die, well...at least it’ll make one hell of a headline.

-Don’t be afraid. I won’t hurt you.- His voice rattles inside my skull like thunder too close for comfort. My willpower to run inside Pier House like a sensible fucking person wavers. -Get on my back.-

I pinch my brows together. I give him a look that screams he’s delusional if he thinks I’m climbing on.

He begins to sink down, forelegs bending as if to kneel. I shake my head, torn between calling it graceful or downright terrifying. Then I feel it—a sizzling line of

magic tugging behind my ribs, dragging me forward half a step before I can stop myself. My rational mind screams at me to stay put, but some wild, reckless part of me wants to close the distance...no matter the cost.

Uh. No thank you.

I can't believe I'm not screaming yet. Instead, I stand here like a stunned idiot. It's a dream . I exaggerate a blink. Dammit. The very attractive, and ridiculously arrogant prick is still a bloody horse. I look, but there's no one else experiencing one hell of a delusion.

-One way or another, you're riding me tonight.-

He did not just threaten me in my own mind.

My chin snaps up and I mentally push outward. I may need some quality time on a psychiatrist's couch very soon, but right now, no fucking horse is telling me what to do. That bastard is not getting inside my head again. Dark, thorny vines—why is that my go-to mental visualisation?—twist into a thick wall, shutting out his voice. Mind control. I've read about that ability. 'The Other Crowd Guidebook for Mortals' mentions it a lot. Hell, I've seen it in movies. And yet...he's not the only problem. It's that invisible thread that sprang into existence the moment I saw him. It's drawing me to him for reasons I can't explain.

-Don't make me ask twice.- His mental command is staticy and laced with too much amusement. That tosser is enjoying this way too much.

I weave the vines tighter. He's not getting through.

I still feel that strange pull in my gut, but I don't get the sense it means harm to me. The vines thicken. He's not dangerous. I'm the dangerous one. That thought feels like

a punch to the ribs.

Something in me flares, like a hairline crack in a fortress wall. I can almost see it—shadows of vines twisting around my consciousness, trying to shut him out completely. But there's a split second where I feel an opening, small but unmistakable. And my indignation surges through it before I can stop myself.

-Why should I trust you?- I snap, and the moment the words ricochet through our connection, I realise I've just launched them past my own defences.

His stallion eyes flicker. -Because I'm asking you to take a leap of faith. Is this not what you came here for?-

I'm no expert on mental wards, yet somehow, I'm holding him at bay and letting my anger slip through but shutting down everything else he might use against me. There's a tiny gap in my defences, big enough for a whisper of his thoughts to seep in, like a ghostly breeze brushing past my mind. I can't say I understand how I'm doing it, but right now, I'm not about to question a good thing.

I cross my arms. -So, my vacation now includes a ride on a magical fae. What's next? GPS navigation by fairy dust?-

His laughter coats the inside of my head. -Your ability to mindspeak and crack jokes, even when facing the inexplicable, only deepens my interest. You wanted to investigate, so come with me.-

He's got a point. As weird as this conversation with a fae who's half-man, half-ghostly stallion is, something about it is reassuring. His midnight eyes hold more honesty than I'm used to seeing in people, and they draw me in with a comforting glow. Maybe the whole absurdity of the situation is making my brain give up trying to make sense of it.

I don't trust him, but I can't fight the pull. It's a morbid fascination or the strange sense that something beyond me is waiting, and this moment might change everything in my life.

I take a long, steadying breath. This is a terrible idea—an epically horrible idea. Anyone with a drop of self-preservation would run. I should be bolting the other way. The dark, thorny vines in my mind start to ease back. No idea how I'm doing it, but I know it's a choice. A choice that feels way too reckless, but I've already made it.

I step closer to Niall. His coat shimmers, a dark void swallowing the light, glinting back at me like it holds the night sky. A thousand stars reflect in his coat's smooth, midnight black as though the darkness is alive.

-Alright- I say, or project, or whatever. This is too bloody weird to analyse the correct terminology. -I'll trust you. For now.-

It's not like I can really say "no." I want to think I'm making an intelligent decision, but the fact that I'm letting a massive, wraith-stallion fae talk me into climbing onto his back doesn't exactly scream good life choices.

