In the dark: A novel and critical reflection of changeling folklore as an allegory of mixed-race identity

In The Dark:

A Novel and Critical Reflection of Changeling Folklore as an Allegory of Mixed-Race Identity

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Thesis completed under the supervision of Professor Margaret Harper and Professor Sarah Moore Fitzgerald in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Submitted to the University of Limerick

September 2021

Declaration

I verify that the contents of this novel and critical reflection are my original thoughts except where otherwise indicated with reference to sources.

Lauren Preston

03.08.2021

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the University of Limerick, the entire AHSS department, my advisors Meg and Sarah, Joseph O'Connor, Donal Ryan, my entire Creative Writing MA class (especially Evan, Kevin, and Graínne, who continue to keep me sane), Carrie Griffin, and all the rest of us tortured artsy types.

To my family:

Christian, I still remember the day you were born. I was sixteen, still a child myself, terrified of the inevitability of adulthood. I had lost faith in myself and in the world around me. Baby brother, you saved my life. None of this would have been possible without you, little Bug. You are clever and funny and you stole my heart from the second I saw you. I would not be who I am today without you. I hope with my whole heart that this novel, which I have worked on for as long as you've been alive, will serve as a reminder that you can be anything you want to be in this life if you work hard at it. I love you, Bug, with all my heart. Thank you for making me a big sister.

Kiley, I also remember the day you were born. I wasn't living at home anymore and I was afraid I'd miss your delivery, but you waited for me. When your little blue eyes opened, I was the first thing you saw. You stopped crying then and we gazed at each other. I think even then we saw a bit of ourselves in each other. Before you were born, I wanted to name you Morgana. I hope this novel helps you to understand why that name has such power to me. Mummy had a dream that she called you Kiley, however, and I think we can both agree that Mummy was right. Still, the magic you carry in you is no less mirrored in the magical characters in this novel. I know sometimes it is hard to believe in magic in a world that is often so dark, but I hope one day you see that *you* are *my* magic in that darkness. You have it

within you, no matter what your name is. My hardest days are made liveable by just remembering that you and Christian are waiting for me to come home. The two of you give me hope, give me purpose. My little Rose, I am so proud to be your big sister.

Love Always,

Lala

Mummy and Daddy, I am so proud to be your daughter. I have never known a world where the two of you were together, but I also have never felt in any way that I was less loved than my friends who had both of their parents in the same house. I am writing through tears as I think about how hard you both worked so that I could have everything that led me up to this achievement. I never imagined I could be the person I am today, but you two did. You saw greatness in me when I could not. You have held my hands and been the strength I didn't have enough of. You have taken less so I could have more. I am here today because two young kids didn't give up when the world told them over and over again that they could, that they should. Thank you, with all that I am.

Love,

Your Lauren

Grammy, I am so grateful for you. You've taken care of me since I was a baby. You understood my anxious introvert heart in ways many people couldn't. Thank you for always being there for me, for being a weekly videocall away, even when you were having bad days yourself. Thank you for letting me be a vicarious pet-owner to all your sweet animals. Thank you for fond food memories of acini, fall-off-the-bone ribs, and that lemon cake thing I love

so much. Thank you for being such a good Grammy that even my friends and my boyfriend have a special place in their heart for you. I especially thank you for letting me live with you for that year that I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. You let me figure things out, and because of that I had the time to realise that this path was the one I wanted take. I'm no Dean Koontz, but I hope you'll like my book anyway. It is possible, in part, because of you.

Love you, Grammy,

Lauren

Chris, the love of my life. We survived a global pandemic together, and Dublin rent prices. You woke up beside me every day and loved me for who I am, a feat I often struggled to accomplish myself. When I have been in the depths, refusing to climb out, you climbed in and carried me out. You showed me my strength when I was convinced I had none. Through sickness and health, richer and poorer, you have already proven yourself. My family loves you, my friends adore you, and when I think of my future I always see you beside me. You came to me at a time when I thought I was at my lowest and you showed me hope beyond my wildest dreams. All I want is to be the same for you. Our next chapter is coming and I can't wait to turn the page with you. I love you, baby.

Always,

Lauren

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PROLOGUE

There is a feeling in the air before a lightning storm. The cold heat of static raises every hair. The sky is too close. Sometimes the storm seems to roll right by. Sometimes the storm brews, hidden in a place where humans would never think to look…

***

The veil was severed—a sound like a fire devouring wood. Thin as spider silk, the divide between the Faerie realm and the human realm split. Out of the rift flew the small black and white body of a magpie. The bird screamed into the night sky before taking a dive. As she plummeted her feathers shrank, her bones broke and stretched. A woman took the place of the animal. Swirling red tattoos covered her body from her supple throat to her muscular arms. Beneath layers of silken skirts, leather flat-soled boots were stuck like a second skin up to her ample thighs. Her alert head rotated at an angle. She was hungry, as ever, for blood.

The Magpie, Airina, sighed.

Tonight is much too important, she thought to herself, shaking longing from her head.

She knew that Morgana, the Un-Seelie Queen, would not permit her to stray long. The Magpie twitched, the seams of her skin feeling thin. She concentrated on her weary flesh, willing it to stay in this form. The blood on her mouth had gone dry. She licked her lips and whistled a sharp note into the cold night air.

A howl welcomed her call as a charging black hound emerged. The bulk of his muscles bulged beneath gleaming fur. The beast leapt towards her throat in his enthusiasm and she gnashed her teeth in a smile. The other Faerie Queens would not have allowed her to risk bringing him, for mortal eyes could see her pet though they could not see his Magpie mistress. The black dog, human stories called him and his kin. A harbinger of death. Airina

shivered with delight, shedding Court guidelines like too-tight skin. Tonight she was loyal to one Queen only.

With a heavy click of her tongue at the hound, she sauntered onward. Onyx feathers blended with her hair. She felt her mouth curl into a proud grin. Morgana would have sent a Reaper to kill the girl if she was meant to die. Airina was sent because she could keep a secret. A dangerous secret.

Airina and her hound both sniffed at the lock of hair her Queen had saved from the babe. Breathing deep, the Magpie opened her mouth to sing a sweet, lilting soprano. The song was as ancient as her people:

Come Faerie child

Come Faerie child

The dew damp night whispers wild

Come Faerie child

O sweet, lost child

Come home, Come home

Where you belong

Long wings like pale red gossamer bristled at her spine and Airina again took flight. A hum resonated in the rustling of the trees. Her song served its purpose. The girl was close. Cold air whipped Airina's hair into her face. Samhain was on its way. Autumn dripped into her bones as soothing as a kiss. She longed to detour, to bite in the dark, but with the wind came the scent.

Below her, the hound bayed. Their quarry had been found. Airina listened to the trees, sniffed the wind. The skin of her fingers split open at the tips as she flew and thorn-sharp talons protruded. The Magpie found her perch as she clutched at a windowsill, digging her

clawed hand into the wood.

The girl was beautiful. She was the very image of her mother. Smooth brown skin stretched over her, taut with youth. Thick black hair fell down her back in tight coils; a satin scarf bound it in place as she slept.

At long last, Airina thought to herself.

It was just as Morgana had said. A broken note in the world felt as if it had righted itself. The Magpie could not contain her smile.

Airina looked to the sky. High in the inky dark of night the moon burned a luminous white. Midnight. She turned back to the girl and watched as light ignited the room in crashing waves. The black eyes of the Magpie shone like polished rocks in the sun. Airina knew now why the girl's mother named her Bright. Such radiance would be hidden from human sight, but even the youngest Fae child would recognise her in their world. Too soon the time passed and the light dimmed. The wings retracted and the bones settled.

Airina watched the girl a moment more and thought of the madness this child would cause in her world. Change, the Magpie knew, was often discussed, often even fought for, but never easy to embrace.

She could not allow herself to speculate too long. The rip in the veil would have triggered the King's Guards.

"Sleep well tonight, little beauty." The Magpie whispered on the wind. "Soon a nightmare will begin, my Summer Queen…Bright Grían."

The girl's eyes opened at the sound of her true name. Dark blue. An ocean capped with waves and starlight. No one would deny her lineage when they looked into those eyes.

Airina's toothy grin spread as the girl looked back at her, amazed and half-dreaming. The Faerie woman turned and leapt from the ledge to meet her black dog on the ground. Her

ribs shortened and hollowed, feathers burst through her skin, and a rasping call escaped her beak.

Together, with a pop like firewood splitting, the dog and the bird fled to the Autumn Court.

PART ONE

ONE

Anna screamed as her heart drummed an erratic rhythm. She tried to piece together what she had seen. A woman had been there…wings…in her windowsill…staring at her.

She had called her…*Bright*.

Anna smothered an involuntary smile with both hands.

"Anna! What happened?"

Her mother rushed towards her only daughter in a flurry of messy hair and cotton pyjamas. She held Anna, pressing her into a suffocating embrace.

"Someone was in my window." Anna answered, muffled. Her half-squashed right eye saw her father enter her room, carrying a baseball bat. "A…A woman. She left scratches all over the ledge. She called me Bright."

Anna could just make out the pinched expression that came over her mother's face.

"What scratches, Anna?" Her father asked, searching the quiet street just beyond her window.

Anna tilted her head as far up as she could. Her eyes found the scratches beside where her father rested his hand. She looked away, used to seeing things no one else saw.

"Maybe it was a dream, Daddy. I'm sorry. It just seemed so real, you know?"

"What did you say she called you?"

"Bright," Anna repeated. "Bright Grían."

Once she had said the name again, Anna felt that same impulse to fly out of her window or scream at the top of her lungs with laughter. She bit her lip instead, conscious of her parents' eyes on her face.

"Bright, huh—"

"David." Her mother stopped him with a look. Anna's eyes darted between their wordless glances but could not pick up the silent dialogue. "Anna, go back to bed. I'm shutting this window."

"Mum, no! Please, it's too hot." She whined without meaning to, the line blurring for a moment between childhood and adulthood.

"You're killing our heating bill. You can go a few nights with this window shut. I'll buy you a fan for your room, okay?"

Anna went to complain but instead she shrugged, obedient. Her parents each kissed her head and left her room. She could hear them mumbling down the hall to each other but was too embarrassed to bother listening.

Anna was adopted. That fact hung over her in moments like these, moments she felt so *different* from them. She was a weird, gangly black girl in a normal white family who had already had two sons and a dog long before they got her. A splotch of ink dropped in milk. She wanted to tell her parents about the woman whose hair spilled over her bare shoulders like black feathers, but she didn't know how. Anna wanted to tell them how the woman had looked at her like no one had ever looked at her. Like she *was* different, but in the best way. Anna wanted to tell them how she felt when she had heard that name. *Bright.* That it seemed to fit where the rest of her felt hand-me-down.

When the woman left, she had screamed…because she had wanted to go with her.

"Wow, you're so beautiful."

Sam's voice set off whirling butterflies in her stomach. Anna had been busy toeing the morning-dew covered ground just beyond her front porch with her shoe. Thinking too much. She felt like she was always thinking too much. Then the familiar whine of her boyfriend's

faded black Mustang, its jangling muffler emitting loud, metallic sounds, broke through her train of thought. Anna decided she had to put her strange night behind her. Sam kissed her forehead softly as she met him by the passenger door. His light eyes inspected her t-shirt and short billowy skirt. He wore a black peacoat over a jumper.

"Doth my chariot await, my handsome knight in shining armour?"

"It does, milady."

Anna smiled up at Sam, slipping her hand under the sleeve of his coat to touch the sword tattooed onto his forearm. Their hands brushed as she pulled away—his a creamy pale colour and hers a warm brown. Sometimes Anna still couldn't believe he was *her* boyfriend. She often worried that he would wake up one day and realise how strange she was. She saw how other girls looked at him. What if one day he looked back?

Anna kissed him and was surprised at the warmth that spread over her cheeks.

"Wanna ditch?" Sam said, catching her by the waist.

"Be a good influence on me." Anna giggled.

"Go put more clothes on, then." His eyes mimicked severity but his mouth twitched at the corners.

"Never going to happen." She narrowed her eyes, touching his skin again to prove she wasn't the least bit cold.

He chuckled and shrugged.

"Yeah, alright, could we at least be late? Stop off for some coffee?"

Anna reached into her bag and produced a thermos warm with Columbian Roast. She nudged past him to jump in the passenger seat of his car.

"Fine," Sam sighed, sliding into the driver seat, "perfect attendance *and* perfect grades it is!"

"There's Becca!" Anna called out a few minutes later as they pulled into the school parking lot.

The familiar dark-green Honda that used to belong to the eldest of her older brothers was parked crooked. Her best friend was behind the wheel. Each hard-hitting bass note from the radio shook the car windows until they rippled like water.

Becca opened the driver side door and switched off the ignition. Her blonde hair poured like gold from her head down to her tiny waist and wide hips. Her skin glowed luminescent, her cheeks naturally flushed. As she got out of the car, people turned to look. They always did. Anna tried not to envy Becca's casual confidence.

"Good morning, love birds!" Becca called to them both, waving.

She ran over to cover Anna's face in a staccato flurry of kisses. They both laughed when Sam wrapped them up together in a big bear hug.

As Anna escaped to catch her breath, she noticed people looking at her and then quickly away. Not at them, at *her.* She was aware of her skin. The warm darkness of it, how it did not match anyone around her. Even the few students who did look like her did not bother to offer a friendly smile. They looked her in her abnormal eyes and they did not see themselves, only a stranger. Two beautiful black girls sat on a bench near the school, one a golden shade close to Anna's skin, one a deeper, warm mahogany colour. One girl was braiding the other's hair, fixing something that had fallen out of place. Her fingers flew through the girl's coils in a way Anna didn't understand. The golden girl glanced at Anna then whispered backwards at the other, a telling smile on both of their faces.

When Anna was little all she wanted was to have her hair braided. The other little black girls had their hair braided for special occasions or just to keep their hair out of their eyes

while they played; their heads embellished with long cords that would swing as they walked and echoed with the rhythmic clack of adorning beads. They told her of the salons their mothers would take them to and laughed at her ignorance.

"Are you even really black?" They would laugh. Anna never worked up the courage to answer.

Now she watched as people looked down at her hand clasped in Sam's with an unguarded mixture of confusion and surprise. Their relationship wasn't new, so what could they be surprised by?

Me, Anna answered her own silent question. *They're surprised that I touch him like this. That Becca would be friends with me. That I would dare to pretend to be like them.*

Anna breathed out to steady herself. She didn't want them to see her get angry. What she wanted was to disappear. Instead, she made herself listen to Sam and Becca as they continued to talk without noticing the glances of their classmates. By the time the three of them walked into school together things seemed a little more normal.

Except, of course, for the flutter wings…

Today most of the wings were red and gold and orange. Elegant women who appeared carved from precious gems walked the hallways of her school. Most of them had eyes like polished black glass, shifting like an animal. Some of them were not so bright coloured and seemed to have somewhat human-looking eyes. The dilated pupils were far too wide for the florescent-white hallways.

No one else in the school seemed to notice the Faeries, even as their wings brushed right through them. It was as if the human and Faerie realms were overlapping photo negatives that never merged though they touched.

Anna saw Faeries everywhere, especially in school, but she didn't know why. She had

learned long ago that she should just pretend she couldn't see them and she was used to that. She was afraid of the Faeries, but no more than she was afraid of a drunken rabble of men or the way police slowed their cars when they saw black boys in her neighbourhood. Anna preferred to look at the floor, ignoring humans and Faeries alike. Anna had been seeing this sort of second world since she was a child. It terrified her as much as it amazed her. The Faeries were beautiful but there was also something wild in their movements that grabbed her deep within her stomach. It was a primal, instinctual fear. Anna knew just by looking at them that even though she *could* see them, she was definitely not meant to.

She turned away from the over-crowded hallway and back to Sam and Becca. In the innocence of childhood she had confessed and the three had formed a strange understanding that had not been questioned since. She cherished them, but as she ignored the things they couldn't see, ignored the thoughts they couldn't possibly think, she felt her differences like a wall wedged between herself and them. Anna knew she should be able to talk to them about last night, but how could she explain the pull under her skin ever since she had heard that name? A thread had been sewn into her heart and tugged.

Bright…

Anna again felt that burning desire to scream. Somehow Anna knew that the Faerie knew her, that the red Faerie had precious answers to the chaotic question of Anna's existence. With a fierceness like nothing she had ever felt, Anna realised that she wanted those answers.

"Where are you right now?" Becca huffed as they walked single file to make room for the crush of students.

"What…oh sorry, Bec. There's a lot of them today."

"Oh, right. What do they look like?" Becca asked. She had a flippant way of talking

about the Faeries that made Anna feel at least a little more normal.

“Today they look a lot like autumn leaves. It’s beautiful.”

Lost in thought again, Anna was caught off guard by a sudden flash of familiarity. She stopped walking and Becca crashed into the back of her.

“Wha—," Becca yelped a shocked and confused noise.

“I thought I saw something. Someone…”

“Anna?” Sam pushed through until he was standing beside her.

Anna’s eyes bulged.

There she was. The Faerie woman who had clung to her windowsill stomped into the school building like a model down a runway, shooing the other Faeries out of her way with an aggravated flourish of her willowy hands. The Faerie didn’t bother to push down her wings. The red expanse of them seemed almost endless. Anna’s gaze travelled over the Faerie’s braided and pinned hair, the flush pink lips, the dagger strapped to her thigh. She was hypnotized by the woman’s dangerous beauty. Then she was gripped with sudden fear.

The Faerie had looked right into Anna’s eyes…and smiled.

“We have to go.” Anna whispered, her heart leaping.

Even though Sam couldn’t see, he glared over his shoulder in the direction she had been looking as he ushered them into class.

The red Faerie seemed to roll her eyes before turning herself into a bird. A magpie. A few students around her gasped as the bird appeared. Becca screamed, ducking into the classroom. Anna turned and nudged Sam. He nodded with widened eyes. For the first time ever, he had been able to see what only she had seen. They both stood, transfixed, watching until the magpie was out of sight.

Anna had broken her one rule about the Faeries.

She had stared.

TWO

“My Queen.”

“Magpie.”

Morgana Le Faye’s voice was cold, her blue eyes like piercing oceans in the surrounding darkness of her skin.

“My Queen, I do not wish to anger you.” Airina bowed low.

Bangles of dried thistle and bones rattled on the Magpie’s wrist as she tapped her fingers to her forehead in a sign of respect.

“I know, I know.” Morgana said, like one would speak to a child, but said no more.

Their heavy silence resumed.

The Queen sat with her long legs crossed at the ankles atop a large mushroom and Airina was quiet as she regarded her. The pair had met in secret, somewhere between the border of Autumn and Scotland.

Morgana rose as if preparing to leave. Confused, Airina mimicked her. Together the Autumn Queen and Airina grew from their diminutive form as they walked out of the shelter of the overlaying grasses. The mushroom that had served as a throne was now no bigger than a button. Morgana had yet to speak again and her eyes were far away. Airina knew the things her Queen saw now were secret things, glimpses from a future constantly re-written.

“I must be vigilant,” Morgana finally whispered, “and you must be patient. If Oberon discerns what games are afoot his fury will fall upon us all too quickly.”

“What would you have me do, Queen?”

“Watch her, Airina, guard her. She is your only task. If any other Fae approach her, kill them.”

“Yes, my Queen.”

The Magpie smiled up with adoration, but the Queen was again lost in her visions.

Morgana sighed.

“My husband seeks my company.”

A breath of crisp air enveloped the Queen and she was gone. Airina watched the leaves on the ground rustle and then quietly fall.

THREE

Clattering sounds were coming from the kitchen as Anna's mother and father cooked.

In her room, Anna had been thinking of the red Faerie again—without trying to, without *wanting* to. *Bright…* her mutinous mind replayed on a loop. She turned her head as if to physically remove the thought and welcomed a different kind of alluring distraction.

Anna's gaze drifted over to where her boyfriend sat. Sam was encased in gold as the sun set behind him. The fine hairs of his face and neck turned translucent in the light to match the tips of his long eyelashes. Anna sat up and titled her head to the side, scanning the features she loved best—his eyes darting over his homework, his smooth, pale skin wrinkling at the brow, sculpted bones defining the strong jawline. His pink lips moved as he read.

Anna leaned over and kissed the side of Sam's face. Then, before she could stop herself, she had kissed him again. She wanted this forever. He loved her and more than anything she loved to love him in return. He could be with anyone, Anna knew, but for some reason he chose her. She couldn't imagine life without him.

"What was that for?" Sam laughed, his fingers in her hair as he brought her lips to his.

"Nothing," Anna sighed as they parted.

"I love you," he whispered.

In that simple sentence he seemed to say everything. She shifted her weight so she was sitting in front of him. Their foreheads touched. It was a habit the two of them had had since they were kids.

"I love you, too." She smiled, kissing him once more. Then she sat back. "Now stop distracting me. I have a ton of homework."

"You started it!" He laughed, giving her shoulder a gentle push. "I'm going to have to start all over with this stupid probability question. I see you haven't even begun to start your

essay."

Anna snickered, putting her laptop back on her lap so she *could* in fact get started on her essay. Then she groaned. History as a subject was great—written by the victors and therefore often biased for sure, but still fascinating. Writing an essay about history, on the other hand, was tedious and boring.

"I'm never going to finish this essay, Sam. I might as well give up." Anna pouted, sprawling herself out over the bed they sat on.

"You never give yourself enough credit." Sam smiled down at her, stroking her face.

"What?"

"You're so smart and well capable, but you don't act like it. You always forget how incredible you really are. In a week you'll have the best essay in the class and everyone knows it. Including you, I think. Deep down."

He winked at her and Anna felt her face warm. Her response died in her throat even as she sat up to speak. She wished she saw herself the way he did.

Approaching footsteps in the hall preceded the appearance of her father in the doorway.

"How's homework coming, kids?" He asked, a smile playing awkwardly on his lips.

Her Dad looked at them, scanned the bed they sat on, then looked back up at them.

"Okay, I guess." Anna answered, careful to keep the snap out of her voice.

"Alright, well take a break. Your Mum says it's time for dinner. You're welcome to it, of course, Sammy."

Sam gave a slow, polite shake of his head. Anna fought a sudden urge to kiss him again.

"My Mum will kill me if I don't show up for dinner at least once this week. I

practically live here."

"Yeah, but it's been like that since we were four years old." Anna rolled her eyes.

Her Dad chuckled as he shuffled off.

"Don't go, Sam. Have two dinners!"

"Appealing, but no. I promised her." Sam laughed.

"Please? I don't want you to go. I hate when you leave me. I don't even know who I am without you."

Sam hesitated.

Anna froze. She didn't know why she had said that, but it was out now. When Sam was gone, she felt like a piece of her was cut off, missing.

"You are Anna Michelle Kingsley, the love of my life, the most amazing person in the world. You know that, right?" Sam said, the last words muffed as he kissed her head.

Anna felt herself simmer down a bit when Sam said her full name. They hadn't done that in a while.

Once his bag was packed though, she had to force herself not to sulk. For the last few weeks Sam's Mum had been insisting that he come home by dark. As Anna followed Sam down the stairs to the front door, thoughts came unbidden to her crowded mind.

She thinks I'm not good enough for her son. She wants to pull us apart. She knows there's something wrong with me…

Anna shook her head, forcing herself to stop spiralling. Ms. Burrow had always adored her…right?

"I love you, Samuel Mark Burrow." Anna said, following Sam's oblivious smile out the door. He kissed her again.

It was said that Faerie lovers exchanged their full names. If you had someone's name they were as good as yours. Or at least that's what Sam and Anna and Becca had read once in a public library when they were still trying to understand why Anna saw the things she saw. Anna chuckled under her breath as she watched Sam from the patio, thinking about how young they were then. Innocent. He waved as he pulled his car out of her driveway.

Just as Anna was about to close the front door, something moved in the corner of her eye. It took a second for her to realise what she had just seen. A wing, a flash of red. It moved so fast.

Anna almost tripped over the doorframe as she ran back outside, searching the thorny bushes by her driveway. There she was again, the Faerie Anna had seen leaning into her window, the same one that had looked right at her in school. This time the Faerie wasn't looking at Anna at all. In fact, the Faerie seemed to be… *hiding*. Anna ducked down in the front garden. The sudden movement had the opposite effect and instead drew the attention of the red Faerie. The woman's eyes were wide as she pressed a finger to her perfect lips—coated in what looked like blood—and whispered a gentle rushing of air.

"Shhh."

Anna almost felt the soft sound nestling into the bend of her ears. She nodded her understanding, heart flopping. Seconds ticked by, but to Anna they felt like hours. Just as she started to wonder if she should run back inside and lock the door behind her, she felt…cold.

Anna could see now what the red-winged Faerie was hiding from. Another beautiful woman approached, another Faerie—skin as silver as the morning light reflected off glass and wings a shivering colour of blue. Obsidian eyes glittered like rocks in a frozen lake. She wasn't looking for the red Faerie. This Faerie was calm, staring straight ahead. Still, Anna wouldn't chance moving. Long, brunette hair streamed down the silver Faerie's back and far over the black horse she rode side-saddle. The horse's eyes were bright red. His gaunt body

was graceful though skeletal. His coat gleamed. Anna's gaze returned to the silvery-blue Faerie. Her lips were red and plump, like a ripped open plum. Big, burly black dogs walked at her heels. Muscled guards surrounded her, arrows on their backs and sinister looking blades strapped to their forearms. Their weapons and armour looked heavy and as if carved from strong wood. Long black hair framed their perfect faces with gazes like wolves. The otherworldly party marched on until they disappeared around the bend of the road.

"Anna! Come on in!" Her mother called and Anna whipped around expecting to see her standing in the doorframe.

Startled, her heart slamming into her ears, Anna turned back just as the red-winged Faerie lunged. Anna covered her head in time to duck out of the way of a screeching magpie as it flew through her open door. Her mother shouted after her again, but Anna didn't answer. Instead she ran through the door and climbed the stairs to her room two at a time.

When she reached her room she searched inside but found it empty. She fidgeted with her fingers, picking at the skin around her nails and wondering if perhaps she should be seeing someone about these impossible things.

"You've already told enough mortals by now, don't you think?" A full-throated voice interrupted her thoughts.

Anna spun on her toes to see the red-winged woman glaring. Anna's eyes were drawn to the tattoos on the Faerie woman's body, which snaked around her curves and framed her high cheekbones. Even her hands had them. The Faerie's wings were still and draped like a cape. They touched the floor. The woman was even more beautiful than Anna first realised. She cursed under her breath when she noticed she was staring again, open-mouthed.

"Who are you?" Anna whispered.

"My name is Airina. I am a Magpie of the Autumn night-lands." The Faerie answered.

Her conversational tone surprised Anna.

"A…a Magpie?"

"I am a Faerie. I am *of* Faerie, but what you might think of as a different *breed*." She sneered a little. "I am both bird and woman, at will."

"I've never seen a Faerie like you." Anna admitted.

"No, we Magpies are often in service to the Royals. We are too busy to roam school halls like other Fae do. In any case, we often prefer our bird form in the human realm."

"Why do Faeries come here at all?"

Airina laughed a little. "A fair question. It is not too common for our kind to intermingle, but your little town lies on leys."

Anna tried to remember what little she knew about leys. They were lines, weren't they, that connected…connected…

"They connect areas of ancient magical importance. The veil between our worlds parts easiest along the leys." The Magpie said, smirking as Anna looked up in shock.

"C-can you read my thoughts?" Anna asked.

"Yes. Some Fae can. Others may do other things. Many other things." Airina cocked her head to the side, like the bird Anna knew she was.

Anna didn't know what to say in response. Curtains of hair and feathers spilled over to shade part of Airina's face. She looked beautiful…and lethal. Anna eyed the bright stain of blood in the corners of the Magpie's full lips and then looked back up to her haunting black eyes.

"You've been following me," Anna said at last.

"You wanted me to come to you again. You wanted to see me again."

"I—"

Anna couldn't deny it. She had wanted to see the red Faerie again. *Bright*.

"What does that mean? You followed me…because I wanted you to?"

"I serve The Un-Seelie Night Queen, Morgana Le Faye, as her head lady-in-waiting." Less of an answer, and more of a fact.

"Faeries can't lie." Anna whispered, half to herself. Airina's lips curled.

"No, we cannot." The Faerie smiled wider and a bark of something like a laugh escaped her lips.

"What is an *Un-Seelie*?" Anna tried instead.

"There are Four Courts divided in half by the night-lands and day-lands of Faerie. The Summer and Spring Courts rule the Day, governed by the Seelie Queens, brightlings. The Un-Seelie Queens, darklings, govern Winter and Autumn, the Courts that rule the Night." Airina's feathers bristled. "I am subject of the Autumn Court. There are four Courts, three Queens, and of course the King of Faerie, our King Oberon."

Anna gasped. A short montage played unbidden in her head. Rupert Everett clothed in vines. She almost wanted to laugh, and if she hadn't been so terrified perhaps she would have.

"Yes. It is true." Airina's interjection interrupted Anna's train of thought. "William was told about our world by an enamoured Nymph disguised as a servant girl. I will spare you the details, but know that he never saw the Royals with his own eyes."

"Titania?" Anna asked, pairing doubt with curiosity.

"Titania is the Seelie Day Queen of the Spring Court. She is the most loyal to her husband of all the Queens."

Anna raised her hands in exasperation. She tried to will herself to believe her favourite

Shakespearean play could be a factual account of the world of Faeries, but it seemed more like a telling sign of mental instability. Anna reigned in her doubts as she met the fearsome gaze of the red Faerie in front of her.

"Are all of the Queens—"

"Yes." Airina snapped. "By Law, a Court Queen must be bound to the Faerie King."

"*Bound…?*"

"Titania's closest friend and Queen Sister, Maab du Corbeau, the Un-Seelie Dusk Queen, is the Queen of the Winter Court. You glimpsed her moments ago."

Anna shivered again, thinking of the cold the silver woman brought.

"There are four seasons, and so there are four Courts. It is how it has always been."

"Wait, so there's the Autumn Queen, Morgana, the Spring Queen, Titania, and the Winter Queen, Maab…"

The Magpie grinned. Her every sharp tooth jutted like broken glass in her stark white smile. Anna felt her body stiffen as a wave of gooseflesh rose.

"There was once a fourth, and soon the Summer Court will hold a Queen again."

"Who will be the Summer Queen?" Anna asked.

"You will be, Bright Grían."

FOUR

"What?!" Anna gasped.

"You will be the new Summer Queen," Airina grinned. "The Seelie Dawn Queen of the Summer Court."

"I'm not a Queen! H-h-how could I-I be?"

"Do not be afraid, Bright. Your true mother is my Queen, Morgana Le Faye. My Queen has foresight, as her mother—the mortal Morgana Le Faye—did."

"Stop! Look, this doesn't make any sense! It..it just can't be…I'm…I'm nobody…"

"Nobody, Bright?" Airina seemed puzzled by the phrase, her head tilted again as she blinked. "Your human grandmother was wooed by a Wood Sprite—a Dryad. There are many tales in our world of his beautiful dark skin and how he admired her haunting blue eyes. When their daughter was born—a half-blood bestowed with his skin and her eyes—Oberon stole the child and kept her in our world away from her mother. This child grew to be my Queen and your mother."

"I. Am. Not. A. Queen." Anna said through her teeth.

Maybe she *was* going crazy. Except that every time Airina called her Bright, Anna's heart clenched in confused recognition. Something about that name fit, it felt right. She wasn't sure if she believed she was half Faerie or quarter or whatever Airina was saying, but she was desperate to understand where she belonged.

"You're destined to be both Queen and Wife, Bright." Airina continued.

"Wife?" Anna quirked her brow and let out a nervous chuckle.

"I've already told you. The Queens of Faerie must marry Oberon."

"Oberon…?" Anna's head was too full. Shakespeare. Sam. Two mothers. Faeries. "I'm seventeen. I'm not marrying *anyone*! Especially someone I don't know. And I have a

boyfriend!"

"So I have seen, but the child is mortal. Royal Faeries are not to mix with humans…except as playthings. It taints the blood."

"Sam is *not* a plaything!" Anna hissed, afraid she'd shout otherwise.

"You may think different once you are immortal." Airina's tone was dismissive.

"Your Queen is half-human!" Anna shot back.

Airina was quiet for a moment, her gaze as cold as steel.

"I will not argue with you about things you do not understand." Was the Magpie's terse reply. "You will marry the King. This is how things are done in Faerie. You would do well to rid yourself of your human sooner or later."

"I love him!" Anna's lip trembled.

What had happened between those easy moments ago, sitting on her bed doing homework with Sam, to now? Had she even said goodbye? She couldn't remember.

There was a long, deep braying like that of a hunting dog. The sound pulled Anna out of her introspection. Airina turned her full attention to the open window before she crossed the room in two long strides.

"Wait!" Anna rushed to Airina, clutching her strong arms. It was the first time she had ever touched a Faerie. The sensation sent electricity through her skin. "Where is my…my mother? You can't just go!"

"I must go." Airina's eyes narrowed. "If the Queen Sisters discover I am here conversing with you, there will be questions my Queen is unprepared to answer. I will seek counsel."

Anna blinked back the need to cry, watching as Airina fumbled behind her head. From deep somewhere in her hair the Magpie yanked firmly and produced a black feather with a

white tip.

“Keep this with you. Soak it in moon-lit water overnight. It will bring you protection from wandering eyes.”

“O-Okay?” Anna whimpered.

“Don’t be afraid, Bright.”

Airina dropped from the ledge and disappeared with a fiery sizzle and a pop. Anna watched the now-empty space with wide eyes. Then she sank to the floor, her mind as murky and dark as over-steeped tea.

FIVE

Sam was in his room, incapacitated by his full stomach. His mother seemed to be making more hearty meals. All his favourites—thick steaks smothered in gravy, roasts with buttered potatoes, pasta bake dishes oozing with cheese. He laughed to himself, resting a hand on his belly, and sighed. Sam liked listening to the silence of the house. Anna's house had always been full of noise, even now that there were only three people living there. Here it had always been his mother and himself.

His quiet house was nice, but it didn't have Anna. Sam thought of her all the time. Her skin like suede and those dark blue eyes that kept him up at night. He felt foolish sometimes when he imagined marrying her—they were young, and he knew it; what did he have to offer her—but he couldn't imagine feeling the way he felt about her with anyone else. He wished he could see the things she saw and comfort her. He had been relieved to see that bird at school. He knew what *he* saw, and there was no bird there before. What did that mean?

"Sam?" His mother called to him from her bedroom. He could hear the water running as she brushed her teeth.

"Mum?" He replied.

"I'm going to bed, baby," she mumbled around the foam in her mouth. She walked into his room a few minutes later.

Sam's mother smiled as she rubbed the stubble dotting along his chin. Her curly brown hair dripped water onto her bathrobe. He had her eyes, but none of her round features. She said he looked like his father, but he wouldn't know.

"Did you even try to fill out these forms, Sam?"

Her soft face lost its smile as it creased with frustration. Her hands shuffled the blank applications on his desk. Sam rolled his eyes.

"I'm not signing away my life to a school I haven't decided I want to go to."

"*They* haven't decided they want *you* either!" She sighed, rubbing her forehead. "That's why you need to apply, so you have options when you graduate this year. You can't stay here chasing that girl around forever!"

"That girl?" Sam spat.

"Don't you raise your voice at me! You know what I meant."

"Why do you always bring Anna into this? She wants me to go to college almost as much as you do! Just because she's different—"

"Samuel Burrow, don't you dare! I have loved that little girl all her life. I wasn't trying to start a fight. I just want you to think about *your* future. I don't care who you date, but they can't be your whole world."

"I love her, Mum. She *is* my whole world."

"You're just kids!"

"I'm eighteen! I know what I want, and all I want is her. Forever."

Sam's Mum put a hand to her head again, but then she smiled and placed that hand on her hip.

"Then think about her, too. Anna is very smart. She's not going to stay here forever. Don't you want to go with her?"

"So, you won't mind if I only apply to the schools she applies to?" Sam said, half joking.

"You know what, kid? If it gets you applying to colleges, yeah, go for it. Deal?"

Sam didn't respond but the tension in the room had died down. He didn't really want to go to college. He didn't know what he wanted to do yet. Still, he couldn't deny that the idea

of a tiny apartment near some campus with Anna *was* appealing. He nodded.

"Don't stay up too late on the phone." Sam's Mum kissed his cheek before she left his room.

As the door clicked shut, he let himself exhale.

It seemed that only a few moments had passed when his cell rang. Sam picked up, already knowing who it would be.

"Hey, Anna."

"My name is Bright." She choked on her sobs. Sam's chest clenched tight.

"What? Anna, what's wrong?"

She began telling him everything, from the first time she had seen Airina until just moments before she had called him. By the time she had finished speaking an hour had gone by.

"Do you want to marry him?" Sam asked. His blood seemed hot in his veins.

"That's all you can say after all that?!" Her voice was sharp.

Sam tried to push past the nagging anger in his chest, but he couldn't. It had a name to it. Oberon.

"Please, Anna, just answer me. Do you…"

"No Sam!"

"Then why—" Sam stopped talking. Anna was crying. He had made her cry.

"Anna, baby, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I just—"

"I don't want anyone but you. I just want you." She hiccupped around her sob.

"I only want you, Anna, forever."

"But…" she hesitated, and Sam held his breath. "What if it's all true? What if I belong there, not here? Sam, what am I going to do?"

"We'll figure it out, Anna. Together. I won't leave you."

"Could you come over?" Anna begged.

"It's almost midnight. My Mum would kill me."

"Sam, please." Anna pleaded again. His heart constricted. "I need you."

Sam went down the stairs sideways, distributing his weight over the full length of his foot to make the least amount of noise. He was gentle with the front door. Then Sam walked to Anna's house a street over, trying not to think of what his mother would or would not cook if she knew he'd snuck out.

He went straight to the back yard, knowing he would find Anna in the treehouse. Sam climbed up the rope ladder and found Anna huddled near one of two rough windows. In the dark it seemed as if reflective streams ran down her cheeks. A mirror covered in a thin film of dust was propped up against the thick tree trunk, which made the main wall. The tiny chairs grew moss on one side. His childhood memories swam before him. How small they had been. How in love with her he was, even at eight. How he was only more in love with her now at eighteen.

Anna looked up at Sam as he entered. He crossed the small room and wrapped her up in his arms. Her tiny body fit perfect with his.

"It's okay, Anna."

"I love you, Sam."

"I love you, too."

"I'm…I'm scared."

“We’ll figure this out. Together. I promise.”

SIX

"How could this have happened, Magpie!"

The Queen Morgana whispered but it sounded like a scream. Airina felt the squeeze of her Queen's hands as they clasped her by the throat. Morgana had shifted into something more feline than woman. Claws, milky white and hooked, extended from her fingers. The Magpie coughed and tasted the brine of her own blood in her mouth. Two Fuinseoga flanked the Queen. Their shining wooden armour gleamed and their stern wolfish faces scowled. Morgana shooed them away. Before the second had left, the agitated Autumn Queen had called him back.

"Diarmuid, fetch her husband. Now!"

Airina cringed in silence as she stifled the urge to fly away. Her body twitched between bird and woman with the effort. Morgana turned to face her Magpie maid.

"What right did you have to speak to the girl, darkling?"

"My Queen, I meant no foulness to so upset you." Airina cowered in Morgana's grip. "The girl saw the Winter Queen and openly addressed me as Faerie. She had questions I had to answer honestly. I could not keep them at bay. She is afraid, my Queen, and she wishes to know more. S-she inquires of your Sight to see if she might keep her mortal pet. She…loves him."

"You let a child a mere fraction of the seasons you have seen outwit you?"

"I had taken provisions. I was drunk with blood, my Queen. I-I was weak!"

"There is more. Tell me!"

The Magpie bent her head, allowing the pain to wash over her like a numbing balm.

"I was hungry, my Queen. A different hunger. I've never known it before. When the girl acknowledged me, I took the opportunity to be close to her because of what she

means…to you."

"I see." A cold smile crept over Morgana's face.

The Queen moved her fingers in Airina's throat. The veins spilled in reply. The edges of Airina's vision was fading to black.

"No, my Queen! I swear it to you that my only wish is to serve you and your daughter. I made a mistake! Search your Sight and find me to be trustworthy, if not also foolish and arrogant. Please, my Queen."

Morgana's gaze left Airina's face and was far away, but her hand stayed around the Magpie's throat. At that moment, the Fuinseog returned. Airina gasped, unable to speak. He was there. Gearóid Ó Bháis.

"My Queen," Gearóid bowed low to Morgana, black hair falling over his cheeks and eyes, "please release my bride. Let any offense you find with her be paid by me instead."

Airina felt her eyes well. Morgana released Airina and the Magpie fell to the dirt with a soft thud. She coughed, sucking in air and spitting up blood. The Queen shook herself like a horse shakes off flies. Her long claws returned to smooth, slender fingers. Airina adored her.

"Thank you, My Queen." Gearóid said.

Airina fought her desire to reach out to him. He was dressed in dark green leather. Heavy black boots matched a long cape which lay nestled between his inky blue wings. His uniform and frosted skin marked him a Reaper for the Winter Queen. A binding ring of charred bone encircled his index finger. Airina wore one to match it.

"Deathbringer," Morgana murmured, "I have a need for you. You are known for your unwavering devotion to the Faerie Courts and your skill with a blade. Your wife, my maid, has been entrusted with sensitive information. I need it protected, even from her. Though I believe she aims to serve me, she also needs more of your logic, your patience, and

willpower. I want the two of you to work together. Will you serve me with as much loyalty as to your own Queen?"

"My Queen Morgana, I cannot ensure that I would give you the same loyalty as to my own Queen."

"Good, good." Morgana smiled, lethal, her skin as smooth and dark as polished cherry wood. "A less honourable Fae might have attempted to lie. I need to trust you. Can I?"

Gearóid narrowed his eyes. Airina stayed silent. The Reaper was silent for a long time before he again bowed his head to the Autumn Queen.

"Heal your wife. When she is mended, the two of you must come find me again. Then I will tell you what must be done about the heir to the Summer throne."

Gearóid's eyes widened. Morgana nodded, pleased at last.

"Bed my maid well and see to her recovery. Go."

She lifted from the ground then, stirring the fallen leaves with the brush of her wings. The remaining Fuinseog left with her.

Gearóid ran then. His light feet moved through the trees of Autumn. Airina watched him as long as she could before darkness smothered her vision.

Airina woke again as the Deathbringer shook her, her face reflected in his black eyes. Beside him was a young Faerie woman. The shaken brightling knew her purpose and knelt beside the dying Magpie. The Faerie ripped open her shirt at the collar and allowed Gearóid to pierce the tender flesh with his teeth. Gearóid motioned and the Faerie moved closer to Airina.

"Drink, my beloved." He cooed, pressing against the neck of the woman.

A soft moan escaped the brightling's brave lips. Airina's mouth watered. The wounded

Magpie lifted her head and drank deep. Her wounds stitched slowly together. Every sinew tethered wet cords to her shredded muscles. The young Faerie sat until the Magpie had had her fill. Airina looked up and kissed the soft mouth. Then she licked the Faerie's neck, leaving a trail of sticky blood as she parted. Gearóid watched.

"I've missed you, my husband." Airina said, woozy.

"And I, you."

Airina smiled and took his hand. Her wounds had yet to heal completely but she pushed the woman away. The young Fae left, her own wounds healing almost the minute Airina let her go.

Gearóid picked Airina up from Autumn's forest floor and seconds later he placed her weary body on their bed. The scent of scorched air lingered as he removed his heavy cape.

Their home rested between the Winter and Autumn provinces. The cool air snaking through the small windows chilled Airina's hot skin. Gearóid lay beside her, now only half dressed, and curled a stray hair behind her ear with his calloused fingers. She caught his wrist in her mouth, bit, and drank. When she opened her eyes again, she found her husband toying with the clasps on her bodice, prying them apart. He bent to her as he did so, landing a kiss in the centre of her clavicles. Airina pulled him close.

She had missed him.

SEVEN

By Saturday, not having seen or heard from the red Faerie, Anna was having doubts. Had she imagined it? Or was it that the Faeries had taken one look at her and realised she couldn't be the Queen they were looking for? All week she had tried to ignore the Faeries at school as she used to do, but something had changed. Now she couldn't help but imagine herself as one of them. *Bright*. She had always felt like she didn't quite fit, but she couldn't be a *Faerie*. Could she?

Anna was distracted now at least. All she wanted to do was spend the weekend curled up in her room beneath soft blankets, her hand held by Sam's, while they watched television. She didn't even want to think of Faeries. It was well past midday on Saturday when a pair of black and white birds flew in through her open window.

"Airina!" Anna jumped up.

"What?" Sam asked, ducking as one of the birds swooped over him.

"Do not be stupid, girl!" The Magpie scolded, half-feathered. "You should not assume that every bird is a friend."

A sickening chorus of crunches popped in quick succession through the Faerie woman's spine as it realigned itself. Sam looked around, trying to catch a glimpse of the birds he had seen. Anna squeezed his fingers.

"Airina…"

Anna trailed off as she glanced over to the other Faerie in her room. Her jaw tightened.

"That's a little better, I suppose, but you need not fear this Reaper for now, Bright." Airina seemed to roll her eyes, but as there was no distinctive white space Anna couldn't be sure.

The other Faerie wore a heavy looking outfit of leather. His boots seemed hard at the

shins as if they were made from thick scales. A black cape swayed behind him and his hair was matted with feathers.

Anna jutted her jaw at the Reaper, turning fiery eyes to him. She was bested by his own calm, lethal stare. She looked down at her feet.

"If you had been wished dead by my husband or his Queen, I tell you now, you would be. We have been sent by your mother to protect you. Here."

Anna took the heavy cloth that Airina was shoving towards her. Inside the bundle was a rusted looking horseshoe. Anna brushed a finger over the metal. It stung a little where she touched it.

"What is it?" Anna asked.

"This will permit your mortal to see us as you do." Airina chuckled and Anna's eyes went wide.

"How—"

"Go on, Bright. It is what you want, isn't it?"

Anna blinked back her shock.

"Sam, take this and tell me what you see!"

He reached out trembling fingers.

"Anna, where did you get—"

"Sam, just trust me!"

He gripped his hand around the horseshoe and his breath caught in his throat. Airina smiled at him, her sharp teeth gleaming. Her husband glared. The horseshoe fell to the floor with a heavy metallic clank that echoed Sam's surprise.

"It is a temporary charm. A shoe from a once-bridled Kelpie. It must always touch his

skin."

"T-thank you," was Sam's eventual polite reply, having reclaimed the fallen shoe.

Airina looked him up and down and it seemed the Reaper's expression softened by the smallest degree. Anna chanced a longer glance at the new Magpie. His blue skin blended with the shadows on her wall. He looked the way a nightmare felt.

"Gearóid will guard your human as I will guard you. I can answer your little endless questions. We only have a few moons until your throne will call to you. You will need to be fit to rule by then."

"But…"

"Your emotions are so tangible. You have been saturated by this human realm, Bright. Fear not, child. Your mother has seen that you will keep the mortal."

Anna felt as if air had been let into her lungs. Airina had read thoughts in her mind she hadn't even fully formed to words. She wasn't ready to even entertain the idea of being anyone's Queen—much less a wife. Still, if she had to leave everything she had ever known behind, if she had to take the words of a Faerie as fact, if she had to become a Queen in a land she never even knew was real, she knew she needed one person by her side.

"Sam!" Anna turned to face him. He seemed confused, but his smile was genuine. She giggled. "I love you, Samuel Ma—"

"Don't!" Gearóid roared. His dark eyes narrowed, and his teeth were bared. They were sharper than Airina's. "Foolish children! If one knows your full name, they may use it against you. If you are to enter our world, you must learn to abide by our laws or you will be dead before you reach your first Summer. A name is bond!"

The Reaper scoffed, fury ebbing away into stoic calm. Anna found her head bowing as her shoulders pinched together. He grunted then went back to his almost sculptural state.

Airina laughed, a boisterous bark that startled Anna.

“Stop shivering, you frightened kittens! Only learn to tame your tongues. Gearóid is correct, if a bit enthusiastic. Your names are precious in our world.”

Anna nodded, pressing her forehead into the top of Sam’s abdomen. Of course they were. That’s why they did it. Except now it was real, not just a story in a book. Anna felt a strange pitch in her stomach. How much of fiction was fact?

“I love you.” She whispered.

His eyes glinted, unblinking. Anna wrapped her fingers over the hand that held the shoe, begging him to say it back. Sam looked down at her. His shock was apparent.

He could run now, Anna thought to herself. *He could abandon me to my strange, dangerous world. He could walk away and never look back…maybe he should…*

“I love you, too, Anna.”

EIGHT

Oberon woke beside a pretty half-blood Kelpie girl. He loved half-Fae women and this one was a dangerous sight to behold, near lethal when nude. She possessed the soft, wide hips of her human ancestry and the red eyes and watery midnight-coloured skin of her Fae kin. Oberon had seen the creature bathing in one of the many springs and knew he had to have her.

She hadn't acknowledged his words of woo though she had, at his bidding, slipped soundless into his bedchambers just two nights before. In those two nights she had yet to say anything to him, though he made tender love to her. She moaned, and she sighed, but she would not speak to him. She rose to leave when he woke and he did not stop her. Instead, he watched her go, hypnotised by the sway of her hips. The Faerie King flexed his fists and ground his teeth as the door swung closed. She hadn't even looked back.

Oberon's mother had been a goddess. The first of all the Fae. She bore Oberon to a Faerie she made from the dawn's rays. His father's fiery passion could not return the earnest love she had felt for him—not enough to remain faithful. Mortality was his reward. Broken-hearted by his father's betrayal, his mother also cursed their only child, but not with death. Instead, Oberon would be forever doomed to chase ephemeral love. She left him then, going to the other place where the dead must be guided to their rest.

"And so, I alone am King." Oberon spat, talking to himself.

He stood and bathed before dressing in a pale green suit of woven leaves which revealed his slender, muscular form. Moss ropes draped around his neck in regal adornment and he stacked his three binding rings on his long index finger. He reviewed his reflection: full mouth; pale green skin; vivid yet dark green eyes. It was no lie to say that Oberon was beautiful, and he knew it. Yet his face felt like a false face. Something all his people quietly hated. Something *he* hated. He raised his arms and stretched, pushing his massive wings

through the openings of his shirt.

Oberon called out to his chamber guard. As the young Springland Fuinseog walked in, he shook out his mane and dropped to the floor before his King. He left his neck exposed in the odd canine way all the Fuinseoga had when they greeted him. Light fell over the stern face. The sun from the abandoned Summerlands leaked into Oberon's home in Faerie, a central palace in their world called Heart. Oberon closed his eyes, breathing deep. A coldness writhed in his stomach. He ached to soothe it.

"Titania, brightling. I want your Queen, Titania."

NINE

“Husband.” Titania cooed.

Her skin and matching wings had been rubbed with whipped butters until they glistened a soft pink. Her rose-petal cape fell behind her. She wore little else.

Titania hoped she looked as beautiful as she felt. Hours had been spent preparing with her favourite ladies’ maid. She liked to make him wait when he summoned her. If she could have made him wait days she would have.

The way he made her wait.

“Titania, my Queen.” Oberon smiled.

She watched his gaze take bites out of her in morsels. He gestured to her to come to his bed.

“Woo me, boy.”

Her vicious eyes shone beetle-black and her wings trembled. She bared her teeth as she spoke to him.

“My Queen?” He chuckled. She hoped she shocked him.

“Tell me you love me.”

“I love you.” He grinned, half-hearted.

“Again.” She whispered, unclasping her long hair.

“I love you, Titania.”

“Show me.” She demanded. She begged herself not to cry.

He crossed the room in languid, almost bored strides. When he reached her trembling mouth with his own, she smiled. She wrapped her arms and wings around him. He was tender. This was the Oberon she knew, the King she loved.

“Gwyn Oberon Mordha.” She sighed.

“Titania Ardella Mordha, my most loyal lover.” Oberon lifted his face so that his lips aligned with hers. She pulled away.

“Show me.” The Queen whispered.

TEN

Anna woke to the soft click of her mother opening her door. She sat up at the noise, stiff from the awkward position she had been asleep in. It was a cool Monday afternoon and a breeze wafted through her window. The school day had come and gone. Sam lay sprawled on the floor still, snoring. The unwatched television had turned itself off hours ago.

As Anna looked into the soft, pale face of her mother—wrinkled with confusion, tinged by disappointment—Anna felt her eyes sting. Before she knew it the tears had fallen, silent at first and then gentle sobs shook through her throat.

Her mother looked startled. She ushered Anna into her bathroom and soaked a washcloth with warm water. While Anna propped against the sink, her mother took the cloth and wiped at her face, and her neck, and her arms. Anna felt her body ease at the touch.

"Thank you." Anna whispered, trying to hold back the catch she felt in her throat. Her mother…but not her mother. "I'm sorry. We'll go to school tomorrow. I promise."

Her Mum stayed quiet for a while, as she continued to drag the soft rag over her daughter's warm skin. Anna squeezed her eyes shut, desperate to tamp down her strange emotions.

"Anna, baby, what is going on? You never miss school. Your father and I are worried. Is it—is it Sam? He is a sweet boy, but—"

"It's not Sam's fault," Anna snapped.

Her mother went quiet.

"Mum," Anna adjusted her tone, struggling to look her mother in the eyes, "what would you say if I told you…I…I think my name is Bright?"

Anna's mother stopped moving. New creases seemed to line her forehead.

Tell me it isn't true, Anna thought to herself. *Tell me I belong here. Tell me I'm your*

daughter, no matter what my skin looks like, no matter what I can see…

"You weren't supposed to find out."

Anna's stomach dropped. A life full of memories whirled in her head. They felt like lies now, a mask. They hid who she really was. What she really was. Anna was shaking. Her head was too full. Full of fury, of fear, and somewhere, hot and heavy as iron, full of shame.

"You would have had questions about where you came from and I would have no answers for you." Anna's mother tried to reason aloud. Her voice pleaded for understanding.

"You said there was an agency. That you and Daddy picked me. That…that I was special…"

"You *are* special, baby!" Her mother cried.

She tried to hold Anna, but Anna moved away from her, using the hurt on her mother's face to fuel her own silent seething. How many times had her mother imagined this day, this conversation? How long had she intended to hide the truth?

"You lied to me." Anna felt the venom line her words. The tears in her eyes stung again, aching to fall. "My whole life, you lied. I never felt like I belonged here. You knew! I'm not even human! I should have been left with my own people."

"What? What are you talking about, baby? Of course you're human!"

Anna stopped her brimming tirade to look at her mother again. The face looking back at her now was one of pure confusion.

"Anna, look, one night there was a noise outside the door. It sounded like crying, but I was too afraid to open the door. I had seen this special on TV…never mind. Your father went instead, and he said there was a child wrapped in *silk* out on the porch. Silk! I couldn't believe it. A beautiful baby girl with sweet brown skin and ocean blue eyes. I picked you up and within seconds you stopped crying. It was like you knew it too, that you belonged with

me."

Anna held her breath. She had never heard this story. She was surprised by her hunger for it.

"I took you inside to clean you off and a thin piece of paper fell down. I thought it was a leaf. I remember it felt so light in my hand. Something was written on it in thick black ink and the strangest, most beautiful handwriting I've ever seen. It said *Bright Grían*. I didn't understand what it meant. Bright Sun?"

"So, you… you don't know where I come from?" Anna asked.

"I don't know who your parents are or anything if that's what you mean. We…your Dad and I…we did some things that weren't exactly legal so we could adopt you. They wanted to put you in child services but I just…I looked at you and I had to…I can't explain it, Anna…I just *had* to keep you…"

"So, you don't know what I am?" Anna interrupted.

"Anna, what do you mean, *what* you are?"

"Mum, maybe we should go get Dad and Sam. We all need to talk."

ELEVEN

"You told them everything, Anna," Sam cooed on the phone. "It's not your fault that they didn't believe you."

He was in his own house again, feet propped up on his headboard while he lay on his back.

"What do I do, Sam?" She asked him, a tremble in her voice. "I don't know if *I* believe me. This is all so crazy."

Sam wanted to say the right thing. To fix it. But they had spent hours trying to explain. Sam had shown them the horseshoe. He had backed her story as much as he could. Still, they didn't believe them.

"I don't know, babe. But I'll be there, no matter what. I love you, Anna."

"I love you, too, Sam. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"First thing."

"Becca's gonna kill us."

"Probably." Sam laughed. "Goodnight, baby."

"Goodnight." Anna said. He could almost hear her smile.

Sam's heavy eyelids closed as they ended the call. He couldn't blame Anna's parents for not believing her. If he had not seen two Faeries with his own eyes, he realised, he might not have thought it was possible either. In the end he had had the difficult task of convincing her parents that Anna was safe, sane, and a bit overworked at school. Now Sam rubbed the space between his eyes and exhaled.

A sound, a whisper of air that was almost a growl, rushed close to his head. Sam shot up from bed. He looked around, inspected the shadows of his room, and saw nothing. Sam laughed to himself as he stretched the tight muscles in his back. He reached under his

mattress and wrapped his fingers around the strange flaking metal of the horseshoe he had been given. It gave him an odd comfort.

He attempted to balance the Faerie charm in his palm, but it was heavy and slipped to the carpeted floor with a thud. After retrieving it, he lay back down and placed the shoe on his chest just below his ribs. Another sound found his ear. This one was like a cough with teeth. Sam turned towards the noise and he was met by Gearóid.

Sam gasped and sat up, holding the shoe to his chest. His knuckles stretched milk white. Gearóid sat nestled into the nearby intersection of the walls. The Reaper kept intimidating silence, never taking his sharp, bird-like gaze off Sam. His ankle rested on his opposite knee. Black hair, thick with feathers, covered half his face. An exposed edge of a dark-blue tattoo snaked up Gearóid's sharp jawbone like outstretched fingers.

