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Excerpt from: Won, a Novel

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EXCERPT FROM: *WON*, A NOVEL

by

JENNA ELLENBOGEN

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for the Honors in the Major Program in Creative Writing
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ABSTRACT

High school is bad enough with cliques, coursework, and the impending threat of college – now some old evil is coming to Solomon Starek High School (SSH for short). It's up to transfer student Ella, older than time and unthinkably powerful, to stop it. Ella's certainly up to the task, but the world's changed since the last time she was in it. Society has merged magic with science, and Ella's not sure she's up for that. Can her new classmates help her stop what's coming, or will they fall short? This excerpt tracks Ella's first days at school, and sets the stage for the chaos to come.

DEDICATION

With much gratitude to the people who helped and guided me
on this journey, and pushed me to believe in myself
when I couldn't see a way to.

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PROLOGUE

“Lady Mother, if you can hear me, please, I need your help.” Alisdair Benson prayed at the window of his office, moonlight glinting off the shattered glass circling him. He grasped a long pendant tightly, the beads at one end hooked over his thumbs. He lifted his head to peek around the room. Nothing happened. He bent his head, wound the long necklace around both hands, and prayed again. “Lady Mother, please hear me. Your help is needed.” Alisdair waited a moment, then checked the room again. Still nothing. Huffing, he unhooked the chain to make two strands and wrapped them tightly around his forearms, then pressed the medallion between his hands. Clutching it between his palms, he felt the sharp edges prick his skin, and as the blood dripped onto his knees, he squeezed his eyes shut and thought with all his might. *Lady Mother, I need you!*

What do you want, Alisdair?

Alisdair blinked. *Who is that?*

It's Aidyn. What do you want?

Aidyn? Why, how, am I talking to you?

That is not important. What do you want Alisdair?

Shifting, Alisdair thought, *She needs to come here.*

I doubt that.

I'm not kidding, Aidyn.

Why?

Alisdair thought of his office at the moment – shelves ripped off the walls, frames and glass boxes smashed to pieces, debris carpeting the floor except for the small area he was in.

Vandalism is not a good excuse, Alisdair.

This wasn't a student. One of my instruments did this.

So you're having issues with the integrated technology; am I supposed to be surprised?

This wasn't tech, Aidyn. It was one of her gifts.

For a few minutes, Alisdair's head remained suspiciously quiet and empty.

Which one?

Alisdair pictured the device— a sphere, a bit bigger than an apple, with a metallic sheen and a surface seething with striations.

What did it usually look like?

Alisdair thought he heard tension in the other man's thoughts. He sent an image of how the instrument normally was, random striations appearing on the sphere, normally staying only a moment before fading into something new. Very rarely, specific patterns reappeared, lingering on the burnished exterior. Sometimes they emerged as no more than swirling lines in the metal, and sometimes they manifested as pulsing veins of light, changing color rapidly. Eventually, the instrument would quiet, the subtle movement providing a meditative effect.

And now?

Alisdair presented another image: the sphere broken into jagged pieces, a hideous mauve color and radiating terrible heat.

Again, Aidyn met this with silence. Alisdair was wondering if he somehow broke the connection when Aidyn's thoughts rang in his skull.

Fake whatever you have to. I'll get her there.

Alisdair heaved a great sigh in relief, about to thank Aidyn when he realized the other man had left. Opening his eyes, he swayed briefly, finding a lot more blood on his legs than he expected. Focusing, he pried his hands away from the pendant, and drew the forefinger of his right hand from the base of his left thumb to the base of his left pinky. As he did, the blood still on his palm evaporated, and the wounds closed, healthy skin building up so not even a scar remained. He repeated the process with his other hand, then slowly stood up. Still dizzy, he turned his face toward the window, and scooped a hand through the air. Light, not quite solid but somewhat tangible, filled his grasp, and he brought it to his mouth to suck it down. After a few more mouthfuls, he seemed steadier on his feet. Turning from the window, he regarded the the remains of his office, and began the long process of cleaning up. All would be well now; the Lady was coming.

CHAPTER ONE

Ella

Ella couldn't decide if she hated these kinds of mornings. The sky burned a shade of blue out of place anywhere except a movie. No birdsongs broke the early morning quiet, but already an oppressive heat beat down, the sun barely over the horizon. She could feel the humidity curling the hair escaping from her cap. Everything looked too bright, and she wanted a pair of sunglasses to cut the glare. All told, not the worse morning, but not the greatest either.

None of that mattered at the moment, though; right now, she had to figure out how to enter the building. It towered impressively over a filigreed fence, the brick and stone making it look out of place near its stucco neighbors. Ella couldn't even see where the building ended, or any of the campus. The façade was simply too big. Perhaps seen from far away, it merely looked like an optical illusion, but this close, Ella could almost smell the magic used to create it, the same way she could smell the creatively trimmed bushes inside the gate. Fauns and angels frolicked among rearing horses, pouncing wolves and soaring birds. The building even featured a giant clock set above the double doors. Maybe the steeple pushed it from "impressive" to "pretentious," but the excellent reputation of the school excused its grandiose design.

Coming to the gate, Ella noticed no lock, so she pushed it open just enough to get through, then let it swing shut behind her; it didn't clang, not like a proper sort of iron gate at all. Ella shook her head a little, but walked on, heading for the double doors at the entrance. Again, she opened them just enough to slip inside, then quickly closed them to keep the cool air in. Sweet relief, even if the sudden change did make her eyes tear up a bit. When she could see again, Ella looked around for something to point her in the proper direction; but no, that would be too easy. Three hallways

branched off from the entrance, and she wondered which one to take when some slight noises from the left tickled her ear.

Following the sound, Ella peered into a large, open room, the floor and walls covered in some kind of soft, blue padding, like the sparring mats of a dojo, the windows high up but big enough to let in a good deal of light. In the middle of the room, a boy swung a wooden stick.

Ella studied him. He seemed like an average teenager: not quite grown into all his limbs and a few inches away from fitting into his body. Still, he moved carefully as he shifted from one form to another. Ella turned her attention to his toy. It really couldn't be called a sword, not as light as it looked. Ella could see designs carved along the handle and blade, probably to prevent any damage to it or the person wielding it. Those marks made what could have been a serious weapon into a training tool.

Ella watched another minute before she spoke. "You are dropping your right shoulder."

The boy jumped a little, stumbling as his attention faltered. Once righted, he grimaced a little, turning to face Ella. She noticed his grip tightening slightly on the wooden hilt.

"If you think you should attack, you should take a better stance. You are wide open facing me front on like that."

The boy frowned a little more. "Can I help you?"

She forgot; normal people did not correct strangers on their battle stance, thought it rude or something. "Could you tell me how to get to the headmaster's office?"

Clearly eager to be rid of her, he said, "It's through the first door on the right-hand side of the main corridor, just inside the entrance."

Ella nodded, and stepped out, pushing the door back to its original position. As she walked away, she distantly heard the sound of wood slashing through the air.

Back at the front, Ella found the oaken door marked “Administration.” When she stepped inside, it opened not onto a single room, but instead another hallway lined with doors, some light in color, some dark, some free of decoration, some plastered with stickers and print-outs. With a name and title carved into each door, Ella found the one marked “Alisdair Benson, Headmaster” at the very back, and went in without knocking.

“I’ll be with you in a moment.” The dark-haired, dark-skinned man bent over the desk did not look up from the papers holding his attention. Ella looked around the room. Four large windows, one on each wall, showed different views of the campus outside, and all but one had to be enchanted to do so. The window just inside the door could hardly reveal a football field otherwise. The wall space left between the windows carried framed diplomas, letters, and pictures. In pride of place behind the man hung a large portrait of a dancer, her face turned away, back and leg arched at impossible angles to create a strange trick of the eye. Something about the portrait—the woman’s hair, maybe—made Ella feel like she was forgetting... she was not sure what.

The man marked the page he was reading, and finally straightened his back, stretching as much as he could while sitting down. He turned his attention to Ella, mouth apparently ahead of his brain.

“Now what can—oh! My lady.”

Ella kept looking at the painting. “Do not call me that, Alisdair.” She cocked her head; really, the woman’s hair seemed very familiar.

“As you wish. Um, my lady, I am terribly sorry, but, if you don’t mind my asking... what are you doing here?”

Ella turned to look at him. “You asked me to come.”

“Yes, but, forgive me, I wasn’t sure you would.”

Ella frowned. “Aidyn said it was important. Was he mistaken?”

“No, no, not at all, it’s only...” Alisdair huffed a little. Ella thought he might be annoyed underneath the surprise. “You’re late.”

“I am not. There is hardly anyone here.”

Alisdair raised his eyebrow, and Ella saw his mouth twitch at the corners. “That’s true, but not what I meant. Classes began two weeks ago.”

Ella blinked as she reared back a little. “I thought there was some kind of holiday.”

“There is. Labor Day was yesterday.”

“Schools do not close for that?”

“They do.”

“Why would you have a day off on the third week of school?”

“It makes about as much sense as having a day off the first week of school. State regulations mandate how long we have to be open during the year.”

“That sounds bothersome.”

“Yes, but it’s the price we pay to stay open. Not too hefty a cost.”

Ella shrugged, and turned her attention back to the portrait. Alisdair watched her for a few moments, expecting her to speak.

“My—”

“I told you not to call me that.”

“What would you prefer? One of the sacred titles? Should I call you ‘Auntie,’ perhaps, and respond to ‘Nephew?’”

Ella flicked her eyes at him, then returned her gaze to the painting. “Who is she?”

Alisdair sat back in his chair, confusion evident on his face. He swiveled his chair to look at the dancer. “In the portrait?” When Ella nodded, she could see something else come over him, something... weary. “It’s Rylla, Auntie. My wife.”

Ella nodded distractedly. “Oh yes, of course. Pregnant with your first, is she not?”

The look went from weary to woeful. “Our third’s turning eight soon.”

Ella had nothing to say. Instead, she turned to the other frames. “You probably should not call me ‘Auntie.’”

“Not in front of anyone, I won’t, but I have to call you something. Where are your papers?”

When Ella looked at him blankly, Alisdair leaned forward. “I sent papers to Aidyn that I would need to bring you here. I assumed when they didn’t come in the mail, you’d bring them in yourself, if you came at all.”

Ella did not look away from him. He rolled his eyes as he pulled open one of his desk drawers, shuffling things around before pulling out a sheaf of papers. He closed the drawer and laid the papers on his desk, tapping a symbol of a pen in the corner. The design changed color from black to green.

“Name?”

“What?” Something appeared on the page, before Alisdair swiped his hand and it vanished.

“This is an auto-fill form, my lady, so please only say what I ask. Now, name?”

“Ella.”

“We do require last names.”

“I thought you were only supposed to say what is on the form.”

He swished his hand again, “That’s what you’re supposed to do, my lady. Now, name?”

“Ella.” Alisdair twitched his hand at her. “Ella McNair.”

“Aren’t you going by O’Toole?”

“Does it matter?”

Alisdair hesitated a moment. “I’ll just put it down as a middle name, if that’s acceptable.

Ella McNair O’Toole.”

“Fine.”

“Expressed gender?”

“What?”

He waved his hand again. “It’s something we ask now. Expressed gender?”

“Female.”

“Date of birth?” Alisdair asked. Ella raised her eyebrows. He frowned a little. “Right, well, just pick a day and we’ll put you in the right age bracket.” His grimace deepened. “You’ve no idea how weird it feels. Having students born in a different millennium than me.” He shuddered, then turned back to the form. “Date of birth?”

“Twenty-first December.”

“Address?”

“Why do you need that?”

“The school needs a record of where you’re living. If a student has no physical address, the school must provide housing for them, and since the government subsidizes our boarding options, we have to keep meticulous records. Address?”

“Jeeves found a place.”

“Who?”

“Aidyn.”

“Oh. Why did you call him ‘Jeeves’?”

“He said I should. I think he was trying to make a joke. I did not understand.”

“Ah. Well,” Alisdair looked at the form, and flicked his hand again. “give me that then.”

“I do not know it.”

He stared at Ella, shifting in his chair, like something had gone slightly off balance. “You don’t know the address you’ll be staying at for the next four years?”

“I doubt I will be here that long.”

Alisdair stilled, and that peevish look from before came back across his face, but he quickly smoothed his features out. “I’ll ask Jee— Aidyn, then. Should I put him down for your emergency contact as well?”

Ella shrugged. He looked down at his form, and scrolled his finger down the front, then flipped the page over. “Well, most of the rest will come from him.” He glanced at the stack of papers, then at Ella. “I don’t suppose those transcripts I faked for you...” Ella just looked at him. “No, of course not. Fortunately, I kept a spare set.” He pulled a drawer from the center of the desk, and started shuffling papers around, but scowled shortly. “Now if only I could find them.” He started opening other drawers and looking through them.

“Do I need to be here for this?”

Alisdair looked up. “Oh, no, my lady, forgive me. Here,” he pulled something from one of the many drawers and held it out to Ella. “I put you in the system and drew up a class schedule, just in case.”

Ella took the paper. The more she read, the deeper the notch between her brows grew. “I will not take more than the bare minimum.”

“That is the bare minimum. Requirements for students at Solomon Starek High School include seven classes, and participation in at least two extracurricular activities, either at the school or with an approved outside organization.” Ella stared at him while he searched through his desk. He did not look up as he spoke. “No, that’s not a joke; yes, my lady, you must fulfill all the school requirements, as you are technically a student here.”

“Are there more requirements?”