His response is a nudge on my shoulder with his nose, a surprisingly gentle gesture that belies his size. It's a move that makes me want to roll my eyes, but also...I can't help it. It's sweet in a weird way.

"Note to self: add 'horse-friendly' to the dress code next time," I mutter as I prepare to climb onto his back, I wonder how my life became a circus act.

Surprisingly, I get on with a bit of grace. Maybe it's because I've been riding horses for as long as I can remember. I tell myself it's like riding a bike, except with more magical, potentially deadly consequences. My heart is hammering, but my muscles know exactly what to do. That's one advantage of being an avid rider. I'm still

thankful the púca has a broad back and low withers, but no reins? Even when I rode bareback, I always used them. What the hell?

His voice fills my mind like it's no big deal. -Grab onto my mane.-

I blink at the concept. -Fucking, hell. Nothing says trust like grabbing a guy's hair. I hope you like a firm grip, big guy.-

I hesitate. I'm not riding him. He's a fae who could probably snap me in half without breaking a sweat. I'm not digging this whole situation. It's probably best we call it a night and leave it at that.

I can almost hear his smirk in my head. -A little late for that, love.-

I let out a huff, glaring at him. "It's rude to read a person's mind without her permission. Are you sure about this?"

Laughter vibrates through him or me. Fuck, if I know.

He snorts. -Do it.-

'Do it,' he says. I must be out of my flipping mind, but curiosity is getting the better of me, which is probably how people end up eaten by trolls or marrying warlocks with dodgy morals. But here we are. And now I'm questioning everything I've ever known because fae? Absolutely bananas. Reading about it in my handy little guidebook is one thing—hopping on for the ride? That's a whole different kettle of fish. And by a kettle of fish, I mean I might need to book myself a bed in the nearest psychiatric ward.

"Right," I mutter, gripping that impossibly thick mane for balance.

I wind sections of long hair around each hand, surprised at how soft it is. I should've expected it, what with him being some magical creature, but still. His mane is softer than some of the blankets I own. I'm not equipped for impromptu midnight horse-riding adventures. All I can do is hold on and hope for the best. I wish I had my camera with me. It would make for an exciting blog update, that much is sure.

-You feel okay?-

I let out a snort. I hear a fae's voice in my head, and he asks if I'm okay. Sure, why not? This night is totally normal. "Oh, I'm grand—just trying to remember how to breathe and not hyperventilate. It's a process."

-Hold on tight.- Before I can respond, Niall jolts forward.

We're off, racing through the brisk summer air. I clench my teeth, my muscles taut and trembling as I clutch his mane. He picks up the pace while I'm trying to stay on a horse like this isn't the weirdest thing that's ever happened to me. I don't press my thighs too hard because that would make him buck, and I'd fall off. I'm not really in the mood to face-plant in the middle of the night.

Pretending I'm riding a regular horse helps a little, but the whole mystical fae beast thing keeps getting in the way. I have no idea how I will explain this to Cyn, let alone Nathan when I write my next article. How do you casually mention that you rode a fae ghost horse through the night and that, by the way, he's also the guy you were flirting with at the bar? It's completely bananas.

At least I'll have something to amuse my readers. I'm all about content creation.

When Niall shifts into a canter, I let go of my mental grip on sanity (mostly) and adjust, leaning back enough to follow his movements.

-Yes, like that.- His satisfaction fills the space between us.

I let myself relax into the rhythm, even if the landscape around us keeps changing, shifting, as though it's not quite real.

The road beneath us is rougher now, my body bouncing with each trot, but I can't deny that everything grows more vivid. It's like the mundane world around us is slipping away, and magic is pouring in. The world is breathing, alive with power, and every stride takes me farther away from the world I know.

I feel oddly safe with him. It's terrifying how much I want to trust him, even though I shouldn't. His power and the strange connection we have wrap around me. I'd be a fool to think I can control it. Somehow, I feel like I might be willing to try.

His thought crashes into my mind. -I'm looking for a solution, but you? You turn every plan I have on its head with that damned smile. And the more ground I give, the more I can't ignore that you might twist these secrets into your next story—at my own bloody peril.-

The trace of contempt takes me by surprise, but suddenly, he shields himself. A solid, impenetrable mental wall comes up between us. It's a sharp, painful silence.