Though Gearóid seemed to have no problem with keeping their silence, Sam was becoming uncomfortable.

"Is, um, your wife with Anna?"

"Yes."

Silence again.

Gearóid began flexing his fingers and licking his teeth.

"Can you read minds…like your wife?"

"Her name is Airina." The Faerie sneered, wings fluttering behind him like an involuntary twitch. "I cannot. I am lesser Fae."

Gearóid's eyes flicked around Sam's room—a metal baseball bat, some toy cars Sam had since childhood, a snow globe—and Sam was surprised to see that the corners of his mouth turned up.

"What's that mean?" Sam smiled too but soon regretted it.

He had thought his question was harmless, but Gearóid clenched his jaw and his eyes were narrowed. Sam wanted to run.

"Mean?" Gearóid growled.

"What—"

"I don't…speak your language very well. I…cannot understand. Airina has taught me, but it is…not native to me."

He returned to flexing his fingers. The joints cracked and Sam flinched.

"Oh. Sorry. Uh, what do you speak?"

"In the human realm? Irish, Latin, and some French."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I-I don't speak any of those. I don't know why I—I don't speak any other language. I'm…Sorry." Sam's hyper-tensed muscles were getting stiff, stuck between fight and flight, but he was too afraid to move. "I was trying, um, to ask what a *lesser Fae* is."

"I serve below the high Fae. Airina is high Fae and serves a Royal. Bright will be a Royal. There are…rules? Orders…"

"You have a class system. I…I understand now. Thank you."

Bright. Sam's Anna was now *Bright*, he thought. She was Faerie and he was human. Only human. Where did that leave him? Gearóid stood and took off most of his outer covering. Sam wasn't sure which the Reaper would consider more rude: to look or to look away. Sam chose not to move at all.

When Gearóid finished undressing what he was left with was a leaf-green sheath over his skin and leather breeches. The back of his top was cut to make room for his wings. He folded his discarded clothing into a neat square.

"You should sleep, Samuel. My hound is out front. He keeps first watch. Samhain

approaches."

"Oh, I…well…okay? Goodnight, I guess." Sam said.

Sam unfolded himself as he stood and prepared for bed as well as he could with a Faerie man glaring at him from the corner of his room. Sam didn't have siblings. He hadn't had a sleepover since he was a kid. Sam gripped his horseshoe again, doubting he would sleep much at all. Before he turned off the light, he looked over to Gearóid one final time. The Reaper glared at the floor.

"Gearóid?"

"I don't understand."

"What?"

"Good…night…"

"Oh, Um, sleep…well?"

"I hope to." Gearóid replied, brow quirked.

"Right. I mean, it's just something we say when we go to sleep. Like, 'I hope you sleep well, too.'"

"Why should my sleep concern you? That is strange." The Faerie brushed a hand over a wing to smooth it.

"Lots of things are strange," Sam replied, half to himself, without thinking.

Gearóid chuckled.

"Good…night." He tried, very low.

Sam smiled and then, surprisingly, he slept.

TWELVE

"My son?" Titania called as she entered the Spring palace.

Water Sprites were making wine in the large foyer of her home. They moved slow and soft as wind over the now deep red fountain as it trickled and frothed. Titania lifted a willowy hand, willing a plump grape from its stalk and bringing it floating to her lips. She bit down and savoured the taste. Acres of flower-filled land could be seen through open, sun-drenched windows. The Springlands stretched out on either side of the mansion built into the thick trunk of an ancient tree. It had been a few days since the Spring Queen had opened her home to her people, as she did every Sabbat, yet the flood of bodies was already a heavy tide. Everywhere she looked she saw colour; her people poured out in multitudes, eager to serve their Queen. Samhain's approach had Faerie in a joyous uproar. Titania could not find her son in this vibrant crush.

Tarak was Titania's only child, a boy stolen away from old India when his mother—her human maid and friend during Titania's brief time in the mortal world—expired during childbirth. The Faerie King Oberon was sterile from birth and since Titania had vowed to be faithful, she had sacrificed the birthing of her own children. Titania stole the infant boy from his human life to honour his mother. Among the Spring flowers and vines, Titania began to cherish him. His human skin bled blue once his mortal blood became immortal. She had named him and she had protected him ever since.

"My Queen, Tarak lounges in the Reading Room," said a Dryad called Briae, Titania's favourite maid, as she ran up to her Queen.

The girl carried a crown of crystals in a willowy cage of branches. Titania nodded, inspecting the adornment. She allowed Briae to crown her and then to undress her. Like most Faeries, Titania was unashamed of her naked, glowing body. She basked in the whispered praise as her people fawned over her form. Soon a new silken robe rested on the Queen's

polished skin and glistening wings. Titania looked to her maid to thank her. As she did, she noted a frown had creased the otherwise flawless face. The Faerie girl couldn't meet her eye.

"Speak your mind, Dryad." Titania insisted.

Briae fell to the ground in a graceful bow, her face hovering over the floor. The Dryad lifted her arm, head still drooped, and exposed one slender wrist up to face Titania—the gesture for mercy.

"My Queen, it is your son, Tarak."

"What about my son?"

"He has known of my affection…my love, my Queen…for him for some time. Such devotion has been returned and while you were away your son…proposed we bond."

Titania's lips pressed thin. She looked around at everyone staring. Did they all know? Did they laugh at her behind her back? Titania's narrowed gaze saw the girl anew. Her gemstone green eyes, her sapphire flower petals embedded in taut skin, thick vines of hair. Her beauty now seemed to mock. Titania reached out for Briae and snatched a fistful of braids. The Dryad shrieked and her tears streamed. Titania's colourful people fled, screaming as she flung the maid up at the high ceiling. The Queen then called back the frail body to her rage-shaken hands.

"My Queen, he means everything to me! I mean to love him, just as you do!"

Clear, sap-like blood oozed from the Dryad's bottom lip. Titania stared at it, releasing her from her mind's grip.

"You will *never* love him as I do."

Tarak appeared as if from air, shielding the Dryad with his broad chest. Shadowy blue skin stretched like the night sky over his angry muscles. His lips pulled away from white, feline-sharp teeth as he growled.

"How dare you, Tarak! You should honour your mother and bow to your Queen. This creature has bewitched my son! I should have her killed."

"My Queen, please!" Briae sobbed.

The maid shrieked when Titania pointed a single long finger and pressed her head to the ground with invisible force.

"You're right, I should kill you myself."

Tarak snarled at Titania, teeth bared again, but she would not relent. He turned to the Dryad.

"Do not be afraid, Briae." He said to the girl, running fingers through her vines.

The Queen's concentration broke as she watched her son—so tender, so sure. The girl jumped up, free again of Titania's phantom grip, and rushed to hide behind Tarak.

"Stop this foolishness now, boy. She is common."

"I love her, my mother and my Queen. I will not relent. You cannot kill her without killing me!"

"Love? You speak like a human, Tarak! What do you know of love?"

"I know what my mother has taught me as she departs at her husband's bidding to his bed and spends several suns with him, all the while knowing that once her warmth has left it will be replaced by another!"

Titania gasped, struck in the secret places of her heart. The room echoed with his accusation.

"What has come over you, Tarak!" Titania whispered.

"Love, mother! She is knit within the fibres of my very soul."

"My foolish boy, my darling son. She is my lady's maid and you…you are the only

Prince of Faerie."

Titania's tears were threatening to fall and she didn't know why. The emotion infuriated her. She straightened her neck and jutted her jaw.

"Love me, mother, and so whomever I love." Tarak soothed.

The Dryad maid curled her fingers around his hand, drawing strength from his words. Titania watched with a fascination that almost drowned out her fiery anger. Finally, she broke the silence.

"Briae, you are my best maid. I will not relinquish my hold on you. Nor will my son, it seems. Will you be forever torn between two allegiances?"

"Forever, my Queen, if you will it."

Briae bowed low again, tapping her fingers to her forehead.

"If you break my son's tangible little heart, I will have you torn to many more splinters than could ever be re-planted, Dryad."

"Aye, my Queen." Briae somehow managed to bow lower. "I want nothing more than to please you and to be bonded in loyalty to your son."

The girl could not say it if it was not true.

"Leave me now. Both of you." Titania snapped.

Briae left, as she was told. As usual, Tarak disobeyed.

Titania ran her fingers over his jaw, caught between anger and adoration. She had to tilt her head back to look at him when he unfurled to his full height. He had grown into a handsome Faerie. Deep hazel eyes were set wide beneath long black lashes. His thick hair spilled an obsidian river down half the length of his back.

"I love you, Mum. I always will."

Titania understood little of his lingering human emotions, but she was his mother. She knew what words he needed to hear from her, even though she couldn't be certain if he could ever know how much she meant them.

"I love you, too. Foolish creature."

THIRTEEN

Bells chimed from Anna's cell phone. Her alarm clock. She rushed to shut it off before it woke the black dog.

Airina's massive hound slept like a lump of heavy meat at the foot of Anna's bed. Anna was told to make sure she woke herself, as her parents would be able to see the creature without Sight—and for humans, to look upon a black dog was as if one were looking at death. Airina was quite clear that though Anna wished her parents believed the truth, it was best for now if they didn't. With great effort Anna wound up the courage to prod the beast awake. He woke with a snarl, his broken-glass teeth glinting, and then looked at Anna with close-set, intelligent eyes. She bowed her head to him, as Airina had shown her. He made a gruff sort of noise before taking a graceful step off the bed. He leapt out the two-story window in one great bound. A short while later, as Anna was getting dressed, a bird flew in the window and broke apart until it was Airina.

"Hi." Anna waved, awkward and tired.

She had meant to sleep and the dog surprised her by being warm and comforting, but her mind had raced all night regardless until morning crept silent through her window.

"Hello, Bright." Airina smiled. "Gearóid will arrive with your human in a moment."

"Please call him Sam." Anna tried.

"I doubt I will." The Faerie answered.

"Please, Airina. He is so much more to me than my *human*."

Airina didn't answer. She was very quiet. Anna knew her silences better by now. The Magpie knew what Anna was thinking—had been thinking all through the night.

"So, you have come to understand at last."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You do, child. I know that you do. Speak. Ask."

Anna steeled herself, watching her reflection in the Magpie's obsidian eyes.

"I want to go to the Faerie world. For Samhain. And I want to bring Sam. Please."

Airina chuckled and Anna's courage faltered. The nagging voice in her own head was stronger than her doubts, though. *Bright…* it whispered, as it often did these days. This world was not her home. She had to know where she belonged.

"What do you know of Samhain, child?"

"I know that the veil is thin. That humans can cross over. That Faeries take them to the Faerie land."

"You are not human." Airina gave a wicked smile, eyes twinkling.

"Then take me back to Faerie!" Anna snapped.

Her chest was rising and falling. Airina was calm, but Anna felt a panic rising in her. What had she said? *Back* to Faerie? Gooseflesh pricked her skin.

Bright…

Airina was saying something, but Anna missed it.

"What?"

"Listen, brightling. Listen to me. I will take you to Faerie if that is what you seek, but it is dangerous. You must do as I say. Any deviation could get us both killed."

Anna was silent, her breathing shallow. After a long pause she finally nodded. This is what she wanted. She had to go to Faerie. She had to know for once and for all where it was she belonged.

Airina watched her and Anna couldn't comprehend the terror that crossed the Faerie's face. It clashed with her feral smile. Finally, the Magpie spoke again.

“Chaos. I knew you would bring us chaos.”

FOURTEEN

Queen Maab du Corbeau sat on her throne of dead trees woven through with bones and ice. She reigned over the overgrown thorns and slick frozen lakes of the Winterland. An ash-green Pixie fed her small hearts. Maab's dark eyes turned to look at him. She saw herself through his mind's eye. Her beauty was savage, yet delicate, a jagged knife carved from ice. Maab was chosen well for the Winter Court and she knew it.

A Gnome came up to her, bowing and crawling at once. His blueish-purple skin bubbled and oozed with sores. His flat teeth ground together from the cold. He was greedy—as was his nature—and cupped his hands together in a defenceless beg, desperate for a scrap of magic. He offered no information to sell, no one to betray, just his stinking body and upturned hands. Maab smiled as she burrowed deep into his mind, forcing him to step closer to her lazily outstretched hand. When the creature was close enough, she plunged her fingers deep into his chest. The Winter Queen smirked as she removed his still beating heart. She placed it with the others in the bowl.

"Morwin!" Maab called to her favourite Kelpie.

The skeletal black horse nuzzled the corpse with his fleshy nose before devouring it in a few grinding bites. She laughed, her bloody hand staining her petticoats. Soon, though, the Faerie Queen was frowning, lost to her thoughts again.

"The Prince is engaged to be bonded." Maab hissed to herself between her teeth.

She had heard the news as it rippled through Faerie like a wave breaking on a parched shore. Titania's stolen child was engaged *to a maid*. Maab once entertained a notion that she would win Tarak's affection. She had told no one, not even her dearest friend, his mother. Maab still remembered when Tarak was brought home to the Springlands in Titania's arms. Maab wasn't a Queen yet then, just a reckless young Nymph with a dangerous affinity for

telepathy. But when the Winter did call to her, she had allowed herself, in secret, to adore the only Prince of Faerie. It was a childish infatuation, never anything close to a romance, and yet the rejection still stung.

A snowstorm billowed around her. Maab tried to calm it but, like her mind, it ran rampant. Happiness, for Tarak and her favourite Queen Sister. Bitterness, to think that a common maid should have him. There was more—the dark knowledge that of course she could have him. Maab, a Royal, with her set of skills, could have anything she wanted. Yet Maab knew what it was to be bonded to someone by force. She would not wish such a fate on Tarak—even if it meant her own happiness.

The Pixie fed her another heart. The warm blood of the gnome had made the rest all the sweeter. Maab, in her castle of snow and stone, heard the echoed whispers and fantasies of her people. Everyone wanted to know if Titania would allow it. Some said she almost killed the girl and might try again. The gossip reverberated until it all sounded like the buzzing of flies.

Maab felt sick, angry, sad.

“Morwin.” She called again, curling her fingers at him.

The Kelpie snorted and shuffled his feet before transforming into the brawny body of a man. His silver-black skin and red eyes remained.

“My Queen, Maab?” Morwin asked, bowing.

“Seek company for me. I dislike this bleak atmosphere so close to Samhain. 'Tis a happy occasion, is it not?”

“I would keep my Queen company.” Morwin bowed lower.

He swept the back of his hand gently against his jaw before he extended it to her—a gesture of offering. His closely shorn hair and muscled body gave him the appearance of an

ancient gladiator. A scar from an old mêlée stood out on his chest. Maab rose. She shooed away the Pixie who disappeared with unconcealed gratitude.

Stand, Maab commanded Morwin.

He trembled as he involuntarily obeyed. Maab stood as well, and long flowing rivers of hair spilled over her bare shoulders. Her heavy wings expanded to their full capacity, a gift from her husband. Maab alone was the only one of her Nymph kin to fly with wings. She flapped them gently, like a vulture landing on a carcass.

The Winter Queen hovered inches from Morwin's face. He didn't flinch, looking into her all-consuming eyes with his glowing red ones. Maab rewarded him with a kiss as soft as melted snow. She shivered with delight when she felt his gentle gasp.

"I do not think I would like you to be a part of this carnage. Not tonight." Maab said when she was finished. She trailed the tip of her nose against the side of his neck.

"Yes, my Queen."

"Fetch others, then." She demanded, letting him go.

He nodded, shifting back into a horse. Maab knew where he would go. The Summerlands were the best place to capture raw Fae. They were all but lawless and had no one to miss them. Morwin galloped away. Maab watched him until he disappeared over the horizon.

Then, alone, she cried.

FIFTEEN

"Do you still have on the shoe?" Anna asked from the passenger side of Sam's car.

Sam fidgeted, but he lifted his top to where the rusty shoe pressed against his bare abdomen, held in place by the waistline of his jeans. It looked uncomfortable.

"Gearóid thinks there is a way to make it into like a ring or something so that I don't have to lug this thing around everywhere."

Anna nodded, and Sam took a steadying breath. They both gathered themselves before they opened the car doors and walked in to school hand in hand.

Anna was used to Seeing. Now she also understood that the intersecting leys her town was built on were the easiest ways for Faeries to travel between realms. Centuries of memorised paths had seeped into their instinct, like migrating birds. On top of that, Airina had told her that Faeries fed from high emotion. They gathered where there was a lot of emotional activity—hospitals, concerts, schools, funerals.

Anna had tried to prepare Sam for the spectacle, but the magic of Faeries was indescribable. Sam's eyes were soft and wide as he and Anna stepped through the door. He lifted a hand and raked it through his hair, his mouth parted. Anna guided him through the halls. It was like pushing a small boat through water thick with reeds.

"Sometimes the horseshoe shifts and I can't see them. And then they're there again. They're so…God, Anna, are there usually this many? They're…they're all so different."

"Sam, stop looking at them. They can see you too, remember."

Anna patted his arm to anchor him back. She knew what it was like, this living between two worlds, but she had never had to navigate someone through it before.

"Right, right. I'm sorry." He averted his gaze. Sam looked at her instead, his bright eyes no less starry. "They're so…"

"Yeah, I know. They're beautiful. Magical."

"Exactly." He kissed her.

Sam and Anna turned a corner to find Becca waiting for them before class. Anna grabbed Sam's hand and rushed towards her. She had a dozen missed calls from Becca over the weekend, but Anna had wanted to wait to tell her in person, to see her face. None of the past few days had felt real at first, then too real. Now she needed her best friend. Anna felt the muscles in her cheeks strain to contain her smile.

"Hey!" Anna exclaimed as they got closer.

"Right, so, both of you out of school at the same time?" Becca glared, looking down at their entwined hands. "Then you come back even more loved up than before? Didn't elope over the weekend, did you?"

"If we had planned to elope, you'd be the first one I called." Anna laughed.

"You didn't call at all, though, did you? You didn't text. You both ignored me *all weekend*."

Anna felt her stomach drop and her face warm. Sam was too distracted by all the things he wasn't supposed to be seeing. Anna kicked at him. Becca's face was blotchy red, her arms crossed.

"It's my fault. I promise to call next time, Becca. I promise. I'm sorry." Anna tried to hug her, but Becca shrugged away.

"Next time?"

"Anna has gone to the dark side now. Skipping school will probably be a regular thing." Sam winked.

Both Anna and Becca glared at him. He put up his hands in surrender.

"Really, where were you two?" Becca asked, icy.

Anna went still, her fingernails were digging into the flesh of her palms. She felt the dry rush of her breath against her lips. Sam nodded at her, encouraging, but something in Becca's eyes made her hesitate for a moment.

"Bec…" Anna looked around and beckoned, directing them all to a quieter corner. Then she whispered. "I spoke to a Faerie."

Becca's mouth dropped open.

"Are you kidding me?"

"Well, two. I—"

"Are you *kidding* me?" Becca repeated. Her blonde brows met in a scowl.

"It's…complicated. There's a lot going on." Anna didn't understand Becca's expression. "They say I'm a Faerie, too. I don't know. It's all been a blur. Sam—"

"Anna, stop! Faeries? What, are you like a Faerie princess or something?" Becca laughed but the noise was harsh. She flipped her long hair behind her back. "You aren't actually lying to my face about ditching me to be with your boyfriend and claiming it's because of *Faeries.*"

"It's true, Bec." Sam tried.

"Shut up, Sam! You'd agree with anything she said. You know what, forget it. Don't tell me where you guys were. I honestly don't even care."

Anna swallowed hard as her heart pounded.

"Becca," Anna croaked, her voice failing her, "don't you…don't you believe me?"

"Look, we were kids when you first told us about all that stupid Faerie stuff. What was I going to say? Now, oh, come on, Anna! Don't look at me like that. There's no way I'm the

bad guy for not believing in *Faeries*! I let you talk about them to your hearts content for years, but I'm sick of it. It's time to grow up."

"Bec?"

"Faeries. Are. Not. Real!"

Anna stared at Becca's back as she walked, oblivious, through the body of a moss-covered Faerie. A sensation like falling in a never-ending hole overcame Anna as she watched her best friend leave. Part of her childhood burnt away to ash. Sam tugged on Anna's arm. The students were pressing into the classroom they stood in front of, spilling like water through the door. Anna felt the tide of bodies and wished she could drift away.

"Becca…" Anna exhaled as her heart broke, barely enough breath in her lungs to whisper.

Realisation sunk like a blunt knife and twisted through the marrow of her bones. Becca had never believed in her.

SIXTEEN

Sam held Anna's small hand in his own. He couldn't imagine what she must be thinking. Her eyes were vacant and her mouth was pressed closed. He wanted to comfort her, but today Sam was distracted. He had to work hard to avert his gaze from the beautiful creatures who inhabited the hallways. Some were small, scurrying like flower-adorned mice. Others towered at least a foot over him with bright coloured skin to match their wings. Some didn't have wings at all, but he could still they were Faeries from their eyes, their skin, their otherworldly grace. His favourites were the strong, wolf-like Fuinseoga. The wood they used as protective armour was polished to a mirror shine, stained dark, and layered almost like dragon scales. Anna had told him they were warriors for the Royals. Royals like her.

Sam was surprised to see any Fuinseoga today and wondered if they had congregated near this particular ley for some reason. Six were flanking two Faeries now, coming towards him and Anna. The other creatures around them parted like oil dropped in water. One of the two guarded Faeries was a woman with smooth silvery skin and black eyes. Her gaze had a fierceness in it like an animal. The other was a green man. His jaw was tense and his wings looked powerful, not quite like the delicate wings of the other Faeries. *He* looked powerful, Sam realised, as he stood straighter. He looked like a king.

The King of the Faeries. Oberon.

Sam's fists clenched. Oberon's skin was the colour of moss and the texture of velvet, his body was lean and tall. His enormous wings were outstretched, hovering over the oblivious mortals like smoke. Sam forgot to breathe. His mind was spinning away from him and his chest heaved to catch up.

"Sam? Sam, what's—"

"It's him…"

"Who…"

Sam knew when Anna had seen him.

"Sam. Stop staring, Sam." She gasped. "They'll notice. Please, Sam!"

But he couldn't stop. Anger flooded his veins. The Royals were moving slow, a leisurely violence to their movements. They were arguing and paid him no attention.

"My husband, surely you do not mean to prohibit me from such sport?" The silver Faerie snarled. "I never took you for a hypocrite, my dear Oberon."

Ice crystals formed on her eyelashes and at the fullest parts of her mouth. It was obvious that she was the Winter Queen, Maab.

"Do not mock me, Queen." Oberon snapped back. "You have had your fun these thousands of moons, and I have allowed it. Brazenly stealing from the Summer Court those wild Fae for your afternoon whims is unacceptable. They are not yours to dispose of. They may not have a Queen now, but they do still have a King."

"You ignore my jibe. Is it not true that many of your bedfellows have been plucked from the ripe, Queen-less Summerlands? Why should I withhold *my* desires when *you* cannot contain yours?" She giggled, but it was a cold and haunting sound, and her enormous blue wings shivered with her delight.

"You will learn your place, Maab du Corbeau!" Oberon roared.

The Faeries bordering the hall retreated. Maab bowed her head to her King.

"My curse is mine to bear, as you well know, Nymph. *You* will not steal Fae from other lands besides your own. Do you understand?"

"Yes, King Oberon." Replied Maab, head still bowed.

"Very well, love." He yielded, looking at her with an expression of such softness that his vivid anger seemed forgotten. Sam struggled to follow their lightning quick dance of

emotions. “Where might I find my Titania?”

“She is locked away with preparations for Samhain as well as her Indian boy’s wedding. She will not leave the Spring realm.”

Maab’s devious smile seemed to creep back at the edges, but she held her tongue. A horse—an actual horse! — sauntered to Maab through the narrow human hallways. The Winter Queen mounted the back of her steed as if to go but Oberon grabbed her hand.

“I will require you in my chambers tonight.” Oberon demanded.

Queen Maab’s face wiped clean of expression.

“King, the Winterlands have their own preparations for the impending Samhain. It fast approaches. The Queen Morgana Le Faye began her work early in the Autumn realm. I am sure she awaits your beckon.”

“Her then,” Oberon agreed but his green eyes shifted now as if embarrassed to be overheard.

Sam tried not to show his contempt.

“Your Changeling Queen, Morgana, will come if called, but she will not go happily to your bed.” Maab said slowly, like coaxing a child.

“None come happily!” Oberon snapped.

Maab bowed her head again. A look of something like pity crossed her face, something like fear as well, but then she steeled herself. When she spoke again it was so low Sam almost missed it.

“Then perhaps they should not be made to come at all. Of course, my King, my Queen Sister, Titania...”

“Go now, Maab! Take your meddling elsewhere!” There was a glint of something sharp in his mouth. Teeth, Sam realised. Serrated teeth.

Maab reared her horse, her face passive, defeated, and left without another word.

"Sam, let's go!" Anna was whispering, clutching his arm, but he was caught in the web this otherworld had woven. She had to drag him away.

This was not his world; he knew that now. He didn't belong to it. Now Sam realised that he had only two options—follow Anna or lose her forever.

Summer was not far enough away.

SEVENTEEN

When Anna woke up she realised it was going to be one of those balmy Autumn days that reminded her of the summer nights she missed. The crisp, earthy smell of fallen leaves enchanted her. Then she checked her phone. Becca still hadn't called or texted. Anna raised a finger to message her friend. Unable to find anything to say, she texted Sam instead.

They met for ice cream at the local place before it closed for the colder months. They ate on the curb side, vanilla-chocolate swirl and rainbow sprinkles for both of them, before getting up and walking to the nearby park. Gearóid and Airina accompanied them as they searched for shade amongst the dense treeline. Anna forced her thoughts away from the confusion and hurt she felt, unwilling to be scrutinised by Airina's knowing, but her determined quiet was drawing the Magpie's attention anyway.

"Gearóid said something last night that confused me," Sam's voice interrupted Anna's attempts to guard her thoughts.

"What did he say, human?" Airina asked.

"Well, he mentioned that when you two got married—I mean, *bonded*—that you were only six moons old."

"Yes," Airina smiled, wistful.

"Does that mean you count your time by full moons?" Sam inquired.

"We do not need time in Faerie, only in the human realm is it such a commodity. But yes, we can judge spans of time by phases of the moon, by harvests, by seasons. Humans once knew such things."

"Okay, but then doesn't that mean that you were just six human months old when you were bonded?" Sam asked then.

"Yes, well, six moons for Faerie are not the same as six moons for a human." Airina

laughed. “It takes us around two moons to reach our physical maturity. Once we hit such a time, we stop aging all together.”

“Animals do not grow as humans do.” Gearóid added, dragging a hand over his hound’s gleaming fur. “Though we speak and walk like you, we are not human.”

“Is it possible that I stopped aging already, then?” Anna asked.

“Your body is like a human. When your mother left you, your Faerie blood adapted so that you would remain hidden in the human world.” Airina clarified. “You won’t stop aging until your throne calls to you.”

“Oh.” Anna sighed.

When your mother left you, Airina had said. Anna tried to hide the twist of pain inside her.

“Do you miss being a child?” Sam said to the Faeries, his hand reaching for Anna’s. “Do you even remember it?”

“No.” Gearóid and Airina answered together.

Anna smiled at Sam. When childhood lasted such a short time it must leave little room for nostalgia. She looked down at her small brown hands, sticky from melted ice cream.

“Why would Faeries ever want me for a Queen?” Anna asked.

Her eyes went wide and her cheeks flushed. She hadn’t meant to verbalise her thought.

“They could do worse than you for a Queen, girl. Foolish, unruly Summer Fae. It’s a shame my Queen has been forbidden them for sport.” Gearóid grunted as he laughed.

Anna was taken aback. Airina glared at her husband. He shrugged, then took up staring into the trees.

“Aren’t they just like you and Gearóid?” Sam asked.

"The Summer Fae have grown very wild and rambunctious these few thousand moons." Airina explained. "They have no Queen to show loyalty to, so they spend their time throwing endless parties to feed their hunger for their bacchanalian urges. The King loves the women the Summer produces and turns a blind eye to much of their more harmless annoyances, but they are not well loved in our world."

"Why?" Sam asked.

"They are selfish, immature things. Only ever taking. Unsustainable. They feed on revelry, but they have no real sense of responsibility or limitation. Worse are those that venture to the human realms. They are brazen and greedy, desperate to be worshipped. They throw on a glamour and seduce humans. They beget children and leave them to the wilds of humanity without remorse, lost and purposeless. They play nasty tricks for their own mindless merriment."

"What am I supposed to do? Why can't Oberon look after them?" Anna asked, her voice rising.

It wasn't just that she didn't want to be Queen…she couldn't. She had no idea how to oversee anything. She didn't even like to do group projects; how could she be a Queen of unruly Faeries?

"Oberon has done his part as King to protect them, but all Faerie knows that once they have a Queen they will become for Faerie what they were born to be. You will be their salvation."

"Why?!" Anna shouted, overwhelmed. "Why are you so certain? Why me? I can't…I'm not…"

"Faerie calls to the Queen the realm needs." Airina answered. Her steady gaze bore into Anna. "Only Faerie can know why you have been chosen, but you *have* been chosen."

"You speak as if the land is alive." Anna responded. The trees around them made music in the autumn breeze.

"Of course the land is alive." Airina smiled as she spoke. "We are all connected to it. The Summer Faeries have ties to the land they were born to, and to their King, but they need a Queen. They are to be your people, Bright."

She couldn't speak but she knew Airina could hear her anyway.

"We will need to protect Samuel for Samhain," Gearóid said, eyes ever scanning.

"Why? What do you mean?" Anna asked.

Airina held up a willowy hand to hush Gearóid before he could speak.

"Bright, I will speak plain. Summer Fae derive their life nourishment from… well from pleasure… Sometimes harmless, other times…"

"I don't understand."

"A human child will eat sweets until they are ill. They must be taught what is right to eat and how much."

"And the difference between permission and theft." Gearóid concluded, grim.

Airina glowered but Anna could hear the threat in his words. To a human the Faeries would seem like gods. How easy it was to mistreat something that worshipped you.

"W-will Sam be safe around them?" Anna asked.

"As long as he doesn't eat or drink *anything*." Gearóid warned for the tenth time at least.

Sam nodded his head, though. His face was pale.

"Do not worry, Bright." Airina smiled. "I have an idea."

"What idea?" Sam asked.

"Hold out your arm." Airina replied.

Gearóid grinned and Anna had to look away.

Sam did as he was told, holding his forearm up. Before Anna had a chance to blink, Gearóid had bitten down into the tender part of Sam's flesh. The Magpie smiled as he bit. Sam thrashed out of pure instinct and the Reaper pulled away. His teeth left behind a broken half-moon. The horseshoe at Sam's waist slid to the ground with a thunk as Sam jumped back. His eyes went round as he continued to stare at Gearóid and then Anna understood.

"I…I can still See." Sam gasped.

"Yes," Airina said, laughing as she licked blood from her husband's lips. "We can invite humans to revel with us on Samhain, but we must brand the ones we wish to keep for ourselves. The others will not touch you. Mind the Royals, though. If they take a liking to you, it is not our place to interfere."

Anna felt a strange twang of something she couldn't put to words. Her head was fuzzy again. Full of blood and wings and birthright. Though she did not speak, Airina's knowing gaze felt heavy on her flushed face.

EIGHTEEN

Titania fidgeted, bobbing her knee and twisting the many rings around her long slender fingers. She kept her hands from touching her bonding ring, but that did not do anything for her awareness of its presence. Her mind seethed.

The Seelie Day Queen was being fitted for her new crown by a shy Faerie girl, a pale yellow brightling who seemed to swoon at Titania's every glance. The Faerie was too afraid of mussing her Queen's hair to perform the proper measurements. Annoyed, Titania batted the trembling girl away until she was alone.

She needed to announce the bonding of her son to her maid. The thought of it still somewhat exasperated her, but she cared for Tarak and wanted him to be happy. Tarak told her this was what it was like to love. She doubted it—it felt more like begrudged acceptance. She was even more irritated to find that rumour of the engagement had already flitted around Faerie like a flame to dry wood.

Titania held her arms tight to her ribs. Her son had fallen in love with her maid, right under her nose, while all of Faerie watched her cling to an unfaithful King. Even at this moment Titania knew Oberon was likely bedding whoever took his current fancy. The Spring Queen was ashamed. Was she fit to rule, to mother, for anything…if she was not fit to be loved?

Titania found she often daydreamed of past innocent encounters from before she was his Queen. His green eyes cool on her flushed face. When Oberon looked at her now, when he sought out her company, he was only ever half there. Her husband was not hers alone.

She remembered the nights she fought with Oberon over her son. Those thousands of moons ago. Why had she wasted so much time, she wondered, hoping he would change? Even then, the day she brought Tarak home, Oberon had only ever cared about himself. He

had coveted Hippolyta in her marriage bed to Theseus. He had played games with mortals and her.

Tarak was a man now, loved and loving. Yet still Oberon made a fool of her. Titania was still enamoured with an ass.

An icy giggle and three knocks at the door drew Titania's attention away from her inner turmoil. Maab had come to visit. Titania hiked up her skirts of organza and berry-dyed lace to greet her. Maab would displace this ill mood with the fun ferocity that Titania adored. The Spring Queen pulled at the glass rose set in the large oak door.

She found Maab indeed. The Nymph was covered in a white gown which made her silver skin and blue wings all the chillier. Her lips were painted a bloody red, her body dusted with snow and ice. Titania's face fell.

Beside the Winter Queen stood the trembling maid, Briae. Titania had not permitted the Dryad in her presence. The sight of her felt to Titania like a knifepoint dug into a fresh wound. The maid wore a half-finished wedding gown with pins and tucks still in it. Maab had obviously stolen her from the Royal dressmaker.

"M-my Queen, Titania," Briae curtsied impossibly low despite the needles in the dress. Her vines dusted the floor as she bowed her head.

"Maab, this is cruel—even for you." Titania sulked, ignoring Briae.

She turned on her heel from them, dragging her skirts with her.

"Now Titania," Maab clicked her tongue, "the girl has done nothing wrong but love your handsome boy."

"She doesn't know what love is," Titania said, moving to recline on a plush purple sofa in her chambers. "She's Faerie; a lower Fae. Her loyalties will shift like a tide. Tarak is foolish."

“Tarak has lived quite long enough to know his own heart by now, my Sister. How many human centuries old is the boy, again?” Maab asked rhetorically, pulling Briae from the floor by her pointed chin.

A surge of protectiveness came over Titania, but she bedded it back down. She knew Maab would not hurt the girl. She hoped.

“Stop your games, Maab.”

“Stop your pouting, Queen!”

“Maab!”

“Briae is a loyal and caring servant. Why would she not carry such natural traits to bonded life?” Maab continued. “Come, take your maid back. Did you think a well-tailored dress would give her the pretence that all is well, that you have forgiven her for stealing your boy’s heart? I hear rumours she sobs almost every night in her chambers for her beloved Queen who was once like a mother to her. I know how you so hate rumours, Titania.”

Briae could not meet Titania’s gaze. Titania, however, did look at Briae. She saw the misery that aged the pretty face. Titania knew Maab loved nothing so much as a quarrel. For her Sister to defend Briae spoke well of the Dryad’s character.

“Come here, Briae.” Titania said.

Shock registered on the delicate face, but Briae stood and walked to meet her Queen. Titania swallowed her pride and wrapped her arms around the girl’s shoulders. Briae sobbed in an instant. Titania held her for a moment and then pushed her back with her fingertips. Things had changed between them that could not be unchanged, but Maab was right. Titania had been childish. The girl was not at fault for her Queen’s foolish heart.

“The Winter Queen knows me better than I know myself. Wounds that are older than you have been opened. Forgive me for taking my anger out on you. I will never touch you in

anger again."

Briae fell to the floor and first touched her head with a fingertip, then the space above her heart. Loyalty.

"I love him, my Queen. With everything I am. I will not dishonour you."

The Dryad fluttered away after bowing again to both Queens, tears washing her emerald eyes. Titania turned to Maab with an annoyed glare.

"Oh, my Queen Sister. Do not look at me so. You give me chills." Maab laughed, rustling her wings in delight. "You knew you could not both adore and hate the girl forever."

Maab smiled as contented as a fat cat with its paw on a mouse tail.

"I should hang you by your long hair, Nymph. Or rip off your bartered wings." Titania threw back, pouring two large goblets of wine.

"Oh, Sister." She pretended to chide, but already she seemed bored.

Titania knew that Maab being a Nymph—the most erratic of all Faeries—had a difficult time lingering on one emotion. Even Titania, a Sylph—Faeries known for their airy nature—had always had a hard time keeping up with her, but that was part of their fun.

"She's a sun-sweetened Dryad. Whatever bade her to rally with you?"

"I saw the girl at her fitting and all but dragged her here."

"I'm surprised you didn't kill her yourself. I remember how you adored my Tarak once." Titania watched as Maab's expression seemed to darken.

"He is a handsome changeling boy. We grew up together."

"You're seven Winters older, Nymph."

"Only just." Maab grinned.

Titania narrowed her eyes. Maab rolled hers.

"Yes, alright, at first I was…annoyed…"

"You killed over fifty Fae in a single evening, I heard."

"And all that blood reminded me that your boy is too…clean." Maab's teeth glinted as she smiled again. "Still, I had to stir some sort of trouble. You know how jealous I get on Samhain. Our husband always picks his love to be by his side."

"It was not I who shared his bed last night, Maab." Titania said, sipping her wine as she stared at her new crown.

Maab's mischievous smile left her face. Her oldest friend. Her Queen Sister. Titania would wear the crown tonight beside Oberon at the festival, half-fitted. What did it matter? She felt its fallacy like a hole in her chest. A single hot tear rolled down her cheek. The path of its fall seemed to burn the pale skin. The goblet trembled against the rings on her fingers, making sad music.

"I went because I was called. And I left at first light, I promise you. His embrace is tender, but false, Titania. His mind is a mess of thunderstorms, except when he thinks of you."

Titania let herself lean into Maab. She could not hate her. Faerie Law bound them to the same man, but it also bound them uniquely to each other. No, she could not hate Maab nor Morgana. It was Oberon who demanded his appetites be met. Yet, try as she might, she could not hate him either. She had loved him so long she had forgotten how it felt to know peace. To sleep without wondering if he wanted her. To wake without wondering who he woke beside. How long had it been, her captivity, her enslavement to false hope? All of Faerie knew of her centuries-old unrequited love. Every sliver of her broken heart belonged to him.

"This loneliness has become a sickness, Maab." Titania said after a sup of wine. "I've

long lost my King. Now I am losing my son. This disease is consuming me. If he had a heart for me, he would find a way to cure himself of his curse."

Maab didn't speak. Instead, Titania felt the cold arms of her Queen Sister encircle her. In that silent place of understanding, in the warmth of Winter, the Spring Queen wept.

NINETEEN

Samhain.

Halloween.

Anna felt her heartbeat thrum an erratic rhythm in the constricted cage of her ribs. She forced a steadying breath, but her throat was as dry as fallen leaves in a fire. Anna had had the entire day to worry, and she had. Ever since she had voiced the desire out loud, Anna had thought of little else besides getting to Faerie. The impossibility of her request and the strange reality of it being granted struck her this morning like a bolt of lightning to the chest. Today was the day. Anna was going to Faerie.

"Bright," Airina said, sighing.

The Faerie woman crossed her legs in her thigh-high boots. The Magpie had been watching the sun set through Anna's open window. A matte black corset covered a matching tunic. The ends of a cord around her throat hung down to her waist. Her hair was a wild thunderstorm of feathers.

"Bright, be aware of your mind. It betrays you."

"How can my own mind betray me?"

"A mind has more power than you know. Fear is power, but so is hope. One day you will know that you are and have always been a Queen."

"I—" Anna started, taken aback by the Magpie's words.

"It is time to go." Airina said.

She stretched upwards and her red wings melted away in shadow and glamour. In their place were massive things, dark and feathered, like a huge replica of her Magpie wings.

Anna and Airina both turned when they heard a low whistle. Gearóid crouched at the window. A smile stretched across his mouth. Anna had never seen him so happy. He gave an

appreciative click of his tongue at Airina and she crossed the room to him. He met her with a kiss.

"Good wings." Gearóid smiled, running his hand over the black and white feathers.

The Reaper was so tender with his wife. Anna was reminded of Sam, his cool hand on her warm thigh.

"Bright." Airina warned. Anna blushed.

"I will guard my thoughts in Faerie, okay! I didn't think I needed to be on guard now."

Airina glared her disapproval. Anna looked away.

"Happy Halloween…?" Gearóid attempted.

"Blessed Samhain," Anna tried back.

Gearóid graced her with a smaller smile than the one he gave his wife. Then his head gave a birdlike twitch and he turned back to Airina, helping her out the window.

Once she was alone, Anna put on her angel costume. Becca had picked out the outfit a few weeks ago, as she did every year. They always matched.

Anna picked up her phone. A single bitten fingernail adorned in chipped varnish hovered over the screen above Becca's name. The jagged edge of the nail had bled where her teeth cut it down. It taunted her; it was so ordinary, so human. Nothing like Airina's long, sharp, immaculate nails. Anna didn't call. She took a dozen photos of her outfit, selected the best one, and sent it to Becca instead. Then she put the phone facedown and finished adjusting her halo.

When she was done, she covered her eyes with brown contacts. Anna stared at her reflection and her breath caught. For the first time she saw herself how so many wanted to see her. They didn't want her strange, blue eyes. They wanted her Black or white, not both. Neither. They wanted a girl they thought they could understand, not someone they had to take

the time to figure out. Was this brown-eyed girl the friend Becca wanted; the girlfriend Sam deserved? She didn't even know who this girl in the mirror was.

"Anna! You look lovely!" Her mother gushed as she opened the front door for her.

Anna smiled, hugging her a second too long. Her mother let go first.

"Going trick-or-treating, baby?"

"Mum," Anna laughed, trying not to let her anxiousness show, "you know we're too old for trick-or-treating. We're going to a party."

"A party? I don't remember any—"

"I told you two weeks ago, Mum. I'm going to be late."

"Alright, alright, Anna. Be good! You gonna spend the night with Becca?"

"Oh, um, yeah, yes. I need to go, okay? I love you."

"I love you, too, sweetie."

Anna kissed her mother and then ran out the door, swallowing her anxiety and letting the cold night air soothe her guilty face. Tonight she couldn't afford to be human and scared. Tonight she would have to be Faerie.

TWENTY

Sam tried not to think about all that waited for him on the other side of the front door. He stared at it, drawn in by the ordinary white paint, how the grain of the wood showed through the layers. Trying not to think of course only made him think more.

Samhain. Faeries. Anna. *Bright.*

Sam took his cape from the stair railing and tied it around his neck before pulling up the hood. Gearóid had warned them. They would have to blend into the crowd as much as possible so as not to draw the Faerie King's attention. No one was supposed to know who Anna was yet. Sam didn't fancy his chances against Oberon if he had to defend her. An image of a nature documentary came to Sam's mind, one where a larger, stronger lion was opposed by a smaller one.

Oberon.

Maybe there wouldn't be a fight. Sam felt his jaw clench as his mind conjured the image of Anna in the King's arms, Anna smiling into his face, Anna sighing his name as he…

Sam shook his head to scatter the thought. When he turned around he realised his mother was watching him.

"You going as some kind of vampire or something, kid?" Her eyebrow was cocked as she chuckled, trying to move his hood back.

Sam gently batted her hand away.

"Mum, I have to go. I'm going to be late picking up Anna."

"Don't be so dramatic, Sam. She's across the street! Ugh, teenagers." His mother rolled her eyes at him. "Everything is the end of the world with you kids."

She emptied a container of individual wrapped candies into a plastic bowl and set it by

the door before flicking on the porch light.

"It's just she asked me to make sure I was on time, and—"

"Go on, then, Casanova! When will you be home?" She asked over her shoulder as she adjusted the fake cobwebs on the door.

He knew she was ready to lay back on the couch with a bottle of wine, the second bag of candies she had stashed in the kitchen, and a marathon of horror films.

"I'll be in a little after midnight, I think."

"Be safe, Sammy." Her face dipped under his hood and she kissed his cheek. "Promise me."

She looked at him, her brown eyes soft and gentle. Could he leave her? Could he go to Faerie, follow Anna, forever? Sam's mother tilted her head as she looked back at him.

"Yeah, I promise, Mum. Love you."

"Love you too."

When the door was closed behind him the night felt darker.

Sam walked on to Anna's house. He twisted the ring he now wore on his thumb as he walked. Gearóid had taken the horseshoe to a kind of Faerie that could handle iron for a short while. Sam tried not to imagine the pain it had once caused the Kelpie who could not. He didn't need the ring tonight though. The grotesque wound on his forearm throbbed as if in response to his thoughts.

Sam made it around the corner to Anna's front yard and pulled down his hood. Gearóid and Airina stood on the grass, swaying and holding on to each other. Sam followed their gazes and watched as Anna said goodbye to her parents. She ran down to the Faeries but when she saw Sam she ran over to him instead. Sam felt his chest swell. Her feathered white costume wings fluttered behind her. Anna leapt at him, clasping her arms around his neck. He

kissed the top of her head, breathing in the coconut-sweet scent of her hair, before releasing her. She slipped her warm fingers to his tattoo. Sam's stomach pulsed with butterflies.

"Come on. We don't want to miss the procession. We've already missed the wine ceremony," Airina pouted, shaking her great black wings.

From the corner of his eye, Sam saw Gearóid take out his knife and prick the tip of his finger. He offered his wife a taste of his blood. Airina touched her tongue to his finger with a greedy smile.

"We're ready." Anna squirmed beside Sam.

"Are you, brightling?" Airina laughed, much improved by her husband's blood. Her black wings beat the air.

Anna's hand trembled as it fit into his. The cold night wind whipped around them. Airina and Gearóid encircled them, wings outstretched, vibrating with anticipation, circling like vultures. The hairs raised on the Sam's neck.

"How do we get to Faerie?" Sam asked, trying to fight the feeling in his chest that told him to run away.

He didn't hear the answer. Instead his ears rang and the smell of fire and smoke enveloped him. Sam felt his body being ripped, pulled far, far away into the depths of something great and ancient and powerful.

TWENTY-ONE

All Anna could remember just before her body was ripped away from human space and time was an impish grin and black eyes. The smell of fire coated her skin and mouth. She took a wobbling step and felt her calves tickled by tall grass. Anna looked around. In the sky there was no longer a deep tinge of blue. This sky was a deep forest green. Anna could see the stars in spectacular clarity, as if every bright point in the universe was hovering just above her outstretched fingertips. Joy flooded through her. She felt the familiar presence of Sam as he approached and she reached out to grasp his hand. Anna watched as the hounds joined their masters, their tongues lolling. The Magpies wore giddy smiles. Like the stars, they both were in sharp focus. Anna sucked in a shallow breath at their unfiltered beauty.

"Where are we?" Anna asked without meaning to.

She knew they were in Faerie. The very air screamed of another world.

"We're somewhere close to Ireland, but I can smell water. Hy-Brasil perhaps. In Faerie this place is known as Summer. The Samhain festival always begins in the grasslands of Summer and ends in the woods of Autumn." Airina answered.

"It feels so *good*!" Anna exclaimed, unable to control her laughter.

She slapped a hand to her mouth. The warmth she carried with her year-round was alive and twisting through her veins. She closed her eyes and breathed deep. How long had she been holding her breath? All her life?

"Where is everyone?" Sam asked. He was staring at the sky.

"Nearby." Airina replied. "We'll walk there. It'll draw less attention."

Anna turned to the star-dazzled Sam. She secured his hood and exposed his bite from Gearóid. She told herself she was protecting him, but she also needed the excuse to touch him. A rush of adrenaline and desire surged through her, teasing beneath her skin. She

wanted to roll in the warm grass with him, his lips on hers. When Sam's gaze fell to her she saw that he wanted her, too. He smiled.

"A gnome." Gearóid whispered, breaking Anna's train of thought.

The bright starlight glinted off the Reaper's sharp teeth. He pushed Sam and Anna behind him. Peering around his shoulder, Anna saw a small creature hidden low in the grass. It was hard to make out in the dark, but what she could see—oozing sores, pointed ears, and strange, blocky teeth—were miles away from what she had expected to see. The creature hissed at Gearóid like a feral thing. The Reaper charged, silent; his wings fanned like a bird of prey. In one fluid motion he had pulled the creature's head from its neck. Gearóid cawed into the night air as he threw the head of the gnome to the dogs. He then split the body in two with a sickening squelch. He gave one half to Airina. She bit down on the tender flesh of its severed torso, looking up at her husband as if he had presented her with a box of chocolates. Gearóid stole the heart of the gnome from his half of the body and offered it as well. His wife devoured it from his outstretched hand.

Anna passed a baffled glance to Sam. They had never seen the Reaper kill before. It had happened so fast. The split carcass still twitched beneath the sharp teeth of the Magpies. Anna and Sam had never seen them *eat* like that before. Sam's chest heaved. Anna gripped his hand.

Faeries…lethal Faeries. They had stumbled half-blind into a dangerous world, and they had no way to get back on their own. What had they done? The familiar sensation of panic snaked through Anna's chest. She wanted to run, to hide, and hadn't she always? Hadn't she always obediently obliged the rude gazes that fell to her face, the giggled whispers of *half-caste* and *mutt* that put her in her place? She wanted to be more, to be brave. Was this who she was?

"Let's go." Airina called, blood dripping from her smile.

Anna knew Airina must be able to hear their thoughts, yet the Magpie was unconcerned with soothing their human fears. Anna fought the urge to retch. Instead she and Sam moved to follow.

As they walked, Anna could see a glow begin to illuminate the horizon from a bonfire that blazed high into the sky. The heat warmed her face even from so far away. Music—some sort of string instrument, a high-pitched flute, a drum—travelled over the grass and into their ears. Such sweet music. It whispered inside her and shook her heart as if she had been dancing for hours. Anna sighed, breathless.

"Remember, Samuel," Gearóid reminded, "do not eat or drink anything or you will be trapped in Faerie forever and bound to the one who offered. Breathe in the music but breathe it back out."

"I will, Gearóid. I promise."

"Be sure you do, or you will be dancing in the Summerlands until your bones break away."

Sam nodded with round eyes and forced an exhale.

Anna tried but could not keep the grin from her mouth. She touched her lips and flushed face. Wildness beat in her heart. Freedom felt like some palpable fruit she could bite into. Anna put the edge of her thumb in her mouth and bit down with an involuntary moan. Sam wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her into his arms, and then backed swiftly away. She wished she knew what he was thinking.

"Oh! We haven't missed it!" Airina clapped her hands together.

Anna had expected something between a rave and a riot. What she found was neither and both. Over the grassy hill lay a fiery pagan ceremony gilded in raw opulence. Decadent

piles of riches lay beside gleaming bales of hay. The scent of cooked pumpkins and apples wafted in the air. Thousands of goblets of gold-white wine were being passed around and sipped by adorned Faerie-folk. They wore their best, draped in silks and velvets and other materials Anna had never seen. One even seemed to wear a gown made of enormous raw pearls. Every kind of creature was there as well as some glitter-eyed humans dancing with their otherworldly partners. The humans were easy to spot, gaping at it all, adorned with plucked flowers and golden leaves. Anna let herself stare with them.

Along the edges of a forest filled with lithe Dryads was a captivating almost neon-blue lake. The lake seemed to stretch deep into cavernous holes in the ground. Water creatures were playing in the waters, swimming and splashing. They twirled in time to the magical music.

Food was spread out on golden plates of polished wood atop solid jade tables carved into coiling vines. Creatures of all kinds indulged; they danced and flew and stomped and sang. Anna caught Sam's gaze and followed it to the opposite side of the clearing, where four ornate chairs squatted low to the ground. A fifth one in the centre was larger than the rest. Blue flames lined the edges of a path cleared behind each throne.

The music changed and a dance like a fast waltz began. Trees as thick as houses fenced in half of the clearing. Anna wondered if they began the forest border of Autumn that Airina had mentioned. Embedded in the dense treeline were massive columns of raw precious stones—Anna recognised columns of amethyst, quartz, and fire opal. The rest escaped her limited knowledge.

"It's so wonderful," Sam sighed, his eyelids fluttering as if he fought sleep.

"Breathe out, you idiot. How many times will I warn you?" Gearóid growled.

Sam exhaled but his legs were already as unsteady as if he was drunk. Anna took his

hand enough to squeeze it but let it drop when she heard a pounding rustle beyond the trees. A thunderous sound like thousands of deep drums made the grass at her feet tremble. All the Faeries stopped dancing. There was a brief wave of calm before they began to greet the approaching noise with gracious cheers and screams of delight.

"Come on!" Airina squealed.

For a pained moment Anna was reminded of Becca, of the first concert they had attended together without parents. They had danced and screamed and ended the night coughing up the ends of someone's cigarette. Anna ignored the dried blood and grabbed the Magpie's hand as they sped through the crowd.

"It's the procession of the King and Queens! We must get closer!"

Anna could see the thrones clearer now that she was almost at the front of the pulsating crowd. Each throne was carved of the darkest wood she had ever seen. Ornate sculptures adorned them. They had high, narrow sides like a backless wing-back chair. Beyond the thrones, on the flame-lit path, Anna could see a long procession of Kelpies, Fuinseoga, black dogs, and each Royal of Faerie. The magnificence of all the Royals together with their grand entourage was astounding.

Oberon came forward first in his garments of deep green just a shade lighter than the sky above him. Cords of flowering vines, moss, and autumn-leafed branches wound around his neck and forearms. He dismounted his horse and was met by thunderous applause from his subjects. The King of Faerie beamed and adjusted his crown.

Oberon turned back to the party of Royals on their black horses. He sauntered to a silver Faerie with enormous blue wings. Before she dismounted, Maab leaned forward and kissed her Kelpie on its neck. The Winter Queen barely touched her husband's hand as she scanned her awed subjects. She wore a tight blue bodice that complimented her skin and was

made complete by a smoke-white skirt. Maab's hair was bound up on her head in a complicated but delicate arrangement of braids and thick curls framing her face. Snow clung along her cheeks and lips. Black feathers grew from her, adorning her spine, her forearms, and the back of her neck. Terrifying as she was, she was no less beautiful. White flowers sat encased in a thin layer of ice atop her wild hair. A precarious black crown sat among the frozen flowers, as if placed there as an afterthought. Anna beamed, captivated by the Winter Queen's biting beauty.

Oberon walked Maab to her throne. As she sat, it turned an icy blue and Anna could see now that the carvings were shaped like icicles, skeletal trees, and mounds of snow. Maab pressed her massive wings through the opening in the back of her throne before turning to her cheering subjects with a wide grin. They erupted in applause, including Gearóid who was now close enough to Anna that she could feel the thrum of his wings against her arm.

The King went to another Queen in the procession. Her long black hair was pinned down around her ears, frazzled with curls and speckled with the foliage of Autumn. Long black feathers of green and purple plumed from her head like a darkened rainbow. Raven feathers, Anna realised with wonder. The Faerie woman wore a dress of creamy white that bled into a sunset orange as it melted into a long train. The garment touched the floor and covered her long neck but was cut low in the back. Her wings and velvety dark brown skin was exposed. She was covered in jewellery of dangling crystals and pearls; her crown haloed her head like the rays of the sun. The wind seemed to sing her name.

Morgana Le Faye.

A sudden surge of blood rang in Anna's ears. Recognition overwhelmed her. Not as a daughter to a mother, but as if looking in a mirror. Anna looked just like this woman. A flood of emotion stung in her chest until she felt she might be sick. How long had she wondered, waited? Now she had found her birth mother, at last.

The Autumn Queen looked at Anna and smiled. Anna felt her face flush as she met those blue eyes for the first time and turned away.

This is it, Anna scolded herself. *This is what you wanted. Look! You must look! Please!*

She forced herself to turn back in time to see her mother's throne ignite with a warm orange glow, illuminating the leaves and trees built into it. Anna felt a swell in her chest, and she swallowed it down, pressing the tears back with it. Airina touched Anna's arm before joining her people in applause for their Queen.

Oberon went to the final Queen—Titania. Oberon first bowed to her, then fluttered up to where she sat on her steed. He kissed Titania full on the mouth before helping her dismount. Anna heard a delighted sigh from the Faerie near her. From her pale blue colouring, Anna knew she was a Spring Faerie. Titania wore a dress of blushing pink with a narrow, corseted waist. Her single sleeve was tied with a pink blooming flower at the shoulder. Her hair cascaded over her opposite shoulder and Oberon brushed her bare skin with kisses. Roses matching her skin pressed her long curls to the left side of her head. Her crown of ornate cut crystals caged by branches sparkled and dazzled even more than her husband's. Oberon placed her on her throne and it bloomed to life with a sweet sun-warmed green colour. Carved flowers and grasses erupted to life.

The last throne—the Summer throne—was left empty, alone, and dark. Anna watched it and her heart ached. Oberon took his own place and his chair glowed until it embodied each season. A patch of bright yellow represented the Queen-less season in a corner of the King's seat. The Faeries cheered. A blue Nymph with hair dusting the floor behind her offered Oberon a pitcher of wine, bowing the entire time. He poured ample amounts for each of the Queens. The Royals drank, and the Faeries cheered yet again. With a signal from the King they all went silent and Oberon stood again.

"My Faerie and Human guests, welcome on this Samhain night! We welcome you with

food, drink, and merriment!" Oberon crooned as the Faeries turned their faces to the sky with joyous smiles and uplifted palms. "We, the Faer Folk, dedicate ourselves to the Sabbat."

"To the Sabbat," the Faeries erupted, grinning to the sky as they twirled their wrists and outstretched their hands.

"And now, the Queen Titania has an announcement for the subjects of Faerie."