He waved a hand at her distractedly. “I’ll explain it to Aidyn. You may as well go; it’s probably almost time for people to start showing up.” He glanced briefly at something on his desk, and nodded, before resuming his search. “Wait, nearly forgot.” He pulled something out from the mess and tossed it at Ella. She barely caught it, and stared at the bit of black fabric in her hand.

“What is this?”

“We don’t have a strict uniform, but all students are required to wear that patch somewhere visible, preferably at the collar. It adheres automatically once you press it in, and peels off easily.”

“Why do you have this in your desk?”

“Because invariably some student forgets, and since the patch doubles as an ID, I find it useful to keep some handy.”

Ella looked back down at the patch, then stuck it on the arm of her sleeve. It stayed in place, nearly invisible against the black of her shirt until white thread spelling out “Ella O’Toole – First Year” weaved around an emerging design of three navy stylized letters surrounded by a ring of leaves and lightning. Ella stared at her arm for a moment before looking back at the paper she was holding. “I do not know where any of these classes are.”

“Just tap the room number; the schedule has a built-in map function.” Ella looked at the first class on the list and touched the number next to it. A red arrow appeared at the bottom of the page, pointing her out the door. She turned and started to leave. “Oh, and my lady?”

She stopped halfway through the door and looked back. “I told you to stop calling me that.”

Alisdair gave her a small grin amid a flurry of papers on his desk and in the air around him. “When you come up with a good alternative, my lady, I will be happy to call you by it. In any case, welcome to my school.”

Ella nodded shortly, before heading toward her first class.

Connor

Connor wasn't looking where he went. The first bell wouldn't ring for thirty minutes, even the early students would only just start arriving. Well, except him, but he always got here first. He sometimes wondered if he came before the security guards, but he consistently found the buildings open. Still, he wasn't used to company in the mornings; so he nearly tripped over a pair of legs in the aisle. When he finally pulled his eyes away from his bag, he saw... someone sitting in his seat. He couldn't really ascertain if the person, wearing all black, including heavy boots and a floppy cap, was a boy or girl, though that might've been the point. Well, not his problem; wait, actually, it was his problem, but the problem wasn't the person, the problem was—

“You are staring.”

Connor knew that voice. He looked past the person's face to their clothes; yes, that jacket was familiar, and those pants.

“Why are you staring?”

Connor flicked back up to the person's face. “You talked to me this morning.”

“When?”

Connor frowned. Even he didn't forget people so quickly. “This morning, in the practice room.” Nothing, not a flicker of recognition. “When I was practicing sword forms. You said I was dropping my right side.”

“Oh. Yes.”

“Yeah.”

“That still does not explain why you are staring.”

“You’re sitting in my seat.” The person didn’t move. “Dr. Barlow, he puts everyone in alphabetical order, so he can learn our names easier. Where you’re sitting, that’s my spot.” Still no movement. “So are you going to get up?”

“More easily.”

“What?”

“So he can learn our names’ more easily. Not ‘easier.’”

“Okay. Are you going to move?”

The person said not a word, but arose from Connor’s desk, leaning against the window. Connor sat down and started pulling his school supplies out of his backpack.

“Thanks,” he said. Connor could feel eyes on him as he set up his materials, laying everything out just so. When he finished burying his desk under schoolwork, he turned to the person, and remembered his mother’s etiquette lessons. “Sorry, I’ve been rude.” He offered a hand. “I’m Connor.” The person stared at his hand, then back at his face. “You’re supposed to shake it.”

“Why?”

“It’s considered good manners to shake a person’s hand when you meet them.”

“Why?”

Connor thought about it. “I’m not sure, actually. There’s probably a reason.”

“Do teenagers normally do it?” the person asked.

“Shake hands?” Connor clarified. The person nodded. “Well, no.”

“Why would you do it then?”

Connor gave a little grin. “Well, manners dictate we do something. Fist bumps are reserved for friends. Waving at someone a foot away is awkward. What do you suggest?”

“We do not have to do anything.”

“Gotta do something. Want to try the cool kid nod?”

“I do not know what that is.”

“Really? They didn’t have that at your last school?”

“I did not have a last school.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is my first school.”

“Wow, really? Were you homeschooled or something?”

“I do not know what that is.”

“Homeschooling is...well, what it sounds like. You have school at home.” Connor watched the other person cock their head.

“Something like that.”

“Seriously? I’ve never met anyone who was homeschooled. Anyway, the cool kid nod’s basically this thing you do if you see someone you know, but don’t actually want to talk to, or you’ve just met someone and you don’t really know what to say to them. You just give a nod, like you’re both secretly aware of something the people around you aren’t. Like you’re spies in a movie or something. Like this,” and Connor looked toward the classroom door and nodded at an imaginary student, face coolly disinterested. Then he turned back to the person, who was looking at him rather strangely. “You okay?”

The person shrugged. “Just nod?”

“Sure. Watch.” Connor leaned back in his seat, and gave a short tilt of the head. “Connor.”

The person nodded back. “Ella.”

“There, see? Now we have established the proper social order with a minimum of interaction.” Connor grinned. “If Dr. Barlow was here, I’d say something about the secret plot to overthrow the adult hierarchy and lead the world into chaos, but it’ll have to wait.”

“‘Were here,’ not ‘was here.’”

“Do you always correct other people’s grammar?”

“No.”

“Then why are you correcting mine?”

“Language is important.”

“Well, yeah, but we’re just talking, we’re not writing a paper or anything.” Ella remained silent. “Doesn’t that get on people’s nerves?”

“The people I live with do not need me to remind them.”

“That’s an odd way to talk about your parents.”

“They are not my parents.”

“You mean you’re living with friends or friends of your parents to come here? There are a few other students doing that, although most of the ones who aren’t local just go for the boarding option. Where are you from? Your parents still back there?”

“I do not have parents.”

Connor’s jabbering screeched to a halt. He gaped. “Oh, shit.” He frowned. “Shit, that wasn’t supposed to be out loud. Damn, neither was—” Connor clamped his jaw shut and looked at Ella. She didn’t look upset. “I’m sorry.” He squirmed in his desk when Ella just looked at him.

“Was it, I mean, how long...”

“I have never had parents.”

Connor's frown deepened, but before he could ask anything, the door opened. He turned in his seat to see a pale, lanky man walking toward the teacher's desk, arms overflowing with papers, a thermos, and a cardboard box.

"Good morning, Mr. Kingsley, care for a muffin? Who's this?" The man carefully set everything on the desk, glancing between the two teenagers. Connor looked back at Ella, who hadn't looked away from him.

"This is Ella," Connor said.

"That was quick, I was certain the flings wouldn't start before the end of the first month."

"What, no, she's not, we're not; she's not my fling."

"Oh? What's she doing here then?"

Connor opened his mouth, then closed it as he realized something. He turned to Ella.
"Actually, I don't know what you're doing here."

"Waiting for class to start."

"But you're not in this class."

"I am starting today."

"Did you have to switch your schedule around or something?"

"No."

"But school started two weeks ago."

"Yes." Connor stared at Ella as the man at the desk shuffled papers as he sipped his drink.

"Ah, you must be that student Alisdair told me about," the older man said. "Glad to see you could join us after all. I'm Dr. Barlow, you probably saw that on your schedule, but never hurts to make sure. Got your textbooks?"

“No.”

Dr. Barlow looked up from his papers. “No?”

“I do not have any books.”

“None of them? How do you expect to get through your classes?”

“If I need them, I will pick them up later.”

Dr. Barlow frowned, then glanced at the clock on the back wall before turning to his computer. “There’s still some time before the bell rings, so go ahead and get them now.”

“I will do it after school.”

Dr. Barlow looked at Ella. “I’m afraid I have to insist. Go to the front office, tell them you’re new, and they’ll get you the books you need.” Ella didn’t move. “Now.”

Ella shrugged, then walked toward the door. Connor and Dr. Barlow both watched as she left, then looked at each other. “Well,” Dr. Barlow said as he turned back toward his computer. “This should be interesting.”

CHAPTER TWO

Ella

Ella heard voices from the headmaster's office; not particularly loud, but familiar – Alisdair and someone else. “For goodness's sake, Ali, why are you going through this charade? Just tell her what happened!”

“I can't do that, Ryl.”

“You called her here because you were scared, and now you won't even tell her why?”

“It's complicated, I—”

Ella opened the door and the voices stopped. She looked from Alisdair to the owner of the familiar voice, a tall woman with vibrant eyes and riotous curls. The woman, hunched over Alisdair's desk, stood straight and turned toward Ella, saying, “My—”

Alisdair coughed loudly.

The woman turned her head to him. “Well, what am I supposed to say?”

“Miss O'Toole,” Alisdair said, “if you would please close the door.”

The woman looked disgruntled as Ella shut the door without looking. “Miss O'Toole?” she repeated incredulously.

“I have to keep up appearances. What if a colleague, or a student, heard me?”

“That's why you have anti-eavesdropping warding, Ali.”

Alisdair pulled a face, but he pressed down on his desk, in the corner next to his computer. A yellow circle appeared where he tapped, before quickly flashing to green. “Now,” he said, “you can call her ‘my lady.’”

The woman rolled her eyes at Ella. Ella said nothing, examining her.

“Why do I know you?” Ella asked.

The woman stared. “E-excuse me?”

“Your voice, I recognize it, but I don’t know why. Have we met?”

The woman turned to Alisdair, her joints popping from the force of the movement. He returned her panicked look with one of deep weariness. The woman looked back at Ella, and swallowed heavily.

“It’s me, my lady. Rylla.”

Ella stayed silent. Rylla looked back to Alisdair, despair seeping past the panic. Alisdair sighed, looking at Ella.

“Rylla is my wife, my lady.”

“Oh.” Ella’s words relaxed Rylla. “From the picture. I thought your hair looked familiar.”

Rylla’s face fell even further than before, and she looked from Ella to her husband. Alisdair shook his head. Rylla faced Ella; she let a strange smile slide into place. It did not seem like a real smile to Ella; there was something...forced about it. “Oh, the one behind Ali’s desk? Yes, a remnant from my younger days. I’ve no idea why he keeps it,” Rylla said, her voice sounding tight.

Alisdair stood, coming around his desk to lay a hand on his wife’s waist. “I keep it because you’re magnificent, darling, as you well know. Now, thank you very much for stopping in to visit, but as you can see, I simply must get back to work.” He lightly kissed her cheek and murmured in her ear. “We’ll talk more later, hmm?”

“Of course. Later.” With a brusque nod, Rylla fled the room. Ella did not turn to look at her; she was staring at the symbol on Alisdair’s desk.

“Why do you have that?”

Alisdair looked at the glowing circle, then blinked at Ella. “It’s a ward, my lady, part of the defense system, to protect against eavesdropping and the like.”

“I can tell. Why do you have it?”

“Oh. Well, in case I need to discuss delicate matters with a teacher or a parent, or I don’t want my conversations to be heard in the hallway. That sort of thing.”

“It was not on before.”

“Well, Rylla does tend to get carried away, as you—” Alisdair broke off. He glanced at Ella, but she gave no reaction. “Right. Anyway, no need for it now.” He pressed the circle, and it vanished into the wooden surface of the desk. Sitting back down, he looked at Ella. “Did you need something, Miss O’Toole?”

“Books.”

“Beg pardon?”

“The teacher sent me to get books.”

Alisdair stared blankly at her, then smacked his hand on his forehead. “Saints, I completely forgot to get your textbooks this morning! How on earth did I manage that?” Scoffing, he tapped the corner of his desk opposite his computer; a blue keypad lit up. “Just a moment, please.” He tapped a series of numbers, and after a moment, a floating head appeared above the keypad. Ella could see only the back of it, but by the thick braid, she guessed it belonged to a female.

“Morning, Alisdair.”

“Good morning, Dr. Sinclair. Could you spare a moment in person, please?”

“Of course.” The head vanished, and the keypad with it. Ella opened her mouth, but before she could ask, the door behind her opened. Alisdair smiled.

“Miss O’Toole, allow me to introduce Dr. Sinclair, our vice principal here at...” Alisdair made a short sound.

Ella turned. The floating blue head did belong to a woman; Ella could see the braid brushing Dr. Sinclair’s hips. The vice principal looked on the cusp of her twilight years, but if she were magical, she could be much older. She carried her age mostly in the lines on her face and hands; her hair was still thick, and the red-orange hue seemed only slightly dulled.

“You must be the new student Alisdair mentioned. Welcome,” Dr. Sinclair said, offering her hand to Ella. Ella looked at it, then back at the old woman’s face.

Ella repeated the sound Alisdair made. “What is that?”

Dr. Sinclair seemed taken aback, but Ella did not know why. “It’s a nickname for the school. When you read aloud the initials for the school, SSH, it makes a shushing sound.”

Ella thought about it, then nodded, but said nothing else.

Dr. Sinclair stared at her, then looked at Alisdair. “Did you need something from me?”

“Actually, I was hoping you could help Miss O’Toole with her textbooks. I completely forgot to take care of it when she arrived this morning.”

“Of course.” She opened the door out and held it for Ella. “Follow me, Miss O’Toole.”

Ella did not move.

“Miss O’Toole? Were you just going to stand there?” Dr. Sinclair asked after a few moments.

“You said to follow you. That means you have to go first.”

Dr. Sinclair threw a frown in Alisdair's direction. He smiled awkwardly and shrugged. Dr. Sinclair looked back at Ella. "This way, then." She stepped out, and Ella moved after her. Before Ella could close the door, Alisdair called out. She turned her head back.