The magic in him thrums like a pulse beneath my skin. I feel it in my bones, the raw power that he holds. A part of me wants to reach for it, to understand it. Another part, the more rational part of me, pulls back. It's overwhelming. I'm afraid to lose myself in it, but that part of me who doesn't fully trust him is starting to crumble. And the wall that wasn't there before fucking hurts.

I can't help it. A thousand questions rise to the surface, questions that have been there all along, hidden under layers of doubt. What am I doing here? Why do I feel this strange, magnetic force between us? What role do I even play in all this?

The night deepens, and the stars above feel so close I could touch them. But the reflection I keep catching in glass and mirrors lingers at the edges of my mind. Indigo coloured horns curving where none should be, and eyes the colour of lavender. What...?

Fear claws at me, not about him, but about me. About what those reflections mean. Am I some sort of demon? An evil witch dragged from the wrong story? The idea twists deep in my chest, but I shove it down before it can take root. I won't let myself spiral into that particular rabbit hole.

-Let go of your fears.- He's not demanding, but his quiet certainty makes my heart flutter.

I almost let go. Almost, but everything is overwhelming. For now, I hold on to the last thread of who I think I am, even as the boundary between my past and whatever the hell this is begins to blur. The difference between belief and scepticism, between what's real and what's magic—those lines are fading. And somehow, for the first time tonight, I feel like I'm actually breathing.

We move together, my hips rocking with the rhythm. I can't ignore the pressure building between my thighs. The seam of my jeans presses just right, and the friction sends a jolt of heat straight through me. It's like scorching lava, but god, it's good. So deliciously good, like when I touch myself in the quiet darkness of my bedroom. Not uncomfortable, but it's definitely not innocent.

A flush creeps up my neck as the sensation spreads, pooling low in my belly. This has no business happening while I'm on the back of a fae stallion. The pressure shifts again. Bouncing up and down is too provocative, too direct. The feverish tension between us turns ravenous, raking through me with sharp claws. My fingers curl into his mane, another round of heat blazing through me to my thighs. My breath hitches. I can't even tell myself I'm imagining it when something starts to build...what?

That's absurd.

I'm riding a horse, a mythical one, sure, but still a horse. There should not be anything remotely sensual about it.

And yet I'm clinging to this creature, feeling a wave of heat that I can't escape. The sensation is so unexpected it's almost laughable. I'm not getting mystical chills. I'm getting real, physical chills. The kind that makes my skin flush with something too familiar for comfort. A moan leaks past my lips, and his muscles tense beneath me. My body is alive in a way that it hasn't been in a while, and I know, deep down, I will feel this for days.

Chapter Twelve

NIALL O'LEARY

“The trigger for involuntary shifting is typically a strong emotional response to your bond’s presence, words, or actions. It might be love, fear, joy, or even pain, any emotion that deeply connects one to their mate.”

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

We’re not flying, but damn if it doesn’t feel like it. My hooves pound against the ground, the air rushing around us. Her legs are wrapped around me, fingers knotted in my mane. I can feel her. The connection simmers under my coat, pulling me toward her like gravity. My stallion is already claiming her, and I’m...too fucking tempted to stop him.

Her scent is fucking intoxicating. Sharp and sweet, like charred wood and honey, it fills my senses and sets every nerve ablaze. She’s pulling magic out of me like no human ever could. Hell, like no fae ever could, at least not this easily. Most people would’ve dropped dead by now, if they had even managed to stay on at all. Not her. This mortal is different—other. I don’t know why yet, but that’s half the problem, isn’t it?

And then she shifts, a soft, needy whimper escaping her lips. Fuck , my cock hardens. I feel her heat against my back, her body moving with mine, and every inch of me wants to lose control. All I can do is think about how fucking good she feels, how right she feels.

But this? It's dangerous. I need to get a grip , but the part of me that cares is slipping, buried under the pull of the bond.

Her breath catches, her hips grinding against my back. Focus , I remind myself, but it does nothing to slow my stallion. I don't even want it to. The need to mark her is clawing at me. I push back. Hard. Because there's a line I can't cross. My priority should be the Veil. My sister. Damn, if the night isn't making me forget all my good intentions. I can't with the mortal. I could crush her bones if I had the notion to do so.

I've never wanted anyone this badly in my life. She's not mine. She can't be. But gods, the way I want her is a ruinous, all-consuming thing.