Titania rose from her throne to an ocean of cheering. She gave her subjects a serene smile, waiting for the din to die down, then spoke.

"I present to Faerie, with pride, that my only son, The Prince of Faerie, is engaged to be bonded to the Dryad Briae Ní Choileáin by this Spring next. Their union will bring immense joy to Faerie as they continue with loyalty to one another."

"With loyalty!" The Faeries squealed with delight.

The couple seemed to be in the centre of the crowd and were applauded as they bowed to their kin. Anna felt her heart flutter at their bowed heads and gracious smiles.

"Tarak and Briae!" Titania roared over the crowd, with her goblet held high. Each Faerie toasted and cheered.

"This is so…Anna…this is amazing!" Sam whispered in a rush, his chest rising and falling.

Anna trembled head to foot, high off the fragrant buzz of excitement. She couldn't speak. She yearned for her own goblet to raise.

The Faerie Queen Bright Grían.

Anna clasped her hands together to keep them from shaking. Could she be a Queen? Could this be her home?

Oberon rose and kissed Titania before returning to his own throne. Then, with a smooth gesture of his hand, he silenced the crowd again.

"Morgana Le Faye," Oberon called. Anna held a breath.

"My King," Morgana answered, still seated.

"My gift to you, this Samhain, is the gift of a plentiful Autumn harvest. May Faerie continue to thrive because of you."

"Thank you, my King."

Anna watched her mother bow her head without dropping her crown. The Autumn Queen seemed almost…bored.

"Maab du Corbeau," Oberon called next.

"My King," Maab answered, twirling her crown on her long index finger and stealing glances at her Kelpie.

"My gift to you, this Samhain, is the gift of 1,000 new darklings to be born to your lands—faster than you can kill them, I hope." Oberon chortled. A scattered few among the crowd laughed nervously in return.

Maab's eyes gleamed malevolent as she smiled. She held the King's gaze and gave a curt nod.

"Thank you, my King."

"Titania Mordha."

"My King," she replied.

"My gift to you is myself. I shall take no other lover for this night of Samhain. Before all Faerie, I declare that tonight I am yours alone."

Titania bowed her head with a sad smile.

"Thank you…my King."

Anna felt ashamed for the Spring Queen and the crowd seemed to mirror that unease.

Oberon's narcissism seeped through his glowing smile. A hot pink blush brushed across Titania's cheekbones. Anna dared a look at Sam. He glared at the oblivious, still-smiling King. Anna stroked his hand with the back of hers. Sam looked down at her and shook his head in silent dismay.

"I know," Anna whispered. "I know."

"As you will it, should it be, Oberon, King of Faerie," the three Queens intoned in practiced unison.

Anna remembered then: to be a Queen of Faerie was to be bound to the King.

TWENTY-TWO

Sam had expected overstimulated debauchery when he entered Faerie, something between a bacchanal and a nightclub. Instead the festival had the elegance of old-world charm mingled with decadence. The festivities had resumed after the procession of the Royals and a new dance of warbling music and undulating bodies had begun. The result was not vulgar but inventive, beautiful. The dancing Faeries looked like moving sculptures. Spectral beings swayed in time to music with partners or danced alone. They pressed their bodies together in a writhing kaleidoscope; some of vibrant colours, some as dark as black silk, and still others of such pale skin they could be mistaken for beautiful corpses caught in a tide.

A group of female Water Sprites and Air Sprites caught Sam's eye. Their lissom movements strained their every muscle beneath strategic fabric. Men joined in their sumptuous ballet. There were few men in Faerie, Sam noticed, but the ones he had seen were corded with muscles and had very sharp teeth. Yet they remained as poised and elegant as the women. The dancers were doused in a gentle glisten of sweat as they danced. At times one of them would catch his eye and smile. Sam had to remind himself to take shallow breaths with more forceful exhales.

Anna, for her part, seemed at home. She had bitten her lip until it looked bruised and puffy but finally it could not contain her smile.

Oberon roared some order over the crowd in a language Sam's ear did not know. The music picked up with a different tempo and a haunting, beautiful singer took the clearing. Faeries swirled around her in time. The body of the singer seemed fishlike. A few scattered patches of scales dotted her body like glitter, coating her entire torso from her temples to her bare abdomen, and ending at the tops of her long, blue legs.

"A Siren, out of water," Gearóid warned with a telling glance.

Sam made a show of exhaling. He looked around him and saw that the other humans in the crowd were drawn to the Siren and began dancing in perfect time with Faerie partners. Sam couldn't help but think he and Anna might stand out if they didn't begin dancing soon.

"Clever thinking." Airina smiled at him before returning the crowd. "My Queen has left her throne. We must find a quiet place to exchange words with her."

"What?!" Anna croaked.

"You wish to speak to her, don't you?"

"I…of course…it's just…"

Anna looked up at Sam with brown eyes. They looked strange to him. Seeing Morgana before had shocked him. There was no denying that she was Anna's mother. She was majestic, just like her daughter. Unique, even in Faerie…just like her daughter. And those eyes…

The brown eyes that did not belong to Anna scanned the crowd with a strange dread. Then they were fixed to one spot.

"There she is." Anna's small voice floated into Sam's ear over the noise of the crowd.

Sam followed her eye-line until he saw the Autumn Queen. Morgana was waiting beneath a massive willow tree with a man. The man was tall and graceful, his shoulders broad. As the four of them walked towards the Queen, Sam could make out tiny, white-blonde braids in the long curtain of his hair. The man had narrow points to his ears, the hair around them shaved down almost to the scalp. The tops of those pointed ears were marked with what appeared to be blue ink. An elf. The first elf Sam had ever seen. He was stunning, and it was not a euphemism. Sam felt *stunned* by the presence of this elf man.

The elf turned to face the group as they approached and took a few long strides before meeting them. He didn't look at Anna or Sam.

"Magpies, Morgana, the Queen of Autumn, demands you present your humans to her at once."

The elf then bowed to Morgana before he continued walking, back straight. Queen Morgana turned to Airina then.

"Blessed Samhain, my loyal maid," Morgana said as she embraced her.

"Blessed, my Queen, and happily met," Airina beamed, bowing.

"Gearóid, I have never seen you look so well." Morgana cooed.

Gearóid bowed lower than Airina, even as he continued to scan the trees for onlookers. Anna fidgeted while she looked at her mother, but Morgana ignored her. Anna snaked her hand into Sam's and squeezed. Anger surged in him and he turned to the Queen.

"Hold your tongue, human," Morgana cut him off as she turned her gaze on him.

Her fury pierced him where he stood. Sam felt his skin flush and his mouth hung open. The muscles in his neck tensed.

"I—"

"I challenge the Law even standing this close to my daughter. I cannot speak to her though I ache to do so. I would gladly steal her away with me tonight if I could. I surrendered her to your world, and I have lived with that choice for seventeen human years…in agony."

Sam shut his mouth, opened it to speak, and shut it again. Looking at Morgana was like looking at a stone sculpture of the girl he had fallen in love with. Her blue eyes were sharp where Anna's were gentle pools of deep water. Her beautiful dark skin was a shade darker than her daughter's and her hair was longer. If not for these small differences they could have been twins.

"*Why* did you leave me?" Anna spoke into the silence, gulping around the tears spilling from her eyes.

Anna looked surprised both at her tears and the sound of her own voice. From the confused, crumpled expression on her face, Sam could tell that this was not the question Anna had rehearsed in her mind. His heart broke for her. He had never met his Dad, but he had imagined the moment in his mind a thousand times. Looking at Anna's face now he realised that no amount of practice in a mirror would ever do justice to being face to face with a lifetime of questions. Sam wished to hold her to him. To his dismay, Gearóid shook his head when he moved to do so. It killed him inside, but he squeezed her hand and then let it go. Sam faced Morgana instead and waited for her answer.

Morgana met his glare with a smile. Her reply was directed at Sam, instead of Anna.

"Faerie couplings with humans are not unique. Sometimes the creatures these couplings beget were called demigods and worshiped. Other times, these innocent half-fae were burned alive, beaten to death, murdered. When I was born, I was taken from my human mother. Stolen away to Faerie. Then, when I was but a few moons old, already a woman in our world, I discovered who she was and went to find her. My mother, the fae-touched witch, Morgana, tried to teach me things, things of great value, but I was too young to understand. Her lessons were meaningless to me at the time. All I wanted was a mother, not the wise crone she had come to be. I felt disappointed by her, angry, and I left again to live my days in Faerie. I went back to Oberon, the Faerie who had stolen me. Loneliness, hopelessness drove me to his waiting arms. Then the Autumn Throne called to me and I loathed my life that now belonged to him."

All was silent. The revelry of Faerie throbbed around them, but under this tree a quiet sadness had enveloped them all. Morgana continued.

"I saw through my foresight that I would conceive a girl. The King is sterile, so I knew my path would soon be free of his entrapment. I don't know how I would have survived my early reign without such hope. Older, only somewhat wiser, I knew I wanted nothing more

than to have my girl know of the human love my mother once spoke of. The only way I could teach her was to let her go. I thought I could not love her the way she deserved."

Anna was sobbing now. Sam's heart constricted, and his jaw tensed. He watched her shake her head before gasping out loud.

"My father?" Anna whispered.

For the first time the Queen looked as if she wished to turn to her daughter, wrap her in her arms, and wipe away her tears. She *couldn't.* Sam could see it now. Faerie Law was a physical hold on the Queen, not just a rule. Agony…just as Morgana said.

"Her father was a human man," Morgana continued, still looking at Sam. "He was the first man I ever loved. His name was Aryn Grían. We met in my mother's world. I had taken to visiting that realm after she died. I had promised to take him away from his life of endless toil into the beauty of Faerie, and I did. I called him away. Our dalliance was nothing at first, two friends turned something a bit more. Then there was love, the deepest love I have ever known. Aryn asked to bond to me and I accepted happily, but when Oberon discovered our union he had my daughter's father killed."

Anna gasped, but Morgana did not stop. The Autumn Queen seemed to shed the pain of her many years as she spoke, but that pain settled over Anna now. Sam watched with gritted teeth.

"Oberon covets forever that which he does not have. He claims he is cursed to love, but he knows nothing of it. He knows only possession, lust, power. When my husband was murdered, I understood what my mother had tried to teach me. Not just human love, but true love. True love is the most painful, beautiful thing in any world. There is far too little of it here."

Morgana was speaking in hushed tones already, but now she all but whispered. Sam

had to strain to hear her.

"Oberon knows nothing of love and so his rule ruins Faerie. We are not what we could be. He cannot create his own children, but he has bred selfishness and greed into the very fabric of all Faerie. When my Aryn was killed, I replaced my bonded name for my mother's and vowed never to take another. I gave his name to our only child, Bright Grían. I left her in the human world, far from Oberon and yet near enough to our world to ensure her safety. She will return to Faerie on her eighteenth birthday and then, as Summer Queen, she will be our salvation."

"No!" Anna took deep breaths, trying to steady herself, but sobs overtook her to no comforting embrace. "I don't even know you! You *left* me, and now you want me to save your world from my father's murderer?! The *King* of Faerie?! I'm not a Queen! I'm not a Faerie! I'm…I don't know what I am but I don't want anything to do with this!"

Anna seethed, wrapping her arms around her waist. Sam swallowed hard; his hands clenched into fists. He couldn't sit by and be the quiet pet human anymore. Sam faced Morgana.

"What do you want with Anna?" He blurted. "You gave her human love, a human life, and now you're ripping all that away from her! Just leave her alone! We were better off without you!"

"Samuel!" Gearóid threatened, his voice a roiling growl. "You do not speak to the Queen in such a way!"

"She knows that I'm not going anywhere." Sam ignored him. His eyes were locked on the Autumn Queen. "I want answers or I want you to leave us alone!"

Morgana stood. She stared at him through a thick blanket of silence. Several moments went by and still no one had said anything else. Unsure, Sam moved to speak again when

Morgana reached out her hand viper-fast and punctured Sam's throat with her fingernails. She squeezed, and his throat constricted under her grasp.

"You won't speak to me in such a way again, boy," Morgana whispered. Golden shards splintered from the veins in her eyes and her fingernails grew into gilded daggers in his skin.

Sam gasped like a fish and scraped at the pain with his fingers. He tasted blood in his mouth. Anna flung herself at her mother's arm and tried to pry her off. Morgana let him go as Sam retched red. Anna wrapped her arms around him. He tried to push her away, to protect her from prying eyes, but Anna wouldn't let go. He looked up and saw the calm gaze of Morgana watching him. Her eyes were back to normal and in them there was a challenge he couldn't meet. Sam clutched his throat where blood dripped. His consciousness was fading. He fell to his knees before her.

"Moth!" Morgana shouted to be heard. A yellow Pixie girl flitted over and bowed her head low to the Queen. "The boy is bleeding."

Soundless, Moth moved to Sam and kissed the wounds on his neck before he could stop her. Her kisses fell as if she breathed on him. She wiped the blood from her mouth and moved away as quick as she had come. Sam reached up to touch his neck and found the wounds healed. He could hear the rustle of trembling wings. The Magpies had fed off his fear. He could hear Airina suppress a giggle and Sam ground his teeth, embarrassed. Morgana wiped her bloodied hand on her dress and faced Sam again.

"You would do well to respect me, boy. There are very few in Faerie who care to keep you alive."

She stared at him until he gave a begrudging nod.

"My daughter is a changeling, as I once was." Morgana said to Sam.

"A what…" Sam asked, sifting through his mind in search of the term.

"A changeling…" Anna repeated. She was still clutching Sam's arm and he didn't have the heart to move her.

"Changelings belong both to the Fae world and the human world. My daughter was born in Faerie but lived her years as a human. She will forever belong to both worlds, torn between the two. I gave her up, I changed her. Faerie Law binds me to keep away from her now until she comes back to stay on her own, to her motherland. If she chose the human realm, she would remain human, but forever fae-touched with Sight."

Anna brightened. "So I can—"

Morgana cut her off.

"She will not make this choice. I saw that my daughter would come back to Faerie in her eighteenth birth season, as all Faerie changelings do, and she would be the lost Summer Queen. Like me, her throne would bind her to King Oberon. As such, her love will be tested. That is all I can tell you of the future for now."

Sam ripped his gaze from Morgana. He had almost died today. His mind was crowded enough already. Sam didn't want to hear about Anna being bound to Oberon.

"I only want Sam. I love him, just like you wanted! I don't want Oberon. I never will. I'm not staying here!" Anna shouted. Sam's heart swelled, but then he saw the fury that darkened her face.

"There are certain things I will never be able to foretell, for they can alter the path of the future," Morgana responded to no one in particular. Sam felt panic sour his stomach. "Yet, there is a way to keep Oberon from killing my daughter's beloved human."

"How?" Anna spat through her teeth.

"In our world a bond is Law. Oberon cannot break it. In your world there is also a practice, an ancient one, of binding those in love. The two of you should be made bonded in

this way."

"What do you mean? Bonded?" Sam asked. There was silence for a long time. Morgana said nothing, her gaze soft and slightly unfocused. Then Anna gasped. Sam turned to face her.

"Married, Sam…" Anna's voice was small, shocked. "I think she means…handfasting. She's saying…she's saying we should get married."

TWENTY-THREE

Airina was struck by the abruptness to which her lady dismissed their party when she had finished with them. She glanced over her shoulder, looking for the Queen she knew had already left.

A Nymph near Airina had been dancing with a dazed human for hours. Her cloying thoughts were filled with fantasies of all the ways she would please him and be pleased. The scent of the human filled Airina's thirsty mouth with the teasing taste of delirium. She watched as the human clung to the Nymph's ribcage and leaned his head against the smattering of stars tattooed on her violet breast, even as his feet began to bleed. His was a one-track thought: *I want her*. Airina would be surprised if he survived the night.

Gearóid followed her line of sight and sniffed the air.

"Hungry?" Gearóid asked her in a Faerie dialect more agreeable to his tongue.

"Always," she responded, smiling back at him.

She imagined Gearóid's arms encircling her own waist, his hair dangling over her body as he kissed her skin. Sabbat festivals were days when they could be lost in their own darkling desires together. He smiled in a knowing way but she sighed, weighed down by duty.

"I can hear Queen Maab's thoughts."

Airina tried out of decency to ignore the jealous rambles over Tarak's bride as well as the warring pity and self-pity the Winter Queen tried to hide while watching Oberon dance with Titania. Airina sifted past the other thoughts of Maab's loyal companion, Morwin. Beneath all that, a thought like an insistent alarm bell alerted Airina to Maab's desire.

"Maab wants you to fetch new spoils." Airina frowned. "Take the boy with you. I can't keep him. His mind is feverish."

Gearóid nodded, chuckling before he placed a kiss on the edge of her jaw. He bit slow and his sharp teeth drew blood. She shivered. Gearóid motioned to Sam and he followed, leaving Bright to Airina with one long backwards glance.

The girl was far off, her thoughts consumed. Airina let her wander, focusing instead on the minds of those around her. No one noticed her at all. All of Faerie was engrossed in their own revelry.

“Bright, guard yourself,” Airina snapped anyway. “There are many more creatures in Faerie who can read your mind as I can. You mustn’t draw attention.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” The girl shook her head, trying to empty it.

Bright’s thoughts changed as she watched a performance of Spring ribbon dancers. She focused on the lithe muscles pulling, the trailing of the silk ribbons around the dancers’ bodies, their glowing, colourful skin. Like a flash of lightning, the bodies were transformed into the gentle smile of her human, and the sound of his laughter replaced the Faerie music.

“I’m sorry.” Bright flushed.

Airina smiled at her even as she rolled her eyes. Bright smiled back and the two burst into giggles.

“We should go, little Queen. It is very close to midnight.”

“What happened?” Bright asked, her voice low.

At first Airina thought the question was addressed to her. Then she realised Bright was staring at her human boy. He was stumbling towards them, bloodstained. Gearóid wasn’t with him.

“What happened?!” Airina screeched. “Where is Gearóid?”

“Maab,” the boy whispered, his throat still raw from Queen Morgana’s rebuke. “She

wanted to…I don't know. E-Eat me… Sh-She tried to take me and Gearóid asked her to let me go. She just stared at us for a second and then she transformed into something…angry and *dark.* She grabbed Gearóid by his…h-his stomach! She reached inside his stomach! A K-Kelpie became a man and pushed me away from them. I tried to fight back and he cut me. I didn't know what to do. I'm sorry. I didn't know what to do!"

"I've been foolish!" Airina felt the feathers under her skin threaten to break free. "You weren't guarding your thoughts, creature! Maab—"

"She can read minds?" Bright interrupted.

Airina had already started walking, her long legs covered ground fast.

"She can manipulate feelings because she can keenly interpret them. She knew Gearóid was hiding something. Stay close behind me."

Airina knew she wasn't making sense. She could hear the confusion and fear in their thoughts as the human boy and the soon-to-be Queen trailed her, but she didn't have time. It was almost midnight. Faces around her blurred as she ran. She couldn't leave him here. He wouldn't leave her. Gearóid…

Airina could smell Maab hidden behind the tall frame of Morwin, now again in his Kelpie form. She slithered through the crowds, trying not to draw attention. When she reached Morwin she cawed at him. He stomped his heavy hooves and gave a violent snort in response. Queen Maab shushed him until he calmed.

"Gearóid!" Airina whimpered.

As the Kelpie moved she could see that Maab still had most of her forearm buried in the abdomen of Gearóid. His teeth were grinding in unrestrained distress. Vicious hooked claws protruded through of the bare skin of Gearóid's lower back. Airina trembled and bowed as low as she could.

"Please, my Queen Maab." Airina begged from the ground, her wrist held up and exposed to the sky. "Do not let us offend you. How can this misdemeanour be remedied without the bloodshed of my mate?"

"Sly Magpie! You think I did not see the boy's affections? He is frenzied with waking dreams…dreams of an *Anna*. But his mind shifts. He lacks the one-track thoughts of Faeries."

Maab grinned as she reached deeper into Gearóid. A low moan stifled his scream.

"Perhaps he is love drunk, Queen." Airina tried.

"He sometimes dreams of her as *Bright*." Maab ignored her attempt to deflect. "The 'future Queen of Summer'? How could a human know such things? What is more, Gearóid never denies me spoils. Why now would he protect such a pretty morsel? Something is being hidden from me!"

Maab sniffed in the direction of the wounded human. Airina could see in Gearóid's mind the scene as it had played out. Maab had attempted to seduce Samuel. He must have thought of Bright then, Airina reasoned, rejecting her. As he did, Maab was able to sense his thoughts. Gearóid recognized Maab's shift in moods and tried to save the human boy, but instead the sensitive Winter Queen was doubly offended. Airina had to tread careful or they would all die here tonight.

"Are these humans not intoxicated by Faerie? Please, I beg you to release my husband. Gearóid had meant to keep the boy with us tonight. It is rare that we meet, my Queen. Sabbat nights are precious to us."

"So close to lies, Magpie. I can feel your deceit, inky black in your mind. Tell me the truth, darling, or I shall rip him in two."

Maab licked the side of Gearóid's throat. She watched Airina as she did. Then the bloodthirsty Winter Queen removed her clawed hand from his abdomen with a horrible

gushing of blood. Gearóid dropped to his knees.

"Please…" Airina choked on her words.

The revelry around her never stopped. They were hidden somehow or ignored. Airina was alone with her grief, her fear.

"Airina…" The boy whispered from behind her.

She hissed back at him in response. This was his fault! Foolish human! He cowed beneath her fury.

"The Autumn has born a sunrise under the nose of Winter and Spring." Gearóid coughed around the blood in his mouth as he spoke. "A beam of Summer sun wishes for love though she is trapped by Law. The staggering dance of the fates are lured in by her heat. A Changeling Queen soon reigns."

"Riddles, Magpie! How dare you? You treat me as if I were common; something to twine with words. You low-born wretch! Where is your allegiance to your Queen—"

Maab shrieked. She shielded her eyes with a silver hand.

Piercing white light bloomed all around them. Airina knew this light. Her eyes struggled to adjust; her heart hammered. Delicate wings sprouted from the centre of Bright's back. They grew large and powerful. The elastic stays snapped from her false feathered wings. The dancers in the clearing all stopped and gawked. The music went silent. Everything was still, as if caught beneath glass. Airina sucked in a lungful of air, her heart drumming in her ears.

Bright glowed ethereal in her native homelands. Her skin alighted as if sunbeams were trapped beneath her skin. Her people turned to her as moths are drawn to flames. Bright's mouth bloomed into a pout of ripe strawberries and her brown skin glowed. She resembled her mother. She looked almost *exactly* like her mother. Airina felt a wave of awe for the

Summer Queen's beauty and it swept past the lump of fear in her throat.

Bright's rapid breaths rasped. The false colour of her eyes made her expression more animated. The girl drew down inside of herself, but there was no hiding her spectacular light. All eyes were on her. Bright's palpable fear shocked Airina into action. She turned to Gearóid who nodded and grabbed hold of the human boy. Airina snatched at Bright, catching her by a wrist. The last pair of eyes Airina saw before she ripped them all away from Faerie was the deep green, fixated gaze of Oberon.

PART TWO

TWENTY-FOUR

Maab was furious. Ice bloomed in crystal flowers from the corners of her eyes and down her throat like spreading ivy. She wanted to kill something. She paced. That Gearóid would hide something so valuable from her—this spectacular changeling girl—went so far against his nature. The Reaper was *known* for his unwavering devotion. Maab's head was swarming with questions.

A rapid murmur spread among those left behind in Faerie. Maab looked up with narrowed eyes in the exact direction as everyone else: towards Oberon.

"Enjoy the Samhain." The King roared, a glittering smile pasted to his face. "Do not dwell on worries on such a night!"

The Faeries obeyed their King and the music picked back up a lively tune. Oberon masked his interest well, but Maab knew him better. She could see the glisten of fresh sweat on his brow. Desire burned within him.

"Morwin!" Maab screeched at her Kelpie.

Claws again broke through the flesh of her fingertips and she scraped them against her own palms, calmed by the pain. Morwin released himself from his animal form and stood before her as a man.

"I would give you anything you needed of me, My Queen."

"Morwin…"

"Maab, I wish to give you all of myself, to serve only you."

Morwin brought his face close as he whispered to his Queen. She vibrated with fury. He was too close for his station, impertinent as ever, but his words wound through the sharp places inside of her and smoothed them.

Maab exhaled and backed away before Oberon had the chance to see them. Morwin

took a step back as well.

"Would you be bonded to me, you fool?" Maab whispered, just able to let the dream pass through her lips. "My jealous husband would have you killed. Can you not be content? I will not—I *cannot* risk your life."

"I would do anything for you, My Queen." Morwin said, his deep voice soothing to her ear. Stubborn, he slipped a hand into hers. His knees bent and met the ground. "If I only lived to see the sun set with you in my arms before the Reapers came for my head, it would be enough."

Maab pulled her hand away. Tears gathered in her eyes, but she refused to let them pool. Her voice tightened, regaining its regal edge.

"What I wish from you now, servant, is an answer to that insane Faerie-lie Gearóid gave."

Morwin's eyes glinted like struck flint.

"Whatever you wish, my Queen." He bowed his head, ever the obedient soldier, then returned to his post at her flank. Already she missed his touch.

TWENTY-FIVE

“Gearóid!” Airina screamed, shaking her husband as she tried to keep him conscious.

As Anna watched the blood pour from him she felt as helpless as a child. Sam stood behind her, holding her to him.

“What can I do?” Anna whimpered in the wake of Airina’s screams.

They were in her parents’ backyard again and only she and Sam could hear the Magpie’s wail. Sam was trembling for all his bravery. Anna moved her hand until she caught his wrist then placed her fingers on the raised edges of the sword on his forearm. It gave her some relief despite the slick wetness surrounding it.

“He needs blood,” Airina said, her jaw tensed. Her black eyes looked like great holes in the dark. Tears poured from them like broken wells. “His wounds are too great. He’ll kill whatever he drains. He’ll… he’ll have to kill me.”

“No!” Gearóid roared, spitting blood from his mouth.

Airina kissed him, lapping what blood would have fallen to the ground. From her boot she pulled out a terrible, sharp knife and pressed it to her palm. She offered the blood to Gearóid. He turned his head away, though it clearly pained him to do so.

“Drink, Gearóid. Drink and live, my love.”

“I will not kill you!” Gearóid gasped, blood clogging his lungs. “I’d rather die!”

Anna stood motionless, terrified. She had never seen anyone die before. The Magpies began speaking together in a language she couldn’t understand. Airina drew her knife up to her own throat in one swift movement. Gearóid’s eyes went round and lifted a weak hand to deflect her aim.

“Don’t, Airina!” Sam cried out.

“You will not tell me how to care for my husband, human! You will have cost me my

life for his own!" Airina hissed, all her sharp teeth bared.

Sam moved around Anna. His voice was even, careful.

"If we each gave him our blood, he wouldn't have to drain only one of us."

"I can't ask blood from a future Queen, and I have sworn not to draw blood from yourself," Airina pressed the tip of her blade into her throat, ignoring Sam.

"Airina, wait! Wait! I will give my blood freely!" Anna exclaimed, understanding.

"As will I." Sam reached out his hand towards Gearóid. Airina faltered.

"I don't know how much he needs to live. I couldn't ask that of you."

"Y-you did not ask," Anna said, though her voice betrayed her as it trembled. "I am telling you, we are giving Gearóid this blood, as much as we can."

Airina went silent. There wasn't enough time to argue. Anna took the knife from Airina.

"I'm going first, Sam." Anna said as he reached for the blade.

"Anna, no. I have to do this. It's all my fault."

"You're already wounded. And…" Anna struggled to admit it, but after tonight there was no way she could deny the truth. "My blood is Faerie, Sam. It will regenerate. Isn't that right, Airina?"

"Yes. Only darklings need blood. Y-you're a brightling." Airina spoke in a sort of half-trance.

Anna took the knife to her wrist and cut deep. It was terrifying, pressing the cold blade to her skin. She had never known a pain like the burning ooze of broken flesh. She presented her arm, trying to be brave. Gearóid hovered his mouth just under the gash with a question in his eyes.

"Go on, Gearóid. Drink."

And he did, pressing his teeth into the wound and then widening his mouth to spread the gash. Anna gasped, and bit her lip. The pain traced the line between excruciating and enjoyable. Her heart thudded in her ears. When she began to feel faint, she pried Gearóid's mouth from her.

He sighed, and Anna watched his chest rise with the first deep lungful of air he had had since they arrived back in the human world. Anna's heartbeat was thudding in her ears.

"I will never forget this, Summer Queen. Thank you."

Sam took the knife next. The cut he made almost mirrored the shape and length of his sword, only on the opposite arm. It was a garish shape, even next to the teeth marks. Sam fell to his side when Gearóid had barely begun to drink. Anna lunged to part the Reaper's teeth from Sam's arm.

Airina took the knife from its place on the ground and dug it into the gap of her collarbone. She stood apart from Gearóid, forcing him to stand. He rose, stiff and taking small steps. He was rewarded with the blood dribbling from Airina's neck.

"The hounds will watch over you two tonight. Stay here, both of you. We'll return for you in the morning." Airina sighed, Gearóid attached to her throat like a leech.

The Reaper grunted a feral moan and clutched Airina's body to his. Anna blushed and hid her gaze. She had never heard such a sound.

"I have to go home," Sam whispered half-hearted.

"Stay here, creature!" Airina insisted with a furious hiss. "Your life may be in danger. All of our lives, from this night on!" A heavy silence filled the air. Airina caught Anna's eye. "Forgive my temper. I am grateful to you both, eternally. You and I must tend to the wounded. Your—*Sam's* wounds will need your Faerie kiss to heal."

The bleeding Magpies disappeared. Alone now in the night-cold grass, Anna and Sam watched each other in stunned silence, different now than when they had left.

TWENTY-SIX

Anna stared at her torn wrist, the tangled hole of it, as it healed itself. She almost laughed, but the roiling pitch of her stomach stopped her. The wound had only been small, punctures of teeth, but deep. She watched as tendons and ligaments meticulously fixed themselves back to her bone. Anna had never been athletic, so she didn't get hurt often. When she thought about it she realised she couldn't remember anything worse than a paper cut or a scraped knee.

Anna stood in her bedroom staring, marvelling at the magical secret buried for so long beneath her own skin.

"Anna…" Sam whispered, shuffling between one foot and the other.

He seemed determined not to sit on her bed. She couldn't understand why, but then she saw all the blood. His shirt was sticky with it. She had almost forgotten.

Anna's eyes went wide and she rushed to Sam.

"I think…I have to kiss your wounds…like that Faerie did before…"

"Can w-we g-go to the tr-tr-tree house." Sam stuttered and shivered. How much blood had he lost?

Anna's heart beat a frantic rhythm. They didn't have time. She knew enough to know she needed to act now. Her hands reached out to him almost of their own volition.

"Do you trust me, Sam?"

"I trust you, Anna." He said, eyes closing as he fell to her floor.

"Sam!"

Anna ripped at Sam's shirt and inspected the gashes along his chest and neck and the long, ugly wound on his arm. Anna reeled at the sight and doubt seized her. She was just a changeling—not Faerie, not human. Not enough of either. Was there any magic in her kiss?

But she had to try. She had no choice.

Anna pressed wet lips to Sam's skin over and over. Her mouth became stained with his blood. The sticky, salty-metallic taste made her gag. Anna looked around but she was alone and afraid, a painful and familiar sensation. Her parents were sleep. She couldn't bear the thought of their concern and confusion. Sam's mother would blame her. Becca wouldn't believe her. Who could she run to, now?

"Sam…" Anna murmured to herself, rubbing the back of her hand over the tears and gore on her face.

She kissed him again, slow and deliberate. The cold muck of congealed blood spread across her lips. It urged her this time, instead of repulsing her. Her fingers crawled over Sam's body. Heat flared in her chest, in her hands, at the base of her skull. Anna opened her eyes. She choked on a sob and the smell of his skin and then she smiled. Sam's skin was knitting slowly together. His body had begun to break into a sweat as if he had a fever, but the heat only encouraged Anna. She licked her thumb and coated the seams of his body with her saliva. She kissed him, again and again.

After a short time, Anna's eyes scanned the bare flesh of his torso for any other imperfection and found none. His wounds had disappeared with little more than a red welt to mark where they had been. But his eyes still did not open and the heat from his body radiated into her face. She pressed two fingers to his wrist and sighed in exhausted relief. He had a strong pulse. She cleaned herself off in her bathroom, removed her irritating contacts, and brought a wet rag to wipe up his messy blood.

"Anna…" Sam mumbled as though in a sleep.

"Sam? Wake up, baby. Are you alright?"

But he didn't answer except to whisper her name once more. His lips fell into the gentle

part of ease. She looked him over. Tiny freckles and moles dotted his pale skin. It was as if she were seeing him for the first time, seeing how he had grown from a boy she had loved to this…man. She touched a finger to his shaking eyelashes and felt the feather-light tickle of them. Sam's breathing was deep. Sweat beaded like dew on his forehead. Light from the streetlamps outside glistened on his wet skin. Anna sat beside him, uninterested in sleep, watching his bare chest rise and fall.

Her eyes betrayed her and travelled back to his perfect mouth, beckoning her for a silent kiss. The line of her sight crept lower and her hand followed. She stole a few inches closer, reaching to the space beneath his jawbone. She lay down so that her ribs hit the floor and moved her face nearer until her nose brushed his. Anna's breath caught, and she bridged those final inches. Her mouth opened into his and she felt his breath mingle with hers. He didn't respond. A fear took hold of her, a desperate desire, and she deepened the kiss until she was gripping the back of his head and aching for his touch. Anything to prove he was alive. That she was alive.

Her free hand travelled, lower, hungry. She gripped and stroked, kissed and bit. She need him to wake, to want her as she wanted him now. Anna remembered the feeling of her wings as they grew from her back, the terror of so many eyes on her body. She had looked back, then, to where her mother had stood, but there was no one there.

Sam kissed Anna back, slow, eyes still closed, dreaming. She felt the soft pressure of his tongue and moaned. His free hand drifted up until it rested on her hip. She wound her body into to his touch. He gripped her, kissing her harder. Dreaming and waking. She moaned again, her body on fire. She felt him respond in her hand and still she wanted more. She wanted all of him.

Bright.

She bit his lip, hard.

Sam woke then, springing to his feet and leaving Anna on the floor with a bruised ego to match her lips.

"I-I-I…Sam. I'm sorry. I-I don't know what happened to me. I just…you weren't waking up…" Anna tried to sit up, tried to rationalise the hunger that had seized her. He looked afraid of her.

Sam grabbed his shirt from the floor as if to dress himself. The scent of old blood wafted, turning her stomach. All she wanted was for him to lie down with her again, to want her, his hand on her hip, his skin beneath her teeth. Anna looked down to see that her wrist was smooth as glass.

"I-I love you, Anna. You know that."

"Sam…I…"

Sam wouldn't look at her and she was almost glad. Anna's skin still felt like it was a coal plucked from a fire. Her mind burned too, with the afterimage of his body pressed against her. Sam was standing but Anna felt as if she had melted away. It had felt so good…but…she had taken advantage of him. She had…touched him, aroused him, while he slept. What was wrong with her?

"Sam? I—"

"I love you, Anna." He repeated, crossing the room to kiss the top of her head.

Then he escaped to the bathroom and left Anna in her room alone.

She was easy prey to her own mind then.

Airina had called her a brightling. Perhaps, Anna thought, she had been too quick to associate the term she didn't understand with *goodness*.

Maybe she wasn't good at all. Maybe she was something else.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Morgana Le Faye pulled herself from her thoughts, aware of the gentle tug of a handsome Fire Sprite as he combed out her hair. He reminded Morgana of his father, a Djinn now living in the Spring realm. She rubbed her eyes with her long fingers as she thought of how very old she was. Though his parents were brightlings of Spring, the boy had been born in the Autumnlands and so to Autumn he belonged. The Sprite was loyal to her and took great pleasure in visiting her chambers, combing her hair, and lingering as he lit the fires beneath her bath.

Morgana could see a conversation in the near future, like spotting an incoming mist over the sea. Again she rubbed her bleary eyes. She felt as if she stood outside of time. So many envied her Sights, but so few understood how difficult a gift it could be. The past felt lost to her and the future always called her name. Morgana's thoughts were often drawn to the things untouchable and unchangeable. Her weary mind spiralled hours, days, years ahead. She would give almost anything to be grounded in the present.

"It is time you left, child." Morgana said to the boy. "Have the lovely Moth bring me sweet nectar and plums, enough for two. Maab is coming to join me."

When the Autumn Queen was fed and dressed, she sat quiet on the dusty cushions of her chamber in the land of Heart. Morgana's focus remained poised on the doorway. Her hands folded in her lap and her wings rustled like the swish of a cat's tail while it sleeps. She spent no time in this place, not for a long time now. For the occasion she wore a new dress of bronze silk which rustled when she moved, a sound like fallen leaves. A half-corset of charred bone and bat wings fit against her ribs. Her long tangle of hair curled from root to tip. Rouge decorated her lips and cheeks. She adored lavish dressing. It was one of the few things that could help still her mind.

Delicate glass saucers and cups sat before her. Tea for two. Morgana knew the darkling Nymph, Maab, was more inclined to blood than nectar, so she had slit the wrist of her new Elven maid, called Ash, and mixed her blood in with the sweet plums. Morgana kissed the young woman and released her.

The Un-Seelie Dusk Queen sat, barely lifting her fingers from her skirts to dismiss the few servants from her quarters. A single Fuinseog took up post at her door—per custom. She lifted her fingers again and he opened the door to the annoyed expression of Maab.

The Winter Queen huffed, dragging her long skirts of bleached hide, fur, and ice.

"I wonder when I will become accustomed to that aggravating foresight of yours, Morgana." Maab nodded her head to her Sister and sized up the Fuinseog.

The Nymph pulled a long knife from under her skirts but Morgana didn't need her Sights to anticipate Maab's intent.

"That would not be desirable. I know you want of blood. My young elf has given some of hers. I have it here for you, if you would only come and join me."

"I like it fresh." Maab insisted, not moving. Her teeth were bared.

Morgana sighed and motioned to the Fuinseog. His eyes flashed with fear, but he kept silent.

"Would you add some of your blood to Maab's morsels?" He nodded, crossing the room to obey.

"I like to do it myself!" Maab's outburst was childish.

Morgana sighed aloud. Maab took the blade to his neck and pushed his head over the bowl of fruit. She was taunting Morgana, purposely unpredictable. It was her favourite and most irritating game to play with the Autumn Queen. Maab licked the guard's wounds, eyes locked with Morgana, and dismissed him back to his post. She dipped her fingers into the

bowl as she sat down.

"Warm…"

"Ask your questions, Maab. I do not wish to stay long." Morgana said, her chin up.

"What brings you to Heart, Morgana?" Maab began.

"I knew you were looking for me, my Queen Sister. Here, our husband will not search me out."

"Why do you hide, my Queen?" Maab narrowed her eyes even as her smile wrinkled her smooth, silver skin. Maab liked her games but Morgana sighed once more, bored.

"Ask me now what you want of me, Nymph. You know well that I know."

"Who was the girl, Morgana!" Maab growled. Morgana reached for her arm, attempting to calm the Winter Queen's whiplash mood swings.

"Her name is Bright Grían and she is my daughter, the future Queen of Summer." Morgana answered. Maab's gasp echoed.

"Her father cannot be Oberon? Is it possible?"

"No. Her father was my second husband. He died before he ever saw her."

"You hid her from the King?" Maab's eyes were saucers. She reached down to pick up her tea.

"I had to. Though it is not long now that he will find her…and want her."

"The way he wanted you." Maab looked at Morgana. She was young, by the standard of the Faerie Royalty, but she was clever.

"I will not let him take my child as he took me from my mother."

"Who was the boy?" Maab whispered, "I want him. I like his emotions. I could eat his pretty little eyes."

"He belongs to Bright. She loves him."

"Ah, I see. That is why you have such interest in the little changeling." Maab erupted into a giggle. "She *loves*. Oh, lonely Queen, so like your mother I hear. You cannot live through this girl."

"*This girl* will be your Queen Sister, and yes, she will show Faerie how to love. She will show us things that are true. Our gilded debaucheries must come to an end. She will bring us into an age to rival our past."

Morgana was careful not to give too much away. She sipped her own tea. Maab watched her.

"Our past is who we are, Morgana."

"Though not who we must be, Maab. We have become vicious, uncaring. Our new Queen—"

"I want to find her. You know this don't you?" Maab interrupted.

Morgana nodded while she sipped. An abrupt vision of Oberon walking through the doors appeared in her near future. She put down her tea.

"We must leave this place, Maab. Oberon approaches. He wants Bright, but it is not yet time. I will entrust Morwin with her location and he will accompany you. I will grant this in good faith, but you must not touch the boy, Maab. Please. For my sake?"

"You already know my answer, sly Queen." Maab laughed, pleased, but then concern creased her perfect brow. "Titania will be furious."

A short bloom of jealously shot through Morgana. Maab would never love her as she loved Titania. She felt alone in her Sisterhood. In her life. Morgana forced her mind to go quiet, searching her Sights.

"Yes, but not for long, and it will please your Court to do this for me now."

Maab hesitated a moment.

“I am trusting you, Morgana.”

“And I you.” Morgana hooked her arm with Maab, “Come away, Sister.”

Oberon had already searched the Winterlands today. He would not think to look there again. Maab snapped her fingers at Morgana’s request. When the Autumn Queen opened her eyes next, a plume of cold air escaped between her lips.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Anna sat peering out the classroom window. She hadn't spoken much to Sam since Samhain night. She felt awkward around him now. What she had done was wrong. It didn't matter that he was her boyfriend, it didn't matter that they were in love. His body did not belong to her.

Yet she yearned to touch him now. She craved the ease of his hand slipping into hers. Anna felt different since crossing the veil into Faerie. A new heat was building beneath her skin. All of Faerie had seen what she was, but what was she?

Faerie.

Changeling.

Queen?

It was impossible to sit through a boring lecture and pay attention when her thoughts were crashing together in her mind.

"Bright? Have you picked the flowers for your bouquet?" Airina nudged Anna.

Anna had spent so long ignoring Faeries she didn't know how to interact with one now without being seen by the surrounding humans.

Airina was flushed with excitement. The Faerie struggled to keep her bird form concealed in flesh. Gearóid smiled, patting down the erect feathers sprouting through the skin of his wife's exposed back. Airina was enraptured with the idea of human marriage ceremonies. They had their similarities with Faerie bonding, Anna was learning, but it was the differences that amused Airina. The Magpie was obsessing over every detail. Anna couldn't concentrate on any of it. She had pictured marrying Sam a million times since they were kids, but this was different. This was a ceremonial tactic to keep Sam alive. Just a different kind of shotgun wedding. Anna sighed.

“Leave her be, Airina.” Gearóid said, gruff but not unkind.

Sam reached out a hand to Anna. She smiled back at him and took it, grateful for this touch. She still felt insecure and apologetic. Sam didn’t need to be able to read her mind to know that.

“I’ve put all that behind me, Anna. I wish you would too.” Sam whispered, “I can’t imagine how you felt after everything that happened that night. I trust you. Everything is going to be okay.”

“Mr. Burrow? Could you complete this equation for me? On the board if you please?” The algebra teacher sneered at their clasped hands.

Gearóid growled.

“It’s okay.” Sam whispered to the empty air on his right. The teacher raised an eyebrow.

Sam walked to the front of the room to answer the question written there. Then the entire class went limp like corpses. Sam dropped to his knees before crashing to the ground.

“Sam!” Anna screamed.

Her insides seemed to pucker as fear and adrenaline overwhelmed her. Anna rushed to his side.

Sam’s face was calm, as if he slept. He was still breathing, but he wouldn’t wake no matter how hard Anna shook him. Anna held on to him, screaming for help, but it seemed the entire school had gone quiet.

“That’s Faerie magic.” Airina said in breathy awe. “Powerful Faerie magic. A Royal is here.”

“What?” Anna asked, but Airina’s expression took her breath away.

“Hide!”

Moments later Queen Maab sauntered into the classroom. Frost covered her eyelashes and ice spiked throughout the heavy braid in her hair. A plum-coloured dress wrapped snug around her torso. It billowed in gentle pickups from her hips to the floor. Her lips matched the rich colour. Instead of looking out of place, her beauty seemed to shame the mundane surroundings. Her Kelpie servant stood behind her in his almost-human form. Maab's blue tattoos gleamed.

"Ah, my darling Gearóid…and his little birdy bride. Where is the girl?"

They stood silent, not trusting their Faerie tongues to keep Anna's place behind the front desk hidden. Anna crouched there, holding Sam's body in her arms.

"Tsk tsk. I assure you I mean her no harm. Her mother disclosed her whereabouts to me *personally*. Come now, am I not Faerie? It could not be said if it were untrue. Now where is she? I wouldn't like to kill you…today."

Anna could picture the Winter Queen's toothy grin.

"It's the boy you want, Maab. Your thoughts betray you." Airina stood her ground.

"I am your Queen, Magpie! Remember it and address me thus!" She snarled, crossing the room.

Anna held her breath.

"My Queen," Gearóid spoke, his voice deep and respectful. "I have not betrayed allegiance with you nor the Winterlands from which I was born, but I cannot allow you to harm my mate if it is in my power to stop it."

Maab's wings skittered on the ground, angry as a snake.

"You have displeased me, Reaper. Twice! You were born to be *my* servant. You were born to *my* Winter! Morwin! Kill him!"

From her hiding space, Anna could just see Morwin at the classroom door. She watched

in horror as he drew a sword out from the blue-black skin of his flesh. It was a brutal thing of thick bone. His red eyes glowed with single-minded determination.

"Forgive me, kinsman, but I cannot stand idle and let you kill me." Gearóid declared to Morwin. Anna heard the familiar scrape of Gearóid's blade.

"Stop!" Anna screamed. She shook and swallowed hard. "Stop, please, and I will tell you all you want to know. If my mother sent you, she must have seen that our meeting was necessary. Bloodshed, on the other hand, is not."

Anna didn't know where in her the words had come from but Maab grinned, flicking her fingers towards Morwin to call him off. In her excitement the Winter Queen had become something much more feline. Her movements were sinuous, and her teeth grew sharper. A clawed hand dug into the wooden desk as she brought her face very close to Anna's. Maab exhaled and the claws retracted until they were the elegant oval-shaped fingernails of her silver hand.

"You are Bright, Morgana's changeling girl. A beautiful girl. So like your mother, and your grandmother before her." Maab leapt onto the desk above Anna. "Do you *love* your handsome boy there? The one I am not supposed to touch?"

She outstretched her fingers towards Sam's sleeping face but withdrew at the last moment.

"I do love him, Maab. He is everything to me."

Maab barked a condescending laugh. The Queen's eyes, so orb like in their opacity, seemed to swallow her.

"You will need to protect him from the jealous eyes of Oberon." Maab's voice was a creeping singsong that burrowed into Anna's ears. "He will kill him if he gets the chance, like your father. It will be slow and painful."

"Why did you come here? To taunt me?" Anna said with a bravery she barely felt. Maab smiled again and looked at her with new curiosity.

"I had to see you for myself, little Queen. I have eaten many of your brightlings. They contribute nothing to Faerie. They are an ill-bred lot and are only good for two things: their business with me, and their business with the King." Maab twisted her lips.

Heat flared beneath Anna's heart as it sped. The mistreatment of the Summerlanders stabbed somewhere in a hidden heart. Anna narrowed her eyes.

"I have since been forbidden such quarry by the ever-hypocritical husband that we will one day share." Anna shuddered but Maab continued. "Besides that, your wise mother has persuaded me to remember that we were all once like them—quite wild, feral. Leadership is what they need. As it is now, we have a weak link in both our Summer and our faithless King. Faerie suffers for it. Morgana assures me that you will change this."

"Morgana wouldn't surrender us on a whim." Anna hoped Maab couldn't hear the doubt in her voice. "You must've…offered something."

The Faerie Queen smiled.

"You need a bonding in the human world before your Summer. If you like, I could help you." Maab purred.

Anna bit her lip. Her mind had created a kind of bubble around all the new information since Samhain, as if trying to protect itself. Not even Airina's excitement had burst it. Maab saying the words aloud forced reality down on her like a weight.

This was real. This was her new life. Panic rising in her chest urged her to run.

"I…I don't know…"

"Speak up, brightling," Maab hissed at her.

Daggers of ice cut through the Winter Queen's skin. Anna's breath caught.

"I don't know if I *want* to marry Sam," Anna admitted. She looked down at the man in her arms and felt an icy fear tug deep in her chest.

Maab grinned.

TWENTY-NINE

Oberon paced back and forth through his quarters. His anxious hands reached for anything he could grab and tear apart. He had called for Titania. In the days since Samhain he had lost his other wives. Morgana hid, he knew, with the aid of her foresight. She must be of some fault—hadn't the secret brightling looked just like her? Maab was either with her or off killing something to quell her childish need for attention. No one knew where they were. Perhaps everyone did but they would not tell him? Maybe the Queens conspired and turned his people against him. Oberon picked up a crystal lamp and dashed it against the wall.

He wanted nothing less than the Girl of Light. She who had infested his dreams.

The Faerie King itched, claustrophobic in his own skin. He shredded his tunic as his outrage boiled and flung the tatters to the floor. His fingers wound through his hair, overgrown fingernails nicking his scalp. A cautious knock sounded on the door. Oberon picked up a vase and threw it in reply. It smashed to thousands of pieces. Cyclone, his black dog, whimpered in a corner, eager to hide from his master's anger. Only the great dog's fear subdued the King slightly. He did not wish to frighten his oldest friend. His only friend.

"What is it?" Oberon called as he sat on the edge of his rumpled bed.

There was a dull click of the door as it parted from the frame. Cyclone saw his opportunity and scampered out. Firelight in the halls poured over Oberon's body and illuminated his quarters. The sun had set without his notice.

"Titania is here for you, my King." A sombre Elf announced.

His pale eyes scanned the mess of the King's chambers with listless lids before turning to leave. Oberon ground his teeth.

The door opened a bit wider and Titania glided in, adorned in a rose-coloured slip and silken stockings. Oberon ran to her. He flooded her body with feverish kisses, locking his

fingers into her hair. Pulling, he bit her throat, pressing into her with such a severity as to set Titania trembling. He turned her rose-petal-soft body so her slender back nestled beneath his breastbone. His skin burned. He felt he could not have enough of her even if he swallowed her whole. He cupped her breast, caressed her thighs. She tried to speak but he bent his neck, wrapping his mouth around hers, holding her by her long-perfumed hair. She cried silent tears. It stunned him, but his single-minded obsession could entertain no other thought. He had to have her. He ripped the slip down over her wide hips. She gasped as his hands worked over her bare skin. She trembled again. The tantalising sensation of her body beneath him knotted his stomach in a way that was primordial and familiar. He softened his pressure, willing her to submit.

After a few breathless moments, the Spring Queen raised a slender arm and, quavering, wrapped it around the back of his neck.

She was his.

THIRTY

They lay silent in the bed Titania was disgusted to know had seen so many other women—human and Fae alike. She had tried tender touches on Oberon, as she wished *she* had been touched. It wasn't distracted pity she desired; she had had enough of that during Samhain. Nor did she want the feverish lust of tonight. She wanted just once for him to look at her like he used to, to breathe slow and quiet with her, to be the gentle King he could be. The King she had fallen in love with.

In the dead of night a luminous moon glittered in the sky through the open window. Titania prodded the tender places in her flesh, sore from Oberon's insistent fingers and teeth. She feared to move. Everything was quiet now, gentle, and she hated to break the spell. She knew he loved her best, or she thought she knew. She had seen him cry. He had given her his name. Yet that love, that honour, that trust was years lost. It was hidden even from himself. She wondered at how long it had been since she had spent more than a few days in his company. They used to talk together, to laugh, like friends.

Now he only wanted to conquer her. To own her. To hurt her.

He was not who he once was, but neither was she.

"I want the girl. Who is she?" Oberon said in a furious whisper, half to himself.

Titania looked up to see the King's wide green eyes trained on the ceiling, though his arm coiled around her still. His mouth parted until it was almost slack as he searched the dark for answers it would not give. Her heart constricted in her chest. His hand lay as heavy as lead on her skin.

Titania got up, defeated, and dressed herself. Indeed, bruises had been left on her pale pink skin. Even in the soft candlelight they were visible. She was ashamed. As she dressed, she glimpsed her reflection in a small hanging mirror. Everything about her appearance

reminded her of a wilted rose. Her hair was tangled and tears collected in her eyes, making them shine. She hoped her son would never hear of such a night.

Titania imagined how she would cave in the Briae's skull if she hurt her boy…slow…starting with the delicate eye sockets and ending at the jawbone. For that was how she felt now. Hollowed out, a crushed thing.

As Titania shrugged into a robe Oberon snatched her slender hand.

"Don't go," he pleaded, gentle as a child. "Please. I'm sorry. I…I don't want you to go."

Titania almost clamoured back into bed with him before he continued.

"I can't find Maab, Morgana, or the girl. My mind is in turmoil. I confide in you because you are so loyal to me. You are so good, Titania. Do you…do you know who she is? Where can I find her? Perhaps your maids could search the Summerlands? She must be from there. That light…"

Titania pulled her hand from his grip, cutting his palm as thorns protruded from her skin in her fierce anger. Her eyes grew stormy and she felt the fall of fresh tears.

"If you ever loved me, Gwyn Oberon Mordha, you would kill me now and save me this misery of loving you! Loyal to you? Loyal? I have done no less than *adore* you, Gwyn! Serve you, *love* you. I have only ever wanted your respect, your honour. I have tricked myself into believing that if I was patient enough, if I loved you enough, you would come to understand, but you are as foolish as you ever were, King of Faerie."

"Titania…what has come over you?" Oberon asked, but Titania snarled, sick to death of her broken heart.

"Your wives hate you; your people do not trust you. It is you who poison Faerie with your insatiable lust! You are your only curse! I would hate you and myself before I ever came

back to your bed to lie where countless others have! *Never* call for me again, Gwyn! Never!"

Queen Titania shouted through bared teeth, not caring who heard outside. She was shaking with rage. Oberon stared at her wide-eyed as if she had rammed a knife in his heart. He reached a hand out to her, but she snatched away from his grasp. For the first time in centuries, she felt strong enough to turn away.

"Titania…"

"No, do!" She seethed, her voice a venomous whisper. "Call for me in the night when your bed is cold, and nothing will satisfy. Call for me as you ache for the only one who ever truly loved you, fool that you are!"

With that Titania's skin split open and her bones broke until the Spring Queen was transformed into a screeching hawk. She flew about the room twice and then disappeared with a sound like rain on tin, too enraged and broken hearted to walk the lonely road home.

She wished she did know where her Queen Sisters were, for without them she felt utterly alone.

THIRTY-ONE

Anna tried to mask her tears. He deserved more. She couldn't marry Sam.

Maab turned to Morwin, flinging herself onto his back as he transformed into his horse form.

"You have some choices to make, little girl." Maab cooed. Her voice was as biting as frost. "Send Gearóid home when you decide."

From inside her billowing skirts Maab pulled a velvet drawstring bag. She tossed the thing at Gearóid who opened it and pulled out small crystal orb. Something like a rainbow cut a jagged line through the centre.

"You will find me with this."

The glittering crystal shone as he touched it and showed Maab where she was now, astride Morwin's horse-like back. A sizzle of electricity followed by an icy blast of air, and the Winter Queen was gone.

Soon after Maab left, the students and teachers awoke. An alarm was sounded some minutes later under the assumption that there had been some kind of gas leak. The students were all sent home. When Sam woke in Anna's arms she could see a million questions behind his eyes, but she had silenced him with a look.

Later, Anna climbed into Sam's car, leaving behind their Faerie escorts. As Sam drove, he twisted the horseshoe ring around his finger over and over with his free hand.

"Anna?"

"Yeah, Sam?" She managed to whisper.

"I love you, I hope you know that. But sometimes, I just don't know how to act around you. You're beautiful and smart and *literally* otherworldly." Anna rolled her eyes, smiling.

"I…I love you…Bright."

In an instant, Anna was sobbing. She felt hot all over. Sam pulled his car over, almost landing in a ditch as she choked on her tears. He faced her, eyes wide with panic.

"Anna? What's wrong? What did I say?"

He tried to touch her, but she shook her head over and over. Her was breathing was shallow, her lip shaking.

"I can't marry you!"

Anna bolted from the car, tripping into the dirt on the side of the road. She sat there, unable to move, and looked back at him. He looked at her through the empty passenger seat and its open door, his mouth a pressed line, his chin quivering. Sam was silent for so long she thought he might slam the door and leave her in the mud.

Then he was bending down in front of her. When she could see into his eyes through the blur of her tears, she was surprised by what she saw there.

Sam circled around her, crouched beside her.

"Anna?" Sam whispered, putting his arms around her. She fought for a second but then gave in to his embrace. He wrapped around her and she cried. His heartbeat was a steady drum in her ears. "What happened?"

"Maab came and…no…well, I…" She couldn't form the words, she couldn't think. "Oh, Sam. I just can't marry you."

"Maab? Was here? Anna, what happened? I at least deserve to know what happened."

Anna shuddered, tears biting her eyes. She didn't want to hurt him. Why couldn't he just understand? She wished he would just walk away, hate her. She was ruining his life. *He* should leave *her*. It would be so much easier. She understood abandonment, the whispered words of rejection in her own voice.

Anna's back heaved in shallow breaths against Sam's abdomen, but still he held her, his breathing remained steady until her breath matched his rhythm. He pressed his forehead to hers. Finally, she spoke.

"I can't take you away from the human world. I love you too much. My fate is sealed up. I'm not human. I'm a changeling, Sam. I don't have a choice, but I can't let you follow me to a world neither of us knows anything about. I…I can't marry you, Sam. It's too dangerous. I'm…too dangerous. I have to let you go."