"Don't forget, Miss O'Toole, we have a meeting after school."

Ella nodded, then let the door shut behind her. Dr. Sinclair just outside and Ella nearly knocked her over. "What are you doing?" Dr. Sinclair asked.

"You said to follow you."

"Yes, but there's no call to stand so close," Dr. Sinclair said. Ella, however, did not move.

"If I were you, I'd back up a bit," Dr. Sinclair continued.

"You are not."

"What?"

"You are not me," Ella said.

"Clearly not, but that's not the point."

"What is?"

"That you're standing too close to me."

Ella remained still, so Dr. Sinclair stepped back before moving down the hall. "These are the administrative offices," Dr. Sinclair said. "The guidance offices are down that way," she gestured toward the front of the building. "If you need to meet with your counselor, that's generally where you'll do so."

"Who is that?"

Dr. Sinclair stopped halfway down the hall and looked back at Ella. “No, I suppose you wouldn’t know who that is, being new and all. Come along, then, she can take care of this as well as I can.” Dr. Sinclair made for the front entrance, and knocked at the fourth door on the left.

“Come in,” a high voice said, and Dr. Sinclair poked her head through the door.

“Do you have a minute for a new student?”

“Of course,” the voice replied, and Dr. Sinclair stepped back so Ella could enter.

The tiny room felt even smaller because of the myriad decorations. Pictures and framed writings hid every speck of paint; knickknacks and photographs covered every inch of flat surface. A diminutive woman, who reminded Ella oddly of a chipmunk, stood from behind a much larger desk, her smile seeming too big for her face.

Dr. Sinclair nodded at Ella. “This is Ella O’Toole; she just arrived and needs her books. Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” the cheery woman replied, and waved airily at Dr. Sinclair’s retreating back. She turned toward Ella, who tried not to look directly at this woman with a rather blindingly wide smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Ella, I’m Mrs. Kyn.” Mrs. Kyn stretched her hand out to Ella, who looked at it disinterestedly. “Not big on hand shakes? That’s fine, not everyone is. Please, have a seat.” Mrs. Kyn motioned to two giant armchairs squeezed in front of her desk.

Ella stared, trying to figure out how to sit without climbing over the arm. “Not ‘Doctor?’”

“Excuse me?” Mrs. Kyn asked as she pulled her oversized chair closer to the desk. Really, did everything in this office dwarf its occupant?

“You said ‘Mrs. Kyn.’ Everyone else has been ‘Doctor.’”

Mrs. Kyn's smile did not diminish at all, even as Ella knocked over some of the knickknacks on the edge of the desk as she sat down: a porcelain waving cat, a figurine of a prancing unicorn, a frame made of dark wood. "Yes, most of our faculty here hold doctorates, but not everyone. I decided to stick with my master's." She motioned toward the wall behind Ella with one hand as she righted her desk with the other. Ella craned her head around the wide back of the chair. Sure enough, one of the frames on the wall contained a diploma, complete with an illegible Gothic font and fancy seals.

"So then," Mrs. Kyn said. Ella looked back at the high-pitched voice. "Welcome to our school! Excited to be here?"

"No."

"No? Well give it time, I'm sure you'll be very happy here."

"I do not think so."

The woman's grin stretched even further. "Not with an attitude like that, you won't. Don't you worry, though, we'll soon have a smile on that face! Now, let's take a look at what you need." Mrs. Kyn turned toward her computer and pecked at the keyboard. "Ella O'Toole, Ella O'Toole, here we are. Let's see, Honors Biology, English, Algebra II, nicely done, oh and Gaelic One, that's exciting, and Art History, and—"

"No."

Mrs. Kyn looked away from her screen. "No, dear?"

"I do not want Art History."

"Oh, it's really quite nice you know, not at all boring. I find it quite fascinating, in fact."

"I do not want it."

Mrs. Kyn looked back to the computer. “I’m afraid we require a parent or guardian to sign off on any schedule changes, as well as a meeting with either myself or another administrator. So sorry, dear, you’ll have to take it until we can set up a schedule.”

“I have a meeting with the principal later.”

“Oh, that’s fine then; see, you’ll only have to take it one day. Now then, that’s everything in the Honors section, and then we have Government and Ethics of Magic at the regular levels. So, you’ll need...” Mrs. Kyn turned away from her computer and tapped a corner of her desk. A pink book appeared above a list of titles. Mrs. Kyn started tapping items on the list: “Those two for Dr. Barlow, this one for Dr. Davidson, three for Dr. Hillard. Two more for Mr. O’Byrne, and one for Dr. Castillo. Since you’re not certain about keeping Art History, we’ll just leave that one for now, and then four for Ethics.” Mrs. Kyn tapped something at the bottom of the list, and it disappeared. The book symbol pulsed gently.

She turned toward Ella, pulling a drawer under her keyboard out. “While that’s going, why don’t I write you a note for Mr. Potter, hmm? You shouldn’t need your book this early on, but it can’t hurt to explain why you don’t have it. I mean, there’s no sense in getting it if you’re not planning to keep the class.” Pulling a large, fluffy pen from a jar on her desk, Mrs. Kyn bent her head over a pad of purple stationary. Ella stared at it, then sniffed.

“What is that smell?”

“Smell? Oh, you mean the tea tree oil. It’s these,” Mrs. Kyn said, waving the pen and pointing at the paper. “It’s so good for your skin, and my hands can get so rough handling papers and such all day. I just love scented things, don’t you?”

“No. They make me sneeze.”

“Oh, dear, I’m so sorry! Here,” Mrs. Kyn waved her hand, and Ella’s nose stopped twitching. “There now, I’ve blocked the smell, is that better?”

“Yes.”

“Good, good.” Mrs. Kyn leaned over her note, but a small chiming stopped her. She set the pen down and turned her chair to hunch over the bottom-most drawer.

“Here we are.” Mrs. Kyn pulled books out and started stacking them on her desk. The pile quickly reached above her head. “There now, that should be all of them. Can you manage, dear? Where’s your backpack?” she asked as she finished writing the note.

Ella stood up. She eyed the stack of textbooks, then pulled something out of her pocket. It looked like a scrap of cloth, small and ratty. Ella cupped her hands around it and slowly drew them apart; the rag grew as the space between her hands did, part of it folding over, a strap coming out to hang off the edges. When she was done, a clean black bag hung between her arms. She let her arms down, and the bag hung in the air a moment before falling into her grasp. She pulled the strap over her head and started loading her new books into the messenger bag.

“Oh excellent job, dear. I’ve never seen anything like that. Did your parents teach you?”

“I do not have parents,” Ella said without looking up. Shifting things around, she did not expect the tight pressure around her ribs and arms. She looked down at the top of Mrs. Kyn’s head.

“Oh, I’m so dreadfully sorry! I had no idea, I didn’t mean to bring up painful memories.”

Ella almost patted the small woman on the head, but managed to make her hand land on Mrs. Kyn’s shoulder instead. “You did not, but I do not like touching people.”

Mrs. Kyn jumped back, nearly banging into the wall. “Oh, of course not, I should have known from earlier, I’m so sorry.” Mrs. Kyn looked at a clock high on the wall as a bell rang. “Oh

no, hurry now, maybe you can still make it to class on time.” She started shoving books into Ella’s arms, the note stuffed into one as a bookmark, and practically pushed Ella out into the hallway. “It’s this way dear, I know, terribly confusing, what with the magical expansion, but you’ll get used to it. Dr. Barlow’s class is down that way, you know how to get there, yes? Now, if you need anything, anything at all, you just let me know. Have a wonderful day!” Ella stumbled away from the cheery woman; countless people crowded the corridor. She looked back at the end of the hall, and saw Mrs. Kyn staring after her. She rounded the corner and knelt down, setting the stack of books in her arm on the floor. She pulled her bag forward and rearranged its contents until she could not fit anything else. She piled the rest of her books in her arms, and stood up, another bell ringing as she settled her load. She looked around at the much emptier halls. Better, but she was not sure how exactly to get to her first class, and she did not see anyone nearby. She could go back and ask Mrs. Kyn...no, that was enough cheer for the day. Wait, her schedule.

Ella managed to pull it out of her pocket. To get directions she was supposed to...tap the room number at the top, that was it. She saw the first class on the list – Honors Biology, Dr. Barlow – and touched her finger to the room number. Arrows appeared, directing her down the hall. She walked slowly; when she made it to the door, she found it locked. She peeked through the glass window into a full classroom. None of the students noticed her, but Dr. Barlow waved his hand, and Ella heard the lock click. Trying again, she opened the door, but when she stepped inside, a number of students stood up. She froze, until she realized most of them were looking at a flag above her head, not her. Before she could move, the other students sat down and Dr. Barlow motioned for her to remain by the door.

Ella finally noticed the screen at the front of the room when a voice almost as high as Mrs. Kyn's began to speak. "Assistant Headmasters Sinclair and Tanaka would like to remind students the topiary around the school is not for experimentation. Students are asked not to animate any of the garden features, or statuary, unless under the supervision of a professor or administrator, with explicit, express permission from said professor or administrator. Any student caught breaking this rule will be required to maintain the garden and assorted features, for a period of no less than one month, without the use of magic. Further infractions will result in mandatory maintenance of the stables, for a period of no less than two months, also without the use of magic.

"The guidance office would like to wish everyone an easy start to the semester. Anyone wishing to speak with a counselor may, of course, make an appointment, but counselors will also be available everyday after school until four in the serenity garden. Refreshments will be available. In addition, counselors would like to remind students animal therapy is available upon request, preferably with at least one day's notice. Counselors should be informed of any allergies or preferences when the request is made. Therapy animals include, but are not limited to, dogs, cats, lizards, snakes, rabbits, birds, horses, griffins, wyverns, and dragons. Supervision is required.

"Additionally, Headmaster Benson would like to ask students to report any signs of technomagical malfunction or difficulty to his office, in person, or by phone or email. Incidences may include issues with the lunch line, the rehearsal spaces, the stables, and the like.

"To wrap up today's announcements, the weather will be mostly in the low eighties, with a heavy chance of rain in the afternoon, and the cafeteria is serving chicken stir fry, with vegetarian and gluten-free options available, with a side of rice. Pocky and bubble tea are available upon request. Thanks for listening, and have a great day!" The girl grinned widely, and then the screen

went black. Dr. Barlow tapped something at his desk, and the screen vanished, revealing a large whiteboard. Then he turned toward Ella.

“Terribly sorry about the wait, Miss O’Toole, but the projection gets funny if someone walks in front of it. Ah, good, you have your books. Well then, why don’t you introduce yourself briefly to the class?”

Ella blinked at him. She walked toward the front of the room and faced her classmates. “I am Ella.” She looked at Dr. Barlow. He waved her on. She looked at him. “I am fifteen?” He waved his hand in the direction of the students, so Ella turned back to them. “I am new here.” Everyone stared at her. She looked down at herself. Nothing seemed to be wrong with her: no extra appendages, no swirling fog.

“Right,” Dr. Barlow drawled. “Well. Thank you for that, Miss O’Toole. Why don’t you just take your seat? It’s there behind Mr. Kingsley.” Ella looked where he pointed, and saw an empty desk by the window behind the boy she talked to earlier. She crossed over and dropped the books in her arms on the desk, then set her bag down before taking her seat. “Alright, now, let’s get started. This unit concerns the makeup and function of cells.” Dr. Barlow tapped something on his computer screen, and notes covered the whiteboard.

Ella stared at Dr. Barlow as he lectured, using markers to underline concepts or draw figures. Maybe she should take notes. She opened her book to find what he was talking about, but a bell rang. She twitched, turning to find the sound. Suddenly, people were streaming out of the room and Dr. Barlow was erasing the board. “Ella?” She looked up at Connor. He was standing in front of her, hand raised as though to wave it in her face. “Class is over,” he said.

“Already?”

“I know, right? Dr. Barlow does a great job of making his lessons not boring, so they don’t feel like they’re dragging on. But you know, if you don’t leave soon, you might be late to second hour. Where’s your next class?”

“I do not know.”

“Oh, no, of course not. Here, where’s your schedule?” Ella shifted the stack of books on her desk and pulled the paper out. She showed it to Connor. “You’re in luck, your next class is nearby. Come on, I’ll show you.” Ella stood up slowly, settling her bag on her shoulder and gathering the rest of her books together. “Ella?” She looked up; he was already halfway out the door and holding it open. “You might want to move a little faster. The teachers can penalize you if you’re late.” Ella just walked toward him. “Have a nice day, Dr. Barlow,” Connor called out.

“And you, Mr. Kingsley.”

Ella followed Connor into the hallway.

“Ok, so what you want to do is go straight down this hall, and take the second door on the right. See?” Connor pointed to the right, gesturing to something Ella could not see beyond the hordes of students.

“No.”

“What do you mean ‘no’? It’s right there.”

“I cannot see that from here.”

“Do you need glasses or something?”

“No. There are too many people for me to see where you are pointing.”

Connor gave her a funny look. Ella checked herself again; nope, still nothing strange. “Right, well, once you go through there, go down the right-hand hall, and it should be the first

door on the right. You have a good a day, Ella.” Connor walked away. Ella stared after him a moment, then headed down the hall to where Connor pointed. Pulling the second door open, she came into a small room with three branching corridors. She opened the first door of the right-hand hall just as the bell rang again. She glanced up to see where it was coming from when she heard a thick brogue. “Either step in or out, lass, but do it quickly, I’ve work to do.” Ella turned toward the voice and saw a rather burly man hovering impatiently at the whiteboard. Another adult who thought he knew better than her; how disappointing.