Bonding? I'd sooner walk into the Void in-between, but then she stepped out of nightmares made flesh, and now I'm the one burning. The price of keeping her might be the ruin of us all. Letting her go might save the world, but will leave me hollow.

Her existence alone raises too many questions. It's not just who she is, but how she moves through the world like she belongs to it and beyond it. Her knack for mindspeak? Those writhing shadows? It's a riddle I'm itching to solve. She's no fragile wisp of a fae maiden. She's fire and grit, and I want to burn with her.

I see the wildness of the night sky in her gaze, as if she's born to fly. Not a single creature will be spared when I burn it all to the ground by giving in to a bond that can trigger the end. I don't fucking care when her fingers are tugging my hair, sending a bolt of electricity down my spine like a warning.

That won't stop me. But the truth is, I can't help it. Every sinful thought of her is shadows and ash, the pull of an ancient and unstoppable bond.

Her skin. Her scent. The way she moves. She's...too much. Too perfect. And I'm so fucked.

Because I need her like I never knew what need felt like before her intoxicating smell, like charred wood and honey. No, more than that. Like earth after rain and fire licking at my skin—danger and comfort in equal measure. Like she's a grand feast that I selfishly want to consume without leaving a single crumb. And gods help me, I don't want to share.

She grips me tighter with her thighs, grinding her heat on my back as I pound along the dirt path. Her pulse hammers against me, each beat pulling me deeper. She feels it, too—I can tell—but she's fighting it. Her resistance only fuels the fire crawling under my skin. If she comes right now while riding you, well, that only means one thing—I push my stallion's warning aside.

It's bad enough that I couldn't control my shift around her. That weakness? It's dangerous. For her. For me. I should be ripping my mind away from her, but the longer we ride, the more I'm drowning in her.

Shit, if this is what it feels like to be weak, I'll take it. She's a fierce and beautiful darkness that I have neither the right, nor the business to call mine. But gods, I want to. I feel the blood rushing between her legs and pray the bump I hit in the road doesn't drive her over the edge.

Bonds predestined in the stars? A child's fable, a cautionary tale to keep fae in line. I've told myself that lie so many times, I almost believed it. But every move she makes against me—every accidental graze, every sigh—makes me less convinced.

Every brush of her hips against my back makes me forget every plan I've ever had. My resolve is ash, scattered in her wake. I'm this close to breaking. Because she's pushing every fucking button I've got, and I'm losing the will to care.

I can't help but think...

My stallion snorts. Tell yourself you don't want her, that she's not yours, and maybe you'll believe it one day. I clench my jaw. She's not mine. But I want her. And when I fucking want something, I always get it. That's the problem. She doesn't belong to me. But soon? She will.

Damn the old gods for sending me one so beautiful. So untouchable. What have I ever done to deserve something that feels so good in my ruthless life? The world doesn't hand out gifts; it hands out nooses. And every time I take a step closer to her, I feel mine tightening.

Every dark corner of my mind resists the possibility. Seers don't dream of the apocalypse without good reason. And the old gods don't bind fates without a price. A union could save our world or end it. I'm not exactly lucky. I'm not the hero of anyone's story. And that's why this can't happen.

I cut across the field, feeling the wind bite at my skin. Her fingers tighten in my mane, and it feels good. Too good. I slow down, halting when I reach the stone wall. I drop down to let her dismount.

She slides off me, her heartbeat rapid and erratic, like she's already running from what's happening between us. Her scent clings to me—sweet, intoxicating, like forbidden fruit laced with poison.

I shift back, letting the transformation ripple through me like a tide. Moonlight catches on my bare skin, muscles flexing as I reclaim my fae form. I feel...exposed. Not just in body, but in the rawness of what she sees. Her gaze lands exactly where I expect it to.

I grin. "See something you like, love?"

She smirks, the curve of her lips a challenge. "It's not every day you see a guy turn

into a horse and back. And end up stark naked.”

“Aye, it’s a rare talent,” I quip, leaning casually against the stone wall, as if standing here without a shred of clothing is the most normal thing in the world. The cool stone bites at my back, and for a moment, it’s a welcome relief after the shift and growing heat that has nothing to do with it.

Her expression darkens. Fear, disbelief, or...desire. It’s faint, but I feel it. I catch it in the air, a spark begging for kindling. The bond thrums, her arousal slipping through it, feeding into me like a shot of adrenaline. It tightens low in my gut, a need so strong it takes everything not to push her against this wall and make her mine. I don’t want to hurt her. I’d rather die.