Anna hung her head so low her hair nearly touched the mud. Sam cradled her body in his arms, pressing his lips to the side of her head. They stayed that way for a few moments, bodies obscured by the car on the quiet back road. Sam let the bridge of his nose trace the line of her jawbone.

"Anna…Anna…Anna." Sam whispered. She felt his smile against her temple. "Oh, ye of little faith…"

"Sam, don't joke. You don't know—"

He kissed her, a soft smile spreading over his lips.

"Anna, look, there's a lot of things I don't know anything about. What I do know is that when I was a kid, I fell in love with this girl who said she could see things. And I believed her." Anna looked up to meet his eyes. "I believed *in* her. I always will. And I knew even then that all I wanted was to spend forever with her. Turns out I'll get the chance."

"Sam?"

"I've never been surer about anything. I love you, Anna."

"I love you, Sam." Anna sighed.

She allowed her lips to find his and mouthed *Samuel Mark Burrow*.

"I love you…Bright." His nose scrunched and she laughed.

“Call me, Anna. At least one person should know me in Faerie by the name my mother gave me.” She said, pulling back to look at him.

She expected to find him smiling but instead his face was hard, serious.

“I love you, Anna Kingsley. Forever.”

THIRTY-TWO

“My King, Oberon.” A Faerie called Cassius bowed as he let himself through the unlocked door.

Oberon glared at the guard, having found himself in a fit of rage once again. He recoiled in disgust at his own greedy foolishness. Titania…

“What is it!” Oberon screamed.

“A Naiad reports that whilst lingering in the human realm she has seen the Girl of Light you seek, my King. She was with a human boy. It seems he belongs to her.”

Oberon bit his lip, torn between repentance and desire.

“Send Reapers. Find where it is she lies, and I will come to her. Kill the boy.”

“Yes, sire,” the guard bowed again.

“Send for Maab as well,” Oberon hissed. “I know she has some part in this.”

“She has been sent for, my King. Yestermoon you called for her? She will not come. She rests in her chambers, I am told. Along with her servant, Morwin.”

“Here in Heart?”

“Yes, King.”

“Insolent Nymph!” Oberon sneered, thinking, slender fingers drumming his bare hip bones. “She may stay there for now, but do not permit her to leave, by King’s order. Have the human women you fetched been bathed? Are they comfortable?”

“Yes, King. Quite. They sip belladonna-laced tea in the nocturnal gardens. They think themselves to be dreaming.”

“Good. Give them anything they ask for, then send them to me.”

Oberon felt the knot of discomfort ease in his chest as Cassius bowed. Why shouldn’t

he have everything he wanted? He was the only King of Faerie.

Later that same evening Oberon was surprised to find that the strings of his heart were again wound tight. The Faerie King was unaccustomed to having his desires unmet. Heart was once for him a thrumming hive of ecstasy, the centre of Faerie.

Now it was a dead place.

"Cassius!"

Oberon thundered through the corridors, his wings trailing in the dust behind him.

There was a boredom he felt in the aftermath of his liaisons with humans. Such fragile things. He knew nothing of self-control and they too were greedy for him. They stroked his ego, yet it was never enough. He had a void even eternity could not fill.

"My King?"

"The human women you brought me were acceptable. See them home. Then bring me more."

"Yes…my King." Cassius replied.

Oberon tried to ignore the flash of disgust that had crossed the Sprite's face. He barged into the Winter quarters.

"Maab!" Oberon exclaimed as soon as he was through the door.

She turned a lazy gaze to him. It struck him how much she looked just as she had when she had been presented to him centuries ago: a tiny, half-dressed Nymph combing out her long hair. She had wings now, though. They had once been a bonding present from himself. They dwarfed her slender body, covering her like a cape. He was so much taller than her that she seemed almost like a feral child sitting on the plush cushions of her chambers. Morwin stood in a corner as guard.

"My husband," Maab purred in reply, enunciating every word until it fell like poisoned honey from her lips.

She turned away from him and giggled cruelly at his reflection in her ice-covered mirror. Her dress rode up her quicksilver thigh as she crossed one leg over the other. His mouth twitched, eager to graze the soft skin.

Oberon crossed the room, spun her around, and slapped Maab flush across her cheek. Morwin flinched from his post but knew better. Maab faced Oberon, a thin smile on her pale lips. A tear rolled from one eye, but her smile stayed intact.

"I wish that had hurt you more," Oberon admitted, picking up a feather from her dusty bookshelf and ripping it to pieces.

"It hurt enough. More so to know that I can never be rid of you."

Maab turned back to her mirror and continued brushing her long hair but Oberon saw the tremble in her delicate fingers. He moved nearer to her. She did not flinch from his touch, but she would not turn her face to his when he kissed her neck. His mind raged, confused and sullen.

"You all left me. You hid from me. I wish I was different, Maab. I wish I had not been cursed. I would pledge loyalty to Titania and see her happy—see her loved."

Oberon's voice wobbled as he clutched the ends of her long hair in his fists, breathing in the chilly blood-stained scent of his Winter wife. He went to his knees. Maab turned to him, but her eyes were dull black glass. She could never care for him. She tolerated him. Soft hands cradled his face. He felt sick.

"Your curse does not bind you to the creation of a harem, King," Maab whispered, as careful and calculated as she had been the night she asked for her wings. "It does not give you leave to strike your wife—any of them. That I expected nothing less is your flaw, not

your mother's curse. You are a King."

"I called to you…"

"I came to our home, not your chamber. You found company besides."

"I…I'm sorry, my Queen."

"I have heard your endless apologies, but I will not belong to your bed tonight, Highness. I will go to my Sister. You have hurt her far worse than you could ever hurt me and I love her far more than I could ever love you. I only came because I was called, but I will not stay."

"Maab…"

"Could I say it if I lied, husband?" Maab smiled, rising and dressing herself, knowing he would not stop her.

"I-I had questions for you." Oberon whispered, still kneeling on the ground. He had never felt so small.

"I will answer them when my Sister, Morgana, permits me." Maab said before letting out an icy peal of laughter. Oberon looked up in time to see the playful glint return to her darkling eyes. "Still, I may decide to say things you didn't know to ask."

"Like what?"

"I can tell you that the Girl of Light that you seek is destined to be Queen of Summer. Yet she loves a mortal, foolish thing."

Oberon seethed but Maab held up a slender hand to still him.

"Patience. Hear: she has a little friend, a young flaxen girl. I had a scout watch her these few nights and she and the girl are close. Though things have been…difficult…they miss each other dearly. I think if you stole the girl, you would find yourself face to face with the young brightling again, just as you wish."

Maab laughed, now dressed. At her command, her servant Morwin approached her. He looked at her fresh bruise. Oberon noticed his protective glances and stood to kiss his wife. Maab's bruise healed. Her Kelpie kept his eyes to the ground.

"Who is the girl's father?" Oberon asked.

"A once faithful and now dead servant of Morgana," Maab answered. Her eyes were far away.

Oberon recalled a memory as hazy as mist. A scout had been sent to discover why his Morgana had grown so distant. Oberon remembered his fury when he saw how Morgana leaned on her secret husband. She adored him. She had never looked at Oberon in such a way. The same way Morwin looked at Maab now.

"The girl's friend is called Rebecca," the Winter Queen said, snapping his attention away from his remembrances.

He knew what she was doing but it still worked. Oberon nodded. Maab said nothing more to him as she disappeared.

The King stood there, alone. He couldn't stand to be alone.

He opened the door to find Cassius again.

"My King, I have brought one dozen human women to the baths and they are being cleansed with moon-soaked rose-water."

"Good." Oberon sighed, exhausted by his own folly. "Manifest whatever they desire."

"Yes, my King. Will I have a Dryad or a Sprite draw your own bath?"

Oberon stood, thinking. He flexed his hands, tightening them into fists and then spreading them wide again. A pulse throbbed in the tender space on his back where his enormous wings twitched.

Oberon turned down the start of the long corridor to his chambers, obscuring his face

and his own self-pity from his servant.

“Either. One I haven’t had before. Bring me honeyed water and casks of cherry wine. I am sending you out again.”

“You desire more women, my King?” Cassius asked, no true question in the tone of his words. Oberon wished to strangle him, to snuff out the judgement in his monotone voice.

“Just one more, tonight.” Oberon responded. “Queen Maab’s scout has found a human girl belonging to the brightling I seek. Find her. I want her brought to my chambers.”

“Yes, sire.”

THIRTY-THREE

Airina pointed, watching.

Anna felt an infectious smile tugging at her lips as she flipped her snow globe back and forth before setting it down. The Magpie watched the glittering specks with fascination. She stood at just about the size of the globe itself and pressed her tiny hands to the glass. Her hair was mostly feathers. The Faerie stretched until she was her own height again.

“Did you find Morgana?” Anna fretted despite the pleasant distraction. She smoothed her hands over her dress for about the fifth time in as many minutes.

“Gearóid did. He is so much the better at tracking.”

“What did she say? About the wedding?”

“Of course she can’t speak with you, but she promises to attend. A Faerie promise is as good as a bond.”

“Thank you, Airina. Thank you.”

“I have something for you from her, actually.” Airina smiled, roused from her excitement over the snowglobe.

From her skirts she pulled a white hair comb littered with sharp, luminous crystals.

“This is for tonight. Morgana told me it is carved from a bone once belonging to your father. It was offered to your mother the night they were married. I’d say it was once a rib.”

Anna grimaced. The implication left Anna speechless. As she held the delicate trinket, though, she realised it did not feel macabre at all. Though this was the first time she had ever seen it, it was a sudden source of calm that she needed.

A comfortable silence enveloped them while the Magpie seemed to be thinking to herself. She brushed a stray piece of Anna’s curly hair behind her ears with a delicate touch and smoothed Anna’s thick hair into an elaborate bun. Airina picked up a veil that Anna had

found in a junk closest earlier that day. The Magpie then pinned down the veil along with her mother's gift. Anna slipped into a silky white dress of no particular extravagance which just brushed the floor and draped off her shoulders.

"Thank you, Airina," Anna whispered.

"Everything will be fine, Bright." Airina said, touching a hand to Anna's shoulder before she disappeared.

Anna blinked in confusion at the sudden absence and a strange wave of loneliness crashed into her and almost sunk her to her knees. She wondered if she was supposed to feel like this on her wedding day.

Anna's hands were trembling by the time she worked up the courage to leave her room. Downstairs Anna's Mum and Dad sat on the couch, sandwiching a bowl of popcorn and watching a movie. Anna stood behind them, just watching them as they laughed. They playfully fought over who would get up to grab the chocolate. Anna ached to lean into her mother's embrace, to grab a fist full of popcorn. So ordinary. So unaware of the terrifying, hungry world she was going to leave them for. Yet, fearful as it was, Faerie had sunk into her bones with a new familiarity. Anna knew she could never go back to what she was. Her bouquet of baby's breath trembled in her hands.

After a while, Anna's father stood up to go to the kitchen. He stopped when he saw his daughter. The spell was broken, Anna realised. There was no turning back.

"Hi, Daddy," Anna whispered.

Her mother followed the path of her father's eyes and stood up. They looked at her with bemusement, then confusion. Anna swallowed the lump in her throat that threatened to choke her.

"What's going on, Anna? Baby, why are you dressed like that?" Her mother's smile

was wrong at the edges.

"Sam and I are going to get married. Tonight. I…well, I really wanted you to be there."

Anna felt her knees wobble. When she had finished speaking the door blew open with a slow, eerie whine. Anna could see three Faeries and a human walk towards her. All Anna's parents could see was the blushing Sam wringing his hands. Reality settled over them and their eyes went round first, then…*angry*.

"Have you lost your mind?!" Her mother's voice was soft, but still Anna flinched.

"I have to marry Sam…"

"Have to? Anna, are you in trouble?" Her father started, his face red.

"Oh, Anna! Is that what this is about?" Her mother's voice was now shrill.

"No! I didn't say that, please, just listen. I love him, and—"

"Anna, you're a child! You can't get married!" Anna felt too warm, her mother's words cut like knives.

"I'm not a child, listen to me—"

"Why now—"

"Please—"

"You can't—"

"Stop!" Anna begged. "You're not listening."

"Anna, you are our daughter—"

"STOP!" Anna screamed. "I'm not your daughter! You don't even know me!"

Anna's mother's eyes welled, but Anna pressed on, her molten fury spilling over.

"I'm not asking your permission. I don't *need* it. I don't need either of you! You *lied* to me when all I ever wanted was to just be normal. I just wanted to be part of this family, but

I'm not like you and I'll never be like you!"

"Anna?"

"No! I have to do this, to protect the only one who does know me, all of me, and loves me anyway. I know who my *real* parents are and—"

Anna's parents jerked their heads upwards as if they had been struck on the chin. Then a dull waking-sleep overtook them both, eyes cloudy and unseeing. Anna's anger was replaced by panic. What had she done?

Anna looked to the door and saw Maab's black eyes staring back, a delicate hand extended towards her parents.

"That is enough, changeling girl." Maab whispered. "Only the foolish wound to heal their own scars."

Anna stood in the wake of Maab's rebuke and remembered herself.

"Command them, girl." Maab's tone chided in the stunned silence.

"I…Sam and I have to get married." Anna said to her drowsing parents. Her voice was meek, even to her own ears.

She had prepared a speech, but it was wrong now. She didn't know if they'd even remember it—or her—after tonight. Maybe that was for the best. Maybe they should just forget her.

"Can you get dressed…please?"

Anna's parents walked away and up to their room. Anna felt her knees give way as they passed her. She heard Sam approach before she felt his gentle, loving embrace. He kissed the side of her head as she fought with her lungs for breath.

"My Mum is at the church. It was hard for me to see her like that too. And what you said…you were just hurt. You lashed out. They know you didn't mean it. It'll all be okay, I

promise."

"What if that's the last thing I ever get to say to them?" Anna whispered.

Sam's body was tense. Anna braced herself against the guilt she felt like a tidal wave. She turned her head up to look at him, tears falling from her eyes. They could have eloped alone, but Sam had wanted his Mum there and she couldn't deny him that. Especially after all he was sacrificing for her. His hair was messy as if he had run his hands through it about a thousand times.

Anna wondered again if this was how it should be. Fear and magic and sadness. No, she knew this was not how love should be.

"You're not supposed to see me. It's bad luck." Anna bit her lips, pressing her hot forehead to Sam's chest.

"We'll make our own luck." Sam promised her. She tried to believe him.

THIRTY-FOUR

After the simple wedding, Sam looked down at the reddish wood band encircling his forefinger and the plain gold-plated band on his ring finger. Anna was already in the tree house, waiting for him.

He was electrified and vaguely aware of the homework he was ignoring, but how could he think about homework now? He was a married man. A married man wedded to a Faerie Queen. A Queen who was betrothed to a King that wanted him dead…

Reality felt more like fiction.

Sam climbed the wooden staircase to where Anna sat on the tree house floor. She was beautiful. Her velvet skin melted with the shadows as if she was part of the night itself. She watched him remove his jacket.

"The shirt…"

Her voice was whisper soft. She could have said nothing and still he would have known what she wanted.

Each button seemed to fight against being undone in his clumsy fingers, but finally he was free of his shirt. For a moment he was self-conscious. He held in his abdomen and stood up straighter, allowing her a long, languorous look. His skin prickled with the chill of the frigid wind coming in through the window.

"Don't you want to go inside, Anna?"

"No," she whispered again. She was still staring at him. "The ring looks nice."

"Yeah? Apparently it would have been tradition for my father to give me my bonding ring, says Gearóid. If I had been born a Fae. It was nice of Airina to give these to us."

"I'll cherish mine forever," she said.

"I'll cherish you," he answered.

Anna reached behind her back and unzipped her white dress. He kneeled to help her and she gasped at his touch. Then she covered her mouth with her hand as she laughed, pressing her forehead into his shoulder. The warm rumble reminded him of a summer thunderstorm. She sat down in her underthings. Sam was enraptured.

Anna looked up at him. Her parted mouth quivered just a little. Fingertips brushed across his bare chest. He bent towards her but she shuddered and let out a low sigh. She turned her face from his. Her breathing quickened into short bursts, but her hands never left his skin.

"It's okay, Anna. It's okay. Are…are you afraid?" Sam whispered.

"Terrified." She trembled.

"Of me?" He asked, pulling back and taking his hands off of her. "You know I would never hurt you, right? We don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

She pulled him down so that his lips met hers. His body exploded into stars. It was like their first kiss, their thousandth kiss, all the kisses he could ever want or have. He pressed fingertips on the cotton of her small clothes until they gave way. She was bare beneath him and so small. Yet she was powerful. How had he never noticed it before? Or maybe he had always known. She was magic. A Queen. A goddess. He buried his head into the soft swell of her chest. Her heartbeat thundered, and he kissed the sound. She moaned, and it crashed like waves in his ear. He kissed her, lower, until he heard her moan again. Her fingers gripped his hair.

"Of me…" Anna whimpered, gasping again. Sam raised himself above her, looking into her dark blue eyes. "I'm afraid of me."

He understood then.

"Anna, tonight, you are only my wife and I am only your husband. There is no Oberon, there is no fear, there is no Faerie. There is me…" with shaking hands he pressed her down and lay over her warm body, "…and you."

When Sam woke, he was amazed to find Anna facing his bare chest and his arm curled around her, amazed to find he hadn't dreamt it all. He would do anything for Anna. Marrying her was the easiest thing he'd ever done.

Sam bent his head and kissed Anna's eyes, her lips, her nose. A pure joy was running over him like a warm rain. She turned up her face to him and hummed a pleased sound. Eyes still closed, she parted her lips and kissed him back.

Without warning Airina flew in through the rough-sawed doorway with a screech, startling the nude newlyweds.

"Get dressed, my Queen. You must come now!"

"Wait! Why?" Anna yelled, her eyes wide, but Airina had already left.

Sam shook his head to clear it of the shock. Anna rubbed the sleep from her eyes before staring at him. Was he supposed to know what to do? He hadn't thought beyond sneaking back home in time for breakfast. His empty stomach growled.

When they were dressed in their rumpled wedding clothes, Sam and Anna dropped from the treehouse. The bright morning light and cold grass over-stimulated Sam's senses. When his eyes adjusted, the first thing he saw were dark shapes in the trees around him. They were walking towards them, then he saw they were armed. Sam and Anna looked around and found themselves surrounded by Maab and her many guards.

"Maab?" Anna asked. Sam held her hand.

Maab licked her sharp teeth. Her fingernails seemed to grow, and Sam recalled the

scrape of them against his skin. She wore a midnight blue gown and her hair dangled. Sam was astonished to see that the Faerie was barefooted in the early morning frost. For the first time he noticed that her silver skin gradated down to an icy blue around her dainty toes. Her lips were deep purple and curled into a grin.

"T-Thank you, my Queen Maab, for your help last night." Anna bowed her head but Sam could feel her rapid pulse.

The Winter Queen snapped her fingers and an attendant came to her. He placed a glass chalice to her long fingers and poured a drink that was as white as sunlight. Morwin stepped forward. Maab raked a line of fresh cuts across his jaw with her fingernails. She held the goblet under his chin, collecting the drops of blood, before kissing him. After swirling the mixture together twice, she licked her fingers and sipped from the glass.

"I have news, brightling." Maab sighed, sipping again.

"What news?"

Maab shook her head and wagged a finger at Anna.

"Is this how you speak to your future Queen Sister? I have a mind to leave." All Maab's teeth showed.

Airina exchanged a look with Gearóid but the Magpies remained silent. Sam felt his body bristle but he swallowed it, reminding himself that the mercurial Winter Queen could tell what he was thinking in her own way.

"Please, Maab. What is going on?"

"You're no fun at all." Maab rolled her eyes. "What a boring little creature. I will tell you, but you mustn't be angry with me, little Sister."

"I'm not your *Sister*." Anna snarled under her breath. Sam squeezed her hand as Maab's dark eyes raked over them both.

"Ah! Some bite at last! You war with yourself little girl." Maab's voice was teasing but her knowing eyes were sharp. "Remember this: there is no greater enemy than your own mind. If you can make peace with it, you can rise above anything."

"Queen Maab du Corbeau," Anna answered, her chin held high. "I don't need advice, I need answers. Are Sam and I—are we safe?"

Maab went as cold as if she were carved from ice.

"Dear brightling, you will never be safe again. Neither could I promise you safety here in the human realm—with your skin and your mate and your life—there will always be those who refuse to see you as anything other than a threat and they will hate you for it. There will always be those who think they can own you, manipulate you, destroy you. Changeling Queen, you were born to chaos. My kind do not fear such things. There is strength to be found in the dark. We choose to let it test us and then rise above it. You are a young brightling. You will learn."

Maab smiled so wide her mouth looked like a gaping cave full of sharp teeth. She turned, walking away as her intimidating procession followed. Maab touched her chin to the edge of her shoulder as she looked backwards at Anna.

"Do not be angry with me, little Queen." Maab called. "The King desires to bait you to his lair. I told him of your pretty little blonde friend. He liked the thought of her so much he sent a scout for her. Rumour in Faerie is that she's his latest captive. And her prison is his bed!"

With a peal of bitter laughter Maab turned away again and sank her mouth to Morwin's proffered wrist. Then she drained her chalice, tossing it behind her down to Anna's feet. The Winter Queen disappeared into the trees behind Anna's house. Her bloodied teeth were exposed as she laughed. The red and white colours flickered in Sam's mind like an after-

image.

THIRTY-FIVE

“We have to go back to Faerie! Right now!”

Anna knew Oberon was setting a trap, but she couldn’t sacrifice her best friend just to avoid him. How did it keep happening? How did she keep ruining everyone’s life?

“Bright, think—You cannot go to him. That Oberon has not come to kill your human himself says much of your bond. We can wait the King out until your Summer.” Gearóid grumbled.

Anna felt his almost imperceptible shift from the Faerie she had come to know to the cold, calculating Reaper. She forced herself not to lash out at him for his bluntness.

“I don’t care! She’s my best friend! We have to get her back!”

“You don’t know Oberon as we do.” Airina tried.

“I won’t leave her there! This is all my fault. Please. Please! Take me now!”

“We have to think this through.” Airina looked around as if she could pluck the answer they needed from thin air.

Anna felt her heart sinking. She should have made up with Becca when she had the chance. Then she would have been with them last night, not stolen to Faerie by a sadistic King.

“We have to save her!” Sam said with stern conviction.

“He will tire of her company and release her.” Airina was shifting into part bird as she spoke, itching to fly away.

“We don’t have time for him to get tired of her, Airina! She’s not a toy, she’s a person!” Anna shouted, not caring who heard. “You were sworn to protect us!”

“You, not her! The girl is nothing to me!” Airina barked back.

"She *is* me!" Anna screamed. "She's my best friend, we're the same age, and we fought, and…" Anna trailed off. She could feel Airina's eyes on her face. Anna wiped a tear away with the back of her hand. "I can't leave her there. I won't. Help me get my friend back."

"It's a trap, you know this." Airina said, her voice soft.

"Then we have to be smarter."

THIRTY-SIX

"My King?" A Fuinseog rapped his knuckles against the wooden door of the King's chambers.

Oberon ignored the sound, combing his fingers through white-blonde hair. It had been washed by Pixie maidens in honey-nectar and rainwater. The fair strands smelled of sweet, fresh-bloomed lavender. It glowed with magic and for some strange reason the gleaming hair soothed Oberon's weary, angry mind. She was a beautiful human, short and muscular with soft flesh along her thighs. Her smile was cherubic, almost impish, as she looked up at him, inviting him for another kiss. Oberon felt himself growing bored of her company and her delirious fawning. He hated himself.

"I think I love you, Oberon," she whispered, almost slurred, as if intoxicated. She turned his face with delicate fingers so that he was forced to look at her instead of her body. "I was so afraid of you at first, but now… now I love you."

"We've talked about this before, you sweet, simple creature. I do not love you." Oberon smiled, even as her eyes welled.

The Fuinseog knocked again and Oberon ignored him again.

"You don't love me, little girl. You are infatuated, as am I. What we have is not love."

"I don't understand!" Her petulance was comical.

"I am well versed in desire, my beauty. But not love. I cannot love." Oberon quipped, matter of fact. He trailed his long, green fingers over the back of her knee.

The girl pouted, turning from him. The smooth arch of her hips tapered to a tiny waist.

"Don't do that," Oberon laughed, growling with the effort to contain himself. He clambered over her body and watched the plush bulge of her pink mouth as it trembled. Her eyes darkened with tears. "You're so beautiful when you do that. So helpless and…and

beautiful…"

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her across the bed. His muscles strained to remain gentle, careful not to hurt her in his fervour.

Another knock sounded on the door and Cyclone barked. Oberon looked up then, trusting his knowing familiar, and forced himself to dislodge from his bed. The King wrapped a thin robe around his waist.

"What do you want, Fuinseog?" Oberon shouted without opening the door. He placed his back against the wood, his eyes resting on cream-pale thighs. He smiled. "I am occupied."

"My King, the changeling is here. She comes to claim the human from your chambers."

"What?" The human questioned, a sharpness in her already high voice. "Does he mean me? Who is she, Oberon?"

Oberon swung the door open and felt his skin bristle with desire. She was here! His Girl of Light! Her eyes were like blue flames and she wore a strange, strangled expression. He wished to drink her in.

The Girl's breath caught short when she saw the human curled up in his bed.

"Anna…what—"

"Bec… Bec, I'm so sorry."

Oberon smiled at her but she rounded on him.

"What have you done!" The changeling girl roared.

"Your dear friend has been treated well. She was even bathed her here in Faerie. She has not had a bite of our food, I swear to you." Oberon rolled his shoulders back so she might see the breadth of his chest. "The magic will expire when she leaves."

"I don't want to leave!" The human whimpered from the bed.

"Hush, silly girl! My Queen has arrived. You have served your purpose." Oberon hissed.

She was here. His Girl of Light. He needed to touch her.

"Q-Queen?" the human sobbed, drawing herself into a tight ball. "Anna isn't…she can't be…Oberon? What is going on?!"

The brightling rushed to her friend and wrapped her arms around her head as if she wanted to cover the girl's eyes and block out the sight of him. The blonde tried to fight as sadness and anger flooded her. When she succumbed, she wailed, buried into the soft brown bosom. Tendrils of light emitted from the brightling's back where her wings ought to have been. The beams were warm, like sunlight. The foliage of Oberon's chambers turned towards her.

"What did you do to her?!"

"To her? I…well, I made love to her." Oberon answered, not understanding.

Dark brows shot upwards on the changeling's pretty face and she held the blonde closer. Oberon looked between the two girls, licking his parched lips.

"How…why…" The changeling's breath was shallow to match the gulping sobs of her friend. He hadn't done anything wrong. Why were they behaving so foolishly?

"It's my curse." The King said, his throat felt full of grit and tar. 'She craves me, my touch. Humans always do. When she leaves she will forget me."

"She won't remember anything?" The changeling spoke but the human also lifted her head, tears glittering in her eyes.

Was she so desperate to forget him? He swallowed hard before he responded.

"She won't remember that our encounter was real, my Queen. She'll remember it as one remembers a strange dream."

The Girl of Light seemed to take comfort in this, but not much. Her eyes bore into him.

"You *used* her."

Oberon felt struck by her whispered words. He had none of his own to respond with. He laughed instead, mirthless. She ground her teeth.

"Anna?" The girl's friend whimpered through a tear-stained, raspy voice, clinging to the brightling's arms.

He needed the blonde to go now. She had served her purpose. If she would just be gone, he could persuade the brightling to see it his way.

"Becca, did he hurt you?"

"Hurt me? H-He chose me! He brought me here! I love him, Anna!"

"No, Bec it's not…real. It's not right, just a trick. I'm so sorry, Becca. It's all my fault. I can fix this, I promise."

"I don't need you to fix anything! I don't need *you*!" Oberon watched the human tear herself away from the changeling's grasp. The Girl of Light held her arms out until they slowly fell to her sides. Tears clung to her lashes. They mirrored each other almost completely. "Just go away!"

"Becca…please, I have to get you out of here. You have to understand!"

"Go away, Anna!"

The changeling girl met Oberon's eyes with her sapphire glare. She was like a lightning storm and he shrank back from her.

"I…I'm sorry." Oberon felt an odd sensation of heat spread over his face.

"No, you're not! "How *dare* you! She is my best friend! You *used* her to get to me! You're disgusting!"

"No, listen to me, Girl…"

"You're too late, Oberon. I am married…bonded. I am not yours."

Time seemed to slow. A throbbing pain pounded in his temple. Oberon's vision tunnelled, and he moved in swift, liquid strides. First, he grabbed the human by her wrist and threw her out of his bed. Then he gnashed his teeth, shouting a language neither of the girls knew before he found the brightling again and flung her into the nearest wall. Oberon held on to the brightling's slender throat and dragged his teeth in a long line against her neck. The human cried out for her friend but he ignored her.

"You bonded, knowing you belonged to me?!" Oberon snarled.

The brightling ground her teeth again, seething with anger, but her eyes betrayed her fear. Heat flared beneath her skin. It singed his palm and he released her.

"I don't belong to you! I love him! I will always love him!" Her voice rasped. "We are married, consummated, bonded! You cannot break what ties us together."

Anger pulsated through Oberon again. He saw now how the changeling had two rings on her left hand. The one made of metal burned against his flesh. She tried to make a barrier from his embrace with her arms, but Oberon was strong. He pinned her down.

"Who told you your lover could escape death this way?" Oberon shouted, his lips pressed to her ear.

The brightling struggled, her chest heaving. She was his. She was supposed to be his.

"I will not lose you, my Queen of Light." Oberon's voice broke and he was surprised by the bitter sting of tears in his eyes. "I will love you!"

"You could never love me," she croaked, voice hoarse. "And I could never love you!"

He held her too tight, but he could not find the strength to let her go.

"I will make you love me!" Oberon shouted. Then he swallowed, his lips trembling.

The King lifted his head and looked into her eyes. “I will make you love me…”

He released her and she drew a long breath into her lungs. Oberon forced his voice to soften. Sweat glistened on his skin. He wiped his spittle-dampened lip with the back of his trembling hand.

“Stay with me, brightling. Here in Heart. Stay until the bonding of the Queen Titania’s boy and her Dryad maid.”

He saw hesitation and fear in her eyes. A whiplash of emotions stung through him.

“I will *not* stay with you.” The brightling answered, disgusted.

Oberon was quiet. calculating. She was his. She had to be.

“Brightling, I will swear no harm will come to your…boy…all the days you are with me. If you should come to love me, then I will be rid of the foolish wretch that he may never interfere again. If, however, your love for him remains until the moon of the bonding…I will let the boy live. He will be forever yours, or you will be forever mine. That is my wager.”

Oberon watched the tumult of her expressions. His heart calmed; his wings stirred behind him. A smile tugged at his lips.

“I have to talk to my *husband* about this,” The brightling hissed. Oberon set his jaw in a grimace, but he moved away from her. “Send Becca back to the human world. Let her forget.”

Oberon glared at her.

“I will do as you say when you come to a decision, my Queen. Until then, the girl stays with me.”

The Girl’s eyes twitched in the human girl’s direction.

“Becca, come with me, *now*.”

The blonde girl looked between them, crying softly, pupils dilated, but she did not move to stand. Oberon grinned. He brushed the changeling girl's thick, curling hair from her face. He kissed her new bruises away as she shuddered. He lingered only a moment, letting the scent of her fill the back of his throat. She ripped herself away from him and the violence of her disinterest caused a physical pain somewhere deep inside his heart. He smiled anyway, ignoring the daggers in her eyes.

"Becca…please!" The blonde shook her head, a sob burbling over her soft mouth.

"You cannot save her, nor anyone else you love. Not unless you come back to me." Oberon seethed.

The Girl backed away towards the door. The blonde girl sniffed, alone on the ground. The brightling stopped, her eyes filled with tears. Then she looked back at Oberon, only once, eyes like a bee's sting, before she left them both.

Oberon felt a toneless boredom snuff out the exhilaration of her light. He thought of Titania and wished she were there. The human girl made a desperate, sad, mewling noise, a sound Oberon recognised from somewhere inside of himself.

He went to her.

THIRTY-SEVEN

A chill of winter was in Titania's sallow cheeks, but in her eyes Spring was not too far off. Briae arranged Titania's hair with nimble expertise.

"Fix me a drink, Briae." The Queen smiled while she smoothed her pale-yellow dress.

The Spring Queen was becoming used to the idea of Briae being bonded to Tarak. She was ashamed that her previous emotions had bested her so publicly. Such was the tempestuous nature of a Sylph, but Titania would strive to be better.

The Queen and her maid sat among the plush blankets of blooming flowers that surrounded her courtyard. A band of Sprites fluttered in a lustrous dance of flower petals and ribbon. Many had come to watch. Between the blessed Sabbat days, the flighty Faer Folk suffered from boredom easy. As Queen, Titania sought to satisfy her people and their needs. The brightlings needed merriment, magic…ecstasy.

Sunlight drenched the Day Court. A Kelpie girl was being groomed by lanky Elves and Dryads as she lay in a patch of flowering vines. Nymphs sang as they wound through the trees lining the edges of the marble floor, and Mermaids circled the shallows of the nearby pond. Briae returned with her refreshment just as Tarak ambled through the wide curtain of willow branches in the far east wing. His shoulders and hair were dusted in snow.

"The Winterlands, Tarak? What business did you have there?" Titania cooed. "Briae? My son needs thawing."

Briae went to his side and opened her mouth. A warm breeze melted the lingering snow. Tarak was melancholic, though for a moment his lips curled at the corners for his soon-to-be bride.

"Mother…" He said before he looked from Briae to Titania and back again. "Is there a ripe Summer wine, darling? I still feel the chill."

"Right," said Briae, bowing low to Titania. Her eyes met with Tarak before she skittered away, leaving a trail of petals.

"I am always dismal when coming from the Winterlands. I don't know how Maab stands it." Titania whispered, eyes still on the dancers as she rubbed the palm of her son's hand.

She used to pet him in such a way when he was a small child. How tiny his hand was then. How big it was now.

"I'm sure she loves the chill of it, Queen."

"You're right of course. She is a darkling. I do miss her company. She would love these dancers. Though she always interrupts them with her teasing bites—especially in her season." Titania smiled. She looked over at her son, but he was staring straight ahead, lost to his thoughts. "The chill wears off faster if you ignore it. Come, Tarak. Enjoy the show."

He seemed to try, but he soon looked down at his fingers. When Titania had claimed him and he began to eat their food, his skin had changed from a dark supple suede to midnight blue. He was afraid the Faeries would be cruel to him—which they might have been if he was not her son. His fingers had started first, like dip-dyed fabric, and he developed a nervous habit of rubbing his fingertips together when he felt anxious. She watched him do it now.

"Come, Tarak. Tell me what troubles my son."

"I had to tell you, mother, before you heard it from less sensitive tongues..." His words were less than a whisper.

"You were always so protective of me, boy. When will you learn that I am thousands of moons older than you? I can take care of myself."

Tarak smiled and his sharp teeth gleamed in the sun.

"You're my mother. I will never learn."

"So what is this awful news, child?"

"I won't ever leave you alone, Mum." Titania felt a tug deep in her heart. "I know that's what you're afraid of. But you're not alone, and you never will be. I will always love you."

"Why are you saying this now?" Titania whispered while she looked at her son.

"You look at me that way when you're thinking of my human mother." Tarak looked down at his fingers again. "Do you think she would be proud of me?"

"She could not help but be proud of you. She loved you before you were born."

Titania reached to the nape of his slender, blue neck. In many ways he still looked like her, his human mother. Titania kissed his forehead.

"Mother…" Tarak began again. "The King has found his Girl of Light. I crossed paths with a Winter Fuinseog. He told me the King captured a human close to the girl to bait her back to Faerie. Now she has returned and he intends to woo her by all means."

Titania felt the tremble of her own lips. She was a young bride again whenever she thought of Oberon—shy and unsure and hopeless in love. She had kept herself and her people bathed in frivolity since the last time she saw him. To feed them. To dull her heartache. She had almost forgotten her anguish. Now the girl was back in Faerie and who could help but be captivated by her?

Not Oberon.

Her mouth settled pin straight and her jaw muscles flexed. A heart forever breaking settled now behind a wall as thick as stone. The floor splintered with thick vines beneath her dainty pink feet.

Briae came back, deftly side-stepping the broken marble. A shimmering glass of Faerie

wine was clasped in her hands. Titania exhaled, teeth sharper in her mouth.

"Mum…?" Tarak looked up, his brow creased.

"I'm so sorry, my son. I am going to kill the brightling."

Before either Briae or Tarak could stop her, she disappeared. All that was left of the Spring Queen was an audible crack like young wood breaking.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Sam had been placed in the care of Maab and he couldn't understand why. Did the Magpies actually trust her, or was he just being tossed around like an unwanted toy? Maab was looking at him with her lethal smile as she explained that this strange, cavernous home in the centre of Faerie belonged to all the Faerie Royals.

"Your little wife already has a room here, in fact." Maab explained. "Second chamber on the right, near Oberon's."

Sam refused to respond to her taunting. He stared at the wall beside her head, wishing Anna would hurry back. Airina and Gearóid were told by Maab to wait outside. Though they had tried to object, to bargain, they clearly had no hope against the whim of the Winter Queen. He felt as raw and unprotected as an exposed nerve.

Maab's eyes glittered black like the wet shell of a beetle. She wore a blue dress tied tight at the waist with a black cord that threaded through a variety of animal skulls. Maab was barefooted still. Flakes of snow covered her hair, eyelashes, and forearms. When Sam breathed, he could see his breath in white, cloudy tendrils. Terrifying as she was, he could not stop his eyes glancing between her and the shifting black box behind her.

"I'm glad we have some time alone together." Maab grinned, distracting him.

She seemed so delicate and yet so wild. She unnerved him.

"I was surprised you volunteered your hospitality, Queen Maab." Sam attempted to sound as formal and refined as the Faeries.

She cocked her head, a radiant smile on a bright, clean face. She was almost like a child. Or a haunted doll.

"You're afraid of me."

"Very much." There was no need to deny it.

"I've promised not to hurt you, little boy."

She darted to his side so fast that Sam found himself pressed against a wall. It was slick with ice. Sam imaged the skulls on Maab's belt grinned at him. All he could hear was the swoop and crash of her large wings lifting her off the ground.

The black box made a disturbing rustling noise from the centre of the room.

"I-I meant that you are…an…intimidating figure. Very beautiful…very…lethal." Sam stumbled over his own words, eyes locked to her predatory gaze.

Maab's face split into a sharp smile. She put her hand to his neck and as she caressed the skin, ice blossomed. Black nails grew from her fingers in sharp points, but they did not cut him. She seemed to be restraining herself, but he was afraid her self-control would not last. Sam shivered, lifting his arms instinctively to protect himself. As he did, his tattoo was exposed.

"What is this?" Maab questioned, dropping down to her delicate feet.

An innocent curiosity lit up her pretty face. Her eyes were soft.

"It's called a tattoo…" Sam started to explain before breaking off, realising Maab was covered in swirling blue tattoos from her temple to her calves. She laughed at him. "I mean, um, well it's a sword. It's an Irish sword, I think. I was sixteen when I got it and I just thought it looked cool. Anna…she calls me her knight."

"She is a clever brightling. Perhaps that is some of her ancient blood lingering. Your sword isn't an Irish cast. It is in fact similar to one Arthur once carried. Not Excalibur, but another. It's in the hilt, you see."

Maab fingered the illustration with a softness Sam had never seen in her. She seemed to be remembering something.

"Did you love Arthur?" Sam whispered, though he didn't know why.

"Arthur!" Maab exclaimed with a girlish giggle and Sam almost laughed with her. "Not that obscure, preening little boy. No, he was the golden child, the pure of heart, the hero. We were not well suited. I preferred his dark little shadow—Lancelot."

Maab was quiet, staring at Sam's sword. Her face was wide open.

"He was beautiful, the desolate creature."

Sam was so close to her that he could see her chest rising and falling with breath. Ice crystals bloomed like freckles over the bridge of her nose. Her eyes were still far, far away.

"I was so naïve once." She said, a sad smile on her full lips. "I lavished him with many indulgent things humans were not intended to possess. He enjoyed the pleasures of Faerie and his permissive Faerie Queen for a time, but in the end all he desired was his simpering temptress, Guinevere. He never wanted me. Not really. Not enough."

"I'm sorry." Sam could almost see the young Maab falling in unrequited love. "That must have been heart-breaking."

"I went on quite a killing spree of humans that winter, I recall. Oberon even forbade me from leaving Faerie for a while. Not that he knew the cause, of course. I've always hidden my affairs. Better than Morgana anyway. She taught us all the weight of loving."

Her words were harsh, but her eyes were watering as she stroked Sam's tattoo. No one else ever did that besides Anna. It was an odd, soothing sensation. Sam felt words slip from his mouth as if they were water.

"Did you ever love again? With someone who could love you back?"

"Foolish human child!" She dropped his arm, anger creasing her face and breaking Sam's lull. "No one will ever *love* me. They *desire* me—for my power, my beauty. Not love. Not in earnest."

Her words were painful. Sharp as daggers.

“I don’t believe that. I think it’s easier to imagine we’re unlovable. That way we won’t be hurt.” He didn’t know what was forcing his thoughts out of his head. This place—Heart—he couldn’t rationalise here. His mind was an overflowing fountain and it was going to get him killed. “If you could be brave enough to love again, you could be loved in return.”

Maab blanched and a muscle in her jaw twitched. From the far, moon-lit window, the ever-present yet silent Kelpie guard shifted almost imperceptibly on his feet.

The only other sound in the room was the noise of the black box as it shook again.

Sam’s eyes flicked down first, but Maab soon followed. Then her mouth parted in a wicked grin.

“Yes, I had forgotten our guests.”

Her eyes were alight again. The past few moments of reminiscence and honesty were lost. A primal, anxious hitch of self-preservation lodged in Sam’s chest.

Maab kicked a dainty foot against the box before squatting down to flick open the latch that held down the lid. Sam bit back a scream.

THIRTY-NINE

Anna ran from Oberon's chambers and retraced her steps to Maab's Winter quarter of Heart. A small brightness followed her, like a candle flame dancing on the wick. When she looked again the light was a dainty Naiad. Anna started walking. The Naiad had made herself very small and half-walked, half-glided beside Anna's right calf. She reached out to the brown skin of Anna's legs with a worshipful kind of sigh and Anna jumped as the clammy hand caressed her. The Naiad laughed, growing to her full height.

"What do you want?" Anna snapped, hurrying.

"Oberon talks of you, mistress. He talks to his servants, he talks to his women, he talks in his sleep…" The woman cooed, sweet as honey. "He says his hidden brightling will be his new Summer Queen."

"I am not *his* anything." Anna snapped again.

Panic snaked its way through her. She had failed Becca. She had failed herself—the memory of his touch still lingered on her skin. Anna couldn't fail Sam, too. Her heart pounded. In her ears her heartbeat sounded the same as his name. The winding corridors twisted, never-ending.

"My Queen." The Naiad stopped in front of the frantic Anna and bowed. "I am a Summer Fae. Your own, when the time comes."

Anna stopped and looked at the Faerie, stunned. A brightling, of course she was. A Summer Faerie.

"I…I didn't know…I…" Anna started, but already the Faerie was slipping away down the hall like water in a drain.

Anna turned back in time to see Morwin emerge from the opposite tunnel to hers. The Kelpie carried a bowl of plums slathered in a golden liquid like purest honey. He nodded at

her before stepping through the door. Airina and Gearóid stood outside with blank faces like elegant sentinels. Airina opened the door for Anna but neither spoke. Anna didn't understand this part of Faerie. Samhain—before it turned bloody—was magical madness, decadence, bliss. She imagined all of Faerie would be like that. Heart, however, was a tangled maze. Anna felt like Alice down a twisted rabbit hole.

As she entered the frosted room, Anna was surprised to see that the Winter Queen was lounging in a velvet chair near Sam. Her gaze flicked up to Anna and her lips parted into a grin. Sam looked up at Anna and revulsion coloured his face. Shock and confusion hit her in the stomach. Did he know what had happened in Oberon's chambers?

She noticed a black box by their feet. Maab giggled as she followed Anna's line of sight and Sam looked back down, the same disgusted face twisting even further as he watched whatever lay there.

"Out, beasties." Queen Maab commanded.

Three-fingered hands crept over the edge of the box. The skin of the creatures that crawled out was something like yellowed bruises stained with blotches of purple and black. Their eyes were small and far apart. Pus leaked from them as they blinked. Each had a grotesque, reptilian nose angled in opposing directions. Both of the creatures had small, thin legs that looked too little to support their weight. Their mouths hung open, wide and fleshy. One smiled at her. It was like a heaving mass full of teeth. In the harshness of daylight, these gnomes were even more repulsive than the first one Anna had seen.

Maab burst into delighted laughter. She even clapped her slender hands together.

"I promised I would find a solution for your human parents and here they are."

"How will these—they—help us?" Anna asked Maab, trying not to look at the smiling one.

"Don't you know what they are?" Maab asked with mock innocence.

"Gnomes." Sam and Anna answered together. Neither of them would ever forget the sight of the one Gearóid split in half.

"Yes, exactly! Gnomes are particularly good changelings. Though they look foul, they are the best of the Fae for shapeshifting into humans."

"Then why don't they—" Sam started, but he cut himself off.

Anna understood. She was ashamed of her revulsion towards their presence, but she couldn't deny the churning in her stomach. Why wouldn't they make themselves more appealing looking if they could?

"They cannot do it alone." Maab answered the unspoken question. "They require magic from a Royal to make such a drastic change to their appearance, but what little they get they can do much with. I can give these two gnomes enough to live out the rest of their days with your families in replacement for yourselves."

"What?!" Sam looked disturbed. "What are you talking about? You can't just *replace us*."

"I can be cruel when it pleases me, little human, but I would not wish the loss of a child on a parent." Maab looked hard at both of them. "This will hurt you, yes, but it will save them from a far worse pain. You know by now. You cannot go back."

Sam was quiet, his jaw slack. Anna wondered what he must be thinking. They did know…and didn't…and couldn't imagine an eternity without their families. They were only kids. Except they weren't. Not anymore.

"I've read about changelings since Samhain." Anna said aloud.

"Have you now?" Maab purred.

"I just mean, in most stories the people always know there's a changeling in their

house. The Faerie gives itself away somehow. What if our parent's realise they're not us? They're not…human."

Maab curled a finger casually at the two gnomes. They took stiff steps towards her, tethered by an unseen control. The Queen then stopped them at her feet and gave each a clipping of hair. Anna recognised some of the hair as hers and some of the hair as Sam's. Her skin bristled. When had Maab stolen their hair?

The gnomes opened their mouths and swallowed the hair without so much as a grunt. Anna and Sam watched, horrified, as the squat bones and fleshy bodies broke and contorted in unnatural angles. Anna had to look away as the skin blistered and jaws unhinged. A screeching noise emitted from one or both of them, Anna couldn't tell. She turned when she heard the sound of Sam's deep intake of breath.

When Anna faced the gnomes again, she was looking at herself. Not a mirror, but a twin. The gnome was naked. Anna's brown skin and lanky body was duplicated. She felt the heat of embarrassment colour her face. To her surprise, she realised the gnome was blushing, too. Sam stood beside himself. She knew her husband by the bands on his fingers, his clothes, and the scowl on his face, but besides that the other creature was a perfect image of him.

"They aren't us!" Sam exclaimed, struggling to rein his emotions back in. Maab paid him no attention.

"Humans have always believed what they want to believe. That is the foolish wonder of humanity." The Winter Queen said. "These gnomes will make your parents believe."

"My mother would know!" Sam shook his head, his jaw clenching.

"Faeries are not particularly good at pretending to be children, but these will do as you two are much older. They will have lives of their own for you, with your memories and your faces." Maab inspected each of the creatures closely. "You will live your new lives here.

Your mortal families will die having never known you left. It is a mercy."

"They aren't us." Sam repeated again, this time low and forced through his teeth.

"Then leave, human!" Maab roared, rounding on him. "Go back to your mother and live your human life, but your Queen *will* belong to Faerie. So you make your choice. I offer you what we Fae have done for centuries. You offer nothing!"

"My mother deserves better than a fake son!"

"Sam…" Anna's heart dropped.

Sam looked between her and Maab. Then understanding struck him.

"Anna…Anna, c'mon, that's not what I meant. You…you were a baby when…She's my Mum, Anna. I can't just…"

Anna couldn't listen to him. She turned to Maab instead.

"Is it safe?"

"They have their own minds, but gnomes often choose to live as changeling humans. Many populate your former world, regardless of what your stories say." Maab answered.

Anna nodded. Sam rubbed his forehead and swallowed hard.

"I will protect her. I promise." The gnome that looked like Sam clasped Sam's shoulder and looked him in the eyes.

At first Anna thought Sam's gnome meant her. Then she realised he couldn't mean her. Sam's mother…the gnome was promising to protect Sam's mother…

Anna watched as Sam's eyes welled. He brushed the gnome's hand off his shoulder. They both knew what the gnome was saying. *How* he was saying it. Sam never broke a promise. The gnome used Sam's voice, he knew his true fear, more than Anna had. This was what a changeling was. Different, and the same.

"Sam?" Anna whispered.

"I understand. I do." Sam answered, monotone, his eyes still wet.

"You can leave, Sam. I know you don't—"

"I'm not leaving you. If this is your world, then it's our world now."

Anna nodded slowly, her mouth tight. This *was* her world. An ancient and blood-stained world.

Maab huffed, bored. She waved her fingers and sent the gnomes off. Anna and Sam watched with a unique discomfort as their mirror selves left them behind in Faerie.

"Where's Becca?" Sam asked with a wearied voice, finally looking at her again.

Anna had almost forgotten why they had come back to Faerie.

"Sam…we've got to talk," she whispered, staring at the floor.

"Where is Becca?" Sam repeated.

"I tried—"

At that moment Airina burst through the door.

"Queen Titania is coming. I can hear her. She wants to kill Bright!"

Everyone went as still as stone, their eyes all on the Magpie.

Before Airina could repeat herself, Titania whirled into the room with a fiery gaze. Her eyes darted around the room until she found Anna's face. As a reflex, Sam flung his arms out to cover Anna with his body.

"A consort as well?" Titania spat. "Greedy brightling, so like your kin!"

The Spring Queen's eyes fumed. Something about the way she carried her shoulders reminded Anna of an angry cat. Even her voice seemed to hiss.

"Don't touch her!" Sam snarled.

Anna tried to worm her way around him but he was insistent.

"Sam, please," Anna whimpered. Sam didn't move so she tried to plead with the Spring Queen instead.

"I didn't do anything to you. Please. Don't hurt Sam. Please!"

"*Mibdul! Változó! Wisselaar!*" Titania spat foreign curses. Maab laughed as if scandalized, eyes still gleaming. Titania continued. "I will not waste the effort of crushing you from within, *Mendax*. No. I will slice your throat. The old ways. Move, human, or I'll kill you first."

"Such vehemence!" Maab laughed aloud, walking over to Titania. "For one whose own son is a changeling boy, I would have assumed such words had been stricken from your personal vocabulary."

Though she smiled, Anna could see that the Winter Queen took careful and calculated steps. Her eyes glittered, but her mouth twitched down. Anna trembled from the thought of Maab being afraid of anything.

"None of your tricks, darkling!" Titania hissed.

"Sister, I mean only to remind you of your cherished boy. What would he have to say if he heard you call the little innocent changeling such things?"

"Innocent? What innocence? The brightling aims herself for my husband!"

Titania stood almost limp as Maab circled her. Something about the Winter Queen was calming her. Anna was just able to look at Titania from over Sam's shoulder. Tendrils of curls snaked around her head. Her pale crimson skin seemed rosier than the first time Anna had seen her, flushed even. Anna could see the swirling tattoos on Titania's chest and neck. Her wide, blush-coloured wings fluttered. Titania's eyes, like most of the Fae, were obsidian dark and bird-like.

"He is *our* husband, dear Sister. The King of Faerie will belong to her as well, soon enough." Maab smiled, her voice hushed. Titania gritted her teeth.

"So it is true? She's to be the next Summer Queen?"

Titania turned her gaze on Maab who smiled, blowing snowflakes like flower petals over her fellow Queen. Titania swatted them away.

"It is quite true," another voice answered.

Morgana.

Anna had not heard the door open nor noticed as her mother walked into the room to join the rest of them. The Autumn Queen stood among them with the same air of assertive beauty that surrounded her always. Her velvety dark skin looked so soft that Anna ached to touch it. And her eyes…if Anna's were like an ocean, then Morgana's were the bluest seas of Neptune.

"How congenial of you to give us the pleasure of your presence after these many moons." Titania narrowed her gaze at Anna's mother, her kind words laced with polite venom. Anger flared in the Spring Queen again. "I suppose you came straightaway when your Sights saw me murdering your daughter. Don't deny it! All of Faerie is buzzing about your secret."

"I would not dream of denying my daughter, Sister." Morgana said, her words deliberate and sharp. Anna felt her heart pinch. "Bright is all I have left of my most beloved husband. I know that you will not kill her."

"You have become quite the sorceress, Morgana! So like your mother. For though you are Faerie, you have told a lie. I *will* kill—." Her voice caught, unable to speak a lie.

Titania huffed and turned on her heel towards Anna and Sam. From somewhere in her dress the Spring Queen pulled a knife. The glass blade was both beautiful and terrible as it

glinted in the light. It seemed to cut the air around it with its sharp tip. Titania grinned and her beautiful face darkened with a cruel smile.

"Mother!" Anna screamed at the statue-still Morgana without meaning to.

Even Maab looked alarmed. Still, no one moved to stop the Spring Queen. Sam blocked Anna with his strong arms and she could not move around him. Titania's gaze shifted.

"Move human. Now. This is your last chance. You love her and that is admirable, but there are many more brightlings besides her. I will give them to you. As many as you desire. Move, and save yourself. Or else die beside her."

"I-I trust Morgana," Sam murmured. Anna watched him in shock. "You will not touch her. I will not let you!"

Titania made a guttural noise Anna would never have expected to come from her small, pretty mouth. The Spring Queen's back leg extended backwards, and she brought the knife level to the bridge of her nose with her right arm.

Titania lunged.

"The boy is her husband. She wants no other."

Morgana glided over to Maab's recliner and sat down with a weary sigh, as if keeping the words in had caused her physical strain.

Titania had stopped, frozen, just as the Autumn Queen must have known she would. Anna felt her trembling breath rattle within her chest.

"What did you say?" Titania asked. Morgana didn't repeat herself.

"Sister, but consider for yourself that if you killed my daughter's human husband, what would stop her from falling under the spell of our dear alluring Oberon?" Morgana paused, turning her head to gaze at the other Queen. "You also love your people. Would you deny them the Summer Queen Faerie needs?"

Titania blanched as she looked Sam and Anna over with new eyes.

“They must stay here in Faerie for now. Alive. Both of them.” Morgana concluded.

Titania snarled and flung her blade at the wall, where it smashed into several dazzling pieces. Anna exhaled. Sam turned to face her and wrapped his arms around her. He let his weight rest on her shoulders. She realised then how exhausted he was. Tension wound tight knots through the muscles of his back.

The room was quiet again as Anna stroked Sam’s back. She wanted to cry but she forced herself not to fall apart. For him if nothing else.

“If they are to stay here in Faerie, then the boy should stay with me.” Titania said, after a while. She straightened, poised and elegant. “Maab might eat him.”

She linked arms with the Winter Queen like two young girls on a playground might do. It was strange and civil considering what had taken place moments before. Maab petted Titania’s arm a few times, though her smile betrayed her glee.

“I agree that his best wellbeing would not be with Maab in her season.” Morgana interjected. Maab went to object but laughed again instead.

“Oberon has made arrangements with Bright.” Morgana revealed. Anna flushed.

“As I know Oberon, none but himself will be all too pleased with the arrangements.” Maab murmured, incredulous. “Speak plain, Morgana.”

“Indeed, Maab. Our husband is up to his usual selfish ways. He has agreed to refrain from harming the boy in any way if Bright would stay with him until Briae and Tarak’s bond. In such time, Oberon will attempt to woo her. Bright would like to think that she would refuse such an obvious, ill-intentioned agreement, but Oberon is powerful, and she loves her human. So in the end, she will consent to Oberon’s terms and the boy will let her.”

Anna felt her face drain of blood. She shook her head, but words would not leave her

lips. It wasn't exactly how her mother had said it, but Morgana also wasn't incorrect. She didn't know what to say. Sam's jaw set tight.

"*Ọgbanje*!" Titania cursed at Anna. Maab giggled beside her.

"Sister, you should respect my daughter as a future Queen of Faerie. I will not allow her to be disrespected again." Morgana chided. A beat passed as the Autumn Queen glared at the Spring Queen. "My girl does not wish to be wooed. She has no love for the Faerie King. She wishes only to save her husband from a devastating fate."

"Truly?" Titania divided sharp glances between Morgana and Anna. "You do not wish to bed the King?"

"Of course not!" Anna swore, but she blushed under Titania's intense gaze.

"There!" Maab exclaimed with a flamboyant flourish of her hands. "Now we can all be friends. I am very much bored. Will you keep the human, Titania?"

The Spring Queen seemed to consider Anna a while before she spoke again.

"I will." Titania vowed, looking Sam over with an appraising eye. "You can stay in my palace, only do not disturb me… and you must bathe."

Sam looked from Anna to Titania and back. Decisions were being made for them from all angles, like pieces on a chessboard.

"Sam and I need to talk. We need to decide what to do about Oberon together." Anna declared to no one in particular.