Connor

Connor was sitting down for English when he heard a voice from the underworld.

“Connor, how lovely to see you.”

His eye twitched at the saccharine voice. He inhaled deeply and turned. “Hello, Clarisse.”

“And how are we doing today?” The girl reached out to touch Connor’s hair, but he reared back. Now her eye was twitching.

“Fine, thank you; and yourself?”

“Oh, I’m just wonderful, thank you so much.”

“Of course.” Connor went back to his bag, pulling out a paperback and a thick binder.

“So what are you doing tonight?”

“Tuesdays are my shifts at the library.”

“Well, what about tomorrow?”

“Same as every other Wednesday night for the next few months. I have marching band.”

“How about Thursday?”

“Orchestra rehearsal.”

“Already?”

“The drama department’s been in production nearly two months.”

“Friday, then.”

“Marching band.”

“Again?”

“Yes, again. We have practice three nights a week.”

“That doesn’t sound very fun.”

“Some people enjoy it.”

“Surely you’re free this weekend. You and I could—”

Connor had about three seconds before he descended fully into hell. Then, coming in through the door, salvation. “Ella!” he exclaimed. Clarisse’s head whipped around to stare at the entrance. Connor leaned around her to look at Ella, who had stopped just inside the classroom. Connor frantically waved her over, pasting a blank look on his face when Clarisse spun back around to look at him. Connor screwed up his face and blinked his eyes rapidly, trying not to sneeze. Her perfume, as always, drenched him like he had stuck his head in a vat of the stuff.

“Who is that?” Clarisse asked, eyes stalking Ella’s movement forward.

“I am Ella.” Connor and Clarisse turned to face Ella, who stood very close to Connor’s desk. Ella looked at Connor, who was watching Clarisse, who was glaring at Ella. Clarisse did not seem impressed by what she took as Ella’s lack of fashion sense. Too much black, probably.

“Connor, why on Earth is this Goth person talking to you? Do you know her?”

“No, Clarisse, I just happened to call a random name and there happened to be a person who responded to it.” Connor shifted his gaze toward Ella. “What’s up, how’s your day been?”

“Are you injured?” Ella asked.

“No, why?”

“You looked like you were having a seizure.”

Clarisse raised one eyebrow at Connor; he hated that, her ‘solitary eyebrow of death’ look. “No, I’m fine! Just, you know, curious about your day. We haven’t gotten new students three weeks into term before.”

“A new student? That can’t be, Connor, Benson wouldn’t do that,” Clarisse scoffed.

“Well, clearly he did. Anyway, Ella, how’s it been?”

“Fine.” Connor waited for something more, but Ella just looked at him. He opened his mouth to ask her a more pointed question, but Clarisse butted in.

“Connor, dear, you’re being terribly rude. You haven’t introduced your little... friend.”

Connor grimaced. “Right. Of course. Ella, this is Clarisse.”

Clarisse held her hand out to Ella. “Lovely to meet you.”

Ella stared at the other girl’s hand, then looked back at her face. Connor wondered what Ella thought of the tall, pretty girl decked out in the latest fashion trends. At least, the latest trends involving a lot of skin. Connor had no idea why a teacher hadn’t cited Clarisse for breaking dress code with those high-cut shorts; or, for that matter, why Clarisse never wore the long skirts or sleeves Marie found trendy.

“Aren’t you going to shake my hand?” Clarisse asked, nose starting to go up in the air.

“No,” Ella said bluntly.

Connor hid a grin at Ella’s straightforward answer, and the face Clarisse made in return.

“Well,” Clarisse drawled as she laid her hand against her heart. “How terribly rude.”

Connor rolled his eyes. “It’s not rude, Clarisse, some people just don’t like shaking hands.”

“How considerate of you, Connor, but honestly, it’s just a little handshake. It’s not like I have germs or something.”

Connor started to respond, but the bell rang. Ella looked up.

“Ella?” Connor asked.

“Yes?”

“What are you looking at?”

“I am trying to see where the bell is.” Connor stared. Ella looked at his face. “You are giving me that look again,” she said. “Why do you keep staring at me like I have an extra head? There is nothing wrong with me; I checked.”

Connor snorted. He saw Clarisse shift her weight out of the corner of his eye, and then she covered her mouth with her hand and tittered. “Oh, Connor, now I see why you spoke to her. You didn’t tell me she was so amusing.”

“What’s amusing, Clarisse?” a mellow voice asked, drawing their attention. They turned toward a short, tan man with a full goatee holding a coffee cup.

“Apparently, I am,” Ella stated flatly.

“Who might you be?”

“Ella.”

“Ella? Ah, the young lady Alisdair mentioned. Just transferred, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. I am Dr. Castillo, by the way. Why don’t you take this other seat next to Connor? If memory serves, no one has claimed it.” Ella nodded, and sat down to Connor’s left as Dr. Castillo turned toward the whiteboard. Clarisse immediately claimed Connor’s other side, moving a bag out of the way.

“Excuse me, Clarisse, but I was sitting there.” Connor turned toward the soft voice of his friend Ko, who stood in front of Clarisse’s new spot.

Clarisse smiled sweetly. “No, you weren’t.”

Ko held the other girl's gaze for a moment, then shook her head. She slung her backpack across the aisle and sat down behind Connor. Connor made a face at her sympathetically, then shifted as Dr. Castillo called for attention.

“Good morning, everyone. Before we begin, I would like to introduce a new student. Though she comes to us a bit later than usual, I hope you will all help her feel welcome. Now then, Ella, everyone had to introduce themselves at the start of the semester, so why don't you do that now. Stand up, please, and face your classmates.”

Ella stood and turned. Connor glanced behind his shoulder to see the other students. Looking back at Ella, he noticed she seemed to be focused on the wall, rather than anyone else.

“Please tell us who your favorite author, playwright, screenwriter, or poet is, and why.”

Ella looked at Dr. Castillo. “I do not have one,” she said plainly.

Connor shifted, glancing between Dr. Castillo and Ella, who was sitting back down.

“Just a moment, Ella,” Dr. Castillo said. Connor watched her freeze, squatting above her chair. “Stand back up, please. I'm afraid no one gets out this. Please, your favorite, if you would.”

Ella stood facing the teacher. “I do not have one.”

Dr. Castillo gave a strained smile. “Ella, I understand wanting to make your mark on your classmates, but I really must insist on an answer.”

Connor glanced at Ella, who almost seemed to stare the teacher down, before raising his hand slightly to catch Dr. Castillo's attention. “Yes, Connor?” the teacher said.

“I was just thinking maybe the scope of the question is a little too big?” Connor turned in his seat toward Ella. “Maybe Ella has a favorite piece of work instead, or a favorite style of writing?” He hoped she caught his drift.

Ella stared at Connor, then shifted her gaze back to Dr. Castillo. “Can it be religious?”

Dr. Castillo’s smile eased into something much more natural. “Yes, of course; otherwise, we would be excluding a rather large portion of the written text, historically speaking.”

“I was not thinking of something written.”

The tension crept back into Dr. Castillo’s face. “An oral tradition, then. Fine.”

“I was thinking of a song, actually.”

“Lovely. Why don’t you share a verse or two?”

“There are no lyrics in the original.”

Dr. Castillo’s smile seemed sick as a skeleton’s. “Perhaps you should speak of the version which does have words.”

“They are not in English.”

Connor could tell Dr. Castillo was nearing his breaking point. “Give us the gist, then,” Dr. Castillo said tightly. “Please.”

“It is about the Mother.”

“You mean the Virgin Mother? Wonderful, a lovely choice. You may sit now,” Dr. Castillo rushed out. Connor knew Castillo must be really annoyed to speak so quickly and dismissively. He didn’t even ask Ella for a few lines.

Connor shook his head at Ella when she started to say something else. He waved her into her seat as Dr. Castillo began writing on the board.

Connor peeked at Ella from the corner of his eye throughout class; she never opened the book or took notes. All she did was watch Dr. Castillo, and she didn’t even seem to pay attention.

As the bell rang for the end of the period, Connor closed up his bag and asked, “Need help finding your next class, Ella?”

“I can tap the room number to find it.”

“Yeah, or you could let me see your schedule.” Ella handed the paper to Connor. He scanned it. “Oh, we’ve got Government together next.”

“Not another class with the Goth”

Connor grimaced at Ella, motioning her to move past Clarisse. “Clarisse, it’s rude to talk about people like that.”

“Connor, I’m being perfectly polite. It’s not like I know what gender to use.”

“Her name’s ‘Ella.’”

“Connor, it’s not nice to assume anything. Just because someone has a girl’s name doesn’t mean they think of themselves as a girl. You know that.”

Connor frowned as Clarisse brushed past him to move ahead. Connor grabbed the closing door and held it open for Ella, then led her down the hall. “Ella?”

“Yes.”

“You are a girl, right? I mean, you identify as one. I’m not offending you or something?”

“No.”

“Oh. Good. Wait, no to the being a girl or the other part?”

“You are not offending me,” Ella said as she walked into the classroom.

Connor held the door open, thinking. “Ok, yes, girl, good,” he muttered, following Ella inside. For such a direct person, Ella was very confusing.

CHAPTER THREE

Ella

The bell rang. “Finally!” Connor said, stretching his arms over his head before packing up his bag. “Man, some days just feel like forever, right?”

“No,” Ella said as she slung her bag over her shoulder.

“Yeah, I suppose your day went pretty quickly, what with first day nerves and all.”

“No.”

Connor looked up from his backpack. Some little twinge went off in Ella’s head at the sight of him, but she ignored it. Probably just a memory trying to come up to the surface, nothing she wanted right now. “No, it didn’t feel like forever, or no, it didn’t go quickly?” Connor clarified.

“It did not feel like forever. Forever is much worse,” Ella explained.

Connor nodded as he stood. “Suppose it would be. Anyway, good for you, not letting the nerves get to you.”

“What does that mean?” Ella asked as she followed Connor out the door.

“You don’t know that expression?”

“No.”

“Huh. I just meant, you know, it must be pretty weird to join now. It’s too early in the semester for a transfer, but you didn’t start with everyone else, so it’s good you didn’t let it psych you out. Oh, that’s just another expression for being nervous, by the way.”

“What is that?”

“Hmm?”

“What is ‘nervous’?”

He gave her that ‘there is something wrong with you and you have not noticed it yet’ look again. “You don’t know what ‘nervous’ means?”

“I know the word. I do not know the feeling.”

“Seriously?” he asked. Ella shrugged. “Well, it means, anxious,” Connor elaborated. He looked at her like that should clear everything up. Her silence apparently told him otherwise. “Stressed out? Panicked? Worried?”

“Worried,” Ella said. “Yes.”

“Oh, you were worried? Sorry, you didn’t really seem it.”

“No. I remember what ‘worried’ is.”

Connor stopped and stared. “Ella, where did you say you grew up?”

“Hello,” a deep voice interjected. A tall, broad man stood just in front of the two students. Ella moved toward the blond giant; she saw Connor’s jaw drop slightly as he craned his neck to look in the newcomer’s face.

“Um, hello,” Connor stammered.

“I see you’ve made a friend, Ella. That’s wonderful,” the man said, a soft smile on his face.

“You know this guy?” Connor asked Ella. He had a strange tone, something in his voice Ella could not place, though it sounded familiar.

“I’m her legal guardian.” The tall man turned his gaze to Ella. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?”

“He is not my friend,” Ella said.

The older man winced as Connor frowned, then cleared his throat. “I hope you’ll excuse Ella. I’m afraid she’s not really used to manners and the like, so she doesn’t really know how to

put things politely. I'm sure she just means you don't really know each other well enough to call yourself friends yet." He offered his hand to Connor. "I'm Aidyn, by the by."

Connor was still frowning at Ella, but he took the man's hand anyway. "Connor."

"Nice to meet you, Connor. Ella, we should head on in. I don't think we want to keep the headmaster waiting." Aidyn held the door open, nodding at Connor. Ella walked through the door.

"Bye, Ella. See you tomorrow." Ella turned back to see Connor standing there, another familiar look on his face. She thought she recognized this one – wanting? No, expectant, that was it. He must be expecting her to say something.

"Yes." Ella walked ahead to Alisdair's office, and opened it.

"Excuse me!" Dr. Sinclair stood in front of Alisdair. Ella knew the look on her face: anger.

"For what?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss O'Toole?"

"You said 'excuse me'; for what do I need to excuse you?"

"Perhaps you could wait outside a moment," Alisdair said, a smile tightening his face.

"We have an appointment."

"Yes, Miss O'Toole, and I will be happy to have that meeting with you and your guardian as soon as I am done speaking with Dr. Sinclair."

"Not a problem, Headmaster," Aidyn said as he pulled Ella back into the hallway, closing the door behind them. He sighed, looking at Ella. "We really need you to remember etiquette."

Ella noticed something from the corner of her eye; she turned and saw Connor waving at her from the outer hallway, apparently speaking to someone on the other side of the open door.

Wave back.

Ella blinked, and looked at Aidyn.

Why are you talking in my head?, she asked Aidyn.

That's not important, my lady, just wave back!

At Connor?

Yes, at Connor.

Ella glanced back at Connor, whose arm hung halfway up, as though caught between waving and hiding his hand. Shifting her books to one arm, she raised the other and gave a little wave. She got a brilliant grin in return before something distracted Connor and he looked away. Ella stared at him until something knocked into her back. Her books fell with several very loud thumps, and she barely managed to keep her body from following.