That’s a thought I’m not about to examine right now, either. Because I could hurt her. I could break her without even thinking about it, without meaning to. And there’s no pretending otherwise. It’s a truth I don’t want to face, especially not now.

Her eyes flick up to my face. “You’re really real? You’re a púca?”

I laugh. “Aye, as real as the ground beneath us. So, what’s the verdict? Impressed?”

Her arms cross over her chest. “I’m leaning towards questioning my life choices, but I’ll admit that a part of me is oddly intrigued. But let’s not make a habit of you turning into a horse mid-date.”

I laugh. Dark. Flirtatious. “I make no promises, a stór . But for you, I might consider keeping my shifts to a minimum.”

It’s a tease, of course. Because, honestly? I don’t want to admit that I lost control. Not here, not with her. I’m not even sure how it happened. But I’ll be damned if I let her know it.

Her face flushes, her gazing dropping. I can't help but grin. She's a mess of contradictions. I'm beginning to enjoy every single one of them. Way too fucking much.

She bites her bottom lip, like she has any idea what that does to me. Annoyance and desire clash in those stormy grey eyes, but then, for a second, her glamour slips. A glimpse of her true form breaks through.

Lavender flickers through the grey. And the shadows— fuck . They coil around her ankles, slithering up her legs like living smoke, whispering promises only the fae and the damned can hear. They answer to her.

Well, well.

A wicked grin tugs at my lips. I should've known. The visions, the air shifting when she's near, my pulse reacting before I even see her—it was a hunch. Now I know. It was always her .

I take a slow, deliberate inhale, savouring the heat rolling off her. Dark. Dangerous. Delicious. I should be running in the opposite direction, but let's be honest—when have I ever done what I should?

“Can you...I don't know...turn around or conjure some damn clothes or something?” she snaps.

I laugh. But grab a rock from the top of the stone wall and hold it in front of me, using it to block the view of my manhood. But, of course, I can't resist teasing her.

“Well, when you write about me on your blog, are you going to tell everyone I'm hung like a horse?”

I watch her stiffen, her eyes flashing dangerously.

Chapter Thirteen

FELICITY FORREST

“Memory spells prune the thorns of recollection, but the heart remembers what the spell conceals.”

Aisling Talamhain, Revered Seer

I t’s the middle of the night, and I’m a stone’s throw from a man who—moments ago—was literally a horse. And now he’s standing here, fully human, radiating heat and hedonic power like it’s the most normal thing in the world. And now he wants to talk about his... attributes ?

I glance at the rock he’s holding—his only concession to modesty. Honestly, I can’t even pretend I’m not aware of the situation. The heat creeping up my neck is something I don’t want to label. I definitely don’t need to unpack it right now.

I give him my best deadpan stare, schooling my expression into a sarcastic smile. “You’re awful.”

He grins, that damn self-assured smirk tugging at his lips. “But tell me, love, is that a yes, I’m hung like a horse, or do I need to give you a little more... evidence ?”

I let out a sigh, trying to roll my eyes like I’m unimpressed. But my lips twitch, betraying me. It’s absurd, but the pull I feel toward him is anything but. “Sure, Niall, you’re hung like a horse. But, and this is key, can you actually carry the weight of

your own ego?”

“You’re the one determined to write about me on Everyday Supernatural ,” he says, his voice dipping into that low, dangerous register that feels like a physical caress. He leans in, his heat wrapping around me as his lips curve into a wolfish grin. He grabs my hand, trailing it down his bare chest—and lower. “But now? I think you might need...a hands-on sample. Maybe give the goods a proper review, love. Call it an exclusive advance reading copy just for your blog.”

His powerful, scarred body is inked in dark magic symbols, virile and damp with sweat. His grip on my hand is firm but teasing, guiding me across the intricate lines inked into his skin. The tattoos almost hum under my fingertips, as if they’re alive, magic sparking against my nerves. It’s too much and not enough. My fingers flex against the smooth, powerful expanse of his chest, sliding over one of the symbols. Damn it. I should shove him off, laugh in his face, but the heat between us has turned into a wildfire.

He steps closer. His lips hover near my ear, his breath hot and maddening. “Careful, love,” he murmurs.