Morgana ignored her, Titania scowled, presumably at the mention of Oberon's name in her mouth, and Maab stared straight ahead, disinterested. No one answered her for a while until Gearóid nodded in her direction. She decided to take that as her answer.

A bone-deep weariness settled over her. She offered Sam her hand. As he took it she let out a breath.

"Take him then." Titania turned away. "When you're done, have him brought to my palace in the Spring Court. I'll see him attended to by my people. I swear to you that I will not harm him, nor will any of my Court. Though, I would be more concerned about your own brood."

Titania looked Sam up and down one last time. She didn't say anything else. She only walked away, Maab following. A touch of her previous fire was still burning in her eyes when she left.

FORTY

Sam let his fingers glide through the warm water. The Summer chambers in Heart had been noticeably bare to begin with, but light-footed attendants brought things in to make the two of them more comfortable. They seemed to know she was a Royal without her saying. He wondered if everyone knew already. Did they know about him, too, or did he not feature in the whispers of Faerie gossip?

A sheer curtain of see-through fabric was wound around a circular canopy. It hid a claw-footed tub made out of polished stone. The room was like Maab's room, but also different. In it there was the bathtub, a couch, an empty wardrobe, wide windows, a little lavatory, something like a chandelier carved from one massive clear stone, and one enormous bed. Everything was covered in golden flowers and moss. A yellow and pink sunset spilled in through the windows over the tub. Sam watched the ripples of the water. A knot between his shoulders stiffened. Anna had finally told him what happened to Becca. He was furious and less than eager to play the Faerie King's dangerous game. Sam also had to admit he was scared now—perhaps delayed, perhaps irrationally—of the land called Faerie.

Six Winterland Nymphs were sent from Maab to bathe the future Summer Queen and her "mate". They arrived at the door, wingless but otherwise striking in their similarity to their Queen. Silvery-blue skin gave them the appearance of ice sculptures come to life. Anna refused the offer. She told the Nymphs to leave their herbs and oils and things behind and to leave them alone. After the Faeries had poured their steaming buckets of sweet-smelling water into the gleaming tub, they left with their hushed whispers and confused glances over their shoulders. Sam was grateful. He felt like he was stuck in one of those dreams where things were happening without any input from the dreamer. Time was strange here. It felt like a lifetime ago that a creature ate his hair and left to go live with his mother.

Anna seemed to recognise the state of shock Sam was in. She was gentle with him, like

one would be with a child, and he let her guide him through the room until he was back in front of the tub. The ripples had settled and the stillness of the water woke him from his helpless haze. Only then did he notice the tremble in Anna's hands.

Sam reached out and grasped her fingers. Together they stared at the water. It should be so easy. Sam was maybe six the first time he could recall Anna in a bathing suit, her thick hair stuffed beneath a cap. He knew this was different, though. They both knew.

Anna undressed first and slipped in the tub. Sam took a deep breath and joined her.

He was surprised to find the knot in his shoulders eased. Sam smiled at the bareness of Anna's shoulders, the curling ends of her wet hair. He delighted in the pure beauty of his wife… Sam was still getting used to thinking of her as *his wife*. He felt odd even being naked like this in front of her, as if he was unworthy of her vulnerability. Her body was both sensual and striking in its delicate strength. Sam wasn't used to it yet. He wasn't sure he ever would be. Finally he was alone with her, in her familiar presence, but nothing felt familiar. Nothing felt safe. There was a tug in his chest as if she was being pulled away from him, just at the edge of his fingers. So Sam gently splashed her, trying to relieve the tension. Anna smiled and splashed him back, but he didn't miss the blush on her cheeks.

Seconds ticked by that felt like hours before Sam moved nearer to close the gap between them. Her skin was soft and wet and she made a gentle gasping sound when he touched her.

There was something beside the tub that smelled like honey and yet foamed like soap. He picked it up and lathered Anna's back and neck with it. She softened under his touch and kissed his cheek. Sam let go of the breath he had held tight in his chest. Both of them laughed and wondered at the various things left to them to bathe with. Sam held something like a sea sponge out for Anna and caught a glimpse of dullness behind her eyes. For just a second she had been somewhere else.

"Don't think, not right now at least." He told her, pulling out a sprig of something and dropping it into the water.

He crushed a pomegranate in his hands. The red seeds looked like small jewels. Anna watched him and then their eyes met. This was it. He could walk out of the bath and never come back to Faerie, or, if he ate this Faerie fruit, he was part of this world forever. For better or worse.

Sam ate the seeds and offered Anna some. She ate them, her eyes never leaving his face, then she laughed softly when he tossed the rest into the bath water as well. He took her hand and kissed it.

She kissed his fingers back, his forearms. He disappeared into the soft touch of her mouth. Anna kissed his skin again until she hovered over him, her slippery body touching his.

"I love you, Sam. I'm sorry…for what I am."

"I'm not," he answered her, tilting her chin so that their eyes met. "I love you, every part of you."

Sam dragged his fingers through a thick, syrupy oil and ran it through Anna's hair. She turned and did the same to him. He began rinsing her with something that smelled of roses and sat gleaming in a crystal pitcher. She scrubbed his skin with a stone that looked like sea-glass. It melted as she applied pressure. Her face was inches away, her breath even with his. Sam looked down at the way the water moved against her round breasts. When he looked back up, his breath caught at the look of desire in her eyes.

Sam kissed her, Anna kissed him, over and over until they were submerged in the bottom of the tub, grasping for each other. When they broke the surface again, they were out of breath. Anna was luminescent, and her eyes sparkled like polished gems. She reached out to touch him, awe in her eyes, and he looked down at himself as she did. His skin shone pearl

white and felt impossibly soft. Sam reached out then, eager to know the new feel of Anna. Her body was tawny silk.

Sam rose up from the tub and Anna followed him out. They explored each other, silent, slow. Sam was drowning in Anna and he wanted to sink further. Her mouth was plush beneath his, her body warm in his hands, the smell of her hair like wildflowers. She moaned and the sound nestled inside him, low and hot. Her fingers were grasping and he responded. They dripped water on the floor. Sam lifted her body up and her thighs gripped his waist as he walked her to the bed. Her breath trembled when he lay her down.

"I want you, Sam." Anna's breath was hot against his ear.

Sam let his hand glide up Anna's thighs. Her hair was spread beneath her and she arched over the coiling pillow of it all. He kissed her throat, her nipples, her stomach. Both of his hands found the soft flesh of her hips. Heat flared through him as she moaned again. Sam's body was tensed above her.

"I always want you, Anna." Sam murmured, melting into her.

FORTY-ONE

Titania saw to the arrangement of the human's room. She was willing to accept him if it meant the brightling would stay away from her husband. Bright may not want Oberon and his advances, but her girlish blush every time she spoke his name proved she was no less dazzled by him. That was enough room for the Faerie King to worm himself in. Titania knew that all too well.

If Titania could not trust Oberon, at least she hoped to trust Morgana's Sight. Titania wanted to talk to Morgana, her strange and aloof Queen Sister, but to her irritation no one could find the Autumn Queen. As ever, she came and went as she pleased. Until Morgana's plan was revealed, the boy needed to be protected. Samuel he was called, Titania reminded herself again. She needed to be kind to him, this reminder to the brightling of what her prize could be. And what was at stake.

"Violets in the west hall," Titania called to her attendants.

The Dryads conjured the flowers and placed them where the Queen directed. Her perfect skin wrinkled as she tried to remember how to mask the scent of a human.

"Mother? You requested my presence?" Tarak's soft baritone voice filled the room.

"Come, I need your help. The new Queen's human will be here any moment. Have I overdone things?"

Tarak looked around at the flowers spilling into the room from all angles and stifled a laugh on his blue lips. Titania frowned.

"My Queen, his scent will not be so present once he has bathed, if that is what concerns you."

Titania fluttered her fingers with a frustrated wave. The Dryads turned, taking their many flowers with them. Suddenly the room was near empty again. Half a day's work

wasted.

"He smelled earthen when I saw him last. Horrible. Sweat and dirt…"

"Give him ash trees, Queen. Good and sturdy. That's all the foliage he'll need. An almond tree as well if you desire blooms."

"I suppose," Titania scowled.

"I enjoyed books as a child. It helped me feel familiar in this world. I could choose some for you from the library."

"Of course."

"And the windows." Tarak laughed, not at her but still Titania's pride bristled. "He's not a prisoner. He should have light. The air will do more for his scent than flowers."

"It would take too long to widen the windows, boy." Titania snapped, though she did stretch them open a little more.

Her cheeks flared with effort as she produced the trees. She was not a Dryad and so she relied only on her affinity as Spring Queen to influence the foliage. The blood of her Sprite grandmother did little to help her now. Her grandfather had been a Magpie. Though Titania was called a Sylph like her mother, she had questioned what her diverse ancestry made her now. There was no answer for Titania. She had been the Spring Queen for almost as long as she could remember. The bride of a faithless King. That was her identity, and she hated it.

Tarak had disappeared to collect some books while she thought to herself. He was back now and seemed excited. She ignored his lingering chuckle as she attempted a flourishing almond tree. The stubby bush she had made mocked her.

Titania's hair was let down around her wings instead of pinned up in the dramatic fashions given to the Faerie Royals. She fussed with it, combing it with her fingers till it lay smooth.

“Thank you, my son,” Titania said to Tarak.

He smiled at her, tilting his head to the side.

“You’re already angry with your new pet, mother. I know you.” Titania turned away from his intelligent, wide eyes. “This boy is trying to give his whole heart to his Queen. He is brave to come to our world, to stay here. It’s all for her, you must know that. It speaks well of his character and perhaps even hers.”

“You don’t even know him, Tarak. Don’t be naïve.” Titania snapped again.

“I know humans, mother. I was one once.” He smiled, ignoring her jab. “I also know you. You are not angry with the boy, or even the brightling. You are angry with Oberon. Worse, you are angry with your own heart for loving him still. He does not deserve you.”

Titania was quiet. Tarak’s eyes bore into her, but they were kind, loving.

“How is it you have become so wise, my little boy?”

“I am not so little, Mother. I have my own bride now.” He smiled again.

Titania reminded herself to find a thick blanket of rose petals. Tarak had one like it once.

“Yes, that is true. I pray you wed her swiftly. The girl stays with Oberon until you do, and my heart… my heart remains crushed within my ribs.”

FORTY-TWO

Anna had been dressed by a lady's maid. It was incredibly awkward. She could just about remember when her mother used to dress her as a child. Now she was expected to let a petite Nymph fasten every button. First Anna had been dressed in a delicate shift. Though it was as beautiful as a Pre-Raphaelite painting, it didn't feel right. Anna asked instead for a simple long-sleeve tunic and leather leggings like the ones she had seen Airina wear. The girl raised an eyebrow but obeyed.

Anna had also asked for a locket to keep a clipping of Sam's black hair. In mere seconds, the girl produced a contraption made of a shallow, small clay bowl covered by glass. Sam's little cutting of hair was blue it was so black and tied with a matching piece of string. He had given it to her just before he left Heart. Guards took him away to the border of the Springlands to be given to Titania. She had not seen him since.

"Oberon?" Anna whispered, stepping through the open door of his chambers.

She tugged at her sleeves. Protection, Anna finally realised with a pain in her stomach. Somewhere deep and rooted in her mind Anna had chosen clothes that could protect her from the gaze, from the touch, of the Faerie King.

"Oberon?" She called again. Anna clicked her fingernails against the glass of her new necklace.

"Brightling…" The word was a smoky blaze of sensuality.

Oberon was hidden somewhere in his dark chambers. The door behind her snapped shut as vines snaked along the walls to cover it. Anna heard the thud of her heartbeat in her ears. Hadn't her mother—her human mother—warned her of being in dark rooms with boys? Years before she had fallen in love with Sam, in the young days of barely knowing the

difference between a boy and a girl or the appetites of those who love to harm, her mother had tried to warn her.

"Come to me, Girl of Light."

"Where are you?" She ventured in, against every instinct that railed at her.

He had drawn the curtains. None of his many candles were lit. The sun tried to reach her but her eyes couldn't adjust fast enough. Everything she felt under her exploring hands was an odd texture—fur, moss, something scratching, something so soft it almost hurt…

"Why does your heart speed?" Oberon sounded genuine in his concern. "Would I hurt you, beautiful girl?"

"You've already hurt me, Oberon. Tearing me from Sam, forcing me to stay…"

Something shifted in the shadows. He was behind her in an instant, gripping her body to his abdomen. She gasped. His breath was warm on the back of her neck.

"Let me soften the blow."

The Faerie King spun her and the weight of his body pressed her against the wall. Anna reached, frantic, for a weapon or a way to escape him. He pulled the collar of her top down with his long fingers, kissing, biting the exposed flesh of her neck. Anna screamed but no one came. Not the Nymph who dressed her, not the Fuinseog she knew was just outside the door, not Sam, or her even her mothers.

"Help!" Anna screamed. "Please! Someone help me!"

"Beautiful girl…" Oberon whispered between bitten kisses. "My changeling girl…"

"Get off of me! Please! Stop! Help!"

Anna ground her teeth and flailed, practically helpless in his grip. Her strength was failing and she found her eyes closing, her mind fleeing. Oberon's desire dizzied Anna, like a numbing balm slathered over an open sore. She pushed against him but he didn't move. This

was why Titania had wanted to kill her, Anna realised. The Spring Queen knew what men like Oberon wanted and she expected Anna to know, too. Had she known? Oberon continued to kiss Anna's throat, his teeth clipping her skin. Anna closed her eyes and tried to will her consciousness elsewhere. Her arms were heavy, straining, her throat raw. Silent tears slipped from her eyes. The Faerie King's fevered attack reminded her of Halloween night, of Sam in her room and her mouth hot on his skin. Sam had looked at her with such fear in his eyes she had wanted to hide. There was a part of her that *needed* him to kiss her back. To want her, the way Oberon wanted her now. The King was all consuming.

You're disgusting. You wanted this. You deserve this.

Anna's own mind tormented her as tears slipped freely from her.

Oberon grunted; the hardness of his body pressed to her thigh. Anna screamed again, sobbing.

"Stop! Please! Someone help me!"

You're alone. No one is coming to save you. No one cares if you scream. You'll always be alone. You deserve to be alone. You'll never be good enough.

Anna shook her head to force her vicious thoughts from her head. Sam's face swam in her mind. She thought of his embrace, his forehead on hers, his whispers. She cried, the ghost of his last soft kiss on her lips still.

I love you, Anna Michelle Burrow.

Oberon grabbed Anna's face but this time something blazed through her at his touch. She wrenched away from his grip. With one hand Anna wound fingers around her necklace as if it were a talisman and with her opposite arm, she thrust Oberon brutally off of her. Her forearm met his throat. Fumbling, her fingers reached for anything besides his skin. She found the curtain over the window and ripped it down. Light burst into the room and into her

own foggy head.

"Get away from me!" Anna bellowed in a raw voice, nothing soft left in her.

Oberon looked at her, barely dressed and chest heaving. His long hair spilled over his shoulders as he rubbed his throat. He only wore a strange looking pair of breeches slung unnecessarily low. His massive, green wings quivered in time with the throbbing beneath her skin.

"Don't touch me!" Anna's voice was hoarse.

Oberon's face shifted into an unreadable expression that Anna nearly confused for sadness. Then haughtiness hollowed the space beneath his eyes.

"You entered into a pact. Do you wish to break it?" Oberon asked.

"No, I can't," Anna hissed, her fingers back to her talisman.

She took a deep breath and then continued, ignoring Oberon's scowl.

"*Because* I love Sam, and Sam loves me. By his actions, not just his words."

"I would show you better, brightling. Such actions that you would forget those of your foolish human boy." Oberon asserted, stepping towards Anna, a greedy look in his eyes as he surveyed her body.

"Don't touch me!" Anna barked again, stepping further into the light spilling in from the window. She eyed the space between her right hand and the dagger-like fountain pen by Oberon's bed. "I pity you if you believe all you can offer is sex."

"You think you are more than your body, foolish girl? That you are so special?" Oberon sulked to a further corner at her rebuke, tossing his hands up towards the low ceiling.

His words cut deeper than his teeth. She felt tears well in her eyes again but she glared through them.

"You don't know me, changeling girl. I am cursed."

"My name is Bright!" Anna snarled. "*You* don't know *me*! I am no different than any of the other countless women who have been here. You stole my best friend! Do you remember *her* name?"

Oberon's forehead crumpled in thought. He opened his mouth but he could not produce a name. He paled and it fuelled her.

"No one has ever challenged you. No one had ever made you work for anything in your long life. You're an overgrown, ageless child. I agreed to let you pursue me, not to assault me!" Her tears fell again and she seethed with embarrassment.

Oberon stared at her; an eyebrow raised as if her words were foreign to him.

"You stole my friend, you threatened my husband, you made me leave my home! Why?! Because you wanted to sleep with me and you refused to be denied?"

"You don't understand, girl."

"Monster!" Anna spat. He looked struck and she was glad. Her blood boiled. She was screaming now, words spilling from her before she could think. "You think I'm a Queen, so treat me like one! Court me! *If* you win, if I fall for you, I will accept my defeat. But I won't, and then you must grant me what is fair—an eternity of peace with the only man I will ever love!"

Anna's chest was heaving, her hot breath rasping over her lips. Oberon's face was a tangle of emotions, but then a sinister mask settled in place.

"You want to…*date*…your monster?" Oberon asked, smirking.

Anna blinked, unprepared for the Faerie to use a word so…human.

"I don't *want* anything with you. Until the bonding ceremony, I must. I understand now—no thanks to you—that it must take place during the bride's season, which is Spring.

Titania's guard told me."

Anna backed towards the edge of the door, watching Oberon's gaze flicker like a candle flame. The vines slithered away at her touch. Shock turned to overwhelming relief.

"I-I will return to my chamber. Call for me again when…when you are fully dressed!"

Oberon's startling green eyes were softer than she had ever seen them. They bore into hers with a strange vulnerability. Anna shivered.

"What would you like to do?" His voice was low, lulling.

Anna didn't answer. Instead she continued to back away. He could have caught her, she knew, but he only continued watching. His lips curled up, almost innocent if not for the sharpness of his teeth.

"Actually, I might have something in mind." His eyes slid over her. Then he moved slightly and the light from the window silhouetted his defined body, blinding her.

Anna turned without thinking and darted out of the door, closing it before he could say another word. She stopped on the other side, her back flush with the wood. She knew Oberon might hear her heart slamming against her ribs, but she couldn't move. Panic bristled up her spine, delayed, crushing against her chest as Oberon had done. She bent over her wobbling knees, hugged them to her, and focused on filling her lungs with air. She heard a cough and jumped to her feet.

The Fuinseog stood against the opposite wall where she had left him. He didn't respond to her, except to turn his vacant stare away from her tear-smeared face.

"What?!" Anna snapped at the King's guard.

Never again would she forget the kind of man Oberon could be, or the way Faerie bent to his desires. Anna set her jaw and walked back through the corridors to her Summer chamber.

FORTY-THREE

In a small valley surrounded by woods out in the West of Heart a stage had been built in the plush green grass. Faerie creatures from every Season gathered, drawn by the whispers on the wind.

Maab sat beside Titania who pretended, with foolish determination, that she was not stealing glances at the King.

“Rumour among the lower Fae is that the brightling refused Oberon’s advances,” Maab said to Titania. “She implored him to *court* her instead.”

“Quaint.” Titania responded.

Maab frowned as snow flurried down. Only Bright looked around at the sudden storm. Maab sneered as Oberon seized his opportunity to press closer to her.

“He has our people perform for her. Really, Sister, how can you stand him? The people will talk. But let them, he deserves none of their respect.” Maab whispered.

The Winter Queen knew that her Queen Sister was nursing hurt pride but she couldn’t keep the edge out of her voice. Oberon made a fool of his wives as he paraded his latest toy. At least when he had women in his chambers there was some discretion, though not much. This was too blatant.

“Do you hate him? Your own husband?” Titania huffed and though Maab’s blood froze it felt ready to boil.

“He is no more mine than anyone else’s, even yours, dear one. A husband is more than a… A husband is…” Maab trailed off, turning her dark eyes on Morwin, standing to attention nearby.

“Do not prattle on to me, Maab. I pray you will be still and comfort me.” Titania moaned, unable to see anything else besides the King and her broken heart. “The brightling

looks so delighted. Why this performance? Does he tease me?"

Maab watched the acting Faeries prancing about and performing as humans would the imaginings of William Shakespeare. She had always disliked this play. She didn't want to tell her friend, but it seemed very likely indeed that Oberon attempted a jest at Titania by having it performed for the girl. Just another reason to hate him, Maab thought to herself.

"Oberon is a stupid boy." The Winter Queen said aloud.

"By which you mean yes." Titania clenched her jaw.

Maab shrugged. It was a poor attempt to lie, but at least she attempted.

"I don't like how I'm portrayed," she answered instead.

"You're not in this one," Titania reminded her.

"Exactly! I'm portrayed as non-existent! That annoying little man with his stupid decorative frills. How dare he ignore me? Am I not also Queen? Even Tarak is in it!"

"He put you in that other one he wrote. Which was it? That one about the children who are killed by love."

"Barely," Maab snapped, noting the subtle tilt of Titania's long neck arching towards Oberon. The Winter Queen rolled her eyes. "A few lines spoken by a mere boy who later dies. I'm never seen."

"Almost all of them die, in fairness. And Maab, recall, you did try to eat the man."

"Once! The petulant beast! I didn't even bite him that hard!" Maab huffed. "Now…wait, who is that poet I like?"

"Shelley."

"Oh! Shelley! He was a brilliant writer."

"Well, you bit him *quite* hard."

"Yes, well, he liked that sort of thing." Maab smiled wickedly and made an elegant whistle through her sharp teeth.

"Why is it that most of the humans who wander into Faerie are either writers or lunch, and yet there is no one to tell us the difference?" Maab retorted, half-joking.

"The players are working through your snow, Maab. The one playing me is amusing, I suppose. Brave anyway." Titania's eyes narrowed. "I should kill her."

"Yes, do!" Maab exclaimed, making Titania jump. "*Anything* would be better than this miserable *nothing*!"

A few Faeries turned in surprise, though once they saw the Winter Queen they turned away again. She gnashed her teeth at them anyway.

"I'm not allowed to kill anything though I am nearly in my season! How am I supposed to feed? Making snow flurries and caressing humans in their nightmares?"

"Well, isn't that some comfort?" Titania tutted, smoothing her skirts.

The Spring Queen lifted a willowy hand into the air and it was filled with a slender glass of a drink which sloshed almost unattractively if not for the shimmering pink colour. Maab stole it from her, as Titania expected, and sipped it. She smiled with a devious, toothy grin before giving it back. Titania waited.

"I need mischief, Titania…and blood."

"Well I won't offer up any of my Spring Faeries and you can't eat the other brightlings, especially now. That leaves Morgana's or your own. Unless you catch humans."

"What of *your* new human?" Maab's lips stretched into a grin. "Let me play with the boy. Get back at the brightling."

"Maab…"

"I promise I will not kill him!" She swore, licking her lips.

"I cannot. I gave an oath. Besides, I think Tarak enjoys him. It has been a long time since he had a human companion."

"That bloody boy of yours!" Maab pouted.

Her eyes scanned the crowd until she found Tarak with the brightling's husband some yards away. They were seated much like Titania and herself. One was staring pathetically in the direction of the private alcove of drapery and candlelight at the top of the hill, the other attempting to sway his attention. Maab's eyes swung in the direction the human boy was facing.

For her part, the changeling Queen looked uncomfortable with Oberon's proximity, but no less delighted by the play itself. She looked over at her human and smiled for him.

"I envy the girl," Titania confided, her voice hushed.

"I know," Maab said, patting the Spring Queen's delicate, pink hand. "You won't let me have the boy? Just for a little while?"

Titania laughed. Maab was pleased to have at least managed that.

"No, my vicious friend."

"Then might we leave?" Maab flicked her massive wings.

"Yes, let's. I hate this part anyway." Titania wrinkled her lovely nose.

"I always liked Bottom." Maab giggled as they stood. "I think he would have made a better husband than the beautiful Oberon. You shouldn't have judged him so harshly."

"Hush, wanton!" Titania laughed in earnest, blushing at Maab's quip.

The Winter Queen felt a bloom of satisfaction. If nothing else, she hoped Titania's battered heart might start to mend someday.

"Humans, then, if I'm to have no other sport."

Titania nodded and together they crossed to the other realm.

Maab lingered in the human world after Titania had left. Blood stained the edges of her mouth. She had settled for killing some despots and terrifying a few handsome boys in their sleep. Though she would never admit it, she disliked killing humans. It seemed unfair somehow, since they couldn't see her. Like slaughtering a blindfolded animal. Their fear was delicious, but their surrender was bleak and too quick.

She had three men now—young, new muscled, and tender. She had chased them down and bombarded them with frightful visions. They stumbled together into the icy woods and there she hushed them to a fitful sleep. Maab lay between the unconscious humans now as they shivered from her touch. Try as they might, they couldn't wake from their nightmares.

"Morwin, darling? Is there any more to that little beast you caught?"

Morwin marched to where she lay. A severed leg dangled in his grip from the deer he hunted earlier. He showed a bold, appreciative smile as he looked at her. She wore a short dress with a red velvet corset. Her feet were caked in mud and her hair was more than wild.

Maab turned to the most handsome of the humans and dragged her nails over his neck. He whimpered in his sleep as she sipped on his blood. Morwin kneeled down to her, placing his head in her lap. She caressed him, smearing blood over his sharp cheekbones. He bit at the leg, then handed the remaining meat to Maab.

"My Queen, why did you call for me when the Queen Titania left for the Springlands?"

Maab did not answer him but brought his mouth to hers and kissed him. The supple softness of his lips melted into hers and she met them with hungry pressure. She allowed herself just a moment to need him. There was something in Morwin that called to something in her. She felt that something pulsate like two halves of one heart beneath their skin. They

lay back, warmth spreading as they looked up at the tangled branches of the nearby trees and the tiny shards of black sky winking through.

As dawn eventually crept its red head up over the horizon, Maab released her hold on the humans. They stood up and ran, confused, terrified. Maab ignored them, her vision tunnelled.

"Morwin?"

He lifted up on one elbow to look at her, his red eyes glowing ember hot.

"Queen."

"I am yours, if you will be mine."

"I have always been yours, my beloved Queen." He whispered to her, inhaling her with his nose to her throat. "I will love you with my every breath."

Her body memorised the places where it fit with Morwin's. She wound around him and felt a piece of herself returned to her that she hadn't wanted to admit was missing. Maab let her fingers extend into sharp icicles, dragging them over his chest. His silver-black skin split at her touch. He smiled at her then bent to kiss her neck. She pulled back, making him meet her eyes.

"With every breath," Maab's voice hitched, her heart pounded, "lest you aim never to breathe again."

FORTY-FOUR

Sam lay awkwardly on the plush bed. He was unaccustomed to such excess. He would not complain though. He wouldn't dare. The Springland Queen already seemed irritated every time he left his comfortable cage and reminded her of his existence. Whenever Sam would attempt to speak to her, the rare times he had to, some shadow would cross over her face as if he had disappointed her.

So Sam was being very still and out of the way as he attempted to read one of the books Tarak had put in the room for him. They were all children's books. Sam felt his eyes drooping. But that was not to say the stories weren't interesting. The fables at first seemed immature and too familiar to pass any time, but after a while he realised the stories were different than ones he knew. They were more didactic, ferocious, fascinating. These books were like a window into Faerie. Sam wondered how the Fae might interpret humanity through the children's stories he grew up with. While reading a story of the Faerie Queen Niamh and her human husband Oisín, Sam's heavy eyes drifted down to his tattoo. He imagined Anna's slender, brown fingers warm against his cool skin. An involuntary smile lifted his lips, but it was followed by a crushing weight inside his chest.

What is she doing right now*? What might* he *be doing…with her?*

Though Anna had made efforts to comfort him at the play, Sam could not help but notice how happy she seemed. He saw her beaming smile even from where he had sat. Anna loved *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Sam knew that, but he wasn't sure how Oberon had known. Had Anna told him? Had they planned it together? Sam wanted to be Anna's knight and shining armour, but he had nothing in this world other than the clothes he had arrived with. Actually, he had even lost some of those as his wardrobe was replaced by Faerie clothes. Everything he had had been given to him by Tarak or the Queen Titania. His wife was out of reach and he was dependent on her self-control against the desires of a notorious

Faerie King.

"Why did we agree to this?!" Sam shouted to himself, wrestling with the thick duvet that seemed intent to swallow him whole. His book dropped in the process and Sam flung himself off the bed, kicking the book, wishing he had something to stab it with. Then he picked it up, brushed off the cover, and apologised to it.

His spiralling thoughts were disrupted by a light tap on the door. Sam stood frozen and didn't respond, yet Titania's son entered anyway. Tarak smiled, his sharp white canines prominent against the stark contrast of his sapphire skin.

"Good morning, my friend!" Tarak bounced as he walked, slowing only when he saw Sam had not moved to greet him.

"Tarak, will I become like you?" Sam asked before thinking. In the Faerie book, Oisín's skin was blue, too.

"Of course, Samuel. Once a human lives in Faerie—eats our food, drinks our wine—it becomes one of us, as well as it can."

"Oh, I—" Sam started, but didn't finish.

"Would it be so terrible to become like me?" Tarak asked, his head turned to the side, long hair spilling over his broad shoulders.

"I guess I just want Anna to recognize me. When I see her again." Sam lied.

Tarak shrugged. He was muscled and handsome, everything Sam had grown up wanting to be. And Tarak was blue—very blue. Indigo-night blue, with paler blue tattoos swirling over his skin. The silence stretched between the two men. Then Tarak bristled, his attention drawn to Sam's door moments before a Water Sprite opened up the wide panel of oak. She stood silent and still, not crossing the threshold, her hands clapped behind her back. Sam groaned. The Water Sprite stood with her chin thrust in the air as Tarak laughed.

"Why do you fight our custom?" Tarak questioned.

"They're not my customs. I can dress and undress myself. She doesn't need to…help."

"Your wife will be our Queen. You are important to the stability of our world, even if you're not royalty. If it helps, I've never dressed myself."

Sam shook his head.

"She's also trying to *bathe* me."

Tarak barked out a full-throated laugh then, his held tilting back. Sam couldn't help but respond with his own embarrassed chuckle.

"Yes, you must. It has been too long since your last bath. The human stench on you is bothersome. Perhaps you would benefit from a trip to the Springland bathhouse? We'll go now. Get you out of this room." Tarak smiled, his bright and happy tone already familiar.

Sam baulked, self-conscious. By the time they had made it to the bathhouse, Tarak half dragging him, Sam was only more anxious. To call the place a bath house was an understatement. It was an Eden. The walls dripped heavy with ivy and dazzling waterfalls. Sweet smelling flowers of every colour bloomed. Small, clear pools of sparkling water populated the floor as all manner of water creatures played in and out of them. Male and female and even—to Sam's instant surprise—Fae *children* frolicked in the glittering waters.

"Children?" Sam asked, watching as a handful of tiny creatures with pitch-dark eyes splashed a violet-skinned woman.

"Yes," smiled Tarak. "They'll grow up quickly, much faster than humans, but Faerie children often come to the Springlands to mature—except the darklings. They need their own kind."

"How am I supposed to bathe with all these people in here?"

"Like everyone else?" Tarak smiled again. Sam looked around at the Faeries in various

stages of undress. “People will only stare at you if you keep acting like you don’t belong.”

“I *don’t* belong. I’m sure they’ll notice my skin isn’t exactly a Crayola box.”

Tarak made a face, having never used a crayon. Sam shook his head. This was all *wrong*. He wasn’t supposed to be naked around strangers, around children! And yet he felt the innocence of the situation, like a scenic of painting in a museum come to life. Also, though Tarak was too kind to really say it, Sam knew he stank. Some time ago, while walking in the gardens of the Springland castle, the skies had opened up and drenched him with rain. After the sudden downpour, Sam had returned to the chamber he was given and slept. When he woke he distinctly recalled smelling of mildew. That was three moonrises ago—by Sam’s limited grasp of time in Faerie.

Sam realised after a while that the Faeries *were* looking at him. One by one they noticed him, their unblinking eyes staring. He felt weak and strange, too human, small. He never felt like this back home. He wondered if Anna had ever felt like this before.

Of course she had, he realised. A burning shame throbbed in his chest. He clenched his fists.

“Be still, Samuel,” Tarak soothed. “It’s only a few more months of this. If I could, I would wed tomorrow, not only for your sake. I’ve been building a house for my bride—in the Springlands of course—I am still my mother’s son…”

Tarak went on for a while, sometimes glancing over at Sam as they walked along the shallow edges of the intertwined pools. But Sam was losing the thread of the conversation.

There was the faint sound of singing near him, like the echoing of bells. His eyes searched until he found the source. A Mermaid, combing through the lilac and blue hair of a Nymph. Both women were looking at Sam with pleasant, almost seductive smiles on their faces, singing in a harmonized soprano.

They were buried in the water to the clavicles and their faces glittered with tiny scales. They shone like diamonds. Beads of water dripped down into the Nymph's cleavage. Naked. These women were naked. They were laughing, smiling, dancing in the water. He meant to look away. They were combing their wet hair. No, they were diving in and out of the pools. The firm round breast and scaled hips made him blush as they warbled under the water's surface. He wanted to touch them. He had to. He gasped when one lifted her hand and wrapped it around the back of his neck. Sam's head spun as her singing became more insistent. He could only see the glittering and the water, cool and inviting as he sank with her hands on his skin and the sweet pain of her nails against his jaw…

"Let him go!" Tarak hissed, pulling Sam up from the water by his hand. The creatures fled with frustrated cries. "I will invite the Queen's wrath on you if you do not restrain your impulses! This human is the Summer Queen's consort, and you will do well to honour him."

Sam was dripping with water, his outer layers of clothing removed. He was dizzy from lack of air. He sucked in oxygen like a fish, his mouth wide and trembling.

"What happened?" His voice sounded different, like one unused to speaking.

It was quiet in the bathhouse now. His skin burned from the watchful gazes of the Faeries.

"Never trust a Mermaid, Samuel. She will sing you a dirge as she robs you of your very flesh."

"I thought you said darklings don't spend much time in the Springlands."

Tarak laughed. His laughter echoed in the unnerving silence.

"A darkling? No. A darkling wouldn't have bothered to sing. She simply would have killed you."

Sam sighed, raking his fingers through his hair. Already it seemed thicker and the curls

were getting a bit tangled. The last time he had cut his hair was at his wedding. Just a week ago. A month? He didn't know.

"I miss Anna." Sam confided.

Tarak nodded, knowing. "Stick to those who would protect you. Accept the world you must come to call home. Learn patience, and you will have your Queen again."

Sam nodded back, refusing to speak his secret fear aloud.

Will Anna still want me?

FORTY-FIVE

Anna knew time had passed since she had met with Oberon, but she couldn't keep track of how much time. At first, she had tried to track time by what she judged to be the path of the celestial bodies in the sky, but from her vantage point in Heart—in the centre of Faerie—she could see that the sky responded to the seasonal realms, not a fixed trajectory. Since this discovery Anna had given up her efforts, and time bled together in such an endless way that she thought she might go insane. In desperation, she decided "day" was when a letter from Sam would arrive and she felt the warmth of his love like sunlight. "Night" was when letters did not arrive. The last "Night" had been so long that Anna felt the absence like a flower misses the sun in winter. She withered and might have forgotten herself if she hadn't called for Airina and been told that Oberon had ordered the letters burned.

"How could you!" Anna had screamed at Oberon the next time he called for her.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Oberon had sneered, though he cast his gaze at the floor instead of meeting her eye. Later, he sent her a massive bouquet teaming with delicate flowers she couldn't name.

Anna wanted to hate, Oberon. She tried, but he was a complex riddle she kept trying to figure out. She had never spent so much time with any other Faerie besides Airina. A lifetime of questions buzzed around her and, despite his obvious appetites, Oberon at least was willing to answer some of them.

Oberon had not touched her since that first day and she was grateful for his restraint. Anna couldn't help feeling like she was in part to blame that first day. She hadn't been clear enough about her intentions for staying in Heart. She should have known better. If she had grown up here, like the other Summerlanders, she would probably be just like him. So how could she blame him? He was jealous, selfish, petty and childish. Anna had to admit that at times she saw herself in him. Was that because they were both Faerie, or was it because they

weren't really all that different?

For the most part Anna and Oberon just…talked. Oberon, Anna realised, didn't have many people to just talk to. Not really. He had lived such a lonely life. Anna didn't have many people to talk to either, not anymore. She could help him. She *wanted* to help him.

One day they met in an Autumn garden. Anna's guard was up at first, never knowing which Oberon she was going to get on any given day, but then she saw the lavish arrangement of soft cushions and thick, cabled blankets. A portable stove flickered with a cosy flame. The chilly Autumnlands were now warm, inviting.

"This is beautiful Oberon, thank you." Anna bowed her head.

"You sound surprised, brightling." Oberon said as she sat on a folded-up blanket. He lounged on a forest-green cushion.

"Not at all. You have had many years to woo many women."

"I have a question for you." Oberon said, ignoring her glib response. His eyes were almost innocent with excitement. "Explain to me how humans have developed a system of electricity which follows them everywhere?"

"How do you mean?" Anna asked.

"This here, look." He smiled as he mimicked talking into his hand. After, he held out his palm and pretended to scroll. Anna felt her lips part into a smile before she cleared her throat to smother it.

"It's called a phone." Anna answered him. "We write to one another or call one another."

"It seems, well, impersonal." Oberon wrinkled his nose. His green eyes shone as he looked at her. Anna tried not to be startled by their beauty. "One should make requests on scented parchment by personal messenger. There is no elegance to all that buzzing."

Anna rolled her eyes. She turned to her lady's maid with a grin. The Nymph was called Mara and she looked straight ahead, disinterested in the conversation. Anna missed Airina. Now she understood why the Magpie was her mother's favourite.

"Well, it's more than that." Anna continued. "It's a computer, and a camera, and…"

Oberon frowned.

"When was the last time you were in the human world?"

"I don't remember," answered Oberon. "The Fuinseoga go for me if I have the need."

Anna shook her head, surrendering. Oberon could never understand how much she missed the monotony of a lazy evening with Becca and Sam as they scrolled through their phones, sending each other funny videos despite being only a few inches apart.

Oberon seemed to have moved on anyway. He combed his fingers through his hair and stared up at the canopy of trees. A comfortable silence gathered. Oberon rose suddenly and offered his hand to Anna. She accepted it. He helped her up from her seat and then the two walked one of the many winding paths of the Autumn woods.

As a rule, Anna would not meet with him in his chambers again, so when she was called upon Anna had suggested a walk in Autumn. Golden leaves littered the ground around them in the endless forest. Anna thought of Sam. She wished he were here. Part of her wondered if she would ever see him again. He had eaten Faerie food and so he belonged now to the Faerie world, but it was not unheard of—she was told—for humans to still be sent back to their homeland. He would be changed forever, but he *could* leave.

Perhaps he wouldn't want to leave, but that didn't guarantee he would want to stay with her. In the dark places in her mind Anna imagined Sam wanting something else, someone else. In her nightmares he smirked at her, his bright blue eyes turning black.

Why would I want you? He would whisper, surrounded by lithe, writhing bodies, his

voice as melodic as a rattlesnake tail.

"Bright?" Oberon asked, his green hand resting on her shoulder. She hadn't noticed that they were no longer walking. "What are you thinking about?"

"Why are there so many parties here?" Anna said, dodging his question. She brushed Oberon's hand off of her, aware of the warmth his touch left behind. "I've noticed the Summer Fae flock to them, but so do many of the others."

"Ah. That is simple." Oberon answered. "Brightlings need revelry and darklings need angst. Our fêtes, or *parties*, as you call them, are meant to sustain us both."

"What about you? You're neither a brightling nor a darkling." Anna asked, realising her mistake too late.

Oberon moved closer, as a hunter might move towards a wounded animal that was not yet dead. His bright eyes were no longer soft and shining. The black pupils dilated wide. Oberon placed a soft, green hand on her jaw, almost on her neck. Anna shivered.

"Sex sustains me, my changeling girl. Don't you know that? I need you."

Anna backed away. Her throat was dry, and her stomach was warm. She put her fingers to her necklace.

"I will always love Sam."

Oberon was quiet for a long time. When he spoke again his voice was low, his eyes fixed to hers.

"I could make you forget him, little beauty. I could make you forget *everything*."

"What?" Anna asked, hypnotised by the flecks of bright gold in his green eyes.

"Be mine, forever, and for your Summer I would relieve you of your human memories." He wound around her like a viper. "I can help you forget your pain."

"What are you talking about?" She paled. "I…I don't want to forget."

"Of course you do, changeling." Oberon whispered, close to her ear. "I see it in you. Dark, lonesome nights. No one to understand your burden, your secret shame. We need each other. Be mine. I can make you happy, happier than you ever dreamed possible. You would lose a mere boy, but you would gain a King."

"No…" Anna's voice was too soft even for her own ears. A longing stirred in her, a fan to a flame so low she hadn't know it was there.

"You could be loved here, Summer Queen. You could belong here, with me." She felt the warm rush of his breath on her neck. "Let me help you."

"No!" Anna shouted, panting. The edges of her talisman dug into her fingers. Shame tore a hole through her.

Oberon turned and stormed off.

"Leave me, foolish girl!" He snarled over his shoulder, green wings trailing like a cape behind him.

Rainclouds gathered over the garden and obscured the ripe sunlight. The Autumn forest grew dark. What had she done? There was a painful hitch in her chest. She bit her lip to keep from crying, but the tears came anyway. Anna put her head down against the angry rain and ran all the way back to Heart.

FORTY-FIVE

Airina couldn't move. Her tired limbs were sore and her heavy wings hung limp over Gearóid's muscled torso. The thin gossamer things had been transformed into angry, matted bird feathers a few moons back as she struggled to keep up with the demands of two Queens eager for her attentions.

The only reason she had a moment to breathe now was because Oberon had limited her interactions with Bright. Airina worried for the young Queen, but she was only a lady's maid. She could not defy the King. No one could. Things had always been this way.

Morgana was feverish with concern for her changeling child, torn always between letting the fates play out or altering the course of the future. Airina was exhausted by her Queen's tumult of thoughts. Gearóid enjoyed the torments she put him through most nights she could wrap her claws around him, but now she felt an unyielding need for his calm, familiar darkness.

So Airina lingered in the little cottage on the border of Winter and Autumn. Her pillow was the bare abdomen of her husband and her nourishment the blood dribbling off his fingertips into her expectant mouth. An instinct born from centuries of service told Airina that Morgana would be waiting for her in one of the secret alcoves she had taken, but all Airina wanted right now was to stay in bed.

Airina sighed, pushing up off her husband to look him in the eyes.

"What duties do you have today, love?" Gearóid asked in Irish, caressing her shoulders and wings until she relaxed enough that they returned to their whisper-thin form.

"Duties be damned." Airina bit back.

"We were born to serve, were we not?" He chuckled, his hand squeezing her hip.

"What if by some foul magic you were stolen from me?" Airina asked instead of

answering. “Would I not hate every second I was not with you? Would I not be ripped apart from inside my very self?”

“Perhaps you would find another,” Gearóid said, teasing. Only Airina could have felt the hint of doubt in the increased pressure where his hand grasped hers.

“Never, do you hear me?” Airina buried her face into Gearóid’s neck, nipping the cold skin. “There could never be another like you.”

No one could take the place in her heart that had been carved out for him. Gearóid let her lay there for a while, sipping his blood while he stroked her bare back. Airina pulled her head back to kiss him with blood-stained lips. Then she began pulling off what little clothes he still had on. When he was naked, she knelt over him. He smiled.

“I never understood. Human…devotion. It seemed so trivial and…unproductive. But seeing the brightling with her human made me realise that…well… I am *grateful* for you, Gearóid. I love you.”

Airina stared deep into his eyes as she removed her own clothes. Gearóid watched her, his desire apparent, and then he untangled his limbs from hers and stood. He went to the wardrobe and Airina sat on the bed, confused. He found a billowing top and slipped it over Airina’s head. Then he reached for her boots, pulling one up to her thigh.

“What are you doing?” Airina asked.

“Dressing you, my love. I could not bear the Queen’s wrath a second time.”

“What?! I don’t want to leave!” Airina flung her shoes back off. Gearóid stifled a laugh.

“The sooner you leave and report to your Queen, the sooner you can return to me.” He said, retrieving her boot again, though her nimble feet avoided his grasp.

“But what if Maab beckons you?” She retorted, avoiding him again.

He followed, shaking his head. Gearóid was a Reaper, faster and stronger, and Airina knew it. He pinned her to the wall, hooking her ankle with his to drop her to the floor. He stood over her now, no less naked than before. Airina welcomed the ardour that warmed her cheeks. Just as he managed to wrestle one boot onto her, she bit down on his forearm. He growled but she was able to escape again.

"If my Queen calls, I would be duty bound to obey!" He responded, laughing. Airina continued to avoid his grasp. "But if you go and she does not beckon, I will be here, and you will return to me."

While Airina thought to herself, she let her husband catch her and finish dressing her. Gearóid wrapped his arms and wings around her in an embrace. He then knelt to strap her into her boots.

"Only then, when nothing is left in all the worlds but us," Gearóid whispered, his voice low and rumbling, "would I give you everything that is mine to give."

"Gearóid…" Airina breathed.

"And I would very much like to take my time giving it to you."

He smiled as he kissed her. Then Airina disappeared, the ghost of his kiss haunting her lips.

FORTY-SIX

Anna didn't know how she could go to Oberon again if called. She hadn't stopped thinking of their last encounter. If she forgot that she had ever been human, then she could start over here in Faerie, where she was meant to be. Oberon had been right. She didn't want to remember the loneliness, the doubt, the shame of living in a world that obviously didn't want her, a world she now knew she never belonged in. To forget would mean she would lose Sam though. But maybe she didn't have to. Anna had imagined it a thousand times. Maybe their love would be strong enough. She could fall in love with him all over again. She could have everything she had ever wanted.

Oberon had ignored Anna for what felt like months since that day in the Autumn woods. Still, Oberon was not alone. She could hear almost every night how un-alone he was. Anna ached for Sam's touch and his kiss, the way his body fit with hers. She started to think that starting over could be…enjoyable. Every touch would be brand new.

That wasn't all she missed, though. Airina hadn't been to visit in a very long time. After those first couple of days all alone, Anna worked up the courage to ask Mara for extra help with things she didn't need help with. Anna even got used to letting the maid dress and bathe her. But the girl would leave once her duties were fulfilled and Anna's chambers would echo. Finally, Anna awkwardly requested that Mara bring more maids to dress her. With little more than a quirked eyebrow, Mara obeyed.

The first time Mara brought the other Nymphs they all encircled Anna and stared, awaiting instruction. Together their colourful skin reminded Anna of a summer sunset. Swallowing past the lump in her throat, Anna asked them to braid her hair in one of the complex styles the other Queens often wore. At first Anna's maids were confused by her request, but they obeyed; just three Nymphs that first time, then their number grew until they numbered a dozen at once. They wound her hair into beautiful ropes and coils she couldn't

hope to achieve alone. The brightlings spent hours laughing and talking to her while they washed and braided her hair, oiled her scalp, wrapped the ends around their long fingers to form curls.

From them she learned everything—stories of the Queens and of the magical creatures she would learn to call kin. Some of them had even seen Sam, from a distance. Their giddy smiles betrayed their interest in him. Topics would turn to men then, especially the King, and they all seemed to have some lurid tale to share. Anna would blush and they would tease her, coaxing stories of her wedding night from her while they sighed. That night felt like another world to Anna—like a dream within a dream.

The Nymphs doted on her and called her their Queen. She warmed to the sound. This was it, everything she had ever wanted. She could belong here; she could be just like them. Even the once impassive Mara now greeted Anna with a bright smile each day before she ushered the others in.

Eventually, though, Oberon did call for her. Anna knew she had to go to him. Her maids bathed and dressed her, and while they did, Anna thought of all the stories, all their knowing smiles. They weren't smiling now.

When the Fuinseoga brought her to the flowering field where Oberon lounged, Anna felt a tremble in her hands that would not go away.

"Oberon. It has…well it has been a long time." Anna tried to smile, fiddling with her necklace.

"Yes." Oberon responded, languishing on one side and ripping grapes in half with his teeth. He was dazzling, draped in velvet and ivy like a lounging god, but there was something uneasy beneath the surface. She fought the urge to run.

Instead, Anna sat beside him. She was wearing an elaborate pinkish-white gown and a

small crown of glittering flowers. Mara's sister had made both. The dress fit Anna like a second skin with cut-away panels exposing her honeyed skin on the sides. When Anna had put it on that morning, she had wished Sam could see her in it. Oberon's eyes travelled over the fabric and lingered before moving on. Anna felt a shameful twinge of satisfaction.

"I was surprised you called for me," Anna said.

She bumped fingers with Oberon as he placed a fig in her waiting palm. A jolt of electricity snaked through her. Oberon did not seem to notice.

"I was told you have many Nymphs to your chambers each day." He responded with a curl of his lips.

"You have all kinds of Faeries visit your chambers." Anna volleyed back.

"Should I be jealous, then? Or are you?" He smirked and she blushed.

Anna tried to compose herself, but her mind swam with the memory of their last meeting. She loved Sam, she would love him forever, no matter what. Could she risk forgetting everything for the chance to start her life over? Anna thought of Mara and the other Nymphs and wished she was back with them.

The green of Oberon's skin thrummed with life, as lush as the garden surrounding him. After several minutes of silence she worked up the courage to speak.

"Tell me about Titania, Oberon."

Oberon jumped and Anna froze. She almost pleaded an apology before she realised he hadn't yet spoken. The King raked his hands through his long hair, standing. His body was rigid, and she felt tiny beneath him. Anna swallowed past her dry throat.

"Why are you so interested in my Queen?" He growled.

"It's…the way you speak about her," Anna trod carefully. "Even now, you called her *your* Queen. You rarely call me anything but 'brightling'. You don't speak about Maab or

Morgana very much at all. But sometimes you talk about Titania as if you were waiting for her to come in the room any moment. You…you love her."

"No! I cannot love!" He thundered, arms shaking.

Oberon turned away from her. She had to help him see. They were the same. If he could just forget the wager, take her memories, they could figure out the rest later. He could be the Oberon she knew he could be, she could be a Faerie Queen, adored by her people. Anna stood and went to Oberon, placing a careful hand on his arm. She could help him. Her maids had giggled about him, almost cruel.

"He cannot love, only make love."

Mara had said that once, a sneer on her pretty face.

"Who told you couldn't love?" Anna asked, her hand still on his arm. She was so close to him she could see his jaw clench.

"My mother. I could not say it if it was not true."

"Perhaps you have believed a lie for so long that you made it true. Have you ever tried? To love…"

She turned him and he let her. His eyes were downcast, the muscles of his arms and back were flexed. She could smell the woody musk of him, like pine trees in the rain. Oberon looked down at her and raked a hand through her hair.

"I don't mean to," he whispered, hypnotized by the texture of the small braids between his fingers. He brought the strands up to his face and inhaled. "I don't mean to be as I am. Without women, without you, I am nothing. I need you."

Anna shuddered. Hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She imagined touching him, looking at him the way the other Faeries must have. She could give Oberon just a taste of what he wanted, convince him that they could work together. She could feel the vibration

of his body as he breathed, her hand still on his arm. Oberon's eyes looked into hers, longing apparent, but he stepped just a breath away.

Anna stepped closer.

Something in her, something she had denied, *wanted* to be close to him now, to know what her maids knew. He hadn't meant to hurt her before. Oberon wouldn't hurt her, he needed her, he said so himself. She could make him understand. Anna looked at the soft, green skin beneath her fingers and bit her lips. She tried to think of Sam—his eyes, his laughter, his love—but she was tired. So tired of *trying*. She could never be good enough for him. Eventually he would see. He was human, she was Faerie. They didn't belong together, and she was so tired of all the ways she had tried to belong. Maybe Sam had always known. Maybe he was holding on to a false hope, too. Oberon was here, now, at the end of her fingertips. King of the Faeries, mythic man of Shakespearean legend. She was tired of being human. She wanted to be magic.

He offered his hand, she took it.

Anna ran fingertips up his arm and down over Oberon's powerful chest. Regal. Beautiful. Her other hand came up and found his narrow waist. A heavy fluttering in her stomach sunk lower. She looked up at him, caught in a dreamlike wave of want. His fingers were in her hair. His eyes explored hers with innocent surprise, sultry poise. Damp pine, moss-green skin, warm, muscled flesh. A dim part of her fought to think of Sam, but her memories were fuzzy. Her mouth tasted of sweet fig. What colour were his eyes?

"My beauty, my changeling Queen." The Faerie King's voice floated over her body, sedating her.

"Oberon…"

"I want you."

"Oberon…"

"Don't you want me, brightling? Do you want me to help you forget…?"

"Yes…"

His hand came to her throat, tender and weary. In his touch she felt a familiar sadness, but also a promise of relief. He caressed her neck, her face, her lips with the edge of his fingernails. Oberon bent to her and she felt herself tilting her head up to meet his lips. She swallowed an electric burn that scorched through her. His hands bent her inwards. Her breasts were pressed against him. His full lips sank into hers.

Bliss.

Then, a heavy grief. A feeling like falling. The warmth in her stomach turning to bile.

Anna ripped herself from Oberon's kiss. Her mouth burned where guilt lined her lips and she lifted a shaking hand to touch them. Mara, waiting in the corner, reached out a hand to help her but wouldn't dare approach with the King so close.

Panic rose in Anna's stomach. It trembled through her chest and her breath escaped in hot bursts through her still parted lips. Wild heat slithered in the air around Anna's body like a living thing. Warmth pulsated in the sky. What was a dream and what was real? No, she knew. She knew. Her gold wedding band burned her half-Faerie skin. She let the pain reproach her as she thought of Sam.

Blue. Blue eyes. Heartbroken eyes full of tears. She could see them now. They haunted her. Anna clutched a hand to her aching heart and screamed. She screamed and screamed until her throat was raw. Then she screamed some more.

"Fuinseoga!" She heard Oberon cry, but she was far away.

It was a nightmare, like the ones where Sam smirked at her, covered in pulsating bodies. Except she couldn't wake up.

"Sam…" she cried.

The Fuinseoga guards were churning to attention, surrounding her, but still Anna sat alone and crumpled in her long skirts at Oberon's feet. She stared up at him, trying to make herself listen to what he was saying.

"…and tell the Queens they *must* attend. I want a feast to celebrate."

"Celebrate?" Anna asked from the ground, mind foggy.

She wanted to crawl under the covers of her bed and cry. Not here in Heart. She wanted to wake up in her soft sheets at home, to pick up her cell phone and call Sam. To tell him about the bad dream she'd had. She whimpered, tears spilling from her aching eyes.

Oberon looked down at her as if only now remembering she was there. A strange look came over his face. A twisted, snarling smile. He was no longer the beautiful King who had caressed her. That King was lost to her foolish fantasies. Oberon looked up at the Fuinseog beside him.

"Find Gearóid. Kill the boy."

PART THREE

FORTY-SEVEN

“My daughter has set the path in motion.”

After hours of silence Morgana’s voice was little more than a hoarse whisper. Her hand lifted towards her Sights as they converged, for just a moment, towards the present.

“My Queen?” Airina asked.

Morgana was tired. Her Magpie maid had spent the better part of the daylight waiting with her. Morgana had waited longer. Nearly eighteen human years.

The Autumn Queen shook her head, disengaging from her cloying thoughts. She graced the jumpy Magpie with a smile.

“You must go now, Airina. Go to your husband. His time, and yours, will be strained soon. Tell him the Fuinseoga are coming. And send in the boy on your way out. I trust you won’t bite him? He’s a handsome Summerland Pixie, but it wouldn’t do now to have him bleeding.”

“Y-yes, my Queen. Is there anything else—” Airina backed away slowly, confused.

“Go.”

A knock rattled, followed by a gentle, timid cough. Airina opened the door. There stood a pretty lavender-coloured boy with soft eyes and grey hair.

“Come.” Morgana arched a finger at him.

Airina disappeared with a single backwards glance and a sharp pop. The boy startled.

“Yes, my Queen.”

“You are a lower Fae, brightling?” Morgana asked.

He gulped and nodded.

“Don’t be alarmed. I have a message for my daughter, your soon to be Summer Queen.

Take this."

She handed him a precious clock cut from crystal and bone. In his other hand she pressed a folded piece of thin, beautiful parchment.

"When both of these golden shards land on the bottom-most notch, give this to the Queen." Morgana pointed as she instructed. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Queen Morgana," the young Pixie whispered with eyes like saucers.

A warm pulse of sunlight spilled through a nearby window in the cottage where the Queen hid. Morgana stepped closer to the bright beam. She let a slender hand slip from beneath her sleeve and into the glow of hot colour.

"Summer." She whispered; she knew it only from the human world.

"Summer?" The boy repeated to himself. "Winter is not nearly over and Spring hasn't yet begun. What could bring about Summer so soon?"

Without answering, Morgana stepped closer and kissed his cheek.

"Run, brightling. Your Queen, my daughter, will be greater than anything this world could have ever imagined."

FORTY-EIGHT

"Titania!" Maab screeched, storming into the Springlands. "My season! I'll kill! I'll spark war in the hearts of men! Children will kill each other in streets stained with refuse and blood! My *season*!"

Titania was in the middle of overseeing wedding arrangements as Maab burst through her doors. The Spring Queen was surrounded by flowers and silks so delicate they were almost invisible. Maab was chaos in the middle of such delicacy, wearing a blood-red dress and braying. Titania might have laughed, if not for the murderous gleam in the Winter Queen's black eyes.