“What do you think you are doing?” a female voice exclaimed.

Ella swiveled her head to see Dr. Sinclair hanging off Aidyn's arm, breathing heavily.

“Waiting to speak with Alisdair.”

“Firstly, only students of the highest caliber are permitted to call the headmaster by his given name, and only after he invites them to do so. Otherwise, he is ‘Doctor,’ ‘Headmaster,’ or ‘Sir’ to you. Is that understood?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Secondly, did no one teach you not to stand directly in front of a doorway?”

“No.”

Ella watched Dr. Sinclair rear back, then sneak a peek into Alisdair's office. She studied Ella's face, then focused her gaze on Aidyn. “Do you know, I thought he was having me on? So it's really true, about the homeschooling in the middle of nowhere?”

“It is as the headmaster explained,” Aidyn averred, helping Dr. Sinclair get to her feet.

“Well, then. I suppose that clears things up quite a bit.” Neatening her clothes, Dr. Sinclair flicked her eyes between Ella and Aidyn. “In the future, Miss O’Toole, it is best to stand to the side of a door, so people may come and go freely. Remember that.”

Ella nodded. Dr. Sinclair gave Aidyn a last look, then walked past the two, hopping over the fallen books.

“Miss O’Toole,” Alisdair called. She glanced at him in the doorway. “Why don’t you gather your things and come inside?”

“I’ll get them,” Aidyn said, moving past Ella to pick up the textbooks, then ushering her inside. Ella saw Alisdair tap the corner of his desk, before falling into his chair with a heavy breath.

“Did you really have to make things so difficult, my lady?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Every teacher you had today – every one – complained to Dr. Sinclair.”

“About what?”

“About you! They said you were impertinent and uncooperative, among other things.” Ella stared at him. “That means you were rude; you did not engage in class as they expected you to.”

“I cannot control what they expect, nor change my behavior to suit ideals I cannot know.”

Alisdair scrubbed his hands across his face. “My lady, please. While you are here, you must behave like a student, a teenage student. As it is, I’ve already had to concoct a story about how you were raised in almost total isolation from other people, which led to a serious lack of development in your social and interpersonal skills. I wouldn’t be surprised if some of them think you have a disability or the like. In fact, we may have to fake some paperwork to that effect.”

Ella shrugged, leaning in to examine the sigil. A green checkmark glowed inside a circle.

“Who did this?”

Ella caught a glimpse of Alisdair and Aidyn exchanging a...what was that word Connor mentioned? A ‘nervous’ look. “I did, my lady. You just saw me turn it on.”

“I meant, who made this?”

“Oh,” Alisdair sighed, settling into his chair as Ella and Aidyn sat down on the other side of the desk. “Well the school’s security warding was a group effort, actually, but that particular one is Rylla’s. She always did have a knack for keeping things secret.”

Ella nodded, waiting for Alisdair to say more. Instead, he leaned forward, folding his arms across his desk. Ella stared at him. He looked between Ella and Aidyn.

“Alisdair?”

“Yes, my lady?”

“Why are you not speaking?”

“How do you mean, my lady?”

“Aidyn said you would explain why I am here.”

Alisdair sneaked a sidelong peek at Aidyn. “My lady, surely you know by now.”

“No.”

Another look between the two men. “You don’t know why I called you here?”

“Obviously not, or I would not be waiting for you to tell me.”

Ella watched Alisdair’s face shift; she could not identify all the emotions, but she had a vague feeling none of them were good.

“My lady,” Alisdair said slowly, “don’t you feel it?”

Ella heard ringing in her ears. She twitched her head, trying to shake the feeling loose. She swung around, searching for the source of the sound. Around the walls were faint images, like a faded picture laid over reality. Flickering in and out, shelves lined the office, overflowing with items and frames. Ella stumbled over to where a single object stood in vivid clarity: a glass cube containing a small ball. She stroked her finger around the edges, the images completely fading out until even the encased sphere vanished.

“Something broke.”

“Yes, my lady.” Ella felt Alisdair’s eyes on the back of her neck, but she kept looking where the orb had been. “An instrument you gave me, sensitive to evil. That it should break, and take the entire room with it...Forgive me, but could you not notice until I mentioned it?”

Ella lowered her hand, and went back to her seat. “No.”

“You couldn’t.”

“No.”

“And this doesn’t concern you?”

“I am not here.”

Alisdair glanced from Ella to Aidyn. “Come again?”

“I am not here.”

Alisdair focused on Aidyn, who shifted in his seat. “What my lady is trying to say,” Aidyn explained, “is that the body seated before you, while a full physical manifestation, does not in fact contain the majority of her consciousness.”

Alisdair slackened, leaning more of his weight on the desk, eyes wide as plates. “What exactly does that mean?”

“Her body is real enough, but contains only enough of her spirit to keep it animate.”

Alisdair stared at Aidyn. “Why, pray tell, is that the case?”

“I am still asleep,” Ella said.

Alisdair returned his focus to her. “Still asleep? What, back in the mountains?”

“Yes.”

Alisdair sighed noisily. He pinched the bridge of his nose, leaning his head back to address the ceiling. “Let me make sure I understand, my lady. Even though I knew you did not wish to be disturbed, I asked you to leave the Temple, your hidden sanctuary on the other side of the world, and come here with all due haste to deal with a very serious issue which I believed could only be handled with the utmost discretion and skill—in other words, by you—knowing full well if you found my plea unworthy, you were as like to render me powerless and toss me down a hole to be forgotten as to help me, like you did the last time someone called on you for something petty. And you thought sending what is basically a toy would be the best course of action?”

Ella remained silent. Alisdair looked incredulously from her to Aidyn and back. His shocked expression fled, replaced by something rather like rage. Power choked the air in the room, making it difficult to breathe; a moment later, Ella heard glass shattering behind her, frames clattering off the walls.

“Alisdair!” Aidyn thundered, a heavy feeling blanketing the office. Ella felt Aidyn and Alisdair’s magics practically snarling at each other.

“No, Aidyn, I haven’t asked for anything in over a thousand years, not since the world was dying from plague and my best friend—” Alisdair broke off.

Ella could tell he was pulling his magic back, the pressure in the room easing. Aidyn hesitated, making sure Alisdair had control, before letting his own magic quiet. The room felt lighter now, though a gloom still hung in the air. Ella watched Alisdair grind his palms into his eyes; she should remember what he was talking about. A thousand years was not so very long ago.

“My lady!” Alisdair called.

Ella shook her head, redirecting her attention to Alisdair. “Yes.”

“Did you hear anything I just said?”

“Something about your friend.”

Alisdair’s face fell, and he held his hands out to Ella. “My lady, please. I need your help, and I’m afraid it will need all of your attention. Please, you must wake up.”

“I cannot.” Ella sat still as Alisdair inhaled so quickly he choked. Aidyn came half out of his chair to help, but a coughing Alisdair waved him back down. Aidyn sat slowly, gazing at the floor as he fidgeted with his fingers. Ella looked from him to Alisdair, who took long, slow breaths.

When his breathing steadied, Alisdair fixed his gaze on Ella. “What do you mean you can’t?” he asked carefully.

Ella shrugged. “I have been asleep so long, I have forgotten how to wake up.”

Alisdair sent a look at Aidyn, who hunched further over to avoid his gaze. That look was somewhat familiar too; Ella thought it might be a relative of nervous.

“But, surely,” Alisdair stammered, “surely, Aidyn and the others can get into the library, to find the old records of—”

“I do not want to.” Ella said.

“I’m sorry?” Alisdair spluttered, eyes looking even bigger than before

“For what?”

“No, I mean, I don’t understand.”

“I do not want to wake up. I am...better this way.” Now Alisdair wore the same expression Connor had earlier.

“Who the bloody hell told you that?”

“I remember.” Ella broke away from Alisdair’s eyes, looking behind him to the painting of the dancer. “I remember from the last time I was awake; it hurt.” Ella looked down at her hands, counting the lines on her palm as the nails of the opposite hand scratched back and forth. “I do not want to hurt again.”

Silence ruled the room. Then Ella felt her chair move back, and a pair of hands cupped hers. She refused to look up, even when she felt someone lean their head against hers. “My lady,” Alisdair said softly, “I understand you are in pain, and only a tiny portion of you is hearing this, amid all the dreams and darkness the rest of you is lost in. But please,” he begged, squeezing her hands. “I can feel it in my bones. Something is coming. Something so evil the last 1,500 years seem like a child’s daydream.” Ella shut her eyes as tightly as she could as he continued. “You told me, all those years ago when you charged me with protecting this world. You said this would be the final one.” She felt his finger under her chin, gently forcing her face up. She waited for him to do something, but nothing came. Eventually, she let one eye creep open, and saw him staring patiently. “My lady, if this truly is the last world, would you really watch it die?”

After a long time, Ella let her shoulders fall and her eyes drift fully open. She studied Alisdair’s face, saw his eyes flicking back and forth as he watched hers.

“I will not wake up.” Both men took a sharp breath in. “I will try to remember more; and I will let Aidyn and some of the others look in the library for something that could help.” Both breaths came out slowly.

“Thank you, my lady. Thank you.” Alisdair pressed her hands, then kissed them.

“You still need to tell me what is going on, and why I have to look like this.”

“Yes, of course.” Alisdair shifted his weight in front of Ella, still holding onto her hands. “I suppose I should start with the big news.” Ella watched him take several deep breaths, straightening his spine; he looked more nervous now than before. “I asked you to masquerade as a student, my lady, because your children are here.”

Connor

“Ella?” Connor stood from his desk, students filing out around him, eager to leave their last class. Connor waved his hand in front of her face, and she looked up.

“Why did you do that?” she asked.

“I was trying to get your attention.”

“You could have said my name.”

“I did. Three times.”

“Oh.” Ella looked around, then back at Connor. “Where are the other students?”

“Class is over.” Connor leaned down to look Ella in the eyes. “Are you feeling ok? You’re not getting sick, are you? That would really suck, to start school so late and then miss even more.”

“No.”

“That’s no, you’re not sick, not no, it wouldn’t suck, right?”

“Yes.”

“Cool, I’m actually starting to get the hang of this.”

“Connor!” He turned to the door where a lanky, dark-skinned boy stood. “Gonna be late.”

“What?” Connor checked the clock on the classroom wall. “Oh shoot, you’re right. Sorry, Ella, got to run!” Connor waved as he rushed out of the room. “Thanks, Naz.”

“No problem. Who was that?”

“You hear about the new girl?”

“The one who started yesterday? That was her?”

“Yeah. She was totally zoned out. I’m not sure she heard a word the entire class.”

“Seriously? Wasn’t it Benson’s turn today?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s ballsy, not paying attention when the headmaster’s teaching.”

“That’s the weird part. It felt like he knew she wasn’t paying attention, and he didn’t care.”

“No way, Amira told me he gets super pissy if you space out on him.”

“I don’t think he gets super pissy about anything.”

“True. Alright, man, I got to change. See you.”

“See you, Naz. Enjoy the pool.” Connor nodded at his friend as he walked into the dojo.

“You’re late,” a stocky, deeply tanned boy in a matching jacket and *hakama* said. Connor jogged past him, making for the locker rooms at the back of the dojo.

“Not yet, I’m not.” Connor set his bag down and opened his locker, pulling out his uniform. Behind him, he heard the steadily increasing buzz of voices. After he changed and put his things away, he grabbed his *shinai* and went back out to stand next to the other boy. At least thirty students milled around the big room. Connor leaned in to whisper, “What do you think, Re?”

“I think we’ve got a lot of weeding to do.” Stepping forward, Re raised his voice. “Attention, everyone! Welcome to tryouts for the kendo team. Let’s begin.”

#

“Reset!” a voice called over a microphone. Connor stepped back into position, holding his piccolo at attention. He saw everyone moving in his periphery, but he kept his eyes fixed on Amira atop the drum major’s podium and, beyond her on the balcony, Dr. Grant, who adjusted her mic and said, “Trumpets, you’re still arching too far, it’s supposed to be a shallow semicircle. Again.”

“Set!” Amira called. Connor lifted his instrument and watched her. “One, two, one, two, three, four!” Connor counted out his steps as he moved to his next position in the formation, then came to a halt. Amira looked back at the balcony.

“Good,” Dr. Grant said. “Take ten minutes.” Connor got out of the way quickly, grabbing his water bottle. As he took a swig, he noticed someone sitting on a bench, watching the band. Hunched over, all he saw was the monotonous black of...oh!

“Ella!” Connor waved. She looked at him, then waved back jerkily. “Been there long?”

“No.”

“You know there’s not really much to watch right now. We probably won’t do any music today, this is just to clean up the forms.” Ella stared past Connor. “Were you thinking about joining the band? You’d have to switch your schedule around but it’s still fairly early in the year.”

“No.”

“Not a music person, then, just like watching the show?”

“I liked music.”

“You should definitely join then, we’d never say no to another member. Well, unless you’re a trumpet player, there’s always too many of them.”

“I do not play.”

“Oh.” Connor shifted restlessly, took a gulp of water. Ella’s eyes stayed riveted to the band; Connor followed her gaze. “That’s Naz, there. Nazih; he’s the one who grabbed me earlier.”

Ella nodded, but didn’t turn. Connor thought she was almost looking past the band, to something only she could see. “Ella, are you ok? You’ve seemed out of it all day.”

“My family is here.”

“I thought you didn’t have any family.”