My pulse pounds in my throat, every nerve ending screaming at me to explore what he’s daring me to take. I meet his gaze, my fingers slipping lower, just shy of where he’s leading them. His grin widens, all teeth and sin, like he knows exactly how badly I’m losing this battle. I lick my lips, trailing down the hairline until the hair is thicker. With a smirk, my fingertip traces back up, and I snatch my hand back.

“I’d hate to give a bad review,” I whisper, my voice trembling with conflicting desire and defiance.

His growl reverberates through my skin, sending shockwaves straight to my core. “Oh, love, I’ll make sure it’s five stars all the way.”

A raw want I can't ignore hits me. The pull to be ravaged by him, to feel his weight on top of me. To hear the sounds of clothes being ripped away. I'm on the edge of losing control. The next step, the one I'm not ready to take, hangs in the air like a promise that's too tempting to resist.

His grin widens, as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking. Smug bastard. He's too aware of the effect he has on me, and I hate how much I want to lose myself in it.

This can't be real. Maybe I'm dreaming, or worse, imagining it. The rational side of my brain—the journalist in me—reminds me I only had one drink.

I shake my head, trying to clear it, and look him dead in the eyes. "A blog post? Really, Niall? That's your concern right now?"

He smirks. The moonlight casts shadows across his features, accentuating the arrogance as it curves lips. I need to stop staring at them before I do something stupid. "I'd say it's valid. You wouldn't want to misrepresent such an extraordinary creature, would you?"

I cross my arms, trying to maintain some semblance of control over the situation and, frankly, over myself. I still don't know what to do with the knowledge that fae are real and, apparently, shapeshift.

"Oh, trust me, Niall. The world is probably already overwhelmed by your glory ." I wave a hand dismissively. "But, mate, I think the rock's doing a better job of blocking the view than your charm ever could."

He shrugs, tossing the rock aside like it's an afterthought. "Is that better? Wouldn't want anything to get in the way of my charm."

Insufferable. Arrogant. Smoldering. And gods help me, he knows it. My mouth goes dry. Don't look down. Don't look down. I look down. Bloody hell.

This would be surreal if it weren't for the fact that I write about things like haunted battlegrounds and cursed artifacts. But even those stories pale compared to the fae standing before me. I've dealt with the unexplainable before, but nothing prepared me for this.

And nothing explains why my thighs are still humming from the ride, or why my body feels like it's caught in a magnetic field, pulling me toward him. Isn't that proof enough?

You wanted concrete evidence, I tell myself. Well, here it is. Now stop staring.

Despite the shock, I want him. Right here. In this field. My stomach twists with the admission, my rational mind railing against it. Is it him, or is it magic?

I take a step forward before I can stop myself, closing the gap between us. His cocky grin falters, his confidence slipping just enough to satisfy me. Good. Let him squirm. He deserves to be taken down a notch.

I stop inches from him, jabbing a finger into his chest. "You think I haven't seen a naked man before?" My eyes flick down deliberately, then back up. "Trust me, it's nothing new."

His hand catches mine mid-jab, his grip firm but not rough. A shiver races up my arm at the contact. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

His gaze darkens, the teasing light replaced by something hungrier. "Aye, but I imagine you've never ridden one like me before."

I should pull my hand back. I should run. Scream. Do anything but stay rooted in place, my body betraying me. Instead, I stand there, held by the intensity in his eyes. Hot enough to scorch the entire field to ash.

He moves closer, so close that my breasts brush against his chest. I freeze, my pulse racing. “And you want me. Admit it, love,” he whispers, his voice low, dangerous, pulling me in like gravity.

“Is this a trick?” My voice wavers despite my best effort to sound strong. “Some kind of magical mind control? You must have done something to get me out here alone with you.”

It’s almost impossible to think when his erection presses against my stomach. The pulse between my legs intensifies. I want to feel him move to relieve it.

He laughs—a low, dark sound that curls through me like smoke. “I didn’t trick you, a stór . You came willingly, whether you’ll admit that to yourself or not.”

“I didn’t—” I start, but he cuts me off, his voice dropping to a possessive murmur.

“If I wanted you, love, you’d already be half-naked in the grass, begging for more.”

My breath catches. I don’t know if I want to slap him or pull him closer. Probably both.