"Sister, what have I done to offend?" Titania asked, shooing the seamstress Nymphs and all their fabric away.

Briae looked horrified. She conjured drinks for the two Queens and bowed, avoiding the pins in her gown. Maab ripped the tray from her slender fingers and flung it to the ground. Morwin stood behind her, his face a mask of ice.

"By some craft, Titania, you have stolen my season from me!"

Maab held out her hand and her servant from the Winterlands came to her side. The furious Queen burrowed her icicle-tipped fingers into the servant's throat and gave a brutal squeeze. The gurgling noise of blood as it dripped into his windpipe was his only desperate sound. Still Maab slipped sharp blades of ice deeper into his skin.

"Maab! By what evil?!" Titania screamed. The Springland Faeries gasped and rushed to back away.

"Silence!" The Winter Queen bellowed.

As Titania looked again, she saw that the ice was melting from the servant's flesh.

Maab concentrated harder, to the point that her flawless skin began to perspire, but the ice would not stay. She dropped the Faerie to the ground and shook as if she were to cry. Anger flashed again and she lifted a blade from her skirts.

"Maab!" Titania gasped. She reached up a hand and compelled Maab's to be still.

Maab struggled against the invisible force, but in the end the darkling Queen crumpled to the floor, hair sticking to her slick face.

"My season, Titania! My season! I wait all year, I have obeyed Oberon's hypocritical decree, and how am I repaid? Can trust no one?!"

Titania looked around. She had not noticed the warmth of the room in the flurry and commotion of the wedding preparations.

"Summer…" She whispered, astonished by the balmy humidity in the air.

Maab was too young. She did not know a Summer Queen. Titania remembered still, though for years the only warmth in Faerie had been her Spring. Summer was along again at last, much too soon.

"It is Summer, Maab, not Spring."

"It cannot be!" Maab snapped from the floor, pooled in her bloody skirts. She flung a blade of ice, spearing a down pillow.

"Sister, I promise you, I had no hand in this. Something has happened. Something terrible, Maab. This is the heat of a Summer Queen."

Maab considered the heat again, for only a moment.

"Kill her mate! Rip her human parents apart! How dare she take my season!"

"She is emotional, just as you are. Once the little Queen settles down, Faerie will be restored. She wasn't born to this land, but it holds a fierce claim to her blood."

"I don't care! My people are burning." Morwin helped Maab to her feet. His arm bled where she had touched him. "We'll need to feed. There *will* be carnage, no matter who is at fault."

The Kelpie transformed into his horse self. Maab climbed atop his broad back. Titania watched the Winter Queen's cheeks flush with effort.

"I'll take the Fae to the human world to feed off humans for now. I will forestall them as long as I can, but we need havoc, we need to kill. Keep your brood behind your ivy walls if you fear for them. Any Court caught in my boundaries tonight will bleed."

"I understand." Titania answered, and she did. Maab did not bluff. "The girl is doing her best. This is all strange and new to her."

"You grow weak with age, Titania! Where is the Queen that wished to kill the changeling girl?" Maab spat. "You know as well as I that this heat reeks of Oberon. You know it, even if you deny it to yourself. Something has happened, and bloodshed will not be the only consequence. Don't delude yourself, Sister. If you don't keep pace, you'll be left behind."

"I understand." Titania answered again, this time through a clenched jaw.

Maab turned the Kelpie and galloped away. At the end of the hall she turned back. The Winter Queen's eyes were narrowed, sharp daggers of ice split from her collarbone.

"If you see the little Summer Queen, tell her I will see to it that she never oversteps the boundaries of my season again."

FORTY-NINE

“Oberon! Please! You can’t kill Sam!”

“Can’t? You made a bargain, girl.”

Oberon grinned with a sinister joy. She was his.

“I’ve won. The boy’s head belongs to me.”

“Please, Oberon! Don’t do this! Please!” The brightling shrieked at him, looking up from the ground.

Oberon arched an eyebrow. He enjoyed the sight of her begging.

“I will soon help you forget about the boy,” he leered as he bent and rubbed a thumb over her swollen bottom lip.

He wished their kiss had not been so brief. Now that he had tasted her, all he wanted was to finish his exploration of her flesh. She wrenched away from his touch and he laughed.

“I promise I’ll have the Reapers kill him swiftly if that is what you wish. He won’t feel much.”

“Oberon, you can’t! It was a mistake!”

Her breathing was ragged. It was starting to irritate him. He had won. He *deserved* this. She was being impossible.

“I won’t let you kill him! I won’t let you! I’ll go to him and we’ll never stop running.”

Oberon looked down at her with a twisted scowl. Anger rasped in the back of his throat and yet he still wanted to thrust his tongue into her mouth and taste her sweet surrender. Oberon reached down and grasped both of the brightling’s arms between his hands, pulling her up to her feet. He wanted to strike her, to rip off her clothes, to scream at her, to cut her throat, to kiss her. He wanted to make her love him.

"Can't…" He whispered into her startled face. Oberon's reflection wavered in the watery blue of her wide eyes. "Won't…"

The heat of her Summerland skin wafted against him like stirred coals. His skin perspired—from the heat or his desire, he could not tell. Oberon searched her striking face, so like her mother's, and bent to press his mouth to her again. She turned her head from him in the last moment, tears continuing to spill from her feathery eyelashes. Fury rose from a well inside of him and he wanted to shake her, but instead he barked orders, never taking his eyes from her face.

"Fuinseoga!" He roared and four soldiers came. "Take the Summer Queen to her chambers and secure her there. No one is to come in and she is not permitted to go out! When Gearóid arrives, bring him to her. She may give the boy any foolish trinket she wishes. A final mercy from a just King. It will be the last thing he ever lays eyes on."

Oberon heard the growl in his own voice, the petulant jealousy, but he didn't care. He had won. That was all that mattered. She would learn her place.

"Yes, King Oberon."

The brightling screamed as she was dragged away.

"When I come back for you, brightling," he thundered, his green wings shielding him from her heat, "you *will* be mine. There is one King of Faerie. I, Oberon, am he."

FIFTY

Hunched over and alone on the floor, Anna wept. She hated herself, her weakness that had tilted her lips to his. She pounded at her head with her small fists, screaming again.

She had betrayed even herself.

For a moment Anna clutched at a thought it her mind. Maybe it was her Faerie blood. *Bright*. Wildness was growing in her, stronger as she approached her Summer. It wasn't her fault. But Anna knew better. The lure to forget herself lingered in the back of her mind even now. Hope was a heavy burden. She had wanted to give up, give in.

Her mouth still stung with his kiss. Tears dripped on to her fingers as she reached up to touch her lips with trembling fingers.

Oberon. His taut green skin, the carnal promise in his eyes.

Sam. His pale blue gaze, his smile just for her.

Anna's guilt splintered and refracted like a thousand shards of glass sliding down her throat. What had she done? How could she have forgotten what was at stake?

Sorrow melted away to fury—at herself, at Oberon for refusing to understand, for the world of Faerie that bent to his will. Who was she to think she could defeat a King? Anna tore innocent fabric to supress the shaking in her hands, but they would not cease. Her chest pitched inward and she let air escape over her lungs and throat in a heave of a new scream. Tears, hot and overlapping, dropped from the end of her nose and chin. Spittle collected into corners of her mouth as she mumbled to herself. The threat of madness blackened her vision. Something like a flame flickered inside of her body. Sweat beaded on her brow. The image of Oberon stepping back and her own body closing the gap between them played on a cruel endless loop in her mind. She bit back the urge to ignore the painful memory. She had to remember what feeling sorry for herself had cost.

Everything. It cost her everything.

A moth flapped around her head. Anna looked up at the sound of the fluttering wings. Light emanated from her. She looked down at her illuminated skin. Golden tendrils glittered and wafted out of her pores, pulsating with every beat of her broken heart. It cloaked the room and wafted through the windows.

"Sam…" Anna croaked with a raw throat.

Anna she could almost hear him call. When was the last time she had heard her real name? His Anna.

When Airina had first called her Bright she felt a connection she had never known before and she would have done almost anything to hold on it. But she wasn't just Bright. She was also Anna. She didn't have to sacrifice one for the other. For the first time Anna realised…she was both. And Sam loved all of her. Why couldn't she?

A wave of sorrow swallowed her and she cried out again. The light in her skin was throbbing. More moths hovered. Anna lay her head down on the smooth, cool floor and sobbed.

"Oh, Sam…" Anna cried.

"Forgive me, my Queen!" A tiny purple Faerie darted out from beneath her bed and fell into a kneeling position.

"Get out!" Anna thundered when she recovered from her shock.

She looked at him through her puffy eyes, her vision blurred with tears. His skin was the colour of hydrangeas and his head was bowed so low his nose brushed the floor.

"Are you…a Summer Fae?" She asked.

"Aye, my Queen. Your own when the time comes." His lilting accent softened her.

"What are you doing here? Get up. Get up!" Anna rubbed at her eyes with the backs of

her hands, embarrassed.

"Queen Morgana bid me to give you this message at exactly this time." Anna startled at the mention of her mother. Of course she would know what happened. He held out the note without making eye contact. "I never read a single line, my Queen, I swear it!"

"It's alright," Anna soothed. "I believe you. Let me see it."

The paper was thin, the ink black and thick. Anna was careful not to rip it as she handled it between her trembling fingers.

My daughter, your time has come now to save your husband and Faerie with him. Gearóid will come to you and will take you to the boy. You must be strong. You are our hope, my Bright. A star burning in a dark world. I left you so long ago, not because I didn't want you but because I knew you needed more than a Faerie life to be the Queen this world needs. It pained me to wait in the shadows while you cried out—even now—for love. I did it because Faerie needs you. Our power is our weakness. Left to our own debauchery, the human world will come to an end, and so will Faerie.

It has already begun.

Your place is here. You have a purpose. My daughter, my Queen, Faerie needs you.

I wish your father could see you now. He would have been so proud.

I love you.

Anna's body shook as her tears splashed upon the thin page. She was one girl. A small, lonely girl. She couldn't be what her mother hoped for, what Faerie needed. She couldn't.

Seconds later Gearóid appeared from thin air. The Sprite fell to the ground again.

"Bright!" Gearóid shielded his gaze from her light. "I have been sent to kill Samuel."

Anna held out her mother's note, her own eyes wide, her heart wild in her chest.

"Tell me *exactly* what King Oberon said to you." Gearóid said after reading.

"That I was to give you a trinket for Sam. One last gift from me to him. The last thing he would look at before he…" She couldn't finish the sentence.

Anna swallowed. Her mind swam, unknotting the tangled lies she had fed herself like poison for so many years. Unwanted. Unloved. Never enough. Lies, masquerading as truths. Half-truths. Faeries couldn't lie…but what would a Faerie do if it had to lie?

"Take…me…" Anna stood. "Take *me* to Sam!"

Gearóid didn't move.

"The King…"

"Take me, Gearóid! The King asked you to bring something to Sam. Bring *me*!"

Gearóid's black eyes bore into hers. She held his stare.

"Take me to Sam right now!"

Gearóid wrapped his wings around her, then he carried them away. A sharp crackling rang in her ears.

FIFTY-ONE

Sam was pacing. The light seeping through the skylight was unmistakable. Anna. He could feel her fear and hurt radiating through it as if she was crying beside him. Sam paced, wondering what had happened to her.

Part of him already knew.

As if he had conjured her, Anna appeared with a sharp pop like lightning striking. Gearóid was with her. The knives at his waist gleamed. Their polished shine looked dull beside Anna. Sam sucked in a breath. After months apart the sight of her standing there in all her magnificent glory unnerved him. Her pale pink dress lit up her face and her skin glowed like sunbeams were trapped within her. Flowers were woven in her braided hair. The Springland blooms growing in his room angled themselves towards her as if sensing her sunlight. She radiated.

Sam grinned, unable to contain himself, but his smile faded as she met his eyes.

"Sam…"

The light burning all around her grew even brighter. He shielded his face with his hand.

"Anna, Anna…calm down. What's wrong?"

Together they could fix anything. He had always believed that. If they were together nothing in the world—nothing in any world—was insurmountable. Anna looked up at him, silent tears streaming.

"I betrayed you," she whispered.

Sam felt as if the air had been taken from his lungs and his legs buckled. His heart thrashed in his chest to a discordant beat. Broken. Sam could see Oberon in his head. The smooth, toothy grin and his green arm coiled around her shoulders like a snake. Sam could see Anna leaning into his embrace, sighing. Just as it all played out in his worst dreams.

"Anna? Anna, what do you mean…?"

She bent her head again, ashamed. He wanted to run to her but he was on the floor. When had he fallen to his knees? Was *this* a dream? Her glowing skin—hot and flickering like a fire. Her eyes, glittering with tears. She was so beautiful. Too beautiful. He had fooled himself thinking he could ever be enough for her.

"I kissed Oberon. I-I…I went to him and…k-kissed him."

"Anna…" Sam breathed. There was a new hollow space beneath his ribs and his throat was dry.

The Oberon in Sam's mind laughed at him—at his frail humanity, at his undignified stench of mortality. He had tried to wash it off. He had eaten the food. He had given her everything…

"I'm sorry." Anna wailed, light burning off her in waves. "I just… I don't know. I was scared, Sam, and I just wanted to feel good. Just for a second. I…"

What was she saying? Fear he had buried deep beneath logic and love burst now through the seams of his mind. He felt a sinking feeling, like the sensation of falling just before sleep. Why would she kiss him? Why was she here now? Why did this hurt so much? Why why why? He wanted to rip the Faerie clothes off her body, place her in her old torn jeans and his T-shirt. A vile part of himself wanted to hurt her, but he knew he never could. He wanted to kiss her. How was it that even now he just wanted to kiss her?

"Anna…" Sam repeated, the rest of the words still tangled in his brain with his shame, his hurt, his hope.

He looked down at his stomach, convinced there must be something stabbing him. Only his hands were there, clasped together. His skin shone like pearls. It was foreign to him. He had chosen this; he had chosen them. She had chosen herself.

"Sam, I'm—I'm so s-sorry." Anna choked on her tears.

Then there was a strange sound, something scraping and cold. Sam watched her wide-eyed gaze turn to the Reaper waiting in the corner of the room.

"Forgive me, my friends," Gearóid bowed his head in stoic apology. "My King demands Samuel's life as his prize."

Sam had forgotten that part. The wager. For Oberon Sam's life was just a game.

Gearóid unfurled bat-like, leathery wings. A mist of darkness and cold swallowed the Springland room. Sam blinked, eyes adjusting to the unnatural dark. Anna's light cut through like a knife, a beacon in the storm. Sam's feet moved on their own now and he felt his hands reach out. When he had her in his arms, as he had imagined a thousand times, he found holding her was no longer enough.

Sam pressed Anna back into the far wall. Books rained down from the bookshelf as they collided with it. The scent of her skin hit him, enveloping his senses. Desire and anger swarmed inside of him. He wrapped his fingers through her hair and pressed his lips to hers as if he could drink her. His other hand slid around her waist, melding their bodies together. He kissed up her chin, her cheeks, her eyes, her forehead. Every inch of her warm and familiar, and yet her unfaithfulness stung like poison in his mouth.

His wife, his best friend, his Anna. Why hadn't he been there to tell her every day, every second, how incredible she was? Why had he allowed himself to ever be parted from her? Sam felt the burn of tears in his eyes. He was so angry, so broken. And yet he loved her.

"I waited," Sam growled, pressing his brow against hers. "I waited, Anna, and you…"

"I know." She gasped, his thumb on her throat, his mouth over her mouth.

He couldn't touch enough of her at once. His skin was burning as it brushed hers, but he invited the pain if it meant being closer.

"Oh, Sam, I'm so sorry. I'm *so* sorry. Please, please! I was stupid and afraid—"

"I was afraid, too!" He whimpered or screamed. He didn't know anymore.

Tears clouded Sam's eyes as he held her to him. He was scared to let her go now. If he could just hold on to her, maybe they could exist like this always.

"Oberon took your letters," she whimpered. "I was all alone."

"I was all alone, too! All I wanted was you. I left my mother, my home. I would have done anything you asked of me. Anything! I was here all alone."

"I was selfish. I was stupid! I just wanted…I wanted to be wanted."

Sam grabbed her skirts in his fist and shoved their bodies into the books again. It hurt him too much to stand. He buried his face against her neck, legs failing to hold his weight, and she reached up to grasp his hair as he sobbed. The soft swell of her breast heaved against his chest. Anna was panting. His hands were on her soft thighs under her dress. He kissed her again and she melted into his touch.

"All I *ever* wanted was you."

Sam wanted to collide into her, two stars bursting in the sky. He wanted to wake up back in the treehouse to find out that all this had simply been a dream. Sam looked at Anna, her dark blue eyes flooded in tears. He reached up a hand to stroke her lips. The edges of his fingernails were a blue like the start of morning after a long night.

He had given her everything.

"Sam…"

"I came to this world—one I still don't understand, one that has tried again and again to kill me—because I love you. I've have always loved you."

"Sam…please…"

Out of the corner of his eye, Sam saw Gearóid. A jolt of shock rang through him. Sam's stomach knotted and he pushed Anna behind him, but when he looked up again, he realised Gearóid stood motionless, gripping his knife until it shook.

"Gearóid?" Anna asked.

The Magpie dropped the shining blade and departed before it hit the floor.

Anna and Sam stood alone. They exchanged awkward glances as the darkness wafted away. For a long time they stared at each other, unable or unwilling to speak. Sam pulled back first, looking at his wife. The love of his life. He was sobered to his bones. Desperate clutching wouldn't fix this, her smile and warmth wouldn't fix this. Neither of them were the same people they had been. Anna was a hole boring through his heart and right now Sam knew what he needed.

Moving his hands to grip the sides of Anna's face, he pressed his mouth to hers. She shook her head, crying again. She held on to him, but Sam unclasped her fingers from around his neck. Their lips parted. He couldn't look at her as she sobbed or he would go back. Hold her, kiss her, love her enough for both of them. This time he needed to be his own hero. He had given her his whole heart and she had broken it.

Sam walked out of the room with the single purpose of trudging forward and away from the only thing that had kept him here.

FIFTY-TWO

Maab panted, blood dripping down her smiling lips. She was running, she loved running, and her muscular thighs rippled with each thundering stride. Maab liked the feel of her strong body pounding into the cold soil. She laughed as she ran along the border to her Winterlands, snatching wayward Fae.

They had been warned. Now all that remained were fair game.

The abrupt postponement of her season had left her hot and hungry. In retaliation she feasted on the fear of those left in her lands, but these morsels would soon run dry, and she could not only feed herself. Her people ached for chaos as well. She would own up to her promise to Titania, Maab thought. With her affinity she could spark a war in the human realm. It would be bloody, confusing, and pointless. It would stretch on for decades while she and her brood indulged. Maab grinned as a tingle of pleasure traced up her spine.

Morwin snorted and beat the ground beside a dark patch of the forest. As Maab silenced her inner thoughts she could hear the distinct sound of rapid, terrified breathing.

“Come out, beastie, come out, pet. Wherever you are, I’ll have you yet…” she giggled, fingernails elongating to blackened claws.

The creature gasped, caught, and tried its luck running. Had Maab been inclined to let it go, it might have gotten away. The border was so close and she hunted alone. The Pixie darted this way and that, trying not to be caught in Maab’s long nails. He dropped his parcel. Yards and yards of fine lace—the kind that can only be sewn underwater by darkling Naiads, Maab took care to note—and ran for the small divide that separated this part of the Winterlands from the Springlands.

Maab pounced. Time seemed to slow as her lean legs sprang over frozen earth. In a breath he was hers.

“P-please Queen Maab, have mercy.” He squealed in her grip. Maab was delighted. They tasted better when they begged. “I was sent to collect a parcel for the Springland’s new bride a moon ago. I had to wait here while it was made and did only learn of your decree a short while ago. I will leave and never return, my Queen. I swear it!”

Maab placed the edge of her mouth against his throat and inhaled. She sighed with satisfaction as she tasted his raw panic. With one hand on his neck, she scraped her claws down the length of his back. The Pixie shrieked in pain and she lapped up the blood that spilled in thick lines like candle wax. She wrapped him up to her in a fearsome embrace.

“I’m hungry, little Pixie,” she crooned in his ear. Maab had regained her own dainty hands and wrapped them around his throat.

He sputtered to reply, but her grip intensified. His eyes began to roll back, and she lapped up his fear. Then, out of the corner of her eye, Maab saw something that made her drop him.

The ignited sky that burned hot from Summer light suddenly turned golden, pale yellow, and then finally winked out. The little changeling Summer Queen. What had happened now? The Pixie, seeing his chance, ran headlong to the edge of the forest.

“Here!” She bellowed.

He returned to her, of his own will, terrified and bleeding. Maab watched him. She was the Un-Seelie Dusk Queen. He knew it was best to obey.

“Pick up your things. The Dryad will need her pretty lace. And remember what you’ve promised me. You will never come to the Winterlands again. Or I will eat you.”

The Pixie’s eyes went moon-round. He bowed low, collected his things, and ran as fast as his feet would carry him.

Morwin had returned to his bodily form and stared at her.

"What is the little changeling brat up to now?" Maab hissed.

Before Morwin had a chance to answer, Maab hushed him. Something moved nearby. A short distance away and oblivious to her presence, the changeling Queen's human husband wandered across the border. With the absence of Summer light, the Winter sky was darkened again. The human did not stop, did not look around. He was lost completely to his misery.

Pure, feral delight washed over Maab.

A fresh flurry of snow fluttered down from the sky.

FIFTY-THREE

Oberon looked out at the strange golden sky and exhaled. It was fortunate that the little Summer Queen had not won. He wondered to himself what he would have done if she had. Killed them both, he supposed, chuckling. Let her live with her human? It was ridiculous to think of. What would his people think of him then?

Yet he wondered why there was no satisfaction in her defeat. His thoughts drifted to Titania. It had been a long time now since he had last seen her. He missed her smiling lips pressed into his, or the way her hair smelled. Oberon remembered a Spring festival when she had pulled a flower from behind her ear and given it to him as they danced. He couldn't get that look in her eyes out of his mind. He smiled now at the memory of it.

There was a gnawing that taunted Oberon. Only when he was entangled in the arms of some woman did he feel anything. Enslaved to their touch. It didn't matter who she was, he wanted her. Her soft sighs, rapid heartbeat. When he had had a woman, he was powerful. A King.

He couldn't love. And because he could not love so he could never be loved. When he first realised this, centuries ago, his tastes evolved. All manner of Faeries. Humans, half-breeds. But they didn't love him either. Who loved him?

Titania

The name came unbidden as the answer to an equally involuntary question. It was the first and only name that came to his mind. Oberon had seen her love for her changeling boy. Fierce. Protective. Powerful. He had tried to steal him once. Perhaps they could have been a family. She had refused, stubborn as she was. To protect her beloved boy she had refused *even him*. He had never trusted her after that.

"My King!" A Fuinseog called at the door, drawing Oberon from his introspection.

"What is it? Enter!"

"The Summer Queen has deceived you! She is gone. But her human has been seen wandering Faerie. He was last seen in Maab's Winterlands."

Oberon felt a pitch in his stomach. Anger writhed inside of him. How the brightling proved his point. He could never be loved. He could not trust anyone. He alone was King. He would take matters into his own hands.

With a magnanimous unfurling of his wings, and a sound like a clap of thunder, Oberon disappeared.

FIFTY-FOUR

In the Winterlands snow had returned to the ground and with it the hordes of Winter Fae. Ice slicked Maab's palace floor, and she stood upon it, waiting. Despite it being colder than ever, her Fae were full of angst— filled with emotions they were more accustomed to leeching than to owning themselves. Their apprehension buzzed through her blood. Yet they were content to wait for their Queen.

Maab could tell that many did not know or care who the boy was. What they knew was that the Spring Queen had housed him and that he belonged to the new Summer Queen.

And that the King wanted him dead.

Hopes of Faerie War spread like wildfire among those gathered and they bit and struck at the boy. Maab pretended not to notice them looking at their fierce Winter Queen, waiting for her permission to rip the boy to shreds. She wanted to let them, but something stayed her command. The ice around her formed a throne and she sat, gesturing for the boy to do the same. He looked around, then took a seat by her crossed ankles.

A darkling Mermaid slithered out of a small opening in the ice, noiseless. She stroked the human's face and lips with her thin, sharp nails. Delicate trickles of blood bloomed through the cuts in his skin. The Mermaid inhaled, her wet, obsidian eyes rolling. A quick glance at the Winter Queen stayed her webbed hand the second time. She glided back underwater to wait like the others, but Maab still felt the boy's panting terror.

The Winter Queen shifted atop her iced throne. The human boy shivered upon the cold ground. He was not bound, but he knew his chances should he flee. Long, shallow gashes were already cut into him. Maab bent her head down and licked at one of the wounds, sealing it, before she ripped it open again. Her Winter Fae squealed with delight, feeding from his palpable pain. He winced but otherwise did not move. Something about his resignation

reminded Maab of the gentle moments they had spent together in her chamber in Heart. Foolish boy, to try and defy a King. To fight cruelty with love. Samuel. Lancelot.

Maab realised she did not want to kill him, though her brood no doubt did. Maybe she had once, but the shock of seeing him alone in her barren valley had long worn off. Yet she could not stop what was in motion now. Who could? Little by little—as her Winter was restored—a crowd gathered. Maab did not need Morgana's Sights to know blood would be spilt tonight.

The Winter Queen ran her tongue along her teeth. Her watching darklings swooned.

FIFTY-FIVE

Sam couldn't move. He was watching. All of Maab's kind waited for something. He told himself he had nowhere else to go, but perhaps he was waiting too. His heart was pounding with fury, splintered from heartbreak. His anger was seething and strange to him. It pulsed from within him. He burned with it, fed off it. He looked down at his fingertips. They were deep blue.

I wish I could show Anna.

Pain recoiled inside of him. Sam could hear the darklings purr. Anna, Anna, Anna, his heart throbbed. He wished he could hate her because what he felt was so much worse. She haunted him. His mind was in a messy tangle in the shape of her lips, her body, her… Sam couldn't stop thinking about her eyes as she told him what she had done. They looked so…different. She *was* different. Her eyes shone like aqua pearls. Her hair dangled around her hips instead of the middle of her back.

Anna had changed. She didn't love him anymore and maybe…maybe he would have to stop loving her.

FIFTY-SIX

The hard wood of the floor scratched into the soft skin of Anna's knees as she fell to it, utterly alone. Sam had left. Was she supposed to go after him? She had called, but he didn't turn. His back was the last thing she saw.

Her eyes puckered but did not stream, as if her body had run dry of tears. Pain stabbed around the last kiss Sam had left her with. Of all the things she had expected—fury, blame, tears—she never imagined he would walk away from her.

A dry sob escaped her. She lingered on it until it became a burning scream. Anna flung anything she could grasp between her fingers. The unbidden tendrils of light emanated from within her and accompanied the madness. Heat flared through and around her, spilling from her chest as she wailed. She heard footsteps in the distance. It wasn't until Queen Titania flung herself through the doors that Anna remembered where she was—the Springlands.

"What on earth are you doing here, Bright?! What an unfathomable noise you make!"

Anna couldn't speak for fear of breaking apart. She wanted her mother, either of them. She wanted her best friend, her brothers, her dad, her human life… No. She wanted nothing but Sam. The weight of his presence, the curve of his mouth as he smiled just for her, his eyes on her face, the soft sound of his voice as he said her name. She sobbed again, clutching a hand to her chest to try and touch the desperation she felt there.

Titania's maids arched their elegant necks for a better glimpse of the tortured soul who wailed without tears. Anna wanted to fling something at them, but Titania surprised her by shutting the doors on them. Anna watched the Queen. Titania began collecting cool water from a spring along the wall. She pressed a plush rag into a bowl, soaking it, before using it to cool Anna's blotched face. When she was finished, in a gesture most tender, Titania

clutched Anna's throbbing head and held it to the steady sound of her own heartbeat. Shock stiffened Anna, but eventually the tears spilled from her eyes in hot, silent waves. Her Summer light eased as her breathing did until it was again just a soft heat inside of her. Still, Titania did not release Anna straight away. A hesitant hand gently smoothed down the back of Anna's head. Anna was close enough to smell the blossoms in Titania's hair and feel the warmth of her pink skin.

"There," Titania cooed, releasing Anna from her grip.

"Titania, I—how did you—"

"I, of all, am adept at recognising true heartbreak, don't you think?"

Anna opened her mouth to respond but she had nothing to say.

"Spring is often mistaken as a quiet season, with our flowering trees and soft breezes. We are soft, but we love with the passion of sudden rain and the single, dedicated purpose of a sapling. Of all the seasons, it is Spring who truly knows love."

Titania averted her eyes as if a little embarrassed. It was Anna though who was truly embarrassed. What must Titania think of her, this strange changeling she had once wanted dead? Before Anna had a moment to think or speak, a sharp pop crackled through the room and Airina appeared.

"My Queens," the Magpie bowed. Her eyes were wild, and she was half in bird form. Airina turned to Anna. "Bright, Samuel has been caught in the Winterland by Maab. Gearóid has called off the Reapers and Fuinseoga. They have all disappeared. But the rest of the darkling Fae have gathered to Maab, both Winter and Autumn alike."

"What is Maab planning to do with him?" Anna stood, terrified.

"Bright!" Airina shook her head, feathers bristled. "Maab is not the one to fear. She only wants war for her brood."

"Then who are you worried about?"

Titania and Airina regarded each other. Anna looked between them and she understood. All three of them spoke the name together, and it left their lips like a curse.

"Oberon."

FIFTY-SEVEN

Sam watched mute as Maab licked blood off her fingers, tracing her tongue over each digit. He hadn't seen what she had been offered by one of her subjects, but he had heard her eat it. His stomach roiled. She walked through the large crowd that had gathered as she cleaned her hands. Her knowing attendants undressed her layer by layer. After every covering was peeled away, she stood as stark and lethal as a shard of ice. Sam wanted to look away, but he was absorbed by her beauty. Small fluttering Fae clamoured to her, no bigger than small birds. They wrapped her in a long silver dress almost the same colour as her skin. A necklace of bird skulls and moth wings was tied to her slender neck. Her hair was woven around a glittering crown of crystal-clear ice. Sam watched as they braided the thick tendrils around her head, leaving a few curls to kiss the nape of her neck.

Many Faerie had come to the Winterlands. News of his capture had spread, he could tell. Even Summerlanders had wandered to the cold. He could tell the difference almost immediately. They shivered but warmth glowed fiery under their skin. When they arrived, they stroked his luminescent white skin with a sort hungry of awe. Maab had caused a big enough stir to ripple throughout the seasons.

"Boy!" The Queen shouted, stomping back to her throne.

An eager darkling nearby grabbed Sam's jaw, thrusting his head up to her attention. Sam grunted and Maab sighed her satisfaction.

"What do you want with me, Queen?" Sam responded, numb.

"I want nothing with you, dear pet. I want the pain you will cause. The changeling Queen will come for you or the King will. Either way my kind will feast."

"Anna won't come for me." Sam forced his voice past a sob. He felt his heart clutch inside his chest. "Oberon won. Kill me. *Please*. Or he will."

Maab was eerily still. It took effort for Sam to look up at her from the depths of his heartbreak. Maab placed a hand close to her ribs as if something had stabbed her. She extended a regal hand and gestured for the one holding him to let him go. Queen Maab put her beautiful face close to Sam's.

The gathered crowd was shocked into silence. Maab seemed to be looking for something in him. Her eyes were round, soft. Sam could tell she was trying to be gentle as she reached out to stroke his cheek, but still she nicked him with her sharp nails. Sam watched her. Her face, as ever, was the dual beauty of delicate chaos. Maab's mouth parted, but Sam couldn't hear what she had said over the loud thoughts in his head.

"What?" He whispered.

"Nothing, fool mortal. Never you mind."

Maab bent and kissed his jaw, taking away the sting of the fresh cuts. Somehow he knew the skin would heal indigo blue.

The Winter Queen moved away from him suddenly, turning her back to him and prancing on tiptoe. She let her arms float out and spun as if she were a delicate, falling snowflake. Maab selected a partner from the crowd. He matched her graceful steps.

The Summerlanders were attracted to the dance and were the firsts to join. In a short while dozens of Faeries all swayed together. There was no music, just the sound of bodies surging around each other, like tree branches caught in the wind. Soon they all had followed Maab's lead; all of Faerie dancing to silent sound. Sam watched as the darkling Mermaid slithered back out of her little hole in the ice with a wet gulp. Again he felt as if he was caught in a dream. She leaned her body against him. It was slick and shining. She was naked from the waist up. Sam blushed. The glittering black scales on her long tail looked like they belonged more to a dragon than a fish. She fondled wet, webbed fingers through his hair and

scratched at his chest with her tiny, sharp teeth. He felt the pain of her bites like shards of ice beneath his skin. The Mermaid's eyes were black fathoms and he felt himself sinking into them. Maab came back towards him then. She pointed a finger and then arched it into the air. Sam stood up with the help of Maab's power and the Mermaid was left behind on the ice, her scales glittering.

Sam felt his body lifted and suspended by the reaching arms of the swelling crowd. He was floating upon an ocean, with the knowledge of sharks swimming just beneath the waves. The dance spun faster as the stomp of feet became a rhythm. Ice splintered, but the floor was thick enough to hold them, he hoped. The invisible wind that once stirred the Faeries became a gale. Someone leapt up to bite at him and another pulled his hair. Sharp fingers raked across his abdomen. Sam was more than afraid now. He had been too cavalier before. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to die!

Faster and faster, the dance pulsed. Sam's vision spotted. Here the waxy shine of someone's lips, or were they flowers? There frightful teeth smiling. Shards of ice. Shards of bones. Black. Black. Laughter and a kiss on his stomach. Black. Maab—whispering or shouting? Faster. Fingers like knives dug into his collarbone. In his veins?! O God, in his heart!

Black. Black. Black.

"Sam!"

The unmistakable cadence of Anna's voice created a physical ripple of something like sickness and elation through him. He fought tears, rubbing a fist into his eyes.

Sam turned to look in the direction her voice came from. A wavering shadow of warmth and light swirled. Anna's hair billowed around her body and her eyes glittered. Titania and Airina stood by her. Sam heard the powerful bark of Maab's voice say something

but didn't catch the words. The ocean of Faerie bodies gave way. Sam gasped as he realised his hands and knees were back on the snowy, ice-covered ground, though now far away from Maab's throne.

"A-Anna." His voice broke.

Sam couldn't find the strength to stand. His tears flowed unchecked now in silent rivulets. She was so beautiful. He gripped the cold grass between his fingers and crawled towards her. Anna ran to him.

"I'm here, I'm here. I'm sorry. Sam—"

Sam had kissed her as soon as she was close enough. He reached up and clutched her hair in his blue fingers. Her mouth softened and he breathed her in. Anna. His Anna. It was always Anna. It would always be Anna.

"I'm sorry, Sam, I'm so—"

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have left—"

"I love you, please, you have to believe me."

"I love you, Anna. I never stopped loving you." Sam kissed Anna again.

They turned after a while, aware of all the eyes on them, but nothing would ever part them again. The Winter and Spring Queens stared at them with bird-like solemnity. Sam felt a weakness overtake him. The dance had dizzied him. His skin was covered in cuts from sharp nails and teeth. He groaned and lay back on the ice. It was cool and soothing. There was more snow on the ground than before. How much time had passed? Anna moved beside him. She kissed his ribs through his torn shirt and watched as they mended.

His wounds healed in lines of blue. They webbed across him. Even more Fae had appeared since Sam had last been conscious. He had not seen so many Faeries since Samhain. Even in the thick, clear ice beneath him he glimpsed the whirling bodies of Mermaids from

every season. Massive Kelpies galloped underwater. Nymphs swirled in eddies, and other water creatures he could not place crowded beneath.

Looking up, Sam saw Maab as she stared at him in a strange tangle of viciousness and compassion. Titania's eye darted for a reason he didn't understand. Airina ignored him, watching Anna. All of Faerie was holding its breath. Waiting.

He didn't care. He couldn't care. Sam curled an arm around Anna as she lay down with him. Anna. The love of his life, his wife, his best friend, Anna. Sam touched the softness of her skin. The night's he had spent trying to remember her touch did little justice to the reality of it. He rubbed a thumb over the curve of her bottom lip. Sam was overwhelmed by the gentle hush of her sighs. Having her so near in such a public spectacle was almost worse than missing her alone.

Anna had never hurt him as she had hurt him today. Never. He wasn't sure if he could ever forget how it had felt for his heart to break. His mind tried to reconcile the girl he loved and trusted, the girl in his arms, with the girl who had crushed him. Sam remembered with a shudder what his mother sometimes said.

"It's when we're in the dark that we know who we really are."

"What?" Anna asked.

Sam hadn't realised he had spoken out loud. Instead of answering her, he kissed her again, softer this time. He pulled back to look at her before he nudged his forehead against hers.

"I'm so sorry, Sam," Anna whispered. "What I did…you didn't deserve that."

"No, I didn't." Sam answered.

He wanted to say more. He wanted to be angry. He *was* angry, but he loved her, too. Perhaps there was nothing she could ever do to make him forget that she was both girls now

and loving her meant giving her the power to hurt him. Would she take advantage of it again? Was he a fool?

A long moment of silence passed as they held each other on the frozen lake, but it was all too quickly interrupted.

Sam's ears were flooded with a music like the pained weeping of some resigned animal. No, more beautiful. Strange, like an ambulance siren far off in the distance of a great city, the wailing of a violin caught in a tumult of wind, a fox braying in a misty, dark forest. Sam was tired again. So tired.

Dozens of elegant women emerged from the mob of Faerie bodies. Their mouths moved in quivering circles as they sang. The women were draped in thick robes of sheepskin and black fur. Pale winter white women, vibrant blue women, tawny, pink, velvet black women. Each of them had long, starlight-silver hair in various forms of elaborate disarray. One woman stood in the front, leading the others. She wore a decorative headpiece with a bright purple jagged gem dangling against her forehead. She was more beautiful and ethereal than all of them, and older too. Deep wrinkles pitted her cheeks and branched out from her eyes. The woman looked at Sam and began to move towards him. The other women followed, singing their haunting song with words in a language he couldn't understand. As Sam looked up, he saw Maab again. This time she had an excited expression in her dark eyes. Beside her, Titania's eyes were wild.

Sam felt as if he had slipped underwater. The song was so sad and haunting and beautiful. The warmth from Anna's body had shifted away. Sam gripped her hand. She held his hand back, but she had sat upright. Sam tried not to cry. Anna felt so far away now. He tried to pull her back down. He could only succeed in wrapping his fingers tighter around hers while he lay back and let the music of these women wash over him. Calm, he felt so calm. Confused, tired, but calm. An animal tranquilized by hunters. His eyelids were falling

over his eyes.

"What's happening?" He heard Anna say.

She was afraid of the women, he realised. Sam frowned; he couldn't understand why. Their singing was so beautiful. He heard the word *Banshee* from the mouth of Titania. The singing swelled, but he felt as lulled as if he was submerged in a warm bath. He wanted to pull Anna down and kiss her again. He would have to be satisfied with holding her small hand in his.

It was sudden, the way the sounds all seemed to stop at the same time. The Banshee women stopped singing and Sam opened his eyes. He couldn't hear Anna speaking, though he saw her lips move. No Faerie stirred a breath. Even the water beneath Maab's frozen lake had gone silent. Then a shock, like the muffled start of a sonic boom. Out of the stillness, an immense shadow grew. Wings expanded in his vision, a vulture landing on a carcass. Green. A beautiful, green man.

Oberon.

He was resplendent in his fury. He was blinding to behold. Oberon's immense wings unfurled, revealing a monster, a beast, the King of Faerie. His subjects bowed at the sight of his magnificence. Sam turned away from Oberon to look at Anna. His Anna. She was looking up at Oberon and screaming something, something. Sam was watching her, wishing he could stroke her face and calm her down. Then he felt a pain glide through his chest.

Sam had felt blood on his skin so often now that he didn't notice at first as a fresh pool collected. With a sharpness like waking up out of a nightmare, Sam felt a slicing burn split his ribs. Oberon stared at Sam, his face startling close and menacing. Sam's left hand was half-raised, reaching for the smooth, green skin. Oberon had buried a glimmering white sword down to the hilt into Sam's chest. The numbing effect of the Banshee song had already

worn off. Sam felt the pain. The sound of the splitting ice beneath his back echoed through his broken bones. His heart was spilling blood over his chest. Sam watched the vibrant red pools drip onto the snow.

Oberon ripped the sword from Sam's body and then there was the penetrating sound of Anna's scream.

Sam's back arched away from the ice with the pull of the blade. Blood flooded his lungs. He coughed and tasted something like thick warm metal in his mouth. He cried then and he thought of his mother, of how grateful he was that she would never know what had happened to him. He wondered if the changeling gnome would keep his promise. Would he go to college, like she wanted? The pain was immeasurable. Terror laced adrenaline through Sam's muscles and made them twitch. He took stuttering breaths around the blood in his throat. Oberon grinned, every tooth showing in feral glee.

Sam's vision slipped. Not spotty blinks of black, as when the tide of Faeries had him. This was a hazy glaze of encroaching grey. Sam was slipping away, falling somewhere inside of himself. Scent, sight, even the taste of his own blood. It was all fading.

Sam felt his head lull to one side. He felt his breathing sputter and then stop, his limbs go still. He felt Anna's warm fingers still curled around his.

Then he felt nothing.

FIFTY-EIGHT

Anna stared at Sam. His fingers were still knotted in hers, but something about them felt empty. Blood covered him. His chest was dark red, in stark contrast to the white of the snow. The wound had been sloppy. For such a fearsome looking bone-white broadsword, the cut was a dull mess. Force had made the gaping hole in his chest. Brute force. Her body was cold all over.

Anna looked down on her husband's body and remembered the little boy he had been. How he had smiled as they played for hours in the treehouse. The pink of Sam's blushing during their childhood kisses. She tried to force the image to stay. She wanted to remember him like that, not this way. Not covered in blood in a land she had dragged him to. Anna clutched his hand as she imagined the blue of his bright eyes and the upturned corners of his smile. There were paths of clean skin on his face where the blood had been washed away by his tears.

Sam was gone. Anna wept as she bent to Sam's body and kissed his lifeless lips. The taste of his blood was horrible, but she could not stop, not if it meant he might return to her. Her mind held on to the hope that he might wake up, that she had the power to heal him. He remained too still, colder than before, and she succumbed to her agony.

Heat bloomed through Anna's chest. It erupted from her and through the gathered crowd. She clutched his hand to her chest and wailed. Anna's throat felt ripped open from the earlier rawness, but she screamed again anyway. Summer heat burned through her and she prayed it would burn her up.

She didn't want to live in a world, any world, without Sam.

Anna cried, fury and anguish crashing into her. She collapsed on the mangled mess of his torso. Her hands were wet with melted snow, red with his blood.

"Never mind all this fuss, my little Queen," Oberon said, his defiant smile etched into his words.

He placed a heavy hand on Anna's heaving back. His voice was calm and gentle, as if he thought he was soothing her.

"You are mine now." Oberon whispered. "I have won."

Fury seethed in her blood with hot abandon. She glared at Oberon through the ruined curtain of her tangled hair. Tendrils of heat whipped and hissed against the ice, lifting clouds of steam. Anna sprang to her feet, startling Oberon so much that he backed away from her. She curled her fingers into a tight ball and flung her arm with as much force as she could put behind it. As her fist connected to Oberon's jaw it made a sound like water on a hot iron. He was a blade of grass and she was the withering heat of the sun. She watched him back away with muted satisfaction.

"I was never yours and I will never be yours! You are a coward, Oberon. Your people fear you, but they will never respect you. You have a dead heart. How could you ever think I could love something like you! You are nothing to me and you will only ever be nothing to me because you have stolen what was *everything* to me!"

She hit him again, as hard as she could. Her shoulder ached with the effort, but her grin was unbridled madness. She was not surprised when his anger overtook him and he wrapped his hands around her throat. Oberon's wings beat and he pushed her down to her knees. He shifted his hands over the heat of her skin, but his pressure remained. His own self-loathing shone dark in his eyes; Anna could see it now. That thing that made him elusive was no longer a mystery. His strength and his sensuality were false walls to hide behind. The King of Faerie was weak.

Her unending tears dripped over the green hands that tightened below her chin. Anna

hoped he would kill her. She didn't deserve to live with Sam's blood staining her lips.

"OBERON!" Titania bellowed, forcing him into the sky.

The Faerie King looked bewildered and trapped as he struggled against the force of Titania's will. He writhed against her hold, beating his magnanimous wings in the air, but she was able to keep him in place.

"I am due my Queen! How dare you—a-any of you—contest that!"

"You will tire of her, Oberon! You tire of us all!" Maab interjected. "He was her husband, too. You had no right to severe that bond."

"I won!" He thundered.

"I kissed you! It was just a kiss!" Anna croaked, now that her breath had returned.

Her mind was reeling. How could she have been so foolish as to underestimate the power of one kiss…

Anna wept again. She was furious at Oberon, but she was more sickened with herself. It was all her fault. She could hear the shocked murmurs of the other Faeries. Their wide eyes watched their wayward Royals, chosen by the land. To do what? All of them were no better than lethal children, treating lives like toys. She didn't deserve a crown, or a loving husband. Anna looked down at Sam again. She deserved a hole in her chest to match his.

Titania put Oberon down and he did not rush to crush Anna's throat. Instead stared, teeth grinding together, fist clenched. The Spring Queen stood beside Anna. Maab joined them. A tether bound them together.

"You cannot understand. None of you can understand!" Oberon paced. Anna tried to ignore him, but his voice thundered. "You were born to be mine. It is the Law! Perhaps not now—for hundreds of thousands of moons even—but you could come to love me. If he was here, you could never be mine. I-I did what was best—"

His Faerie tongue would not allow him to lie. Oberon's voice wavered, his conviction dying. Titania bored holes into him with her gaze.

"You are a fool, my King, and have been a fool for much too long." A voice like silk emerged from the crowd. The Faeries parted around the Autumn Queen, Gearóid and his Reapers following. "You are a heartbroken child trapped in the body of a King."

"How dare you speak to me that way!" Oberon flushed with anger.

His eyes darted around, looking for a place to lay blame other than on his own bloodstained hands.

"Reaper! It is because of you that I had to execute this mortal myself. Here is your villain, Brightling!"

"I had to inquire of the Queen Morgana's Sight, my King." Gearóid bowed, ever the obedient servant. "I believed a mistake to be made."

"I will have your neck against my blade for this treachery. How dare you disobey your King! For what price have you bought your death?"

"I believe the brightling Queen has not broken her pact with you, my King. I believe you have."

Silence rang out as loud as a bell through all of Faerie.

"What?" Anna croaked.

"Be still, foolish darkling! You speak of things you cannot know!" Oberon paled as he screamed. "How dare you question my judgement!"

"Oberon!" Morgana shouted. There was a weight in her voice, something ancient and powerful that would not be ignored. "You deceived my child! You isolated her, forced her to depend on you. In your efforts to possess her body you harmed her mind. You preyed upon her, Oberon, as you have done to women for centuries. Yet, because of your nature, fool that

you are, you lost your own wager."

Anna was on the verge of tears again. Her mind plagued her with the memory of the King retreating and her own body going closer to his. She couldn't be silent, though she wanted to. It was all her fault.

"I…I kissed him."

"You are not faultless, my Queen," Gearóid admitted. Morgana nodded knowingly in his direction. "Still, the wager was that you would love him. You might have been charmed by him, but do you love him?"

Anna's breath was shallow. She had never known anything like Oberon, his intensity and desire. She had wanted to be wanted, she had wanted to lose herself in him, but love? Anna looked down at Sam's face. He was love, he was sacrifice, dedication, patience. Anna knew what it meant to love someone. Sam had shown her. Anna bent her lips to the ring Sam still wore on his finger. The one made of gold.

Anna stood, facing the crowd and Oberon.

"I kissed him," Anna admitted again.

Oberon beamed, vindicated. He radiated with relief and began to walk towards her, but she held up her hand, her eyes full of fire.

"I was wrong, but I was not in love. I thought I wanted to forget, I thought I needed him, but I don't." Anna took a deep breath, her hand on her talisman. "I love Sam. I have always loved Sam."

"Brightling…"

"My name is Anna Burrow!" Anna snarled. She looked at Oberon, at all of Faerie. "I was born Bright, to the Autumn Queen of Faerie, and raised a changeling in the human world. My mother named me Anna. I didn't know who I was, but I know now. I will be the

future Queen of Summer, I am the wife of Samuel Burrow. I do not belong to you, Oberon, and I never will."

An uncomfortable gasp rippled through the crowd. There was silence, then Oberon's voice cut cold whispers through the tension.

"How dare you thwart Faerie Law, foolish changeling girl? Don't you know that this is the way it has always been and will always be? There would be consequences."

"Who do you love, Oberon? Who does your heart belong to?" Anna watched as the King's eyes slid to meet with the steadfast Titania's gaze. He paled, his previous fury no match for the Spring Queen.

"Yes, my King," Titania whispered. "I have loved you, but you have never loved me."

To the waiting quiet her words sounded like a roar. Oberon trembled.

"I can't love," the King insisted, a quavering hush in his voice.

"You have made excuses for yourself, and our people have followed our faulty lead, but you can love. All it takes is the strength to try. You have shattered my heart a thousand times. With every broken sliver I have loved you, but no more. No more."

"Titania…" Oberon said, clenching his jaw, but Anna saw the tremble of his lip.

"You do not deserve me, King of Faerie." Titania answered in a small, vulnerable voice. She was shaking but her head was held high. Anna was just as surprised as the rest of Faerie, but the Spring Queen persisted. "I will no longer be your wife. No Law is worth it."

Oberon turned, eyes scanning the gathered crowd. Anna watched his brave exterior crumble. She understood Oberon now. She was a lot like him. He was afraid to be alone.

Oberon turned back to Titania.

"T-there will be consequences," he tried out the words on his tongue but they had lost their conviction. "You are my Queen, Titania. The Law—"

The Spring Queen walked over to him and placed soft fingers over his lips as he said the words. Tears collected and glittered on both of their faces.

"The Law is wrong." Maab said, her icy voice cutting through the air. Morwin had wound his fingers through hers and he seemed to give her new strength. "We Queens will no longer submit to it."

Morgana said nothing but her gaze was clear. The Queens were all in agreement. The Law was broken.

Anna watched Oberon clench his fists, his jaw, his shoulders. Then all at once he seemed to surrender, his green eyes settling on the faces of his once-wives. He seemed…lost. An eternally misguided King. Even now Anna could not help but pity him.

In the uncomfortable silence Anna bent down again and stroked Sam's face. She knew Oberon watched her. She felt the familiar warmth of his eyes on her face. She pressed her forehead to Sam's. A tear rolled down her nose and hit his cold skin.

Anna was surprised when Oberon spoke.

"I can do something, Bright, but I must… I'm…I'm sorry. Please…I…" Oberon wavered, his voice soft, his bravado stripped. Anna didn't respond.

"Go." Titania answered for her.

A sharp sound emitted, and Oberon was gone, leaving a breathless Faerie in his wake.

FIFTY-NINE

Maab felt odd.

For the first time in all Faerie history, the Queens of Faerie had declared separation from the King. She hadn't even known such a thing was possible. The Law could not be broken. Yet there was little fallout. What consequence was Oberon on about? The fool. Perhaps they had all been fools. Maab was happy to be rid of his presents, his bed, his fists. Maab was free, but she felt an unease writhing under her skin. Though the boy's death caused the riptide that led to her freedom, it had not been what she had expected for her brood.

Maab stretched her long fingers, extending her nails until they resembled thin daggers. Her large wings flexed in time. Since Oberon had left, there was an almost audible sigh radiating through all the gathered creatures. Titania was surrounded now by Springland attendants cooing and fawning over her. Maab was pleased for her Queen Sister's new-found strength. She deserved more.

Maab's gaze fell over to the changeling girl. Bright curled around her late husband. She seemed rooted to the spot. Instinct guided the Summerlanders to surround their almost-Queen. Dryads pulled offerings of fragrant flowers from their bodies. Maab watched as a Naiad used the water of her hair to wash away the human's blood. The little Queen looked up with an expression first of confusion and then stunned gratitude. Her people soon began to remove the bloodstained garments in favour of woven clothes offered by the many Nymphs. When they were done with him, Samuel looked as if he merely slept. Death had softened his hard features until he resembled the child he must have been once. Maab could not tear her gaze away.

"Thank you," Bright said, crying.

She was already their Queen. They cleaned her next, then they stood, mourning with

her.

Maab turned from the girl to Queen Morgana. The Autumn Queen would usually have drifted off into the distance by now. Maab could not help but wonder why she was choosing to stay.

“Your daughter has suffered today, Morgana,” Maab commented as she stood beside her.

“She is a strong girl. Very like her father. I wish she could have known him.”

“All of Faerie was here to see how your changeling condemned a King and stripped him of his wives. If she is yet unaware of her strength, you can rest assured that her people have come to see it.”

“She is not finished yet, we none of us are.”

“What are you waiting for, Morgana?”

The Autumn Queen was quiet for a long time. Maab stood, growing impatient.

“Do you recall the time we spent in the human realm together, Maab?” Morgana said at last, clasping gentle hands around the Winter Queen’s sharp, cold fingers.

“I remember you lost your strange, mostly-human mother and then you came to me. You asked me to turn the world cold.”

“You did, for a long while, and I never thanked you for that.”

“What thanks would I need for what is only my nature and what was once dark in you? Why have you said these things now, Queen Sister?”

“Those cold nights taught me the most about myself, Maab. We cannot truly know who we are in the bright joys of summer days. Our truest selves are revealed to us as winter creeps in, dark and cold and sometimes unwelcome. You have helped me now again and given my daughter a Winter she will never forget.”

"You saw the boy come to my lands. You saw his death." Maab whispered.

Morgana nodded, her fingers still curled around Maab's in an uncharacteristic display of warmth. More than that. In the Autumn Queen Maab sensed fear and a need for kinship.

"Tell me, Morgana. Tell me." Maab smiled, sitting beside the placid Queen with all the conspiratorial glee of a gossip.

"You will have a new darkling born to your lands, Maab. Before tonight's moon wanes."

SIXTY

Oberon had promised himself he would never return to this place.

Everything here was too bright, too new. It was a world he felt he blemished by his very presence. That was the point, he knew. Reflection. Here was where sins were laid bare. His were too many to count. It was his latest that haunted him now. He had killed before. He had killed the brightling's father for the same reason he had killed her human. Jealousy and a need to dominate polluted his mind. Yet this time had been different. He had never felt this clawing shame inside his stomach before.

Something swam before him, pale as a whisper. A little parade of thin faces covered his eyes like a film. Dead faces. He hated this place.

Yes, he had killed before. Too many times. Now Bright's human was among the dead that haunted him.

"Oberon…"

A voice as soft and cool as wind after rain called to him. He knew he must follow it.

In the brightness around him his skin buzzed like a thousand leaves all stretching towards sunlight. The Faerie King's eyes took longer to adjust than they would in his world, and he held up a hand to shield them from the all-encompassing light.

"I am here," he called, not at all fully certain of where he was. He was waiting for her to find him as he never could find his own way.

"Oberon."

Then she was there, as if she always had been. Light poured off her like white-gold honey. The woman's skin shone; her eyes were pools of liquefied copper. Her hair was loose and a bit wild in utter contradiction to her otherwise flawless appearance, but it only made her even more beautiful. The soft blush pink of her skin was as radiant as a new rose. Her

wings shimmered brighter than cut crystal.

“Danu.” Oberon bowed deep, his nose grazing his bent knee. “Mother.”

She reached long fingers into his hair and made a soft shushing sound. Oberon rose to meet her. Even at his great height he was not taller than her. Her burning eyes bore into his.

“You never enter these lands, boy. What could you be doing here?”

“Mother of Faerie, Queen of All, please, I must beg something of you.”

“You want the boy you killed, of course.”

He did not deny it. As the First of the Fae, of course she knew all. Like Morgana, her questions were often rhetorical. Oberon felt small in the wake of her omnipresence, her divinity.

“He was not mine to kill. He belongs to my Summer Queen.”

“Is she your Summer Queen?”

“N-not mine. Her own. Bright.”

“Interesting. Bright may be otherwise attended? One of her kin could suit her better than a human. She could love again. Why go through this trouble, boy? Why ask this of me?”

“I must. I must do this. There is no other choice.”

“You speak as if you may command me. These are the Afterlands, my child, and they are under my rule alone.” Her eyes were fire as she gently rebuked him.

“Please, Mother.” Oberon said, panicked. “It can be done?”

“A soul comes at great cost, King of Faeries, and the cost will not be all your own. No one can cross to the Afterlands after death and return the same.”

“I understand.” Oberon answered. All he wanted was to leave this place.

“No, darling boy, you cannot.”

Oberon was quiet for a while, letting his mother's words sink in. He had always been afraid of her for as long as he could remember—adoring her and in awe of her, but nonetheless afraid. She had left him so many hundreds of thousands of moons ago and yet he felt her constant presence. Her disappointment, her heartbreak at his father's betrayal.

"I love Titania, Mother." Oberon said, somehow needing to make the declaration aloud to her for it to be real.

"I know you believe that to be true, darling." She answered with a touch of sadness. His self-loathing coated his throat in thick bile.

"Why did you curse me?" Oberon hissed between his teeth in a rush. "Why punish me for my father's crimes?"

"Curse? Punish?" She shook her head and her thick hair followed the movement like waves in a sea. "Child, how could you think I would do such a thing? I *blessed* you. You were born a god, a King. I had to protect you, so you would not make your father's mistake. Oberon, I placed a hole inside of you so that you would yearn only for what is worthy of you. I had no idea the lengths you would go to fill it."