“We are not...they do not...it is difficult to explain.”

“Are they your guardian’s family?”

“Who?” Ella asked, finally looking at Connor.

“Your guardian? Aidyn? Blond Viking dude I met yesterday?”

“Oh. Him. No, they are not related to him. Not exactly.”

“Ok. Then how are they your family?”

“It is difficult to explain.”

“Yeah, you said that.” Ella stared at him. “You know, if you don’t want to tell me, just say so.” Still staring. “Ok, I’m gonna go back to practice now.” Connor leapt off the bench. His shoulders hunching up, he walked back to the practice field.

“I do not know.”

Connor stopped, and turned halfway back. “Don’t know what?”

“How to explain.”

Connor turned fully around. “They’re not your guardian’s family?”

“Not exactly.”

“You know, it’s really annoying to use the same words over and over.” Ella gazed blankly.

“Ok, then. So, not related to Aidyn. Did they serve together or something?”

“Serve what?”

“You really don’t understand slang, do you?” A very precise nod. “Were they in the military together? My father has some old Army buddies he calls brothers.”

“Not—”

“Don’t say it.” Ella clamped her lips shut. “Are they frat brothers or something?”

“I do not know what that means.”

“Probably not then...well, how do they know each other?”

“They have known each other all their lives.”

“Oh, so they’re childhood friends! Why didn’t you just say that?”

Ella shrugged. “It is more complicated than that.”

“Course it is. You know someone so long, it’s bound to be. I’ve got a few myself.”

“Connor!” someone called. Connor turned to see the band lining up, Naz waving at him.

“Speaking of friends, got to go.” Connor nodded at Ella, then dashed back just in time for Amira to call the band to attention. He risked a glance back to the bench, where Ella sat, head turned up to the sky.

#

“Partner up, and work on the following exercises,” Mr. O’Byrne said. Connor turned his desk to face his neighbor and started copying the list of exercises Mr. O’Byrne wrote on the board.

“Hey, Con,” a cheery voice chirped. Connor turned toward the redheaded girl pulling her desk closer to his.

“Hey, Marie. Braids are looking good today.”

Marie fingered a couple of the long braids swinging around her face. “Thank you! I finally had some time over the long weekend to take care of them. What page are we starting on?”

“Twenty-three.” Connor flipped to the page and read aloud. ““Use the following words and subject forms in a clear, cohesive paragraph.’ Shouldn’t be too bad.”

The two bent their heads to their notebooks, scribbling quietly.

“There’s no formal second-person, right?”

“Um...” Connor flipped back through his notes. “Not in modern Irish. Why?”

“Well if I’m writing a paragraph for O’Byrne, I’d have to use the formal. The T-V distinction, you know.”

“You don’t have to address the exercise to him, Marie.”

“Mmkay.”

“I thought you were trying to stop thinking of things in French before translating them.”

“Uh-huh.” Marie jotted something down. Connor went back to work as well, but he could feel Marie’s eyes flickering back and forth from her paper to the top of his head.

“Ask.”

“Oh you know me so well,” Marie let out in a long rush. They shared a quick grin.

“I can hear the question trying to lunge out at me.”

“Are you really hot for the new girl?”

Connor coughed violently, drawing the attention of his classmates and teacher. Waving off Mr. O’Byrne, Connor snagged his water bottle and took a long drink. When his heart stopped trying to crawl out of his throat, he went back to his work. Glancing furtively at the teacher, he split his attention between the textbook and his friend.

“What the hell?”

“It’s not true?”

“Who even told you that?”

“Re, of course.”

“Why would he think—”

“Zee told him.”

“Zee? As in Nazih?”

“Do you know another Zee?”

Connor shook his head. “Why would Naz think—”

“He said you were talking to her. Almost made you late for practice.”

Mr. O’Byrne wandered over to their side of the room. Connor and Marie focused their attention on their work, keeping up their studious façade until he went over to help another student.

“So what, talking to a girl automatically means I like her now? Re’d better watch out.”

There went the infamous eye roll. “No, of course not, silly, but it’s not like you.”

“To talk to a girl? Wow, I guess you need to tell me something, then.”

Marie scoffed. “To be late, Connor. You hate it.”

Connor moved around in his seat and did some more exercises. “Look, she seemed totally out of it. I was just making sure she was ok.”

“So you do like her!”

“No!” Connor whispered loudly. Checking to make sure O’Byrne hadn’t heard, Connor studied his textbook. “Listen, she’s not like anyone else I’ve met. She’s confusing and I don’t fully understand her, but she’s weirdly interesting. She started late and doesn’t really have the hang of things and I thought she could use some help. Ok?”

Connor knew the look on Marie's face very well. It meant she in no way believed anything he just said. "Come on, Ree, let it go. It's not like that."

Marie's expression remained, but she pointedly looked back down at her work. Connor let out a silent sigh of relief. Sometimes Marie's inner journalist came out a little too strongly, although she usually... Connor stopped writing, staring blankly at the page. Marie often got ahead of herself, but she rarely got such things wrong. Did she know something he hadn't even realized?

"Time's up. Back to your seats to review."

As Mr. O'Byrne erased the board and called on someone to speak, Connor pushed his desk flush to the wall, avoiding the question he wasn't sure he wanted an answer to.

#

Connor opened his locker in the dojo, grabbing a clean uniform.

"So what's she like?"

Connor whipped around. "Jeez, Re, why can't you make noise like a normal person?"

"Samurai don't make noise," the other boy replied.

Connor grinned wryly at the standard response. "With so much armor, I doubt that."

Re shrugged. "So is it true?"

"What?"

"The new girl. You like her."

"I told Marie 'no.'"

"She doesn't believe you."

Connor scoffed, then walked toward the changing stalls at the back of the locker room. Re followed, standing outside the door holding Connor's *shinai* while he changed. "You know how Marie gets," Connor said.

"I also know she's usually right."

Connor kept quiet. Leaving the stall, he adjusted his jacket before walking back out to the dojo. Re went with him, leaning both practice swords against the wall as the two boys started to stretch. Connor started to speak several times, but couldn't get the words out. Re waited.

"I'm not sure," Connor admitted.

"Ok."

"I mean, she's interesting to talk to, definitely, but also really weird, and I don't know if it's a good weird. Plus, I have no idea what she really looks like, I honestly thought she might have been a guy that first day."

"Ok."

"And she's really...not annoying—frustrating, I guess. She says these really rude things, and I can't tell if she means them or if she doesn't realize how actually rude they are. Her guardian—who is a literal giant, by the way—says she's not very good with manners, but come on, there are some things you're supposed to know by the time you get to high school."

"If you say so."

Connor grimaced at Re as they settled onto the floor for more stretches. "You're different. You understand basic manners; you just don't care about them very much. Ella...it almost seems like she's a robot trying to talk like a person."

"Maybe she is."

“Nah, they’re still testing the tamper-proof prototypes, they haven’t released a model yet.”

“Maybe she’s part of a secret study to see how the interaction protocols are working.”

“You see Dr. Benson risking that? The last model blew up when that kid tried to mess with it in whatever city it was.”

“St. Paul, I think.”

“Right. He was trying to change the admin protocol and he overwhelmed the circuitry or something. Took three days for them to get his organs whole again, and another five to fix his skin.” Connor set his feet against Re’s and slowly pulled his friend forward.

“So what’re you going to do?” Re asked, voice slightly strained for the awkward position.

Connor helped his friend lean back, then let Re pull him into the stretch. “Nothing, I guess, until I figure it out.”

“That sounds reasonable.”

“Glad you think so,” Connor huffed out, voice muffled by his knees and lack of breath. Re helped him upright, then the two carefully stood and gave everything a final shake.

“Ready, boys?” A diminutive woman emerged from the dojo office.

Connor and Re grabbed their *shinai*, turned, and bowed to the woman. “Ready, sensei,” they chorused.

“Bow.” The boys stepped apart, and made shallow bows to each other.

“Set.” Connor slid back into his stance, his movements mirrored by Re.

“Begin.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Ella

“Settle down, please,” Alisdair called to the ethics class at the end of the day. Ella grabbed a seat near the door, looking around at the circle of desks.

“You haven’t seen this yet, have you?” Connor asked, sliding into the chair next to Ella.

“Seen what?”

“Circle time. Dr. Benson did it the first day of class. He does it every few lectures; makes it easier for us to talk as a group if we can all see each other.”

“What is there to talk about?”

“An excellent question,” Alisdair interjected, taking a seat on the opposite side of the circle from Ella. “The past few weeks,” he said, addressing the class, “Your other teachers and I talked to you about the daily life of a magical citizen of the United States. What you can expect as a person with magic in today’s society. Before we move on, does anyone have any last questions about that topic?” Alisdair waited a moment, looking around the circle.

Ella felt something hard nudge her elbow. She looked over to Connor poking her. “What?”

“You missed the first two weeks, and you didn’t seem to be paying much attention last week,” Connor said. “Don’t you have questions?”

“No.”

“Connor? Ella? Perhaps you should direct any queries to the group,” Alisdair chided.

Connor grinned sheepishly. “I was just asking if Ella needed to know anything from the weeks she missed, Dr. Benson.”

“Very considerate of you, Connor. Well, Ella?” Alisdair asked, looking at her. “Do you have any questions for us?”

Ella opened her mouth, but before she said anything, she heard Alisdair’s voice in her head.

Ask for a recap.

What?

A review, my lady. Ask, please.

Ella studied Alisdair, but his expression never changed. “A recap?” she said aloud.

“Very well, then.” Alisdair gestured towards Ella. “Anyone?” A girl with short, curly black hair and almond eyes raised her hand. Alisdair nodded. “Go ahead, Ko.”

The girl turned in her seat to face Ella. “Most of what we covered was in the reading,” she said, her words slightly tinged by an accent. “But basically, we talked about things like how to handle a car accident when magic is involved, what the general reaction is to magic outside school or the workplace now compared to historical restrictions on public magic, that sort of thing.”

Alisdair nodded at Ko, then turned to Ella. “Will that do for now, Ella?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful. Now, this next unit is a little more, shall we say, philosophical. What we’ve talked about thus far has been mostly practical in nature. There’s not really much debate surrounding our discussions up to this point. For the next few weeks, however, we’ll be focusing on some more sensitive issues; so first, let’s remember to respect whoever is speaking. Agreed?” Alisdair waited until most students nodded. “Excellent. Now then, as before, if you wish to speak, knock your desk. The token will automatically go to the next person in the queue after each person finishes speaking. As a reminder, you must hit the token to signal the end of your turn. Ready?”

Again, he waited for nods, then tapped the top of his desk. A red sigil flashed on the wood. “Desks on,” he said, and Ella saw light flash through the circle, leaving from both sides of Alisdair’s seat. When the lights got back to Alisdair, the red sigil turned green and vanished, and a small glowing ball popped up. “Token is live,” he said, rolling the ball in his hands. “We’ll be starting with the question of religion. What does religion mean to you?”

Ella saw a couple of people tap their desks. The ball disappeared from Alisdair’s grasp and reappeared in front of a stocky boy, the number one now emblazoned on its luminescent surface.

“It’s faith,” the boy said, “believing in something bigger than yourself.” He touched his finger to the token and it vanished, showing up in front of another girl, a blonde sitting several seats to the left of Ella. Now the number zero shone from it.

“Commitment to a deity or idea,” the blonde said before flicking the token with her nail. It left her and popped up back in front of Alisdair, who rolled it over the back of his fingers.

“So we have this idea of something greater than the individual, something above any single person. Anything else?” He checked the circle, but no one said anything. “Ok, then. What are some religions you’re familiar with? Specifics, please.”

Ella saw a lot more people touch their desks this time. When the ball got to the first student, it blazed “eight.” Ella listened to the examples: Islam, Christianity, Santeria, Vodoun, Judaism, Hinduism, Catholicism, Shintoism – a lot of ‘-isms.’ She should probably write these down, they sounded somewhat important. By the time she got a piece of paper and a pencil out of her bag, Alisdair had the token again. “Thank you, that’ll do. Now we have a working definition and some examples. But what does that mean for us? What does it mean to be religious?”

Ella glanced around; no one seemed interested in answering this question. Suddenly, light close to her face blinded her. Angling her head, she saw the token hovering in front of Connor.

“Well, religious has a connotation beyond the basic definition,” he said hesitantly.

“Please, go on, Connor,” Alisdair encouraged.

“Well,” Connor said, grabbing the ball and rolling it around his desk, “if you say someone is religious, or if they call themselves that, it isn’t just that they follow whatever religion you’re talking about. It implies a certain amount of adherence. Like, if you’re Catholic, and you say you’re religious, it means you believe in it more. It’s not just something your parents taught you to do, necessarily; it means something to you.”

Ella wrote “religious = dedicated” on her paper, peeking at the rest of the class. Some of the other students were nodding. The ball went back to Alisdair.

“So there are degrees of religion, or religious devotion,” he said, looking to the circle for confirmation. When no one objected, he asked, “Can anyone else give me an example?”

The ball flashed to Ko. “Going off Connor’s example, if you’re Catholic, then you believe when you take the Eucharist you are consuming the blood and body of Christ.”

“Good,” Alisdair said, grabbing the token as it appeared in front of him and tossing it back and forth. “That’s a good place to jump off of for this next part. Most religions have an element of the miraculous, like transubstantiation, yes?” Most students nodded. “So where does magic come in?” Silence met his question; several students shifted in their seats. “Come on. What is the role of magic in religion?” Still nothing. “I’ll call on someone,” he warned, waving the ball around.