“It’s because you’re fertile,” he continues, his tone laced with dangerous certainty. “You can bond with me. It’s instinct. You feel it, don’t you?”

His whisper lingers, sinking deep under my skin. My gloved hands twitch, wanting to touch him, to trace the hard lines of his body. I can’t defy the heat pooling between us.

I open my eyes. “You’re awfully sure of yourself.”

“Aye.”

I bite my lip, forcing my gaze to stay steady. “Prove it.”

Amber flecks in his eyes darken. He holds the hand I jabbed into his chest, but instead of letting go, he clasps it harder. What I want is to feel his hands press into my hips, to grip me like he means it. He pulls my body flush against his. I fit into him, a perfect match, like my body is made to fill his hard grooves.

He doesn't grab my hips like I crave. His hands cup my face, his thumb grazing over my lips, like he's afraid of breaking me.

I could die right here, if he doesn't kiss me right now. -I won't unless you make the first move, a stór. It has to be you.-

His eyes lock onto mine. His touch is still gentle, but there's nothing gentle about what's happening between us. My hand, the one I jabbed into his chest, finds its way to the hard planes of his abdomen. My fingers trail the ripples of his muscles.

-I want you.- I hear myself say it, but it's not out loud. It's a confession that sinks deep into my bones.

It's enough.

His mouth crashes down on mine. He's all hunger, and I meet it, my restraint crumbling under the force of it. Everything I've been holding back dissolves. I wrap my arms around him, my nails digging into his back as I pull him closer.

A groan escapes him. His arm snakes around my back, pulling me tighter, and then his hand moves lower, cupping my ass, grinding me against the hard bulge straining against my stomach. He kneads me, pulling me deeper into him. I ache for more. I want his hands on me. I want them inside me. I want to feel all of him.

But a sharp, nagging thought hits me.

It's because you're fertile. You can bond with me.

This. This is mating chemistry . Not real desire. If that's all it is, then it doesn't mean anything. He doesn't want me . He's driven by instinct, by some primal fae need for the bond, for the magic. It's not real.

I break the kiss, my chest heaving. I push myself out of his arms, stumbling back a few steps, trying to put space between us, trying to breathe through the thudding in my chest.

His eyebrows knit together, a frown tugging at his mouth, and for a moment, I see a flicker of hurt. "What'd you do that for?"

"What? You didn't expect me to drop my panties and fuck you right here, I hope. Because if you think you can bend me to your will, you've got another thing coming."

He takes a step toward me. He reaches out his hand, his voice low, almost too calm. "I don't think that."

I stand my ground, even though every part of me wants to melt into him. "It's not real. None of it."

He stops dead in his tracks. "What?"

"You said it's because I'm fertile. So it's not real."

Is that a cop-out? I'm not sure. I don't even know what I'm supposed to feel, not with him standing in front of me, looking like something out of a dream I didn't want to have.

"Aye, you are, but that's got nothing to do with this ."

Before I can say another word, he's there. One second, he's standing a meter away. The next, he's pulling me into him, his lips crashing down on mine with a force that makes my knees buckle. His kiss is relentless. Possessive. Hungry. I can't breathe. I can't think. I want to pull away, but I don't. I can't. His touch sets something inside me on fire. I push at his chest, desperate for air, but my hands get lost in his chest, in his skin, in the heat.

I finally pull away, gasping. My pulse is racing, and my heart is in my throat. "I certainly have no intention of bonding with you ," I snap, my voice trembling. "Whatever this is, it's not happening."

For a moment, something flickers across his face—hurt, maybe—but it's gone before I can be sure.

His eyes harden. "Then you can forget about tonight. Forget about me."

It stings more than I care to admit. The tension is so palpable, it feels like it might snap at any moment. I want to scream at him, demand answers, and make him stop looking at me like he knows what's going on, and I'm the one left trying to figure it all out.

A lump rises in my throat, but I swallow it down, forcing myself to meet his gaze. I don't want to forget him. Not really. I want to tell him I'll take the risk, that whatever this is between us—it matters. The words won't come. Not with the way his expression shifts, hardening, like he's made a decision. One he doesn't want to make.

He steps closer. I fight every instinct to pull away. My body betrays me with a shiver. His energy, his raw fucking magnetism. It's too much.