Oberon trembled, clenching his fists, refusing to let tears fall from his eyes.

"I-I just want to love Titania. The way she deserves."

"You can," she nodded, "but I am not certain that you will."

"If you created me to love, then I will love her and only her."

"You have had thousands of moons to love that girl, Oberon. You fool no one, not even her! You desire more than love—with its flaws and failings. You want no part of it. You, my child, are insatiable. Afraid of failure. You crave lust, King of Faeries, not love. That is not my doing, but yours."

"Mother, I—" but she cut him off as she raised a slender hand wreathed in golden light.

"Enough, my Oberon. There is no time to fight all your demons just now. You still want the boy?"

"I—yes—I suppose." Her eyes pierced him. "Yes. Please."

"He will be your charge. The boy will change. He will become what he was never meant to be because of your sending him here. You, Oberon Gwyn Mordha, must protect him from himself."

"I don't understand."

"I told you that you would not. Will you take him?"

"I must."

"Wait here, I will come again."

SIXTY-ONE

Anna lay upon Sam's corpse—cleaned and clothed by her own Faerie people—and could no longer feel the tears slide from her eyes. She traced the sword still etched into his skin. Every time she thought that she must get up, she would remember that she would never again see this sword on his skin and all strength and will would leave her again.

Anna pressed her lips to the cold curve of his ear and barely breathed, speaking as low as she could.

"Samuel Mark Burrow, I will always love you."

A gasp churned in those still gathered, like the winds of a coming storm. Anna sat straight up and looked around, afraid she had been heard. In the distance she saw something like a shadow or like light or somehow both. At times, the thing seemed to glide as smoke, and at other times it seemed to have two legs to walk on. Whatever it was, it was coming towards her. Anna stood then, frightened.

Oberon walked behind the thing coming towards her. Anna spun her head and saw Maab and Morgana and Titania, each watching. They regarded her with surprise but also a calm she did not share. She was afraid. The moving light-shadow reached something like a hand down to her lips. As soon as it touched her, she knew what stood before her. Anna couldn't make her eyes understand what her mind now did.

"Sam?"

The thing bent down to her ear. Something like breath escaped its lips. She closed her eyes, her heart skipping a beat.

"I will always love you, Anna Michelle Kingsley Burrow."

Before she could respond or ask any questions, the light turned to smoke in the air and settled over the body beside her. The mouth of the body at her feet parted as if to welcome

life back inside. Anna watched with unblinking eyes.

As if he had been struck by lightning, Sam's body suddenly bucked, and his limbs shook. His head lolled on his neck at a strange angle, and he dug his fingernails into the surrounding ice as if bracing himself in pain. His teeth ground until a silent scream parted his lips.

As suddenly as it started, it all stopped.

Then there was a rasping sound as Sam took in greedy breaths of air. His eyes snapped open. The hair on his head was beginning to curl, wet with sweat. Sam appeared as a man who had been rescued from drowning. His hands flew to his chest and he coughed in relieved surprise to find himself whole where he had once been gaping and clean where he had once been bloodied. He looked up at Anna, who was sobbing through her smiles. He reached out a hand to touch her but stopped short. Anna watched him look back at his body with wonder.

The white of his skin was retreating. Covering it like a thick indigo ink was his new skin. The blue was spreading, covering every inch of him in a slow crawl over his body. His long fingers, the expanse of his broad shoulders. It painted itself up his neck and down from his hairline. The undersides of his hands were the colour of the sky at twilight and his lips were almost violet.

Anna looked at his body as if she had never seen it before. He was new. Sam's skin was smooth and flawless, his hair a mussed shock, and his teeth were sharper and more canine. Even his eyes were different. They were as bright blue as aquamarines under crystal clear water. Yet around the edges of his iris a black ring was suddenly there, and it seemed to bleed into the whites of his eyes like ink dropped on a page.

Sam turned those new eyes to Anna, his shocked expression replaced by one of love. He reached up to kiss her. Anna melted into him with a surprised hiccup of a sob trapped in

her throat, grateful for the warmth of his living self under his skin. Whatever the colour, she could feel in the tremble of her heart that this was her Sam.

He gasped in pain and she sprang back at the noise. He lifted his left hand and inspected his wedding band with a grimace. He searched around him for a moment, his eyes wild and panicked. Anna got an unsettling glance at the black in them. Finally, he ripped a piece of his shirt and wound it around his ring as he hurried to remove it. He placed it beside him, patting the place it had rested on his finger.

"He's Faerie now, brightling." Oberon said in quiet explanation. He bowed his head at her sheepishly.

"Thank you, Oberon. I-I don't know what you've done, but thank you."

She would have smiled, but Oberon's gaze stopped her. There was something he wasn't saying. Something was still wrong.

Maab encircled Sam and Anna. The strange sound of ice cracking beneath her feet as she walked sent a shiver up Anna's back. Maab grinned.

"Maab, please, tell me. Tell me what's wrong."

"Wrong, little changeling Queen?" Maab laughed. "Nothing is wrong. I am only pleased to have a new son of Faerie. Born to Snow and wed to Fire. What chaos you will bring, my darkling boy."

Sam exchanged a look with Anna as they examined his skin anew.

"He was born to Winter, Bright." Maab grinned. "To Winter he belongs."

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Stolen Children and The Fear of The Other:

A Look at Irish Changelings for the Novel *In the Dark*

Lauren Preston

Introduction: Folklore, Myth, and the Black Imagination

As a Black author, when I write a book I am searching for ways to banish oppression, I am pouring my lived experiences onto a page, and I am fighting for what I believe in because I cannot rely on others to fight for me. Writing in 2020, Rochelle Spencer helps to explain why writing as a Black author requires such complexity:

> This summer, you're either outside protesting and fighting for life and freedom, or inside trying to protect what little you have. The spaces where you can relax and be yourself are few. You can't go bird-watching, for example. And we know George Floyd wasn't safe on a public street, but we also realize Breonna Taylor wasn't safe in her own apartment. (Spencer, 1)

Spencer's statement begins to contextualize the racial atmosphere Black authors found themselves in when publishing in 2020. This statement, in response to a wider exploration of Black consciousness, encapsulates the consistency of Black fear and lack of control. The quote, the book, the protesting masses Spencer refers to all seem to ask a resounding set of questions: Where can Black people be safe? Where do we belong?

One of the founding pillars of the Black Imagination is simply the ability to imagine oneself as safe to be oneself. For many Black children, to be both Black *and* safe is an oxymoron bordering on the darkly comical. Maya Angelou wrote, "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult" (4). Such is the background of my own upbringing in the American South-East. It is impossible to separate such an awareness from my writing and yet the inherent isolation of Blackness is often so subtle as to be misread or even overlooked by those who do not have such a background. The inability of those non-Black writers and readers to relate to Blackness thus isolates the Black writer further,

regardless of the intention. In the Black American experience, recognising one's difference in society and even imagination is a historically founded consciousness that has survived to the present. Other scholars and artists have discussed many difficulties of the Black experience at length, from W.E.B Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folks* to *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* to Tiffany E. Barber and the other panellists who spoke for the Black Speculative Arts Movement convention (#BSAMFUTURISMO2017). Their fight is noble and their voices continue to shape the social change necessary for social and artistic equality.

I wish to add to the conversation of Black art and imagination, but there is a further isolating aspect of my Black identity. For me, the fact of my multiracial heritage at times separates me from involvement in Black art. This reality is also reflected in my writing. Therefore, the aim of this critical reflection is in part to delve into the nuances of interracial consciousness and the impact of mixed-raced representation, specifically in young adult/new adult speculative fiction. Like the Black existence, the mixed-race person recognises the stain of "other" almost instantly. However, the mixed-race Black person experiences unique differences in both privilege and discrimination that separates such consciousness into its own category of perspective. Furthermore, just as mixed-race Black people are often overlooked in the discourse surrounding the Black American existence, so too are the more specific mixed-race, Black, Irish persons. This critical reflection—written from the perspective of a mixed-race, Black, American woman living in Ireland—will attempt to reflect upon the need for literary and academic representation for mixed-race Black people of all nations while also recognising the inability to speak for each mixed-race person's individual experience.

Though there is a temptation to ignore the need for representation of such a minority group as mixed-race Black and the even more underrepresented Black and Irish, evidence proves this would be a mistake. The United States of America 2010 Census Brief confirms

that, “Overall, the population reporting more than one race grew from about 6.8 million people to 9.0 million people [from 2000 to 2010]” (Bullock and Jones, 1). The Irish Central Statistics Office reports, “The fastest growing ethnic group since 2011 was “Other incl. “mixed background”, with an annualised growth of 14.7 per cent” (CSO, 1). In other words, among the two primary nationalities explored in this thesis, Irish and American, there is a continually growing demographic of humans merged under the simultaneously inclusive and divisive identifier of “mixed-race”. The term “mixed-race” may be seen as inclusive as it incorporates many different kinds of people together. Yet it is also a divisive term because it excludes mixed-race people from the community of “pure” races (including those of one or both of their parents) as well as from each other. One can be mixed with more races than just Black or white, or in fact more than two singular races. As such, one mixed-race person may not experience the same culture, stereotypes, discriminations, privileges, or expectations as another mixed-race person.

There are also many identity politics to consider based on how a mixed-race person is perceived by non-mixed-race and other mixed-race peoples. For example, a mixed-race child who has a Black parent and a white parent is often considered by their phenotype—observable characteristics—to be either white or Black, excluding them from 50% of their heritage. In America this can be linked directly to the “One-Drop” rule of the Jim Crow era, defining Blackness by the smallest amount of “Black blood” as it was considered racially inferior. Nikki Khanna expands upon this concept by recognising that the learned categorization of Blackness therefore forces mixed-race children to identify not only as one-half of their parentage but also as wholly inferior (Khanna, 97).

Beyond the divisions and complexities of racial history, humanity also divides by identifiers such as cultural background, visible differences, sexual orientation, thin or fat, race, religion, birthplace, gender, and politics to name only a few. The global concept of

identity is disjointed and yet deeply yearned for. In Young Adult literature the subject of identity is not a simple plot device; it is often a guide to the reader for understanding themselves. In the world of confusing identity structures, it can be a complicated task for young adults of all backgrounds to figure out where they belong. The accompanying novel hopes to address this inconsistency in identity, especially in regard to the main character, Anna/Bright.

In a tumultuous world focused on differences, there is one thing that almost all humans have had in common: mythology. My novel uses this powerful and unifying tool. Joshua Mark asserts that

> "Mythology (from the Greek *mythos* for story-of-the-people, and *logos* for word or speech, so the spoken story of a people) is the study and interpretation of often sacred tales or fables of a culture known as myths or the collection of such stories which deal with various aspects of the human condition: good and evil; the meaning of suffering; human origins; the origin of place-names, animals, cultural values, and traditions; the meaning of life and death; the afterlife; and the gods or a god. Myths express the beliefs and values about these subjects held by a certain culture." (Mark, 1)

Myth defines a culture and its relationship to the world and therefore has the potential to go beyond the limitations of race. The beauty of mythology is the ability it has to transcend boundaries. Many who study mythology look at how myths connect humans of various backgrounds through parallel myths (similar myths found in various different cultures). The study of mythology is thereby anthropological, historical, and theological, as well as literary. Monsters are feared, magical beings are worshipped, and mythology can give people a purpose as well as an explanation for the unexplainable. The novel keeps these functions in

mind and this critical reflection assesses the need in the novel for the infusion of folkloric and mythological themes, beings, and speculative cultures.

There is fear in the world, especially the world of Black existence. For the mixed-race Black child, lack of authentic representation in literature effects the erasure of their unique fears. It is ambitious to imagine a creative writing piece could help mend these wounds. Nevertheless, there is a cry in the world for art that can abate the suffering of this brave new selfish world, even for just a little while. This critical reflection will be specifically focusing on the Irish changeling—a Faerie creature who is swapped in to replace a stolen human. This critical reflection will question why this myth came to be and why it was believed for so long, even to the present day. I speculate that the changeling characterises a specific human fear, one in the same family with racism and discrimination. My novel hopes to address the fear such a creature as the changeling taps in to and why this fear is relatable to the mixed-race experience. For the purposes of this critical reflection, those humans—infant or adult—who are stolen from the human realm and taken to Faerie will also be considered to qualify under the term "changeling".

As mentioned, the novel *In the Dark* is written by a mixed-race Black American woman living in Ireland and has a main character that is a mixed-race Black woman living between worlds. The novel was started when I was seventeen, in my first semester at Howard Community College in Columbia, Maryland. As my education, confidence, and reading material expanded, so did the understanding and interests of my main characters. I found myself inspired regularly by mythology and folklore and retellings of stories. I have always struggled to connect to Black authors and their stories, but I found comfortable kinship with Black authors who incorporated Black characters into stories that retell mythologies of a non-Black or non-African perspective. For example, though Tomi Adeyemi is a Black author who writes Black characters, her stories are based around retellings of African mythologies. Her

world-building is magical and her characters are intriguing, and complex. Yet I did not see myself in the impressive Zelie or even the shy Amari who would grow to be so much more than a princess. Octavia Butler, on the other hand, has a novel called *Fledgling* in which a young black girl becomes a vampire, a traditionally Eastern European myth. Tracy Deonn's debut, *Legendborn* is the story of a Black girl merged seamlessly with Arthurian legend. These are the kinds of stories I find interesting and relatable. There is shame associated with being Black and not connecting to "traditionally Black" literature that is unique to the mixed-race experience. In the novel, Anna/Bright is given a reason as to why she feels so consistently Other—it is because she *is* different. Yet her Otherness is not to be ashamed of or feared. Through the exploration of the changeling I hope to assess how the novel responds to the feelings of isolation within mixed-race identity and the need for an acceptance of that which is other within the self.

The critical reflection is thereby segmented into two parts. Part one will focus on the connection between the Irish changeling myth and mixed-race identity politics. Part two addresses the use of the Irish myth of the changeling and how it is utilised within in the novel.

PART ONE: WHERE DO WE BELONG?

Racial Othering Of the Mind and In the Imagination

To begin to understand the mindset of the mixed-race person and why they might identify with the story of the changeling, first we must understand how racial othering targets the mind's ability to imagine. Racial othering is defined here as the denigration of one or more races by another race that perceives itself as superior. Racial othering is recorded in texts as old as the Christian Bible. For example, in Exodus 1 the Egyptians racially othered the Israelites. The NIV translation reads:

> So they put slave masters over [the Israelites] to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly. (NIV, Exodus 1:11-14)

This depiction of forced subjugation serves to humble the Israelites before God can uplift them as his chosen people, as the Israelite God does throughout the entirety of the text. Yet racial othering is not a bygone issue. To cite only a few examples, in May 2020 scholars Tyler T. Reny and Matt A. Barreto published research on anti-Asian rhetoric in the United States in the time of the Coronavirus pandemic, finding that "anti-Asian attitudes are associated with concern about the virus but also with xenophobic behaviors and policy preferences" (Reny and Barreto). In his article "Why mainstream research will not end scientific racism in psychology", psychologist Andrew S. Winston also claims that "Assertions by psychologists of Black people's average inferiority in brain size, intelligence, and morality have persisted for over 100 years despite repeated, careful critiques. Recent

presentations of these old and discredited claims have sidestepped the fundamental criticism that they rest on essentialized racial categories" (Winston). Lastly, according to research done by the Pew Research Center in the report "Race in America 2019," "White Democrats (64%) are far more likely than white Republicans (15%) to say the country hasn't gone far enough when it comes to giving black people equal rights with whites. About half of Republicans say it's been about right, while a sizable minority (31%) says the country has gone too far in this regard" (Menasce Horowitz et al.). These examples are evidence of a pervasive system of racial othering that goes beyond hate crimes and into the consciousness of human identity politics.

Racial othering of the mind seeps further into the consciousness in the form of racialised imagination. The racialised imagination is at times unconsciously absorbed through literature that stereotypes, villainises, or even purposely degrades a character of colour. Writing about racial expectations of Muslims in children's literature, the authors Daniel D. Liou and Kelly Deits Cutler write, "topics such as race, racism, and religion could be seen as explicit curriculum but its ideological underpinning can still subject students to Eurocentric values that makes it hidden curriculum" (Liou and Cutler). In 2006 David Gillborn asserted:

> In the field of education, the 1980s saw the emergence of what Tomlinson has called 'educational nationalism'; an ideology that asserts the existence of a single (white) culture and heritage which is threatened by the presence of ethnic minorities with 'alien' cultures (Tomlinson, 1990, pp. 36-41). Such views are central to the work of the New Right who have had such an influence over recent educational policy in the UK. (Gillborn)

The evidence presented by Liou and Cutler and Gillborn showcase a disturbing pattern in racial othering beyond the colloquial and social level from peers, family, and other

members of one's society (for the purposes of this thesis, society has a dual definition consisting of one's own social peer group and the larger global understanding of culture and acceptance because social awareness has broadened significantly since the introduction of internationally accessible social media outlets and news broadcasts). This learned racial othering is from our books, our educational system, our absorbed media. These unconscious racialised themes are harming the very children the literature would hope to educate or inspire. Why? Because the pervasive perspective of whiteness as the normalised racial foundation must, for the sake of appointing itself *as* such a foundation, devalue all other cultures and races.

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison explores the racial elements both in the overtones and undertones of post-colonial American literature. She asserts, "For both Black and white American writers, in a wholly racialised society, there is no escape from racially inflected language, and the work writers do to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language is complicated, interesting, and definitive" (Morrison, 20:06-20:25). Morrison effectively communicates that the race of an author will inevitably influence the author's ability to write characters of their own race and of different races, and she points out that the author must understand the implications of their inherent biases on the reader, making an effort towards addressing the racial elements of writing effective characters. Though Morrison does an excellent job of expanding upon why this careful consideration of character matters both as a literary element and as valuable character development, her examples are largely outside of the genre the novel this critical reflection hopes to address. Instead, *The Dark Fantastic* by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas hopes to speak on the same racial awareness of both authors and readers to which Morrison calls, only with a further focus on the Young Adult Popular Literature genre in which *In the Dark* hopes to find its place.

Thomas observes the patterns of negative representation in popular literature directed at burgeoning youth and makes this poignant discovery: "Maybe it's not that kids and teens of color and other marginalized and minoritized young people don't like to read. Maybe the real issue is that many adults haven't thought very much about the racialized mirrors, windows, and doors that are in the books we offer them to read, in the television and movies we invite them to view, and in the fan communities we entice them to play in" (Thomas, 7). This is too-often a radical scholarly perspective. Thomas' assertion that children of colour struggle to enjoy reading popular literature to the same level as their white counterparts because they do not see themselves in a positive light in the materials available for them may be a complex concept to the white reader and scholar, but it is ingrained in the consciousness of people of colour. To a culture so hypervigilant in its awareness of how often its members are a "black face in a white space,"[1] it does not come as a surprise to have such literary concerns and needs overlooked. Thus fuelled by my reading of *The Dark Fantastic,* I have come to define Black Young Adult Literature as somewhere beyond the innocent coming of age stories YA once represented and closer to the controversial New Adult genre. This racial rift in the genre is necessary because Black Young Adult readers are forced into a more mature reality almost from infancy, due to the societal pressures Black youths experience that are unique to themselves. My novel looks to both belong to and stand apart from the white-centred genre, as mixed-race young adults, the intended readers, often do. In Anna's struggle for identity, her romantic entanglements, and her rollercoaster of emotions within the story, we find commonalities with the typical YA tropes. In the novel's themes, violence, sexuality, and fear we find the typical experiences Black YA readers are often presented with much earlier than their non-Black literary peers.

[1] A colloquial Black term meaning the recognition of one's minority status in a largely white environment. Often there is an implied anxiety to the situation derived from the recognisable otherness.

I do not deny that attitudes towards the needs of diverse characters and stories have changed for the better, but too often the content of this awareness remains shallow. There is a need in the literary world for more depth. Many diverse books that are published lack the nuance of character or background that would represent real Black peoples. A study published in 2018 looking at ten years of popular titles in the Young Adult genre found that "Books featuring non-white protagonists made up 18.5 percent of those chosen for YALSA's list over the past decade" (Lee, 5). Frankly, these are horrendous statistics, and they get worse for the mixed-race statistics. Since many mixed-raced Black people are forced into an identifying box of either "White" (which some are unable to claim; this phenomenon will be addressed later) "Black" (which reduces ones complex ethnicity for the benefit of others) or "Person of Colour" (which is altogether too generalised), the 18.5 percent of non-white protagonists found in the above research does not accurately represent how many protagonists were mixed-race Black, if any. The mixed-race identity is effectively erased from the data collected.

This erasure has real-life consequences as the inability to accept a faction of humanity historically leads to the neglect, hatred, and/or physical harm of that faction. For example, *The New York Times* reports news of this phenomenon leading to abuse and neglect in the infamous Irish Mother and Baby Homes: "Women sent to the institutions have spoken about "reject wards" for children deemed unadoptable, among them children who were of mixed race, disabled or Irish Travelers, an indigenous, nomadic people" (Hogan). In 2001 *The Irish Times* also reported anecdotal evidence of a young mixed-race girl living in Ireland who once, "encountered a group of youths in black balaclavas shouting 'keep Ireland white' son the Dublin quays" ("A Very Mixed Experience."). In 2013, online racial abuse came in response to a Cheerios commercial that featured a biracial family (Stump). These are the unfortunate realities of a deep lack of understanding and acceptance.

Yet this is not to say that there are not mixed-race characters in popular literary consciousness. For example, *Saga*, an epic fantasy graphic novel, navigates the racial tensions of the mixed-race experience by having many scenes narrated by Hazel, the mixed-race fugitive daughter of extra-terrestrial race-war deserters, Alana and Marko (Vaughan and Staples). Hazel is a useful representation of mixed-race Black identity for my purposes because the text refers overtly to her parentage and mixed-race identity. As *Saga* is a graphic novel, the reader can also physically see the phenotypic blending of her parent's physical characteristics—both in skin colour and non-human features such as her wings and horns. The communicated message of mixed-race identity in *Saga* is that to be mixed-race is to be hunted, isolated, unintentionally burdensome from conception, and to fear for the safety of oneself and one's loved ones. However, the beings represented in *Saga* cannot be a pure representation of mixed-race human identity as they themselves are not human. Their inhumanity complicates the absorbed messages of mixed-race identity even further, suggesting that a mixed-race person's identity is such an anomaly as to be recognisably alien. This element feeds into the exoticism and fetishization pervasive in the mixed-race experience which the novel attempts to address in Oberon's over-sexualised obsession with Anna/Bright.

The question of *where* to find oneself in mixed-race literary representation is also loaded. The American public radio network NPR published transcripts on its 2018 episode "'Racial Impostor Syndrome': Here Are Your Stories" from listeners to "The Code Switch Podcast". One listener said:

> I've always felt liminal, like I drift between race and culture. When I was young (20s) and living in the city, I would get asked multiple times a day where I was from, where my people were from, because Allentown, Pennsylvania, clearly wasn't the answer they

were looking for...It always felt like the undercurrent of that question was, 'You aren't white, but you aren't black. What are you?' (Donnella)

This complex relationship with identity is so familiar to the mixed-race experience that the term Racial Imposter Syndrome has been coined to combine the known psychological phenomenon of Imposter Syndrome with the complexities of racial identity (Bates). Racial Imposter Syndrome becomes even further complicated as almost no two mixed-race persons can have the same two experiences. The book *Half + Half* perfectly recognises this need for nuance in the depiction of mixed-raced identity as it takes personal accounts from a range of mixed-race peoples—some who shun and purposely degrade the term "mixed-race" altogether (12-27), some who embrace the term (112-124), and others who are raising mixed-race children, only discovering their own limitations in racial understanding in the raising of these young people (80-98) (O'Hearn). This diverse understanding is vital to the representation of mixed-race identity in literature, even for mixed-race authors. Otherwise such a limited representation no more accurately represents the real people the literature hopes to support than the pervasive stereotyped images that already exist.

As the negative characterisation of Black identity in literature harms the lived Black experience, the erasure of or the depiction of threatening exoticism in the mixed-race Black identity in literature forces mixed-race persons either to conform to the identities prescribed for them or risk an erasure of identity. The racially othered imagination is shoved into a box made in the image that best suits those who are unable to embrace equality. Whatever gets spilled over the sides is thus swept up and thrown away—disturbingly obliterated from consciousness altogether.

Fear of The Other and The Irish Changeling

As mentioned in the introduction, for my novel I have chosen to focus on how changeling stories in Ireland often represent the fear of the other and especially how that fear is internalised in the mixed-race reality. Ireland as a country and Irish culture has much to do with this theme. One of the first things to know about Ireland is that it is a country that is generally well versed on its mythology, which lives quite vibrantly alongside history. This connection between folklore and history exists in part because of folklorists like the respected expert, Eddie Lenihan, who keep the practice of Irish oral storytelling alive. Irish stories, along with the Irish language, were once under threat of imperial erasure, and so it is believed that the telling and retelling of Irish stories serves uniquely not only as history keeping but also as post-colonial literature (Hogan, 170). The storyteller-historians, called *seanchaí,* are discussed at some length by S. Ó Duilearga:

> The only real authorities on Irish tradition are the story-tellers themselves. They belong to a different world from their commentators, and even the best equipped collector, no matter how much he knows of the material he is recording, feels at times like a child in an infant school under the tutelage of a benevolent but omniscient master. One must cultivate an academic humility and a feeling of respect and reverence when working with these exponents of ancient lore. One never knows what the fireside *seanchas* may reveal and a chance phrase or rustic aphorism, flashing suddenly across the familiar commonplace, may lift the curtain of the centuries and give a glimpse of a vanished world. (134)

The Irish relationship to storytelling actively embraces the history of the land, even sometimes delving into the macabre for the sake of preservation. This authenticity blended with fable is desirable to me as an author attempting to broach the subject of racial identity in a mixed-race young woman. It is my belief that those real-life readers of mixed-race origin (both in Ireland and elsewhere) would benefit from a character that is unflinchingly familiar

and yet rooted in fiction. This unique quality to Irish storytelling, thus borrowed, benefits the novel by providing both the desirable escapism of folklore and the validating recognition of a lived experience.

Specifically, the fact that stories told of Faeries exist today as something of a living myth between the realm of fact and fiction helps the novel to also exist between the two poles. As noted by Diarmaid Ó Giolláin, "The fairy belief is a part of Irish popular religion which has long been of interest as much to romantic writers as to scholars. It has often been referred to as 'the fairy faith'" (199). This distinction is important to note for the novel because it suggests that there are people in Ireland who believe in the existence of Faerie creatures and their influence on the human world as they would believe in any mainstream religion. This connection between beliefs validates the Faerie "religion" as an authentic bridge between mythology and faith. Though many Irish people today might not say that they actually believe in other worlds parallel to our own, it is practically impossible to bring up the topic of Faeries with a native Irish person without being told of stories passed down through generations or pointed in the direction of the nearest Faerie fort. In fact, advocates for the precious places of Faerie—such as specific trees or forts—spring up in force whenever such a place is threatened, going even as far as to help change plans for major motorways. One such relevant example was when Eddie Lenihan rescued a Faerie hawthorn tree from scheduled roadworks which would have uprooted it. His efforts made international headlines in 1999. An excerpt from James F. Clarity reads:

> Eddie Lenihan, a smallish man with a dark unkempt beard, a wild head of hair and an intense look in his eyes, pointed to the high white-blossomed hawthorn bush standing alone in a large field in this village in western Ireland and issued, not for the first or last time, a warning to local officials: If they bulldoze the bush to make way for a planned highway bypass, the fairies will

> come. To curse the road and all who use it, to make brakes fail and cars crash, to wreak the kind of mischief fairies are famous for when they are angry, which is often. That, he said, is because this particular hawthorn is a fairy bush, a favourite meeting place for supernatural folk, dating back to the mist of pre-Celtic history. (Clarity)

Lenihan's very public and international proclamations are evidence that among some in Ireland the Faerie culture is very much alive in the most unironic way. With this belief comes a unique desire to avoid change or disruption that varies from the universal human fear of the unknown. This complex aversion to change could have developed from a relationship to a folklore that punishes any deviation from the 'rules'—those all-too-easy-to-break Faerie Laws—and thus potentially results in a very specific resistance to change. Or, the folklore banning change might have developed as a means to explain the very human response to fearing the other. By its very name, the changeling challenges the sense of order and consistency, making it a particularly feared Faerie being. In a similar way, just by identifying as 'mixed-race' (or having such an identifier thrust upon oneself, as is more often the case) a mixed-race person represents the kind of change that inspires fear. Can Ireland successfully adopt the mixed-race Black changeling presented in my novel or will a desire to safeguard the past prove a barrier to welcoming the diverse future?

For my purposes in answering the above question it would first be useful to regard Irish literature and folklore through the postcolonial lens, but there is some conflict over whether Irish literature should be considered postcolonial at all. As Eoin Flannery writes, "The advent of an Irish franchise of postcolonial studies has produced a contentious as well as progressive commerce of ideas and theoretical paradigms within the broader discourse of Irish Studies" (359). Later Flannery argues that, "Postcolonial criticism had "travelled" to Irish shores by the mid-eighties, yet still retains a profoundly contested valency, having never been

unilaterally sanctioned within Irish academic or intellectual discourse" (361). While the ambiguity of the term can be appreciated and must therefore be used carefully, for the purposes of this critical reflection I do find postcolonial criticism to apply to Irish literature. Though efforts have gone in to lifting up and valuing the heritage, culture, and of course the beautiful language of the Irish, the fact remains that the British left painful scars on both the land and its people. The stories once told orally by the *seanchaí* have been transformed by translation. It is rare for the stories to be told in the original Irish language anymore and therefore it is impossible to ever know whether the story is an accurate retelling of the original myths and beliefs. In a way the Irish stories themselves have been invaded by the English language, as Lenihan acknowledges in his author's note to preface *Meeting the Other Crowd* (xi). To ignore the pain of colonisation in the critical assessment of Irish folklore does a disservice to those harmed by the British and the Republican ancestors who survived.

Scholar Patrick Colm Hogan recognises this permanent threat to Irish identity in literature and makes an interesting comparison to African social oppression:

> Brief brutality leads us to question the identity of the oppressor (Who is *he* to judge me?). Enduring brutality leads us to question our own identity. There are differences, of course, across the continents. To the African, the oppressor says, "You have no culture; you are an animal." To the Indian, he/she says, "You have no culture; you are a decrepit old fool." To the Irish, he/she says, "You have no culture; you are almost an animal—but at least you are not African. (Hogan, 164)

Though the imagined oppressor separates the Irish and African peoples in a pejorative way, in their oppression the post-colonial Irish can in fact find some brotherhood in the post-colonial Africanised peoples. Mixed-race Black Irish people represent the culmination of such an acceptance between the races—a fact some embrace with warmth and others fear to

the point of ferocious opposition. The changeling main character in my story is not meant to definitively represent the acceptance of mixed-race Black Irish people, however the purposeful merging of her phenotypic features and the Irish folklore to which she belongs certainly encourages representation for those Black Irish and other mixed-race persons who can identify with Anna/Bright.

Second, Irish cautiousness towards a Faerie intruder is understandable. A changeling represents an invasion in the eyes of a frightened Irish mother missing her child or in a heartbroken husband such as Michael Cleary. I will discuss Michael and Bridget Cleary later, but for now it is important to note that on the day of murdering his wife, Michael Cleary is said to have fully believed his wife to be exchanged for another being. In *Fairies: A Dangerous History,* it is written, "On the night of Friday 15th, moments after killing Bridget, Michael Cleary exclaimed, 'God knows I would never do it but for Jack Dunne—It was he who told me my wife was a fairy.'" (Suggs, 115). This account of a man killing his own wife because she was a Faerie changeling was documented as taking place in March 1895, roughly 27 years before the controversial treaty between Ireland and England would be signed and far away from any kind of genuine peace in Ireland. It is likely that Michael feared and believed that faeries had stolen his wife and it is also certain that he was a man living in a turbulent and occupied nation with a genuine first-hand understanding and fear of the pain invaders can inflict. Many in Ireland who spoke of his story might have sympathised with the man who believed his wife was replaced by something Other—something they were so afraid to offend they did not call it by name but only in euphemistic code such as "Good People" or "Gentry." However, we must acknowledge that Bridget Clearly need not have died at all. Her otherness was not a threat—if it existed at all. It was only perceived to be. Separating otherness from danger is the first step to acceptance.

Why is a Faerie changeling, so typically depicted as a "child", historically a being to be feared? How does the idea of being away with the Faeries (lost in the hedonistic lustre of a mythical land as we see with the various retellings of Oisín and Niamh) develop into a threat whispered to naughty children and feared by expectant mothers? These questions helped to develop my characters throughout the novel. Changelings may fit an original 'monsters under the bed' trope, except of course these monsters continue to haunt into adulthood. There are stories of Faerie beauty and magic, of course, but more often than not changelings were the other thing that one feared, a life-altering change one dreaded in a life already full of uncertainty. It is no wonder then that the fear of the changeling survived so long into current literature and other media when the only certainties in life are in fact change and death. In Ireland today some people fear a different change, that being immigration. Experiencing life as a Black American immigrant has given me the personal experience of the fears surrounding some of the Irish nationals. Fears again of invasion, fears again of a culture uprooted and changed.

This is not a uniquely Irish fear and led me to question how fear of the other connects to fear of mixed-race peoples. As Robert Bartholomew says in Alice Lowe's podcast "Hysteria":

> During times of crises, people search for scapegoats and the most vulnerable are the easiest targets. Today these vulnerable people are immigrants, asylum seekers, minorities. This process of blaming others for society's problems reduces anxiety and offers a simplistic explanation for complex issues of the day. These social panics have a function. They function to unify communities and bring people together against a common threat and to help people to feel better by blaming others for their problems. (Lowe, 00:09:38-00:010:18)

Bartholomew asserts that communities are united by social panic and this unity brings a sort of catharsis to a group performing the social othering. This dangerous social phenomenon of scapegoating is well documented by scholars like René Girard in his book *The Scapegoat.* Though painful and unfair for the othered victims, this concept intrigues me for the purposes of the novel. Recognising the lack of logic in the shifting of responsibility towards a person or peoples may ironically help the Othered to embrace self-acceptance instead of looking for extrinsic acceptance. However, for the purposes of the novel, Anna/Bright is insecure and desperate to fit in both in the human world and the Faerie world. Both worlds acknowledge her differences in a way that overwhelms her—a nod to the vulnerability of those in Anna/Bright's age bracket and their paradoxical search for both individuality and belonging. Part of Anna/Bright's journey is her struggle to accept herself for who she is, everything that she is.

Though acceptance is an important concept in the novel, without societal acceptance fear remains a too-constant reality for the mixed-race person who might relate to Anna/Bright. The fear concept of the Irish changeling lives on, but under various racially motivated names. This updated terror is of something that appears like something you know, recognise, and understand (a human) but is actually hiding a devastating secret (a human who does not belong to the same culture, ethnicity, and/or nationality as the observer). In 1919, Sigmund Freud categorised this specific and pervasive fear as the 'Uncanny'. It is a permeating fear of the other yet again. Might we see a renewed vigour for witch hunts and changeling abuse? Bridget Cleary is noted as the last publicised witch burning in Ireland, but perhaps we have spoken too soon. Some of these new "changelings", like myself, have brown skin that is different from the classic image of the native Irish. Thus that image must expand and change. The fear of cultural erasure is a threat perpetuated by fear-mongers. These fear-mongers are those who would use this skin as a sign of danger, much like those who found

evidence of a changeling in a baby's aversion to fire or lack of growth or inability to walk and speak when it 'should'. Modern medicine has found credible evidence that those infants might have suffered any number of treatable illnesses, as discussed extensively in *The Good People*: *New Fairylore Essays*. Yet fear and faith are human traits that are nearly impossible to arm against once they are found in tandem. Perhaps Faeries are real, and some children were stolen, perhaps some immigrants are dangerous to the Irish way of life, but ultimately it is fear that poses the most real danger. Fear of the other is catching and some would use their fear as justification for horrific acts of violence. Unlike the former changelings of Irish stories and histories, the brown-skinned changeling cannot be given the benefit of the doubt. Our otherness is stamped upon us from birth, and thus we are forced to live both with a continual fear of and an inescapable understanding of our own otherness. And the mixed-race othered is further ostracised, as they exist in a confusing tangle of races—at times, conceptually, both abuser and abused.

This mixed-race othered/otherer identity is suited to the Irish changeling myth in the novel. The traditional changeling seems to be singled out as something besides the ordinary Faerie or *sídhe*. There are many kinds of Faeries and they are often things of awe and beauty. Though almost every Irish Faerie story recognises that there is much to fear from these god-like creatures and their many confusing laws, most of the stories cannot help but to mention their beauty. In changeling stories, it is quite the opposite; there is frequent emphasis on their grotesque appearance or poor health. Lenihan illustrates this perception in two changeling stories. First is a story about a human man who comes across two Faerie women taking a human baby from a house. The human baby is accidentally given to the man, which he then takes home. "But next morning, anyway, there was great crying and weeping in a neighbouring house because the baby there was found to have died. He went in to sympathise and he saw this wizened little baby. So he said, 'Put down a good fire there, now. I'm going

to burn this baby. This is not your baby.' And, as soon as he said that, the wizened baby quivered and, according to my grandfather, jumped out o' the cradle and up the chimney he goes" (Lenihan, 298). The second story Lenihan recounts is a story about a disabled baby. The story does not say exactly how the baby was disabled, but it does state that "he was demanding more milk than he was getting," which suggests an abnormal kind of hunger (299). Joyce Underwood Munro finds that the characteristics of a changeling include "a supernatural race exchanging one of their own ill-thriven infants or little wizened old men for a handsome human infant. The human parents are left with an ugly changeling who somewhat resembles their own child but who never stops crying and never grows, no matter how much it eats." (251). Many have discussed the practice of othering the disabled in connection to Irish changelings. For my purposes, the focus is on the segregation of the changeling from both humanity and Faerie-kind. In this way a changeling not only represents a different culture invading the known one, but also a subversion of its own culture, something the Faeries are *willingly* being rid of. This fact only gives humans more reason to fear the unknown creature. From the perspective of the creature (focusing on those changelings that are an unwilling sacrifice to the human world, not stories of those changelings that aim to trick humans) I imagine such an experience would doubtless create a conscious feeling of self-hatred and lack of belonging—unwanted by the Faeries, hated and feared among humans. A comparison can again be drawn between the concept of an Irish changeling and mixed-race people, as mixed-race people often do not fully belong to any one racial "world" or culture. This cultural lack of belonging perpetuates the stereotype that mixed-race people cannot belong fully in the world, creating a self-fulling prophecy when the people of any race refuse to accept mixed-race people into their culture.

The traditional changeling cannot represent "the other" coming into the known culture and serving it, assimilating with success. The changeling represents something that disrupts

the order of those whose lives are altered due to its existence, hence again the fear of the changeling. In the instances where a changeling is only a thing placed in place of the human child, it effectively communicates the same erasure of identity, agency, and personhood that are communicated in the Young Adult literature statistics cited earlier. This erasure cannot continue to stand and my novel hopes to address this need for representation in the genre.

In a story collected by the National Folklore Collection, UCD, a mother's love sends a woman on an arduous trip to retrieve her baby back from the Faeries. Later in the story it is revealed that, "Half fainting she reached her home where she found she held, sleeping in her arms, her own boy, healthy and rosy as of old. In the cradle where she had left the puny ailing little chap was now a sop of hay" (NFCS 507:626). The changeling as a concept is a being so characterised by its "otherness" that it is transformed into a literal object. We see an analogical objectification of the mixed-race person in colourism (the historical preference and privilege given to Black people possessing Eurocentric skin-tone and features), fetishization, and especially in the policing of interracial unions for fear of mixed-race procreation (historically called miscegenation). In my novel such objectification is apparent in the over-sexualised response Oberon has first towards Queen Morgana and then towards Anna/Bright. Oberon's desire to possess Anna/Bright is reflective of society's obsession with the "desirable" characteristics of mixed-race people. His inability to value her wants and needs above his own is reflective of society's rejection of the mixed-race person's autonomy by forcing that person into a prescribed set of social laws based entirely on how that person looks rather than how they identify.

The unexplained and inhuman is the most fearful thing in the world. Would humans fear the dark if we could see in the dark? Of course not. It is clear that humans are not afraid of the dark; we are afraid of what waits unknown and unseen in the dark. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas theorises that the othered human, specifically the Black othered, can only read

themselves *as* the darkness in white-centred narratives because they have been given no other alternative (19). Being pigeon-holed into a characterisation based on little knowledge and much superstition or prejudice is thrust upon the Black identity from birth, some would argue from conception. Kimberly Reynolds asserts that the unflinching honesty surrounding the death of a child in children's literature can help heal the wounds of such a painful experience (97). My novel intends to adopt such an unflinching attitude and address the need to shine a light so that those outside of such awareness of mixed-race identity need not fear the merging of cultures in ignorant darkness. Representation leads to knowledge and understanding, connection and empathy. Can anyone fear a child who has grown sickly and appears to have changed if they know the cause of such a transformation? It is unlikely. And so changelings are not to be feared, only the unknown.

Questions arise almost as quickly as they are answered with the concept of the Irish changeling. It is a Faerie, but not. It is feared, but perhaps it need not be. When writing, I had to ask myself how a changeling can ever become one with the culture and people with whom it hopes to adapt? Humans fear many different kinds of monsters and delight in inventing new ones all the time. These monsters all tend to share two common threads with the changeling—they attempt to blend into society for a time and they are often killed when they are discovered. Perhaps humans are then the real monsters. The other may not need to be feared at all. The known, the stagnant behaviour of a society unable to evolve, may be the thing to be truly feared. Now the question becomes how to prove that change and the intermingling of cultures need not be feared in a world tainted by a history of colonisation.

New Changelings—The Link Between Faeries, Othering, and Race

Race is a critical part of contemporary writing. It was only in the nineteenth century that African chattel slavery was "abolished" worldwide. The fact that discrimination remains, even unto this day (specifically the date, the 2nd of June, 2020—a day globally acknowledged as a day to purposely mark the Black Lives Matter movement on social media in response to the murder of George Floyd) is why race is crucial in literature. As a direct result of African chattel slavery and the systematic discrimination towards Black people worldwide, literature written by and containing Black characters serves as a necessary window into the complicated world of Blackness. Mixed-race Black people of all cultures should not be excluded from this conversation.

To be Black is to be part of a separate world while existing in a world one cannot fully belong. At times it is necessary, even, for Black people to purposely separate themselves in an effort to adapt to oppression and protect the Black culture. In a search for identity, often Black people must settle for safety in numbers. We hide from the world within the safety of our own people, but we also hide from our own people if our views, interests, even fears diverge from those of our Black peers. Black Consciousness branches into many different realities for any given situation in order to stay safe, loved, and supported where we can. This is why my new changeling narrative suits the modern concept of Blackness so well. W.E. B. DuBois touches upon this topic of multiple Black realities when he first introduced Double-consciousness:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (DuBois, 6)

Black people of mixed-race, myself included, belong to this grey area of existence. The conscious existence of a mixed-race person is to live both inside and outside of the community at once—a constant struggle of identity. Defined by skin alone a mixed-race person cannot identify as one race or the other. Defined by culture alone, some aspects of Black or white culture can be adopted by either race. There is no colloquial "Black card" to play. Moreover, because the mixed-race person only belongs fully to one culture—the sub-category of mixed-race—that person is simultaneously excluded from the two (or more) worlds of original heritage. So there is a third-consciousness, a sensation of never being quite enough, unable to relate to anyone, including one's own parents.

Once outlawed and still disapproved of between some communities, miscegenation is classified as interbreeding of two different races. This can be any race, but the history of The United States of America has documented proof of the banning of any intermingling between the black and white races, specifically prohibiting miscegenation since 1661. Laws banning intermarriage between the races were still common in many states as late as 1967 (Cruz, 80), just a year before my father was born. Silvia Cristina Bettez writes that mixed-race *women* in particular find difficulty in belonging to any particular ethnic group and therefore struggle to build a sense of identity within a society. Bettez writes:

> How is it that people know when they belong and to what they belong? This question, about the epistemology of belonging, carries a particular complexity for mixed-race women…I examine how the navigation of hybridity, as it is experienced in the lives of six "hybrid" mixed-race women, illuminates the complexities of identity construction and epistemologies of belonging. (142)

This term *hybridity* is particularly interesting to me. The critical assessments of hybridity and identity by Bettez and others like Homi K. Bahaba brought back internalised

memories from my childhood. As a child, my classmate, a young white girl, once referred to me as a "mutt". She was explicitly indicating that I as a mixed-race child was equal to the qualities of a dog that has no pedigree. Calling a mixed-race person a *hybrid* (or even *half-caste,* as is sometimes heard in Europe) suggests that a person can be less than fully human. Instead, our "purebred" humanity can come into question by the mixing of races. Even as a child I understood that the question of my "halfness" was not because I was mixed with "white blood" but rather because of the "black blood" in me. My *blackness* made me less than human, a hybrid of human and something else. As Bettez suggests, this understanding of otherness would leach into the consciousness of my mixed-race identity—neither fully white nor fully Black, but some unwholesome chimera creation of both. Self-hatred is among the first lessons the mixed-race child is taught.

In this way the topic of a changeling can be made relevant to the growing population of mixed-race children, for a changeling has the same issue of hybridity—neither fully Faerie nor fully human, treated by some as an abomination, and unable to fully belong. Each reader will respond to the concept of "otherness" in their own way. A changeling is feared, hated, distrusted for its otherness. It is labelled as other by its own moniker. In "The Language of Othering" the author says,

> While there have been debates among language theorists over whether language reflects divisions or creates them, the fact remains that language is built around the very idea of difference" and she goes on to say that "language has the power to 'other' people. Often, this is done explicitly and intentionally, but just as dangerous are the occasions when it is implicit and done without conscious thought. (Hadley)

Thus, the idea of new changelings came to me from my own experiences as a mixed-race person and those of my family. My younger sister, for example, has phenotypic traits

that are somewhat notable from myself and our brother. Perhaps people today are understanding enough of these visible differences in one family, but when I was a child and my brother and sister were years away from existence, my friends found it difficult to understand how my mother was of a skin colour different than my father and how—as a combination of both their colours—I was effectively neither. I was called pejorative names, even by people who claimed to like me, or, in the case of my family, love me, and told at times that I was not black enough because of my mixed ethnicities showing so clearly in the colour of my skin. My sister was born with blonde hair, pale almost luminous skin, and gorgeous blue eyes which have become more hazel over time. My brother and I were born with warm caramel coloured skin and dark brown eyes and hair. My sister is not albino or patterned with vitiligo as our great-grandfather was. She has no condition that marks her as different, and yet she beautifully is. When she was born, my mother and I affectionally referred to her as a little fairy princess. In fact, it was the theme for all her birthday parties until she was five or so. My novel was already started by then—my main character was already mixed-race both literally and figuratively—but as my siblings grew and their reality as mixed-race children continued to evolve with the world's acceptance or rejection of us, I began to understand that the world needed stories of changelings again. Living a mixed-race existence is an existence of such frequent understanding of otherness that one becomes acclimated to it. However, eventually I would come to watch my young siblings grow from infants without any concept of race—mine, theirs, our parents—to toddlers who recognised their otherness from their friends, from each of our family members. Now they are young teenagers entrenched in social politics they never signed up for. My sister tells me she is lonely, and it breaks my heart.

The changelings in the novel are there to represent the fear of the other, but they are also something more. It is natural and human to fear the other. However, I want my

changelings to challenge the conversation of what *is* other and ask whether that other thing is actually so different from what is known. Less than one hundred years ago my existence would have been outlawed in some American states and likely simply unheard of in Ireland. That is the new conversation I wish to prompt with my young changeling woman. My novel may expose fear and hatred simply because my main character—phenotypically different from her adoptive parents, belonging to two vastly different cultures, in love with someone not of her race—will live and live well. She will not disguise herself as something she is not. My changeling will live among everyone else and do her best to be herself, because that is what the real changelings—those of us beyond the "norm"—must do. In accepting our differences and uniqueness our communities ultimately thrive.

PART TWO: MAKING SPACE AT THE TABLE

Changelings as Representation of The Other in Irish Folklore and Their Relevance to The Novel

Even at its earliest conception, *In The Dark* was a story inspired by Irish folktales of the changeling, yet most of the implied representation of the mixed-race Black experience through use of this myth was only revealed through research. The main character's racial background was originally little more than a detail to further the plot. It was interesting, and even at times difficult, to find creative ways to make this connection more conscious throughout the various drafts of the manuscript. Interesting because of my own racial background and my unconscious yearning for identity that I found unearthed as I sought to ground my character in reality. Difficult because much of a person's identity is shaped by their own experiences, so there is no prescribed example of "how to write someone as othered." In some ways there was a necessity to let go of the desire to protect Anna/Bright and accept that character is sometimes found in the pain. Once this hurdle was crossed, there were quite a few qualities of the traditional Irish changeling which drew me to recall the folklore for the benefit of the novel.

First, many of the changeling stories from Irish folklore follow a similar pattern: Faeries abducting a human child, replacing it with a Faerie "child," and the family of this child doing almost anything to get it back (Sugg, 103). Folkloric accounts of changelings rarely question *why* the human child was taken in the first place. The abduction is simply treated as the whim and right of the Faeries (O'Connor, 384). There are explanations of how a person has crossed a Faerie creature or improperly guarded an infant from theft by the Faeries (Schneidau, 67-69), but little question as to what use the Faeries have for human children. In "A Few Gleanings from TIR-NA-NOG" by Ellen O'Connor, there is a mention

of a fairy mother who "tiring of her own child, may long for the sweet dimpled face of a mortal baby, or she too may fall in love with a fine strapping peasant. And without any scruple the coveted beings are snatched away to some old rath to dwell for ever with their fairy captors" (385). In less than two complete sentences a rich, vibrant, and frightening tale is told to inspire the most dormant imagination. The concept of a child or person so desired by the magical Faerie race is not one normalised in the Black experience. As noted in the previous section, Black children are often rejected by white-dominated culture even from birth and therefore grow up with an understanding that they are unwanted. However, *In The Dark* proposes a character who is magical within, hidden even to herself and overlooked by the human world yet instantly recognisable in the Faerie world as valuable.

This leads to the question of why the Faeries recognise value where humans do not. When reading Irish stories about the Faerie world it seems obvious at first glance that their world is one superior to ours, though paralleling our own. There is no fear of decay or food shortage in the Faerie land as there is on Earth. The mythology surrounding the land of *Tír na nÓg* calls it "the Land of Perpetual Youth, where years slip round as minutes, where no worm lurks in the rose, where everything radiates with immortal life and happiness and beauty" (O'Connor, 385). Yet some accounts suggest the land can sometimes (though not always) be reached by setting out west from Ireland into the sea, as mentioned in the story of "Oisín and Patrick" which is retold here by Lady Gregory. The adaptation I chose was not selected for its academic merit, but instead for its popularity and availability as is an adaptation that could be familiar to any future reader of my novel as it is accessible in any bookstore. I find these popular sources vital to understanding the needs of the Young Adult/New Adult reader, who are not often traditional scholars of these tales but instead avid readers of whatever edition they have access to. The more academically suitable Project Gutenberg EBook edition of

Gods and Fighting Men provided by the Glucksman Library verifies the continuity of Lady Gregory's story in the popular edition (Gregory, bk. 11 ch. 1).

In the story, Oisín returns to Ireland and accidentally becomes stuck there, unable to return to "The Country of the Young, The Country of Victory" as he calls it. The inhabitants are beautiful, he says over the course of his story, especially his beloved wife Niamh, the Fairy Princess (Gregory, *Complete Irish Mythology*, 293). There are dozens of versions of this traditional folk story of Oisín and his Faerie wife, Niamh—both as written text and oral tradition. Many do not consider Oisín a changeling, but I do for the purposes of the novel. Due to his being taken by a Faerie-like creature, a goddess, a Queen of the many Irish Otherworlds, and because while there he does not age and is thereby "changed" I consider Oisín to be a changeling in the tradition of humans brought to Faerie. One such rendition of the Niamh and Oisín story was recorded in 1938 for the documentation of the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin. In part it reads, "he mounted on the steed with Niamh Cinn Óir and they fled to Tír na nÓg. When they reached there, they had a big feast prepared for them. Fionn's son, Oisín, he lived with Niamh Cinn Óir for three hundred years without getting old" (NFSC). Though the wording is slightly different, the spirit of the story is much the same, which is relevant for this reflection as it reflects the absorption of the story into Irish cultural consciousness. The ability the Irish have of being able to live side by side with their folkloric history offers a strong foothold to the novel as it attempts to marry folklore with the lived experiences of the real world.

To continue with the myth of Niamh and Oisín, for my purposes there are a few important things to learn about Faeries. First, Faeries can have sexual relationships with humans, producing half-human children with beautiful, Faerie-like qualities. This is evidenced in some renditions of the tale through Oisín's children with the Faerie princess.

One such telling reads, “I had by Gold-haired Niamh children of the fairest complexion and greatest beauty — best featured, best shaped, brightest bued — two young sons and one fair daughter” (Coimín, Flannery). Certainly this speaks in some ways to the size of Faeries. The possibilities of Faeries shape-shifting (as they often do in the novel) will be explored later, but for now the facts of anatomy must be that the Faeries are in some way a similar size to a human. Niamh bears half-human children; she also rides a large horse that supports Oisín’s body (Gregory, *Complete Irish Mythology,* 293). Perhaps this is why changelings so easily pass for human, simply because they closely resemble humans.

In the story of Niamh and Oisín, the reader also learns that Faeries can travel in magical and enchanting ways, as Niamh does with her magical horse that travels over water (Gregory, *Complete Irish Mythology,* 293). This information helps the reader or listener to understand how it is that Faeries infiltrate the human world in such unpredictable ways. Also, Faeries also have their own system of monarchy, as the Faerie Niamh is a princess of her world (Gregory, *Complete Irish Mythology,* 293). The significance of this fact is to establish a kind of lawfulness within the Faerie race, again similar to humanity but different. It is interesting to note that these creatures exist in a monarchy, that the Faeries have designated among themselves beings even more superior to be their leaders. The children of these leaders would follow the same understanding of monarchy on Earth, which is to say that they would one day take the crown themselves. Thus, when Niamh chose to marry Oisín and produce children with him, she may have been opening the doors for half-human leadership in Faerie. Knowing this, I then begin to imagine if this was a diplomatic move, a rebellious one, or perhaps this communicates an understanding that for the Faeries one’s merit is more important than one’s pedigree. Niamh loved Oisín and so she married him and gave birth to his children (Gregory, *Complete Irish Mythology,* 293). Her decision was as simple as honest love should be, and her children have the *benefit* of two different world perspectives. They

are not seen to be lacking in any regard. While the discrimination towards and at the very least othering of mixed-race characters is a common trope in popular Young Adult Literature (for example, Hagrid, the half-giant half-human from *Harry Potter*), in Irish Faerie folklore such behaviour is at times notably absent.

Oisín did leave to visit his homeland, but his story is told from the perspective of his being unable to return to the Faerie world. He wanted more than anything to go back to the land of Faerie. If it had not been for an unfortunate mistake, Oisín would have happily stayed among them for the rest of his life, as he tells S. Patrick when he is trapped back in Ireland (Gregory, *Complete Irish Mythology*, 293-296). For my uses, I would question how this tale of Oisín would be adapted if he was a Black man. Would Niamh have been so willing to marry him, bear his children, keep him in the land of Faeries? The absurdity of the question perhaps gives the unfortunate answer. Yet this is exactly the question *In The Dark* hopes to answer. Not only is Anna/Bright mixed-race, but so is her mother, despite her darker complexion (colourism in the mixed-race identity will be addressed later). Further, there is a fantastical range of skin-tones represented throughout the novel, available only in the realm of fantasy—spanning from pale silver to vibrant green, pinks, blues, reds, and more. The overall effect is a world where skin colour is simply an ornament belonging to the body—no better or worse than anyone else's. Though the human world and our prejudices would find fault with Oisín being presented as a Black man, the laws of the Faerie world, given to us by the folklore of this story, suggest Niamh would not have cared about the colour of Oisín's skin as she was more enamoured by his person. Thus inspired by folklore, it is easy to see why the Faeries of the novel's imagining would be indiscriminate in the stealing of humans.

The beings in Tir na nÓg are to be regarded as god-like and in some ways so are the creatures of *In The Dark.* Peter Berresford Ellis describes how the Irish Faeries came to be in close relationship with humans and yet separate in his book *Celtic Myths and Legends*:

> Indeed, there came a time when the Children of Míl flooded into the Island of Destiny and when the Children of Danu were driven underground into the hills, which were called *sídhe*, which is pronounced *shee*, and in those mounds they dwelt, the once mighty gods and goddesses, deserted by the very people who they had sought to nourish. (Ellis, 34)

The question I originally posed was why Faeries would *want* a human child if humans are so inferior to the race of Faerie. The Irish sídhe are not the only supernatural beings who are drawn to humanity. Ancient Greek and Roman gods, those deities more commonly taught in Western mythology, were also particularly obsessed with humans despite their inferiority. The Greek god Zeus begat many demi-gods from his sexual relations with human women (Jones, 6). However, the folktales surrounding Faeries and changelings does not seem to stem from carnal desire.