The token flashed away. Ella flicked her eyes and saw Ko holding it between her hands.

“It depends on the religion,” Ko said. “Historically, some religions were for magic, as it was understood back then, and others against it.”

Alisdair nodded, holding his hand up to catch the ball as it went back to him. “Good. With magic-negative religions, the example of Christianity, and events like the Salem witch trials, come to mind. Why, in such cases, was magic perceived so poorly?”

A girl sitting not far from Alisdair knocked on her desk, grabbing the token as it appeared and fiddling with it. “Some people think Christianity demonized magic as a way of consolidating power. To keep people from reverting to their pre-Christian beliefs.”

Alisdair nodded, leaning forward to dangle the token over the edge of the desk when it went back to him. “Anything else? No? We’ll come back to that then. We have an example, then, of a religion which held unfavorable views of magic. How about a magic-positive religion?”

The token appeared in front of a lanky boy. “The Druids?” he asked hesitantly.

“Not bad, Michael, but how about something a little more relevant? Druids, historically and presently, tend to concentrate themselves in the U.K. and Ireland. What about a religion practiced in the United States?”

Ella finished writing a sentence and flipped the page over before looking up. The other students were all glancing at one another, but no one spoke.

“No?” Alisdair asked, swiveling his head back and forth. “What about a magical religion? Something rooted in the practice or development of magic?” When he still had no answer, Alisdair joked, “I guess no one’s taken that class yet.” A few snickers broke the tension in the group, and Alisdair gave a smile. “Let’s shift gears a little. Can anyone tell me a non-human religion?”

Say something, my lady.

Ella peeked up from her paper. *What?*

Anything, my lady. Centaurs, merfolk, even Aidyn, just something.

Why?

Because I asked you to.

That is not a good reason.

Please?

I do not want to.

“Ella?” Alisdair asked aloud. “You’ve been very quiet so far. Perhaps you could share some thoughts with us?” He tossed the token at her.

It should have hit her in the face, since she did not raise her hands to catch it, but instead it stopped right in front of her nose before hovering over her notes.

I do not want to.

Do it anyway. Please

Ella hunched over her desk. “Vampires,” she said softly.

“Please, speak up, Ella, and give us specifics.”

“Vampires,” she projected. “Vampires have a religion.”

“And for those of us who aren’t familiar, could you describe it for us?”

“They worship the Mother.”

“And is magic important in this religion?”

“Yes.”

“How so?”

“The Mother used magic to make the first vampires. They are grateful.”

“So the magic comes mostly in the form of divine action. What about the adherents of this religion? What are their thoughts about individual magic?”

You know they do not like outsiders to know about this.

Just a little something, please.

Ella opened her mouth, but instead of words, she heard a bell ring. Snapping her mouth shut, she slapped a hand over her lips.

It's just the bell for the end of class, my lady.

Ella glanced at Alisdair, then the clock on the wall. He was right; class was over.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to stop here for now,” Alisdair said, tapping his desk. When the token appeared in front of him, he pushed it down into the wood; the sigil reappeared, flashing from green to red as light spun through the circle of chairs, before vanishing once more. “Please continue with your readings for Dr. Wilson. Have a great day.”

Most of the students scrambled for the door. Ella got up to confront Alisdair, but Connor stood in front of her.

“That’s so cool you know about the vampiric religion. How’d you find out about it?” Connor asked, stealing Ella’s attention.

She glanced back at Alisdair’s seat, but he had already left. “Where is he?”

Connor focused where Ella was looking. “Dr. Benson? Probably he went back to his office. Speaking of, I’ve got to get to practice. But I still want to talk about this,” he called as he left the room. Ella stared after him before slowly packing away her things.

My lady, if you have a moment, I would like to speak with you.

Ella stopped just inside the doorway, checking behind her.

I am in my office, my lady. You may take the other door.

As soon as the words echoed in Ella's head, she saw a dark wooden door appear.

Do please make sure no one walks in.

Ella closed the classroom door and peeked out the window; the halls nearby seemed empty. She pushed the heavy, hidden door open and stepped through into Alisdair's office, just to the left of his desk. Looking behind her, she saw the door swing close, the edge of it just brushing the portrait frame before disappearing.

"My apologies, my lady," Alisdair said with his back to her, "this will only take a moment."

Ella watched Alisdair sign several papers. He scrolled down a number of them with his finger, the green symbol from her registration papers glowing in the corner.

"Would you care to sit, my lady?" he asked, gesturing to the chairs opposite his desk.

"Is the warding up?" Ella asked as she took a seat.

Alisdair stared blankly at Ella, then a worried look fell on his face. He moved the pile of papers aside to check, and sighed with relief when he saw the sigil emblazoned on his desk top.

"Oh, good. Do you know I honestly didn't remember if I'd turned it on or not? Ada would call that a senior moment."

"Who is Ada?" Ella asked.

"Hmm? Oh, yes, you wouldn't know; I was talking about Dr. Sinclair."

"The woman with the braid," Ella remembered.

"Well, her hair isn't always in a braid, but yes, the redheaded woman. There," he said, signing the last paper with a flourish. "That's all taken care of. Now then," he put the papers away and focused on Ella. "We have to talk about your work, my lady."

“What work?”

“Your school work. As I’ve mentioned, you are technically a student here and you do have to follow student guidelines.”

“I am only a student because you asked me to be.”

“Yes, because as I said told Aidyn and you, I believe the upcoming danger will present itself through the students, who are more likely to talk to one another than to an adult. If you are going to find out what is happening, it makes more sense for you to handle the student side of school, while I can inform you of anything on the administrative side. And, if you are pretending to be a student here, then I must treat you like a student. Which means I must require you to meet the same standards of excellence every other student does.”

“What does that mean?”

“You must participate in at least two extracurricular activities in addition to your classes.”

“No.”

“My lady, those are the rules of this institution.”

“I do not care. You are the headmaster. Make something up.”

Alisdair slowly straightened his spine, a dark look weighing on his face. Tension tightened the air between him and Ella. “You would have me lie, tarnish my school’s reputation and my own, so you do not spend an extra few hours after school holed up in your bedroom?”

Something shifted in the back of Ella’s mind—a memory locked away, or a part of herself still sleeping. “No, Alisdair. I am...” Ella could not get the last word out.

Alisdair nodded when Ella trailed off. “I understand, my lady.” He relaxed back into his chair, checking the clock before returning his attention to Ella. “I have taken the liberty of

arranging your activities. You will help tutor the introductory Gaelic students once a week on Tuesdays, and you will volunteer for two hours every Friday at the public library near your house.”

“Must I?”

“Yes, my lady,” Alisdair said. “You must. But I have spoken with the volunteer coordinator at the library, and she has agreed to keep you back in the stacks for the most part. Minimal interaction with anyone other than her.”

Ella nodded slowly as Alisdair shifted his weight. “I suppose that will do,” she relented.

“I am glad you think so,” he said, a slight smile lifting the corner of his mouth as he stood up. “That’s all I wished to speak of with you, and I am terribly sorry, but I have somewhere to be. You’re welcome to join—”

“You should not have made me talk in class.”

Alisdair stopped, half out of his chair. Glancing at the clock again, he said, “I can discuss this with you if you wish, my lady, but right now I need to head for the dojo. Coach Nobutada asked me to cover the varsity kendo practice today, and I need to change and warm up. It takes a bit longer than it used to.”

“Do it here,” Ella ordered.

“Beg pardon?”

“I do not care what you do while I am talking to you, as long as you pay attention.”

“I really don’t think—”

“Alisdair,” Ella said sternly.

“If you’re certain, my lady,” Alisdair replied.

“I am.”

Alisdair shrugged, but stepped around his desk. He slipped out of his shoes and rolled up his pant legs and his sleeves, then sat down to stretch. “What was it you wished to discuss exactly?”

Ella sat down near his feet. “You should not have made me talk in class.”

“I could never make you do anything, my lady,” he replied, bent over his straightened legs.

“If I did not say anything when you called on me, you would look bad.”

“Actually, my lady, I think you would have ended up the worse off in that case. Uncooperative students don’t get much sympathy here, especially from other students.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Alisdair said as he moved into a straddle and turned to lay out over one leg. “This is an excellent school, and students work very hard to get in. If a student seems not to appreciate that, it is as if they are dismissing their peers’ hard work and sacrifice.”

“You still should not have asked about the vampires,” Ella maintained. “You know they do not like to talk about it with outsiders.”

“You brought them up, my lady,” Alisdair pointed out as he switched legs. “You could as easily have talked about the dragons or faery or any number of others.”

“You mentioned Aidyn.”

“That is not a good excuse, my lady, and you know it.”

“Connor asked how I know about the vampires.”

“Ah,” Alisdair sighed. He sat up and bent at the hips, stretching his arms toward Ella. “Perhaps he won’t bring it up.”

“What if he does?”

“You need not give him any information he could not find in a book.”

“How would I know which books he is reading?”

“I think it fair, my lady, to presume he does not have access to the same library you do.”

“Of course he does not.”

“Then I should think,” Alisdair said as he pulled one leg in and turned halfway around, “there should be no cause for concern. It is not even certain he will remember to ask about it.”

Ella could feel a slight buzz at the back of her skull. She shook her head, willing the feeling away. She did not want to see, to know what Connor would do.

“My lady?” Alisdair asked, switching legs and stretching his back the other way.

“No,” Ella said distractedly, still trying to get rid of the buzzing. “No, it is not certain.”

Alisdair nodded, pulling his heels in to touch his thighs. He bent to touch his nose to his toes and said, “Would you care to attend practice, my lady? Our varsity team is quite good.”

“No,” Ella said, the noise in her head finally receding. “I should get to the house. Aidyn has called for his children to help with the library.”

“Wonderful! I haven’t seen them in ages; Rylla will be so excited to introduce the boys.”

“They are coming to work, Alisdair, not to socialize.”

Alisdair slowly sat up. “Of course, my lady, but one cannot work all the time.”

“No. Sleep is also necessary.”

“I meant, my lady, that fun must play a part as well. Give the body and mind a chance to relax, and to refresh yourself before resuming work.” Alisdair examined Ella. “You might benefit from a bit of fun, my lady.”

Ella jumped up. “I must go.”

Alisdair nodded and stood as well. “As you wish, my lady. I should get to the dojo myself.”

Ella made for the office door. Before she opened it, Alisdair called out. “Give Aidyn and his children my best, please.”

Ella nodded shortly. Crossing the threshold, she thought she heard a soft sigh behind her before the door swung shut.

#

Ella walked up the driveway to a satin-cream house. It stood two stories and stretched back quite far. Large windows let in fresh air above a garage. A jasmine tree crowded the front door, and a bush with large, spiny leaves butted up against the walkway. Ella rubbed her nose as she rang the doorbell, though it sounded more like a crashing gong than a bell.

The door opened to Aidyn, turned half away. “Dare, I told you not to change the sound!” he called back. Looking out, he blinked. “My lady, what are you doing here?”

“I live here, Aidyn. Do I not?”

“Yes, of course, my lady, but school ended,” he tapped something on the inside door jamb before saying, “over an hour ago.”

“Yes.”

“I assumed you were doing work, or perhaps looking at a club.”

“No.”

Aidyn stared at Ella. “Where were you then?”

“I could not remember how to get here.”

Aidyn's face drooped. Ella thought he looked like one of those theater masks. Not the grinning sort, but the kind with the furrowed brow and the deep frown.

"My lady, the school is only five minutes from here."

"Are you going to let me in, Aidyn?"

Aidyn moved aside slowly. "Of course, my lady. I beg your pardon."

Ella stepped inside, and took her bag off her shoulder. She held it out for Aidyn to take, along with her cap. Sitting on the stool by the door, she unbuckled her worn black boots and tugged them off, followed by her matching knee-high socks. "Who is Dare?"

"Say again?"

"I asked who Dare is," Ella said.

Aidyn's expression fell further, but before he could reply, a tall young man walked in.

"Grandmother!" he cried upon seeing Ella. He rushed forward and grabbed her in a crushing hug, swinging her off her feet like a doll.

"Put me down," Ella ordered stiffly, arms trapped at her sides.

"Sorry, Grandmother," the newcomer said, gently setting Ella back on her feet. "It's just been so long since we've seen you. Well, the conscious you anyway."

"Who are you?" Ella asked.

"Very funny, Grandmother."

"I am not joking. Who are you?"

The young man flicked his eyes back and forth between Ella and Aidyn. Whatever he saw on their faces made him swallow audibly before straightening his back and tucking his hands behind him. "I'm Dare, my lady. Darius."

“That means nothing to me,” Ella said simply.

The man’s jaw tightened. “I am Aidyn’s son, my lady.”

“You must be here for the library, then.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“What have you done so far?”

“Um,” Darius hesitated, looking at Aidyn. “My lady, we can’t do anything until you let us. The library is still locked.”

“I unlocked it this morning before school.”

“Apologies, my lady, but you did not,” Aidyn interjected. “You said last night you would, but then you overslept this morning. You had to rush to get to school on time. You do remember that, don’t you, my lady?”

Ella looked at him blankly, thinking about this morning. “Oh. Yes. I do now.”

Both men sighed. “Perhaps now would be a good time to begin, Darius,” Aidyn said softly.

“Of course. This way, my lady,” Darius said, walking further into the house.

Ella studied him. “You do not look like Aidyn,” she remarked. Darius had more of a tan than his father, as well as darker eyes and hair, though both were tall and solidly built.