"Felicity, there's something you need to understand," he says, his voice rougher now, as if he's trying to keep himself together. "What happened tonight...You're right. It can't go beyond this field, this moment."

My heart skips a beat. Panic claws at my insides. “What do you mean?”

His jaw tightens. Pain flashes across his face. His voice is barely a whisper when he speaks again. “I mean, this— us —it’s dangerous. For both of us.”

Every part of me aches to tell him how I feel. The pull between us is the most alive I’ve ever felt, but before I can even breathe, he murmurs something in a language I don’t recognise. His hands move with precision, weaving a symbol in the air, and suddenly, everything shifts.

The world tilts on its axis. Power surges around us.

“Niall, wait—” I start to protest, but I know I’m too late. His magic is already at work.

I feel the world around me start to slip away. The magic of the night, the rush of the ride, his hand gripping mine, the desire building between us blurs like a dream fading when you wake up. The sensation of his body and the way he felt beneath me vanishes like sand through my fingers.

But I lift my chin, matching his icy rejection. “Fine by me. Trust me, you’re not that memorable.” The connection between us begins to dim. I regret it, but I don’t stop.

I turn on my heel and walk away, my feet finding their way across the field, praying the darkness doesn’t betray me, that I don’t trip or twist my ankle in some hole. The last thing I need is to be stuck out here. Vulnerable.

“Fine, ye stubborn pain in me hole. Suit yer self and walk back for all I care. Stubborn arse woman,” he calls after me.

“You’re a real charmer, aren’t you? Hope you find your manners before your pants!” I toss back over my shoulder. When I glance back one last time, his face is hard. His

eyes are dark, burning with fury and pain. Sorrow is etched into his features like a mark I can't erase from my mind.

I turn away and stomp towards town, my legs wobbling from the ride, though I refuse to show it. The satisfaction is small but tucked away in the back of my mind. I smile to myself, even if I won't admit that hearing him curse at me, his thick Irish accent wrapping around the words like a goddamn spell, has anything to do with the curve of my lips.

I can't help it. I shouldn't want this. I shouldn't want him . I keep moving, but I'm angry by the time I'm halfway back to town. I'm wondering how much of this I'll remember tomorrow. Bastard. My head swims in a haze, but I cling to my memories with a vice grip, refusing to let them slip away.

The cold night air wraps around me like a pelerine, chilling my skin, but something else tingles at the back of my neck. I stop dead in my tracks. The hairs on my skin stand up, a sense of being watched. I feel it before I hear it. A low, gurgling croak rises in pitch.

I spin around, heart hammering.

Flap.

I look up. Black feathers are silhouetted against the moon. A raven is perched on a tree nearby, staring at me with eyes too intelligent for comfort. My shoulders drop in relief. My heartbeat is still erratic, but at least the tension begins to fade. A bird. Nothing more.

"It's you," I mutter, half-amused, half-exasperated.

The bird tilts its head, giving me what feels suspiciously like a judgemental look.

“Right, because I needed a feathered stalker tonight,” I add, the corners of my mouth twitching. “What’s next? Are you going to start giving me life advice?”

It caws loudly, like it’s laughing at me. Excellent, that’s exactly what I need.

“Just my luck,” I say, shaking my head. “Even the bird version of a wise old sage is roasting me. Shut it. I don’t need your crap tonight.”

The raven makes a squawking sound like it’s genuinely shocked that I’m not all about its wisdom. It flaps its wings and almost loses balance like it’s struggling not to fall off the branch from sheer disbelief.

I roll my eyes. Sure, that’s normal. “Real smooth, mate. Real smooth.”

Something about the whole thing feels...weird. It’s almost like this isn’t some random bird but someone—or some thing— lurking in the background of my life.

I quicken my pace, trying to shake off the strange vibe, but exhaustion hits me like the flu. When the town comes into view, I feel like I’ve been walking for miles. I stop dead in my tracks, looking around. Something is wrong.

How the hell did I get here? One second, I was with Cyn. The next, I’m standing outside the town with no memory of how I got here. There is a gnawing, stubborn confusion because I can’t fill the gaps.

What the hell happened?

A dark feeling settles under the frustration and anger, like I misplaced something or it was stolen. It sinks into my chest like a cold stone. Beneath the confusion, there’s a kernel of something else—something that feels a lot like loss.

* * *

To be continued...

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A COURT OF RAVENS