Instead some stories suggest that the Faeries might steal the child of neglectful parents. One such story is told of Betty Stogs and an encounter with the Faeries. This particular telling of the story is from Cornwall, likely because of the connections between Irish people and their culture in the west of England, especially Cornwall (Thomas, 6). This story, as retold by Lisa Schneidau, begins with the assertion, "It's well known in parts of Cornwall that the fairies will take away the children of lazy, dirty mothers, and care for them tenderly before returning them with a sharp lesson. And it was in this way that Betty Stogs nearly lost her baby" (67). If an Irish Faerie had a desire to raise the stolen child, it brings forward the next logical question of why Faeries are more interested in raising a human child than their own

Faerie child—that is assuming a changeling is a Faerie child. There could be an underlying maternal craving between the Faerie mother and human child within the Faerie culture, such as that depicted between Titania and Tarak in the novel (a relationship inspired by a Shakespearean play that will be explored later in this reflection). The English story of Betty Stogs and the few others like it suggests a desire to raise the human child to a better standard than the Faeries believe the human parents have done, but this is not an opinion widely held by scholars of Irish folklore.

The Dictionary of Celtic Religion recognises that there has been a portrayal of the ancient Irish existing in a matriarchy, which might explain a belief that Faeries have a maternal nature in their response to under-cared-for children. However, this source goes on to disprove that notion as romanticised, claiming:

> The idea of woman occupying a strong position among the Celts or even of a Celtic matriarchy only emerged in the 19th [century] and is based in part on the projection of stories of mythical figures such as Macha, Medb, Rhiannon—It ought not to be forgotten, however, that the stories known to us concerning dominant, self-willed or warlike women were always told by men for men. (Maier, 288)

John Hill, on the other hand, writes that there was a matriarchal connection alongside the patriarchal in the worship and literature of the ancient Celtic cults. Hill writes,

> What has been handed down to us from early Irish literature shows that the theme of sacral kingship was one of the most cherished properties of Celtic imagination. It appears that the rulers of the early patriarchal Celtic society maintained a vigorous and respectful relationship with the old goddesses of the matriarchal cults. Lugd, the shining one, an obvious representative of the sun, leader of the Tuatha de Danaan, who were the bearers of the arts and crafts, had to come to terms with Bres, a leader of the Formors, in order to

> preserve the fertility of the land. In the festival of Lugnasad, the king, as incarnation of the Solar Lug, united with a maiden of the land, symbolizing the earth mother, in order to gain the kingship. An obvious personification of the goddess-queen is Medb of Connaught, who was known to have slept with all the kings of Ireland. (53)

Though these two schools of thought do not exactly oppose each other, they leave enough room for ambiguity that it would be difficult to pin the abduction of human children by Faerie "mothers" to the matriarchal heritage of ancient Celts. This line of research continued to be useful for the novel though in a different way than I originally intended. I was inspired by the strength of the Irish goddesses, Queens, and other women throughout the mythology. Medb, for example, is in part an inspiration for the Winter Queen Maab in the novel. She is a decidedly unmaternal and intense character who flits from traditionally "masculine" dominance to "feminine" vulnerability often within moments. Maab is not intended to be read racially at all, but instead to represent the range of complex femininity. The insight into her character often becomes most clear in her introspective moments when the story is told from her perspective. This was an intentional choice. I wrote her in such a way to highlight the ways strong women purposely detach themselves from traits that are perceived as weak.

Returning to the changeling stories, sometimes the duplicate baby is not a baby at all—Faerie or otherwise. In some stories the changeling is simply an object that has been glamoured to appear like a human baby. The story in Eddie Lenihan's book *Meeting The Other Crowd* concludes by saying, "They sent for the priest. And the priest came and read over the cot. And what happened after a few minutes when he was reading? Only a broom o' heather." (Lenihan, 302). To me this story reveals that Faerie beings have the ability to transform ordinary objects into things that resemble humans. This story also features the addition of a Christian priest to banish the changeling, therefore exposing the story as

belonging to post-Christian Ireland. The oral history of the original tales has been transformed by the influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland. The bitter realisation is that any scholarly texts that could be produced for the critical reflection could not accurately represent anything that could be called original or authentic. For now, though, the facts I decided were necessary for my novel are that Faeries can change ordinary objects (like heather) into a being that resembles a human and that the priests are both aware of the existence of Faeries and able to banish them back to their land. This story brings up two additional concepts for the novel: the religions of humans having power over the Faerie beings (explored in the novel when Anna/Bright and Sam must marry to protect Sam from Oberon's wrath) and the ability for Faeries to manipulate physical sight (not to be confused with Faerie Sight, or the ability for humans to see Faeries). This story also in part takes away the presumption that Faeries are abandoning a leftover changeling Faerie in place of the human. In instances where the changeling is not a real being at all, the Faerie mother effectively has her cake and eats it, too. The Faerie gets to take a human child without sacrificing its own kin.

The topic expands in stories that do not involve babies at all. In these stories of adults being swept or carried away by the Faeries, the Faeries require or delight in the presence of a human in their world for special events such as sport competitions or Faerie births. Again, Lenihan sheds light on these situations as in the story told about the "Man Carried Away to Play Football" (62). This story is interesting because it indicates that a man was given a special honour by being taken and allowed to participate in a game of football with Faeries. No less alarming for the human involved, this story seems to indicate either the demanding nature of the Faeries, their ignorance of human fear of the Faeries, or a desire on the part of the Faeries to intermingle with humans. It also communicates a certain ease of transportation between the Faerie world and human world.

One of the most famous abductions by the Faeries of an adult was of Bridget Cleary, murdered by her husband in 1895 in an effort to kill the changeling who took the place of the woman (Sugg, 113). Gruesome though the historical incident was, and hauntingly set in a time not so distant from today, the death of Bridget Cleary illuminates an unwavering belief by some in changeling and Faerie behaviour. In *Fairies: A Dangerous History,* the story is recounted: "So convinced was Bridget's husband, Michael Cleary, that he spent the three nights following her death at the fairy fort of Kylenagranagh, a mile from their house, waiting to snatch Bridget from the fairies as they rode by." (Sugg, 113-114). This was no fictional folk story told around a hearth that imagines the stealing of a baby. Bridget Cleary lived, but what is much more notable is the documentation surrounding how Bridget Cleary died. In *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story*, Angela Bourke writes,

> After several days in bed with illness, which may have been pneumonia, Bridget Cleary did not look like her usual neatly-turned-out self. Jack Dunne's eyesight was poor, and in any case he was probably not used to seeing her in bed, but he made a dramatic pronouncement. 'That is not Bridgie Boland!' he said when he saw her. His words could have been interpreted simply as a social judgement, a manner of speaking, as though he had said, 'She's not herself today,' but, as the *Cork Examiner*'s reporter wrote later, 'his remark set all fairy machinery into motion.' (62).

We have the benefit of physical evidence to support her existence and her murder. As for her being abducted by Faeries, we only have the conviction of her husband, her murderer. The truth remains that Bridget was not a baby or even a young girl, but a grown and married woman. Simplifying Faerie abductions to maternal instincts or an invitation between realms cannot therefore hold as a theory.

Some other stories suggest that the Faeries can be provoked into stealing humans if the human parents, loved ones, or the person abducted willingly or unwillingly forgets to observe a particular Faerie rite. Such an occasion is written down in *Meeting The Other Crowd*: "I think a lot o' people bring their own misfortune on themselves. A woman expecting a child, now, shouldn't she know better than to go into a [Faerie] fort in the first place, in the name o' God!" (Lenihan, 136). Even being born beautiful or being exceptionally skilled at sport in some way puts a target on a human back for those Faeries seeking to collect, boys and men in particular. It is written in *Fairies: A Dangerous History* that "In Connemara at the same time people still dressed boys and girls alike in red flannel petticoats until the age of twelve, a disguise used to trick those fairies who liked to steal boys in particular." (Sugg, 100-101). This attempt to hide boys from Faeries is seen again in *Meeting The Other Crowd* through a statement given to Eddie Lenihan in 1999: "Boys they used to be more after than girls. That's why they'd have petticoats on 'em till they'd be five or six years, ducking the fairies" (296). The accounts given to Lenihan, like the fate of Bridget Cleary, are telling for two reasons. First, the belief systems and understandings of Faerie ways are not simple superstitions of an ancient past but have survived well into recent history. This is proved by Bridget's death in the late nineteenth century and the quote Lenihan recorded as being given less than 25 years ago. The second is the conviction with which these beliefs are held, to go so far as murder or to blame the victim of an abduction (or their loved ones) for not obeying the unwritten Faerie laws. In the novel, Faerie Law is just as absolute and just as unbound by human logic. One can attempt to follow it but it is all too easy (and at times seemingly inevitable) to upset the balance of Faerie. The second novel of the proposed duology will contend more with this theme.

Ultimately, Irish folklore supports the supposition that an inability to observe ritual or obey superstitions gives some explanation—though not much—into why the Faeries would

steal a child. More than maternal drive, or a desire to intermingle with humanity, this abduction of a loved one as a repercussion for dishonouring a Faerie is the most frequent conclusion drawn by those humans left behind. Again fear of a loss of control is the central issue surrounding Faeries and Humans. Humans who believe in the Irish Faeries therefore often live in anxiety of the easily offended Faeries and perhaps especially a changeling left in place of the human child or person. This fear and awe is vital for concepts found in the novel.

Even less information is given about what becomes of the human lost to Faerie or what becomes of the Faerie placed in the human world if it is not successfully returned. One such human who survived being carried away into the Faerie world was of course the mythological hero, Oisín. As already discussed, Oisín lived in Faerie for hundreds or thousands of years and was married to the Faerie Niamh. The concept of Faerie time in the novel is inspired in part by this tale. Time in the Faerie world in the novel is a far more inconstant thing than in the human world. Children, for example, age rapidly—a nod to the racialised experiences of Black and mixed-race Black youths who endure adult themes such as racism and othering from a young age. However, as the character Gearóid notes in the novel, this accelerated aging of Faeries is also meant to insinuate their more animalistic qualities. I imagine Faeries as something like humans with the feral instincts of wild animals, and so I imagined their aging would be similar. Time in the novel is also defined by significant lunar and solar phases, pagan Sabbat holidays, and Faerie ceremonies instead of a consistent understanding of time as humans have. This element was added to connect to the traditional Celtic relationship to these natural phases but also again to connect Faeries to more animalistic characteristics, as many animals are instinctual in their yearly movements like migrations, copulations, or birthings (Kronfeld-Schor et al.).

There are very few stories about changelings and their amicable existence among humans. More often the stories indicate a desire to be rid of the creature. However, a brief,

real-life story about Mary Colbert, an Irish doctor or medicine woman in 1862, explores the idea that Faeries could live successfully among humans.

> Come August 1862, witnesses in Cork Police Court were convulsed with laughter as they heard evidence of an alleged fraud committed by Mary Colbert, 'the fairy', against a sick girl, Hannah Sullivan…The fact that Colbert was called '*the* fairy' is also intriguing, given that a small number of adults, around this time, were believed to be fairy changelings who had grown to maturity. (Sugg, 72)

The reporting of Mary as a 'fairy', as she was known in her own community and hereafter via the sources that mention her, was notable to my novel. Anna/Bright's hidden difference is plausible because of stories like Mary the fairy. Anna/Bright is discernibly different from the people in her life in almost every way, and yet she is accepted as human though she is not. Stories of changelings surviving to adulthood suggest a similar existence of a creature only just able to fit in among the society it has adopted. This is one of the first connections I made to the Irish changeling and mixed-race identity, for to be mixed-race is to be conscious of one's differences while at the same time hoping to belong. Like Bridget Cleary, the memory of Mary stands as a real-world reminder of the absolute faith in this enduring folklore for some Irish peoples. This belief makes the symbolism of the changeling is poignant for my novel as it grounds the imagination with the living, tangible world.

More often the stories of changelings indicate an inability for the creature to adapt to the human world. The many examples of Faerie changelings dying in the human world (either on its own or in response to human 'remedies') represent the maladaptive experiences of these othered creatures. These stories seem to expose the dangers that could await those who cannot assimilate. One such story was told to Eddie Lenihan. In this story a human girl is saved from being fully taken by the Faeries, but it is a year after her rescue before she is

able to speak again. Once she is able to speak she is fully aware that a changeling was left in her place. She says,

> 'Below, in Castleconnell in County Limerick where I come from, all my people think I'm dead. 'Tis so I was carried by the Good People last November Eve, up to that fort over there, where you saved me. But when they carried me they left a thing instead o' me at home that looked like me, and that thing died away and away and was buried.' (283)

Another way the Faerie fails to fit in to the human world is that it accidentally reveals itself as Faerie in a multitude of ways. One such way was again recounted by Lenihan in a story about an 'infant' changeling who was known to be Faerie as "once or twice, when they came in suddenly, they found that he was out o' the cradle but managed to kind o' scramble back in. But he wasn't supposed to be able to walk. Next thing, he was demanding more milk than he was getting" (299). Later on in the story, the "baby" even speaks Irish to the father. Then immediately after the changeling runs off to join his wife and family. These stories teach the reader or listener that a changeling represents something that simply cannot fit in as it does not belong.

This revelation ends up being a painful realisation for all involved and often times would result in the real-world death of either the human or changeling or both, depending on one's beliefs. Again we can look at the fate of Bridget Cleary as a clear example of the response held towards Faeries who attempt to appear human and fail. A 2016 article reports that

> When Johanna Burke went to pay her cousin Bridget Cleary a visit, she found the 26-year-old being held down and force-fed a concoction of herbs and milk. The men restraining her were three of Johanna's brothers, an elderly neighbour named John Dunne and Bridget's own husband, Michael—By Thursday, March 14th, 1895, he had also sent

> for herbs, gleaned from a witch-doctor type named Denis Ganey; by that stage, Michael Cleary was gripped by the belief that his wife was a malevolent fairy changeling. According to a court report in *The Irish Times* on March 27th of that year, Johanna said the men forced Bridget "to take the herbs and Cleary asked her: 'Are you Bridget Boland, the wife of Michael Cleary, in the name of God?'" She answered twice, but when she refused to answer a third time, she was hauled up and held in a sitting position over the slow-burning embers of the kitchen fire. (Ruxton, 1)

Bridget Cleary would not survive her husband's attempts to return her from the Faerie world. This violent response to a changeling Faerie attempting to exist in the human world is telling of the very human fear of anything which does not belong. The next section will consider how the mixed-raced person struggles to belong and why the fate of the changeling is a dramatic but fitting comparison.

The Shakespearean Changeling—The Other as Both Malevolent and Benevolent

The concept of a fairy or fairies is, for the purpose of the novel, separate to the Faerie. Much like the difference between magic and magick or god and God, this separation between fairy and Faerie is important. The Merriam-Webster dictionary simply defines the term 'fairy' as "a mythical being of folklore and romance usually having diminutive human form and magic powers" ("Fairy"). This definition is both inaccurate and oversimplified, and yet it is the prevailing popular image, which is why this definition and its source was selected. Media has a large role to play in this generalised definition. Fairies have often been depicted as small white women with insect-like wings, like Tinkerbell from *Peter Pan* or Oona in the film *Legend*. Another example of this prevailing image in the Western world is the infamous

story of the well-known Cottingley fairy photos, discussed extensively in the book *The Coming of the Fairies* by Arthur Conan Doyle.

D. FAIRY OFFERING POSY OF HARE-BELLS TO ELSIE.
The fairy is standing almost still, poised on the bush leaves. The wings are shot with yellow, and upper part of dress is very pale pink.

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The fact that so many people of the time believed they were seeing evidence of real fairies in the photos of happy young girls beside diminutive, winged creatures no bigger than birds suggests that the image of human-sized, at times frightening, god-like beings of Irish Faerie stories were not the accepted norm. In his podcast "Tell Me A Story with Eddie

Lenihan", Lenihan recounts a time when an older Irish man told him of seeing real-life Faeries. Lenihan recalls he asked, "what'd they look like, Mick" and was given the reply, "That person sitting beside you could be one of them and you wouldn't know it," leading Eddie Lenihan to conclude that Faeries "can be big or they can be small or they can take any shape they like" (4:18-4:50). This account introduces the concept of a shape-shifting Faerie, to which the novel also subscribes. The Oxford English Dictionary gives further context to the term *fairy* having first arrived in English in or around the year 1330, borrowed from the Old French variant *Faerie*. This etymology is important to the understanding of why the novel discards the term *fairy*. Though it is considered more modern and more widely accepted, it is also inaccurate in regard to the novel.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, both *fairy* and *Faerie* are interchangeable terms in spelling as well as the same term which refers to the mythical creature and their land of origin ("Fairy, n. and adj", 28 July 2020). However, the OED *Faerie* definition elaborates on an important distinction: "the form faerie is deliberately chosen to describe beings which differ from the conventional representation of fairies as small, delicate winged creatures, esp. in being more dangerous or sinister." ("Faerie, n. and adj", 28 July 2020). For my novel, this distinction is important. It is also notable that one of the resources to support the OED definition is William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, one of the primary texts which the novel uses for a loose retelling. As noted earlier, the intention of the representation of Irish folklore in the novel is to separate the Irish Faerie from the popular concept of a delicate and trivialised, insect-like being. As suggested by the OED, the term Faerie is often used intentionally in the hope of this separation. Therefore the novel refers to the more fully fleshed-out, sometimes sinister, sexual, and frankly human-like magical creatures as Faeries and their world as Faerie.

The changelings in the novel were inspired by a convergence of sources. There have been many different adaptions of the concept of an Irish Faerie changeling. The first and perhaps most immediately recognisable of these adaptions referenced in the novel would be the brief mention of a "changeling boy" in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Dr Carrie Griffin notes that despite the fact that William Shakespeare was English, his knowledge of the folk legends of "Fairyland"—as it is referred to in the play—likely come from the intermingling of Irish and British storytelling since Britain occupied Ireland for over 800 years. The fact that the Faeries mentioned in the play are human-sized (though apparently able to change size at will), exist in an invisible realm close enough to interact with the human realm, and are wildly fluctuating in temperament all suggests that these Faeries are in fact similar to Irish Faeries. Even the title itself suggests Shakespeare was aware of folk and pagan practices such as the June 23rd celebration of Midsummer's (Reynolds and Sawyer). Shakespeare interwove many traditions to create one story that would be recognised by a broad audience. In this way, the intermingling of cultures is not seen as a negative thing but rather a tool that Shakespeare employs to unite people from various backgrounds.

Part of the definition of the "otherness" of the changeling in Shakespeare's play has to do with how the Faeries surrounding the boy—King Oberon and Queen Titania of Faerie in particular—treat him. This dynamic in the play is interesting because it suggests that "otherness" is defined by how those in power treat those who belong from those who do not. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the King and Queen of Faeries argue with each other about the possession of a changeling—a human boy adopted by Titania. By my reading the changeling boy loses a sense of personage and agency to Oberon because the King feels the changeling should be possessed or owned by him. Oberon's privilege objectifies the boy. Titania, on the other hand, aims to recognise her love for the boy's mother by caring for her

son and raising him as her own, eliminating his stigma as "other" in her eyes and instead giving him a sense of identity (her adoptive son), belonging (to the Faerie royalty), and culture (Faerie). This disagreement between the King and Queen on belonging is causing a massive disruption in the seasons of Athens, a fantastic allegory of the social disruption caused when a society cannot agree on the social status of those who do not belong, such as refugees or minority races. Oberon believes the issue is Titania's fault:

> OBERON Do you amend it, then. It lies in you.
>
> Why should Titania cross her Oberon?
>
> I do but beg a little changeling boy
>
> To be my henchman.
>
> TITANIA Set your heart at rest:
>
> The Fairyland buys not the child of me. His mother was a vot'ress
> of my order,
>
> And in the spicèd Indian air by night
>
> Full often hath she gossiped by my side
>
> --But she, being mortal, of that boy did die, And for her sake do I
> rear up her boy,
>
> And for her sake I will not part with him.
>
> (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.i.121-142).

This is a notable scene for the novel because it first introduces the idea of a human having a platonic relationship *with* a Faerie—in this case the Queen Titania says the mother of her adopted changeling son was formerly a votaress (or religious devotee) of hers. This

connection is perhaps a link to the Faeries of *Tír na nÓg* who were formally gods and goddesses in their own right. Much anthropological scholarship supports the theory that Faeries were worshiped in folk traditions as an extension of pagan religions. For example, Carole Silver writes:

> Edwin Sidney Hartland, the prolific anthropological folklorist, believed that at least some of the fays were the detritus of ancient goddess worship, survivals from the era of the mother right. He contended that other preternatural creatures derived from the rituals of "stone age worship". At one point in his illustrious career Alfred Nutt speculated that belief in fairies originated in ancestor worship; at another point he argued that the fairy faith came from the widespread practice of worshiping local agricultural deities. The concept of changelings, for example, was grounded in the ancient practice of sacrificing infants to fertility gods. Since only healthy babies were acceptable offerings (imperfect ones were not given to the gods), the folk "remembered" fairies stealing sturdy infants and substituting weak or deformed ones for them. (149)

Returning to the changeling in the play, the argument between Oberon and Titania also reveals a glimpse into the Faerie nature that we do not often see in folklore stories told of changelings. Titania reveals that the mortal mother, her servant *and* friend, died in childbirth, and that because of her care for her friend she took in the human woman's child as her own. This is a far more beautiful glimpse into the concept of the changeling: not abduction but adoption. The perspective typically given, as shown in previous examples, is one from the human perspective—a heartbroken and fearful family and a lie to replace it. From this new Faerie perspective there is no fear of the other. There is love and a care to claim a child as one's own. Queen Titania's adoption of the child goes so far as to deny the King of the Fairies and in fact anyone in the entire Fairyland to take this child from her. Oberon's almost castaway comment that the boy is merely "a little changeling boy" suggests the term to be

almost derogatory, reminiscent of the self-important, possessive mind of the coloniser to the indigenous colonised.

Before the mid-1500s the term for children who seemed to be left behind in the healthy human child's place were referred to as a few different terms, notably the Irish *amadan* meaning "God's fool" or the *oaf,* from *elvr* or elf (Eberly, 227). In current colloquial speech, the term oaf is hardly a term of endearment, and so the term *changeling* could have had a similar disparaging meaning. This etymological detail makes it again notable that Titania does not use the term changeling, but instead calls him "the child" and "her boy." Joyce Underwood Munro notes the damaging effect on a child only referred to as "it" instead of being given a name and comments that the changeling narratives often refer to the being in place of the human baby as an "it" (275). Though the changeling in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is never named, he is nonetheless a vital character in the play in the sense that he puts many of the plays events into motion by Titania's refusal to dispose of him as trivially as Oberon suggests. The question of the changeling's identity and belonging is the catalyst that sets *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into. In the same way I hope Anna/Bright's search for identity and belonging will propel *In the Dark.*

This first major departure from the traditional depiction of a changeling in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* inspired the novel's adaptation of the myth. The fear of the other is universal, but so is the accepting of something "unworthy" to be raised up as valued. Both of these tropes can effect one's sense of identity in positive and negative ways. The exoticism that comes from being "other" can both harm and elevate the being who is othered, depending on who is perceiving them and how. In the novel, Anna/Bright is almost immediately adored by the Faerie creatures who crave a Summer Queen; they see her otherness as positive but also put pressure on her to perform. The Oberon in *In The Dark* sees Anna/Bright as something other than what he has possessed before, exotic, and desires to

obtain her, believing it to be his privilege and right as King of Faerie. Both of these responses to Anna/Bright are a negative positivity that are well-known to the mixed-race individual. Most stories of changelings convey fear in the revealing of the truth behind the mask of the ordinary. Yet in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare does not hide any part of the boy's identity from his audience. He is a changeling boy and he is *also* beloved and protected by his adoptive mother, Titania, changing the boy from a creature to be feared to a child to be treasured. Still other, but in a truly positive light. The only negative positivity comes from Oberon's coveting of the changeling boy. This coveting transforms the innocent adopted child into an objectified being, much as the erasure of a mixed-race person's identity (by forcing them to fit into prescribed identifiers) transforms them from their individual personhood to something condensed, oversimplified, and mistreated.

Another example of a changeling transitioning from the mortal human world and to the Faerie world is told in the poem "Kensington Garden" by Thomas Tickell. Oberon again features in this poem, and again he is the nemesis of the human baby named Albion. Albion grows to be a beautiful, miniaturised man, thanks to the particular care given by his adoptive mother, an unnamed Faerie nymph.

> She robb'd Dwarf-elders of their fragrant fruit,
> And fed him early with the Daisy's root,
> Whence through his veins the powerful juices ran,
> And form'd in beauteous miniature the Man.
> Yet still, two inches taller than the rest,
> His lofty port his human birth confest.
>
> (Tickell, *Kensington Gardens*, lines 116-121)

It is notable for my purposes that Albion's human qualities are not downplayed in this poem. The poet is not attempting to erase Albion's heritage within the adoptive culture of the Faeries. Albion's heritage is not a threat. In fact his human heritage seems to mark him as favourably set apart from the other Faeries, who measure two inches shorter than he. Later, Albion even wins the love of a Faerie princess, Kenna, showing parallels to the Irish myth of Oisín and Niamh. In these two examples of humans adapting to Faerie culture we see a much less gruesome perspective of the changeling than the stories about Faeries left behind in the human world. These stories are told and invented by human writers, so it could be argued that the stories give a glimpse into human nature—that people are desperately afraid of the other more than the other is afraid of the human. For example, one of the human flaws revealed in changeling folklore stories is the arrogance to imagine differences of culture as a threat. In changing the rhetoric around the changeling for the positive, perhaps a similarly positive change surrounding perceivable differences could begin. This is the hope of the novel.

Susan Schoon Eberly speculates that the core fear of finding one's child replaced by a changeling. Childbearing always has been an emotional, hopeful, and sometimes traumatising experience. One explanation for changeling folklore is that a mother experiencing the loss of a child may cling to the thought that the baby that she had hoped to carry to term and nurture and love into adulthood was taken away to a magical land rather than believe that the dying or dead child belongs to her. Interestingly, this complicates the common fear of the other with the hope for illogical justification. With the arrival of Christian ideals spreading throughout Ireland, Eberly claims that the explanation for children who were disabled children became even more sinister:

> When the Christian church began to interpret the birth of offspring with congenital disorders as a sign of supernatural—and demonic—intervention, both men and women

had reason to fear for their lives if they parented or were even in the vicinity upon the birth of atypical new-borns, human or animal. (230)

A child that seemed changed was not only feared because it was perceived as other, but also because it was feared to be evil. In many cases the rural Irish parents of children who believed their child to be a changeling would have had little control over many aspects of their existence. Life expectancy was low for infants and adults, there was a known history of occupation and misery, the failure of crops and extreme temperatures could lead to starvation and death—life was a tenuous, difficult thing to grasp on to. The joy experienced at the healthy birth of a new baby would have turned painfully bitter if that same child began to waste away with hunger or untreated disabilities.

As Hannah Kent writes in the opening of her novel *The Good People* "Death is the Physician of the Poor" (2). Kent's blunt observation sets the scene of rural Ireland in 1825. The protagonist of *The Good People* is brought the dead body of her husband in the first chapter and hides her unwell grandson from the eyes of her neighbours. Eventually word gets out that her grandson does not talk or walk the way they would expect a child his age should. Desperate, grieving, poor, Nóra searches for cures for her grandson from her local wise woman, terrified that the child she cares for is a changeling. Kent writes with a specific perspective of nineteeth century, rural Ireland, but the story connects to anyone who has experienced a lack of control in life. Stories, particularly folkloric stories, often ascribe inhuman qualities to the at times inhumane pains of existence. Kent's novel straddles the same line between allegorical folklore and painful reality that I aimed for when writing *In The Dark.*

A Modern Message—Folkloric Adaptations of Transformation in the Young Adult Literature Genre

Hannah Kent is a contemporary Australian writer, but she writes of rural Irish life in the early 1800s with authority and passion. Kent's novel reads with notable Irish authenticity, which I admire. However, I would prefer my novel to be considered more "Irish-American." That is to say that the characters, names, and places should read as Irish and be easily identified as Irish, but also the novel should also be representative of experiences familiar to an American audience. That way the dual culture often experienced in the mixed-race experience is equally represented. This distinction presents a challenge for my novel as there is no readily available source to research. The changeling in the novel is of course a departure from the original myth and her lived experiences are incredibly difficult to track back to any specific nationality of people. The challenge for me then became understanding the changeling myth well enough to represent it as a working contemporary metaphor throughout the novel. My research became less about the need for authenticity and more about developing understanding in order to better serve the adaptation.

Though the Irish traditions and stories have not fully disappeared, the people of Ireland today may salute a magpie and yet hardly know why or recognise a Faerie ring but not know how the stories say they are made. There is a great benefit as well as a cost to this new reality. The benefit is that the stories forgotten can now be made new again and remastered to represent the concerns of the time. This has been a successful tactic for many Young Adult and New Adult authors. For example, books such as the *Folk of the Air* series by Holly Black, *Trylle* by Amanda Hocking, the various Shadowhunter books by Cassandra Clare, the Fever Series by Karen Marie Moning, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas (as well as Maas' most recent novel, *Crescent City*, which also features a half-fae half-human protagonist), *The Wren Hunt* by Mary Watson, The Southern Vampire Mysteries series by

Sookie Stackhouse, *Lament* by Maggie Stiefvater, the Iron Fey series by Julie Kagawa, and *An Enchantment of Ravens* by Margaret Rogerson, to name a few, all borrow from Irish mythology.

The main changeling in my novel does not depict that which we must fear. Instead Anna/Bright is a devoted and loving human in her adopted human world, a changeling who will be a Queen in her own right and in her own land. The malleability of the Faerie lore benefits me in this way. However, the cost to pay for moving away from the old myths is the continued loss of the original meanings and the stories themselves. The novel has no intention to take anything away from those original stories, as I also believe in the preservation of Irish culture. Instead the novel simply hopes to add to the discourse about Faeries. There will be an attempt to link the old stories with the new by referring to some traditional Irish themes. The hope in specifically adapting the Irish changeling myth for the novel's benefit is to direct more readers back to the old stories of Ireland, without the need for the old fears.

W.B. Yeats wrote a beautiful, moving, and terrifying poem of a changeling child in the midst of being swept away by the fairies called "The Stolen Child" (578-579). The edition I used for my research was selected as it was published very shortly after the poem was written and while the author was still alive. The lack of scholarly interference allowed me to absorb my own information from the text in order to influence my creativity. I learn from this poem that before a human child can become a changeling, it has to be "stolen" to the Faerie world. This perspective is terrifying, and it harkens back to the original fears of changeling folklore, but also to something dark. Human nature rightly fears the abduction of children—by creature or human. Within the changeling mythology there is the unique duality of fearing abduction and imagining an amazing and beautiful land the abducted child could visit. Yeats' poem portrays this haunting beauty.

My novel opens with a similar poem, meant to be a song sung by the Magpie Airina as she looks for the protagonist Anna/Bright. Like Yeats's poem, the song calls the reader into a world that is equal parts amazing and terrifying. Airina successfully finds Anna/Bright, her song having aided her, and thus the reader gets the first glimpse of the Faerie Bright who lies hidden within the changeling passing for the human Anna. The concept of racial "passing" is complex (and it often is one of the many catalysts of racial imposter syndrome). Passing is the explicitly racialised reality of people of colour who phenotypically present as white—thereby forcing the person of colour to either deny and hide their identity in order to be afforded the privileges of whiteness, or subject oneself to ridicule, fetishization, and/or abuse from *all* races. One perspective of the pains of racial identity for mixed-race black people is recounted by Adrian Piper, a Black, white-passing woman. As Piper notes:

> All you need to do is care about others' image of you, and fail in your actions to reinforce their positive image of them-selves. Their ridicule and accusations then function to both disown and degrade you from their status, to mark you not as having done wrong but as being wrong. This turns you into something bogus relative to their criterion of worth, and false relative to their criterion of authenticity. Once exposed as a fraud of this kind, you can never regain your legitimacy. (6)

Note the language Adrian Piper uses: *fail, ridicule, accusations, disown, degrade, being wrong*. Anna/Bright will experience all of these things and more as she endures being the representation of mixed-race identity, and it begins the night she is called, is transformed, is unable to hide her otherness-within-otherness.

Young adulthood is a transformative time. Making the transition from child to adult is a difficult feat with no real guidebook, often only anecdotal advice, and an absolutely relentless uncertainty coupled with an unstoppable, uncontrollable progression. Young adulthood is

even more uncertain and at time scary when that young adult is mixed-race. Perhaps at first glance a Euro-centric Faerie story is not a good companion to this tumultuous time in life. Some might argue that young people need structure, not fantasy. However, fantasy stories have proven to provide more than childish escapism, especially those adapted from well-known European folk tales. At their core, these narratives can be in some way that often-sought guide to such transformation. Cinderella is magicked into the image of a princess, teaching that even those of low station can be as worthy as those high-born. The Little Mermaid is given legs in exchange for a voice, teaching that sacrifice is sometimes necessary to achieve one's dreams. The Frog Prince requires a kiss to undo the magic that made him unlikely to receive one, teaching that an ugly appearance does not always match what is inside. These stories may be European in origin but transformation is universal, a fact that likely explains the success of the theme in the Young Adult and New Adult genre.

The Irish story of Sadbh (or Sadhbh, as the name is sometimes spelled)—the woman transformed into a doe—is one of these stories that seeks to illustrate the challenges of human life in a uniquely Irish way. In this story love is rebuffed, dark magic is fearsome and unpredictable, transformations challenge and change lives, and one's 'true self' is honoured above outward appearances (Lady Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men*, Part II, bk.1, ch.4). The beautiful and wild story is unlike the didactic darkness of the Grimm Brothers' collected tales or even the haunting moralistic stories of Hans Christian Anderson. The colloquial nature of Irish storytelling is something I hope to tap into in the novel. I believe part of reason that the Irish oral storytelling tradition cross-pollinates so cohesively with the YA fiction genre is that the fables feel tangible and identifiable. African folk tales also begin in this way, as do African-American oral tradition stories. Authenticity is vital to the believability and relatability of Faerie tales. Many cultures with an oral storytelling history show the value placed on authenticity in their stories, but Irish stories in particular are often told about still

surviving physical structures—Faerie trees, Faerie forts, Faerie mounds, Faerie rings. The importance of the place adds to the likelihood of the stories continuing to be circulated and believed.

In County Kerry, mythology and reality merge most especially on the 10-12th of August. Puck Fair is the traditional crowning of a male mountain goat as King. He is brought down into the town to meet his queen (typically a school-aged girl) and is treated like the royalty he is for the next few days until he is released back to his mountainous home. The fact that this display is still conducted shows the way Irish culture embraces both the human tradition and the folkloric magic of the fable. This fair is well documented by locals and scholars. In 1952, the journal *Folklore* reported about a particular tradition in the Puck Fair ceremonies:

> The platform was now cleared of spectators; there remained on it the Queen and her attendants, the chief people of the town, and the representatives of the Press. The wooden canopy was lifted off, and the goat was hoisted up on the lowest platform and placed in the centre. The Master of the Ceremonies then spoke through the loud speaker, "Will the crowd please be quiet during the crowning of the goat by the Queen of the Fairies and while the band plays solemn music." The crowning is done by a little girl dressed as a queen with a crown on her head, but it was impossible for anyone to see the ceremony owing to the crowd of Press photographers. The band played what appeared to be traditional music. The Master of the Ceremonies then announced, "The Puck King of Ireland". (Murray, 353)

Though a child is taking the place of the Queen of the Faeries in this context, it is interesting to note the seriousness with which this tradition is carried out, and the need for silence and solemn music as a child-Queen crowns a goat King. Perhaps a bit tongue-in-

cheek and mock-serious, there is still an amount of reverence to the tradition of the Puck Fair that serves as evidence of the Irish lived connection to folklore. I also noted the matriarchal significance of a Queen giving value to a King, instead of the more patriarchal need to for a King to validate a Queen. As the characters develop in my novel it is revealed that the Queens in fact hold much of Faerie together, though Oberon often refers to his burden as King. This dynamic in the novel was somewhat inspired by the child-Queen of the Puck fair and her vital role. In this one small fair held in one particular part of Ireland there is much to be gleaned from the Irish relationship to folklore. In an older article written in 1894 for *The Irish Monthly*, a telling parallel is exposed between Shakespeare and this folk tradition. The reader is told

> "Puck" in the Irish tongue signifies " Goat," and at this annual fair we have a goat as the chief object of interest-not to be bought or sold, but raised high above us on a platform, and enclosed in a wooden cage. He is clothed in green, and his horns are also decorated with the national colour; he is fed by kindly hands, guarded from rain by a wooden canopy, and only secured by means of a collar, so that he shall always face the main street (M.C.K., 374).

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the fairy who serves Oberon is both called Robin Goodfellow and a "Puck" interchangeably (II.i.35-41). Though there are inconsistencies throughout the play, Robin seems primarily to be the character's name and a Puck seems to be what the creature is—characterised by their ability to shapeshift and cause mischief (II.i.44-59, V.i.448-455). In English tradition, a Puck is a kind of goblin, according to Charles Scott. Scott defines this English creature as a collective of the goblin "race": "Taking into account the ways and pranks of the goblins like Robin Goodfellow, Puck, and the Dobbies, we have thus revealed the simple philosophy of the goblin tribe, 'Let us eat, drink, and be merry.'" (135). Though these definitions of Puck differ in origin, the meaning behind them

remains. The Irish "Puck" is a transformative goat—from ordinary mountain goat to King and back again in three days—making it in some way evidence of magic that exists in the real world; a Faerie tradition that exists to present day. There is no Puck in the novel (though among the unmentioned background Faeries one might imagine a Púca to be lurking), but one of the aims of the novel is a desire to build a world for readers that equally feels magical and yet entirely real.

To summarize, the old changelings of Irish folklore were creatures who knew they were different and did not wish to reveal this fact. They were sickly, always hungry, small, squalling things. They are depicted in the stories as appearing wizened and old with raspy voices. In other words, everyone around them knew they were different but they—like a parasite—had claimed the place of a healthy human child and could not be moved or even identified without certain manoeuvres by knowing members of the society. Once they were threatened or even harmed physically, the creatures were forced to flee. Sometimes the missing human child was returned, other times it was not.

The Irish Faerie changeling has historically always represented the fear of the other in a tightly knit community, the panic induced by the burden on a poor family of a sickly child, as well as the very real fear of the Faerie race. The novel attempts to represent the modern blending of cultures with this folkloric creature of the Other and hopes to indirectly give some semblance of representation to anyone who can identify with the at times dangerous existence of being other. It was always my hope and my wish to write a story that gave people a sense of wonder but also a sense of belonging. As a mixed-race Black writer living in Ireland, I see the need for representation of mixed-race characters in literature. The changeling motif in *In The Dark* unifies the need for change in representation in Young Adult literature to counter the isolation of mixed-race identifying peoples. The old changelings

represented fear. The new changelings, I hope, will represent acceptance of self, others, and a diverse community.

Away with The Faeries—Journal Reflection Introduction

During the writing of the critical reflection and drastic re-writing of the novel, I realised it was important to me to track my writing process through journal entries. I wrote in multiple journals over the course of the three years spanning my Ph.D. In that time I lost and gained relationships, experienced teaching for the first time, read over 100 books, short stories, and articles, moved to Dublin with my boyfriend, had an essay published on racism in Ireland, became a freelance writer, tutored students in various stages of secondary level education, watched helplessly from across the Atlantic as my father, step-mother, grandmother, great-aunt, and step-grandfather battled Covid-19, helped to market indie authors to my over 6,000 Instagram followers, and tutored my now home-schooled younger siblings twice weekly to ease the pressure on my Mum and step-dad.

During my Ph.D. there were multiple riots, a US Presidential election, and a global pandemic. There were good and bad writing days. Frankly, my personal mental health suffered greatly at times, particularly during the pandemic, which is still ongoing as I write this paragraph and as Ireland endures further lockdown. All of my experiences during the Ph.D. affected my writing, as these Journal Reflections will show. Since I was twelve, a year younger than my brother and a year older than my sister, writing has always been my favourite form of escape in an often difficult world. Through the journaling I realised I was often processing my own fears, concerns, triumphs, and hopes through my writing in ways I might not have noticed if I was not actively tracking myself. In this way my writing process improved. Recognising why a certain passage or exploration was so important to the story I wished to tell helped to anchor me as I wrote. I will continue this technique as I continue to write throughout my career and would suggest it to any writer wishing to build a foundation of purposeful self-exploration in their writing.

Each journal entry is written exactly as I wrote it longhand in my various journals (some personal and some purely for the purpose of this critical reflection). I have chosen not to edit what was originally written in my journals but instead to transcribe for the purpose preserving the authenticity of my process. Thus, at times the entries are very informal and introspective almost to the point of stream of consciousness. They are dated by month, as this is the method by which I typically journal. They are arranged by month and year in order to best show the progression in the writing process.

Journal Reflections

Journal Reflection, July 2019 —I have been thinking a lot about what this novel means to me and why it is important enough to me to be published. To me this book represents finding yourself, a theme that is of course common enough in Young Adult Literature. The only thing that has changed are the young adults. Today the world is full of noise—so many things telling you and sometimes even showing you what you should be. What to look like, what to think, who to love, where to work, what ambitions you should hope to reach for. Life has been thrown into chaos. I know when I was younger I thought I was the only one plagued by this chaos, but it has always existed and always will. I also know that as I was growing up and faced with so much uncertainty I flocked to books. They taught me that falling in love was the only thing that made life worth living. Now that I am older, I wish I had read more books that showed me how dangerous that belief could be. That falling in love with someone else before falling in love with myself would be a hard but necessary lesson, and one that only benefits the student the earlier they learn it. The main character of my novel, Anna, is a changeling—by definition she is unsure of her true self. She is mixed-race, both in the human definition and as a Faerie she is half-human, half-Faerie as her mother was before her. I use

the colloquial term “half” though by basic maths she cannot be half of any one thing. This is a term mixed-raced people learn early and are forced to adapt to, to fit within the sphere of understanding by our peers. Anna is also an adopted child, presenting complications I acknowledge I do not know personally. Anna is in love. Her exploration of herself and her true heart is interrupted by her love and the desire to be loved. How she handles herself is the story I want to tell. I want this to be a new Faerie tale—still didactic in nature and resembling the old myths, but in a new way for a much newer audience. I will be competing with social media, friends, television, and dysfunctional upbringings, but I want to try to tell the young adults of this generation a new story about love. I want to write the book I wish I had read when I was younger.

Journal Reflection, July 2019—Is it cultural appropriation? As a Black woman I have a unique perspective that helps me to understand the sensitivity surrounding one or many cultures adopting the behaviour, style, and/or history of another and treating it like their own. Still, I do not believe my adaptions of Irish folklore would be considered disrespectful. Mythology has no copywrite—cultural or otherwise. A true retelling only borrows from a myth, never steals. Shakespeare utilised Greek myth not because he wished to steal it, but because it unified his audience. Neil Gaiman wrote *The Anansi Boys* not because he wished to seize and colonise the traditional African myth, but instead to expose it to an audience that might not have otherwise known the story. Is that not the point of storytelling? How many stories have been done on vampires? Disney has built an empire on retelling tales of all cultures. Adopting specifically Irish Faeries for my own story is about shedding light on the beauty and ferocity of Irish Faeries as they can be overlooked and overdrawn by the image of playful, spritely creatures that are more common to the public eye. I do not want those small things that are so removed from humanity and our many flaws so as to be essentially ornaments. I want a story that is rough and true; something that is beautiful despite the

darkness. Irish Faeries are exactly this. I will offend someone. It is inevitable in this world of sensitivity. If I offend—as Puck offers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—pretend it is a dream and nothing more. My intention is only ever to honour the true meaning of Faeries.

Journal Reflection, August 2019—It is not a good writing day. I am irritable, tired, the sky is a blinding Irish summer overcast. I would rather the sky were either black or blue, not this uncomfortable shade of neither. I am in a book club, so I will be in town tonight. Hopefully that will lift my spirits.

Journal Reflection, August 2019—I read a lot today. A self-help book, a collection of Fairy Tales, a Young Adult retelling of Shahrazad. I realise each of these books inform my writing. As I learn, my characters learn too. My characters are ultimately me. Their flaws are my flaws. Their triumphs are my hopes for myself. Their life lessons are my own. I learned practical things too—I prefer duologies to endless (admittedly money-making) books in a series; I like how folk tales make no sense except in the world of their own story (such as bearing children by digging them up from the Earth or finding oneself married to a crab) and yet the message is universal (conceiving and birthing children is sometimes difficult and frightening or that sometimes marriage is not how we imagine it when we are still single). The sun today has inspired me. It is funny the way a little heat can do that. A nearly literal spark. Time to read is so vital to my writing process. That is the main thing I have learned today. I will always need time alone to just read.

Journal Reflection, August 2019—I have such a strong desire to be creative. Like it has been pent up. I want to write, to paint, to sing. Gardening feels creative some days, even though I am objectively bad at it. Getting dressed, too. Cooking. Putting on makeup. I feel creative because I am creative. At my core my true passion will always be to create something. Anything that showcases me. I did not really think of being an author as being an

artist when I was a kid. It seemed as natural as breathing. I suppose storytelling is. Everything yearns in some way to create. I have never felt a passion for anything as much as I do for books. It is a love affair, and like a great romance all I want to do is to share that love with others.

Journal Reflection, August 2019—How should modern conversations be added to modern literature? The topic of feminism and what it looks like for each person is still a hot and often debated topic. Diversity and inclusivity are as well. Authors like Louise O'Neill and Deirdre Sullivan have created feminist retellings of classic fairy tales, most notably both of them have remade The Little Mermaid. I am still trying to figure out if that is something I want to attempt as well. My fictional world is admittedly more matriarchal at times, despite the ruling King who creates much of the rising action (mostly due to his chaos, but that is not an intended commentary of all men). Anna is mixed-race twice over, but that is more about writing what I know. Some people will find the character arch of the women in the book both feminist at times and anti-feminist. Some people may think I intend to brow-beat straight men and their presumed sex-drive by how I have written Oberon. I do not really want to say these very specific things. I am not writing for that purpose. The truth simply is that some men may see themselves in Oberon as he seeks sexual comfort instead of personal and emotional maturity. Some women may as well. Some women choose to stay in unsatisfying relationships because of blind love as Titania does. Some men do, too. Some women are vicious and afraid and secretive and untrue to themselves. Some men are, too. Some people would rather be feared than be vulnerable enough to be loved. Ultimately I want this to be a story that everyone reads differently. I recently joined a book club, and someone remarked how amazing it was that she loved the book and the rest of us hated it. It was amazing. She learned so much about herself in those pages that I did not. That is what I really want for my

readers. To me it is honestly the most important thing. I want them—above all—to discover more of themselves by reading my books, as I have done by writing them.

Journal Reflection, August 2019—Writing bad poetry and working out. Trying desperately to not think about my long distance relationship. Writing used to feel like breathing whenever I felt like this. Now I dread it. I know how my mind spills out on to the page and forces me to face myself. I'm not sure if I'm able for it just now. I'd rather numb myself. I suppose this is why so many artist are also addicts. It's all too much sometimes.

Journal Reflection, September 2019—Why are toxic relationships so glamourized in Young Adult novels? These are exactly the people we should be educating on healthy relationships. I keep reading Young Adult novels with female characters who are willing to give up so much of their identity for the sake of the male lead. Or male characters unable to express their emotions and instead bursting in fits of rage (which is usually frowned upon by the female lead but is also exactly what draws her to him—his 'ferocity'). Would any of us encourage our children to have relationships like these? Are we assuming they know better? They do not! I remember being a young adult and thinking I wanted a romance as intense and devoted as say Edward Cullen and Bella Swan. Now I think what an awful standard for love they are. Reactive, insecure, volatile, possessive, and manipulative to name only a few flaws. I am surprised at myself for falling for this poor example, but we all did! Twilight was the most sought after series in my teen years. It is a little heart-breaking, if I am honest. Our teens deserve more than this. They are already thrown to the wolves in terms of a lack of education on the truths of interpersonal relationships, sex, and friendship. For so long we have simply equated teen years with toxicity and chalked it up to the experience. Perhaps that it true now that I write it out. We cannot expect their first relationships to be perfect and healthy. That comes with learning. What we can control is refusing to glamourize toxicity for the sake of selling drama. Authors have a responsibility. We must be more than mere story tellers in this

modern age of writing. We should return to the old ways of stories. That is to say, we should warn our children not to go into dark woods alone.

Journal Reflection, October 2019—I love to watch nature, especially birds. I have a fondness for cats, I always have, but their magic seems obvious. Birds have a secret kind of magic hidden away behind duty, diligence, focus. Plants have magic, too—not just in their medicines or poisons. The way they grow. Small and then taking root and then shooting up towards the sun. Bees and spiders. The clouds. Is it only humanity that has lost its magic? Because of all the electrical currents? Because we became obsessed with obtaining more, forever more? Is it any wonder we always return to nature when we feel overwhelmed? Lost. The woods have always offered us a way back. Perhaps we should return to being pagans.

Journal Reflection, October 2019—Compassion instead of Criticising. Write down positive thoughts. "The White Goddess". Is there poetic history of changelings? Spirals representing death and rebirth. Queen Maeve/Mab/Maab. I just want to go home.[2]

Journal Reflection, January 2020—When I grew up writing I did not think of drafts. I wrote, usually the entire novel at once over the course of months. Then I would spend many more months editing from start to finish. Again and again and again. I never gave these drafts—edited completely from my own feedback—to anyone to read. Only when it was finished would I show it to someone. Usually my best friend. I am learning that writing is more collaborative than that. Someone views the writing and the feedback spurs on the writer. Or, in other cases, the more I learn as I read academically the more it inspires changes to my novel. For example, I am about to entirely change the opening scene because in most of my readings I have found that Faeries *call* humans away. It is a purposeful act. A hunt

[2] I find it difficult to interpret this brief section of my journals. I was very depressed at the time and struggled to structure my thoughts. However, I included it as my clinical depression is part of my writing process and the entry details some of my vital research.

almost. In my current draft Airina finds Anna in the way humans and animals hunt. Finding her by scent is fine, as is the use of a Black Dog, but leaving her to her bed to be patiently watched is not very Faerie as I have come to know Them. There is no lure. Even the witches in *Hocus Pocus* entranced with song. Airina is a Seeker—a huntress—and one of her many Faerie talents should be her ability to lure with song, as Faeries have historically done.

Journal Reflection, January 2020—Should I change the Faerie names? So many of the names in the novel sound French and I suppose I've done that on purpose. That's how I once pictured Faeries—dainty French portraits of lithe women with butterfly wings. But if I am adopting Irish Faerie mythology it only makes sense that they have Irish names. It's more fitting. Oberon, Titania, Maab, Morgana, and Bright were definitely named on purpose. Other names could be changed though, especially the surnames. Should I imply more Irish qualities to these creatures? Or to the humans even? Is this Ireland or America? Does it matter? Of course it does, really.

Journal Reflection, January 2020—I resisted editing at first. I want the help, but it's true what they say, it is difficult to "kill your darlings". I had to take the first big plunge at 40 pages. After that it was surprisingly easy to recognise the need to execute many "darlings". Even more, I discovered they weren't so darling after all.

Journal Reflection, March 2020—It is two week after my birthday and the world is plagued by Covid. Ireland is locked down. My Dad is talking about me going home, but I can't go home. My family is scared, I am scared, trapped, alone except for Chris. I haven't written anything in weeks. I don't know what to do. I can't go home, I can't afford to live here. What happens to my PhD if I go home? Or my relationship. But if something happened to my family while I patiently waited 3,000 miles away I would lose my fucking mind. We were supposed to go to America for Summer. I don't even know if that will happen now.

How can I write? How can I care about anything except my brother and sister, alone and confused. Kiley is so scared one of us will get sick. I hate that I'm not there. I just want to lose myself in the novel but it all feel so trivial.

Journal Reflection, June 2020—Largely my editing process was a very self-reflective process. Typically I would write an entire story in a first draft, editing slightly as I went. Then I would edit once more over the entire manuscript. Finally I would read over the manuscript, editing as I did, and feel satisfied at the end that I was finished editing. In my mind I had some strange concept that it did not matter how rough my novel was, once I had secured an interested publisher the hired editor would simply take my rough work and fashion it in to genius. Perhaps there really is a unique arrogance to the creature that is the writer that should be further explored in other studies. For now, I will simply note that I am learning through my PhD that the editing process is not only vastly different from what I had been imagining and practicing, but also extremely rewarding. I was tasked to take my first 40 pages of my manuscript and turn them in to 20 pages. I was baffled by the proverbial killing of my darlings, but once I set out to the task I was surprised by how willing I was. My work—that I had cherished fondly even from the conception—was made all the better by the strict constraints I limited myself to. It felt more alive, more matured. I took the leap to edit my entire manuscript with the same eye keen to cut down on the excess. I found that I preferred the lean version—almost 30,000 words leaner. It seems a simple thing, but I learned a valuable lesson. Possibly the most valuable lesson of my writing career: editing is a vital part of the writing process.

Journal Reflection, June 2020—What it means to be Black can't be taught, just like what it means to be white. What it means to be a cop, or a friend, or parent can't be taught. I thought that I was just writing a book, like I've always written books. Now I think I'm writing something that needs to be written. I hate that academia is too often inaccessible—it

focuses too much on what has been said and deemed worthy instead of listening to what is being said now. Being Black is being scared and angry, being born into chaos when all you needed was love and kindness. Being mixed is wishing you could hide, knowing you'll always stand out, and trying to be proud of both facts. I can't teach people why Anna wants to know who she is and is also terrified of everything that makes her into who she is. I can't explain why her self-loathing makes her hurt Sam, the person who has tried to show her constant, unconditional love. I can never know if anyone will ever understand Anna or care about her as a character and that hurts me because I have been Anna in so many ways. I want her to be loved. I want the marches and brutality and hatred to stop. I worry about my brother more than I worry about my sister. Because she can pass where he and I never can. But then I worry about her. Does she feel that much more alone? How do I explain what it is to wake up Black every day? To watch the news and not be surprised and to be shaken to the core. To try and fail to be good enough. To watch our culture stolen and the blind hatred, to listen to our allies patronise us, to feel so gaslit that we give up trying to explain. My changeling, Anna. I just want to protect her. But I can't, because there are so many of us that deserve to be seen. Our world is magical, but it is also brutal.

Journal Reflection, September 2020—Structure! As an anxious person I have always liked structure. I'm not sure why I didn't think of needing structure for my writing. I've never done outlines or mind maps for my stories. At best I've written down character names, I used to draw what I imagined they looked like. But actual structure is amazing! I like the book so much better now. It was getting so hard, reading and re-reading. I started to hate the book. It started to bore me and that was so scary. My mind was just so full. I miss the kids so much it's driving me crazy. Moving. It feels good to be back in Dublin, though. My parents never saw my homes in Limerick. They never visited and now they can't, but I'm hopeful that they'll see the place here in Dublin. Chris and I got tickets home for May so I just need to

hold on until then. Re-structuring the novel is going to take a lot of work but I'm excited. It makes so much more sense now. I'm really looking forward to it.

Journal Reflections, October 2020—Halloween is my favourite holiday but it's kinda bleak this year. Well, Chris and I had fun in the apartment, and we dressed up, but restructuring is proving difficult, busy season for him is exhausting us both, and I really miss home.

Journal Reflections, November 2020—Working on edits for both the critical reflection and the novel is extremely taxing. I just feel like everything I'm trying to say isn't coming across and I don't know exactly how to say it. I know imposter syndrome is almost comically cliché in writers and academics, but I wasn't fully prepared for it anyway. I feel so alone in this PhD. The virtual coffee days would probably help but I hate small talk, I'm sick of virtual conversations, and I never feel like I'm a real academic anyway. Maybe I'm not trying hard enough, but I'm so just tired.

Journal Reflections, January 2021—Christmas was hard. I'm always away for Christmas but this was really hard. I haven't written anything in almost three weeks.

Journal Reflections, March 2021—I turned 30 in our apartment in Dublin. Chris made it so special but we both knew it was a hard birthday. I always struggle in Winter.

Journal Reflections, March 2021—My Dad and my step-Mum got Covid. My sister is extremely anxious and depressed. My Mum is exhausted and trying to take care of everyone. I've never cried so much. I'm so tired all the time. I hate my novel, I hate my thesis. I'm so tired of all of this. I should be home but I'm stuck here. I've read the novel so many times and every time I find more mistakes. It feels so pointless. Daddy is so weak and I don't know what to do. He's always been so strong. He used to lift me up with one arm. I used to put my arms around his neck in the pool and he'd dive with me on his back like a whale.

Journal Reflections, April 2021—I finally told Meg and Sarah how depressed I've been. It was hard. My laptop died and my Mum had to buy me a new one. I'm so grateful because there's no way I could have afforded it. Daddy is getting better but I'm still scared about Covid and the kids. I like the structure of the novel a lot better. I like what it has to say. I've restructured the critical reflection, too. I just want to focus on finishing up. We're not going to be able to go home in May. I'm trying to be as patient as I can but it feels like I'm holding my breath until I see my family again and my lungs are burning.

Journal Reflections, May 2021—I finally "met" with Meg and Sarah over Zoom. I hate all this virtual meeting but I understand. I felt a lot better about the novel and graduating and everything I want to accomplish after this. I feel like we're all on the same page and now I just have to work really hard to push over the finish line. I'm tired all the time and I'm anxious. My brother and sister aren't adjusting well, but they're new teenagers in a global pandemic! I can't imagine the internal stress. I miss them so much. But I'm doing this for them. Even if they never read it, even if they don't care, I write for them. They get me through all of it.

Journal Reflections, August 2021—I don't know if anyone will understand. I am self-reflective enough to know that I'm seeking kinship, understanding. Like Anna, I yearn to know that I belong somewhere safe and seen. For so long all of this—the novel, my thoughts—have existed only in my mind. With this final letting go…I relinquish that control. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't terrified. I am. But in my braver moments, I am quite proud as well. In those moments I don't know that it is all that important that I am understood. It is enough to know I was honest with myself, that I gave it everything I have.

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