“No, my lady. I take after my mother,” Darius explained.

“You sure about that, Dare? I always thought you were more like Uncle Fin,” a young Amazon said from the couch. Ella looked around the living room—big enough for some kind of party, Aidyn said when he first showed it to her. Something to do with sports. A mega bowl? In any case, several deep, dark-colored couches circled a massive screen. The woman who spoke sprang up from one of them and walked toward Ella with arms outstretched.

“It’s good to see you, Grandmother,” she said, smiling warmly.

Ella stepped back, nearly pushing Aidyn, as Darius stepped forward.

“Tone it back, Shay,” he said quietly. “She’s still not awake.”

“But I thought, she’s supposed to be—”

“I know. Just, stick with formal, for now. Ok?”

The woman nodded slowly before focusing back on Ella. “I beg your pardon, my lady, for my exuberance. It’s simply nice to see you again.”

“Who are you?” Ella asked. She saw the woman clench her fists.

“Seònaid, my lady. Shay, if you prefer. I’m Aidyn’s daughter.”

Ella looked at the three of them. Seònaid, though very tall, still stood just a little shorter than the two men. Her long hair matched Aidyn’s shorter braid in shade, and she had a nose very like Darius’s. “I can see the resemblance,” Ella said.

“In what?” a new voice asked.

Ella turned toward the far right of the room, where the kitchen and dining table sat off to one side. Another man, older than Darius but younger than Aidyn, wiped his hands on a rag. Ella cocked her head; this new one had dark blond hair pulled back from his face and pale grey eyes. “Is this another of your children, Aidyn? He looks like you.”

The third man stuffed the cloth in his back pocket, glancing at the others, before giving a short bow to Ella. “I am, my lady. My name is Callum; I am Aidyn’s firstborn.”

“That makes sense,” Ella said.

Silence hovered among the four awkwardly until Callum spoke up. “I hope you do not mind my using your kitchen, my lady. I thought we might work best with some food in us.”

“I do not mind,” Ella said. Again, something shook loose in the back of her mind. “No food in the library,” she amended. Strangely, the others’ expressions seemed lighter when she said that.

“Of course not, my lady,” Seònaid reassured. “We remember your rules.”

Ella stared at her blankly. Rules?

“If you would, my lady,” Aidyn interrupted, handing Ella’s things to Seònaid and nodding his head back toward the front door. “With your help, we can begin.”

“Yes,” Ella said, looking around the room. “Where is it?”

“Through here, my lady,” Darius said. Ella followed him around a corner, past several doors of different colors before reaching a dark brown, wooden door with a gold handle.

“Dad had to put the library in the garage. It was the only room he could make fit on such short notice,” Darius said, stepping to the side so Ella stood in front of the door.

Ella nodded. She examined the door as Darius, Seònaid, Callum, and Aidyn watched.

“My lady,” Seònaid said after several moments. “Aren’t you going to open it?”

“I must remember how to,” Ella said. Out of her periphery, she saw Darius turn to Aidyn, a...Ella did not know what to call his expression. Some more serious cousin of “nervous,” perhaps.

“I believe it was a blood ward, my lady,” Aidyn prompted.

The phrase knocked something into place for Ella. “Yes. I remember now,” she said, raising her right hand. She clenched it and when she opened her fist, blood dripped from her fingers. She traced symbols onto the door, using all five fingers to paint sigils from the top of the door to the bottom. She drew the last sign in the center of the door, then pressed her palm against it. The bloody marks flared, becoming carved patterns in the wood, and musty air came in under

the door. Lifting her hand, Ella pressed her fingertips together; they came away clean. Opening the door, she felt Aidyn's children crowd behind her, trying to get the best view.

"Wow," Seònaid exclaimed. "I can't even see the back of it."

"Course you can't, Shay. It's not like it ever ends," Dare said.

"Aidyn will tell you what to look for," Ella said, turning to leave.

"You're not staying, my lady?" Callum asked, looking from Ella to his father and back.

"Alisdair and Aidyn say I must do my school assignments," Ella replied.

"Of course, my lady. If you get hungry, garlic bread is warming by the stove. Dinner should be ready in a few hours."

Ella nodded, then left the four of them staring into a massive room, full from floor to ceiling with endless rows of bookshelves.

#

Ella walked into the Gaelic classroom before realizing no one was there. She looked around briefly, somewhat expecting another person to walk through the wall or something. When no one did, she spun around to leave and nearly ran into Mr. O'Byrne, her Gaelic teacher.

"Ah, you must be the lass Alisdair mentioned. Ellie?" he asked in a thick brogue.

"Ella."

"Right, right. Here to do tutoring, yes?"

"Yes."

“Good. It’s pretty basic; if someone comes in, you help them. If a number of students come in, and there’s not enough tutors, or the tutors can’t explain well enough, I’ll step in. Otherwise, I’m just here for supervision. Clear?” he checked.

“What if no one comes in?”

“Feel free to do your own work. Just don’t make a ruckus,” Mr. O’Byrne said before sitting at his desk and promptly ignoring Ella.

Ella sat down near the door and dug through her backpack looking for her Gaelic textbook and the little notebook Aidyn made her carry. An agenda, he called it, when he showed her how it laid out each day of the year with lines next to the date for writing reminders. Ella found it very useful; she only had to remember to check the agenda, not remember every assignment itself. That is, as long as she remembered to write the assignment down in the first place.

“Ella, hey!”

Ella glanced up from her bag to find Connor sitting in the desk across from her. “Hello, Connor,” she said calmly, looking back in her bag.

“I didn’t know you were taking Gaelic.”

“I am.”

“You here for tutoring? Maybe I can help.”

“No.”

Ella found the correct book and tugged it out from under several others. It settled heavily onto the desk while Ella searched for her Gaelic binder.

“Hey, that’s not our book,” Connor said, leaning around Ella to check the tome on her desk.

Ella studied it. “I thought it was.”

“I think that’s next year’s book, for Honors.”

“Yes.”

Connor’s eyes bulged. “You’re in Honors Gaelic already? You’re only a freshman!”

“A what?”

“A first year. Hang on, what was your guardian’s name again? Aidyn?”

“Yes.”

“That’s an Irish name. Is that where you’re from? You don’t have an accent.”

“No.”

Connor blinked. “That would be no, you’re not from Ireland?”

“Yes.”

“You know the whole yes/no thing should make things easier, but it really doesn’t.”

Ella shrugged.

“That doesn’t help either. So you’re not from Ireland. Is Aidyn?”

“Not ex—”

“Nope, don’t say it.”

Ella closed her mouth.

“Is Aidyn the reason you know Gaelic?”

Ella thought about it; she could not really tell him the truth, but she had to say something.

The last time she stared at Connor quietly, he got very...ah, nervous, that was a good word for it.

“Sort of,” she finally said.

Connor snorted. “At least you didn’t say ‘not exactly.’”

“Ellie.”

Both students looked toward Mr. O'Byrne.

"My name is Ella," she reminded the teacher.

"Why are you not helping the lad?"

"Oh, no, I'm fine," Connor said, waving Mr. O'Byrne's concern off. "I just came in to do some work before I head to the library."

Mr. O'Byrne harrumphed, then went back to his computer.

Ella opened her binder to the last set of notes, pulling the loose pages out. She checked her agenda, then flipped to the page where the homework began in the textbook. Lifting it, she touched her finger to the bottom of the spine and pulled a straight line down to the desk. When she moved her finger, a line of light connected the book and the wood; she let her other hand fall from the book, and it remained upright, balanced on the light. Ella set her own notes around the textbook, connecting each page to the book with another light, so they hung in the air around the edges. Then Ella tapped the first exercise in the book, and the paper zoomed in on the first question, a translucent keyboard appearing on the desk.

"That's awesome!"

Ella looked at Connor, who reached a hand out to touch the line holding up the book. She knocked his hand away. "You cannot touch it," she said.

"Right, sorry, it's just so cool. Where'd you learn that? Can you teach me?"

"No."

Connor reared back. "No? What do you mean, no?"

"I cannot teach it to you."

"Why not?"

“It is impossible.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said it is impossible.”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time, Ella. You know, I’m starting to think you were raised by wolves or something,” Connor said, snatching his bag and leaving abruptly.

Ella stared at the desk where Connor sat. “What do wolves have to do with me?” she wondered. She thought about it for a moment, before shrugging and returning to her work.

#

Looking around the large, open room full of row upon row of books, Ella felt she could hardly call this a library, not compared to her own. Maybe this was the best humans could manage.

“You’re Ella, right?”

Ella turned her gaze from the surrounding shelves to focus on the voice addressing her. It belonged to a short girl with dark hair and eyes.

“You look familiar,” Ella told her.

“You’ve probably seen me around campus. I’m Amira, Nazih’s older sister. I think he said you joined his theory class, right?”

Ella nodded; now she recognized the girl as the person standing on the platform at that band practice she saw.

“So can I help you with something?” Amira asked.

“I am a volunteer.”

“Here?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure? We don’t take volunteers this time of year.”

“Alisdair said I would volunteer here.”

“You mean Headmaster Benson?”

Ella nodded. She thought the expression on Amira’s face might be a diluted version of the one Connor wore the first few days of class. She did not have an extra head then, and she did not feel one now. Perhaps a third eye was popping out instead of another head? She thought she had been doing a remarkable job keeping her body together, but just in case, she felt her forehead. No, nothing there except skin.

“I’ve got it, Amira,” an older woman said as she came up to them. “Go on back to prep.”

Amira nodded, then waved at Ella. “Bye, then.”

Ella waved back, then turned to the older woman. “Who are you?”

“I’m Ms. Darby, the supervisor for the youth section. Alisdair arranged your service with me, and let me know who to look for. Come this way,” Ms. Darby said, beckoning to Ella.

Ella followed Ms. Darby to a thick door made of a light-colored wood. A red light glowed over a keyhole; when Ms. Darby held onto the handle for a few seconds, the light flashed green, and the door opened. Ms. Darby held it open as Ella passed through into a narrow corridor, then moved ahead to lead Ella on.

“There’s just a few things to take care of before you get started. Normally, we’d do this at orientation, but it’s just as easy now. Alisdair had your paperwork delivered earlier this week.”

“Paperwork?” Ella queried, glancing at the many doors they were passing.

“Your volunteer application, school verification forms, parental consent, all of that. All we need to do now is get you coded in the system and show you what to do. Here we are,” Ms. Darby said, stopping at a white door.

Ella followed Ms. Darby inside to a small room. Ella tugged her jacket around her fingers, curling them up against the noticeable chill. “Why is it so cold in here?” she asked.

“The server room’s nearby. We’ve had some problems lately with the machines frying randomly, so IT told us to keep the temperature down,” Ms. Darby said from behind one wooden table with a computer. “If you could just step over here and place your hand on the sensor.”

As Ella moved toward Ms. Darby, she noticed an area of the table, slightly recessed and lighter than the surrounding surface. Glancing at Ms. Darby, Ella pressed her palm to the patch, and felt it warm to her touch. The computer Ms. Darby stood in front of beeped, and she pressed her fingers against the screen. “You can move your hand now,” she said to Ella.

“It is warm.”

“Yes, I know, but we’re almost done here. Just need to grab one thing.” Ms. Darby pressed a finger against the edge of the table, and Ella heard a faint whirring sound. When the sound stopped, Ms. Darby pulled something out from under the desk and handed it to Ella.

“Here’s your ID. Make sure to always be wearing this when you are working here. If you lose it or it gets damaged, let me or one of the other librarians know as soon as possible. We’ll get you a new one. When you arrive for your shift, your palm print will let you use the first door we came through to access the back area. The volunteer lounge is first on the right after you come in, through the blue door. There’ll be a cubby with your name on it. Your badge and any information we have for you will be there, and you can put your belongings there as well. Understand?”

Ella nodded as she stuck the badge on her shirt. "Should I put my bag there?"

"Yes, I just said that."

"I meant now."

"Oh, yes, of course. Just come back here when you're done."

Ella quickly left the room, blowing on her fingers to warm them up. Retracing her steps, she found the blue door toward the front of the hallway. Going through it, she came into a large room with several sofas and big chairs. A small kitchen occupied one wall, with the bathroom opposite. An open storage unit hugged the wall just inside the door. Ella saw names above each hole, including one at the bottom with her name. She knelt down to push her backpack inside; despite the narrow appearance of the cubby, the bag slid in with ease.

Ella returned to the white door, which Ms. Darby was just closing behind her. "Excellent, now come this way," she said as she strode toward the far end of the hall.

Ella stepped after Ms. Darby, following her through a tan door and coming out into an area full of books. Multiple floor-to-ceiling shelves stood in a row, most of them empty or nearly so, and bins brimming with books sat at the end of each shelf.

"These are the returns. Every time someone checks a book back in, we put it here to be sorted for shelving. Alisdair mentioned you have some experience with this?"

Ella considered her own library, an endless, complex archive stretching back beyond the world. "Some experience, yes."

"Wonderful. Then you'll recognize the different call numbers. Nonfiction, including reference, is on the left, everything else is on the right. You just take a book out of the bin, like so," Ms. Darby said, grabbing a book on top of the nearest pile. "Then go over here," she said,

walking to one of the shelves, “Once you find the right area, put the book down,” Ms. Darby said, doing so. The book stood straight, though it was the only book on the shelf and there were no bookends. “When the section gets full, tap the section label,” Ms. Darby said, pointing out the name of the area carved below the shelf. “The books will be automatically shelved in their correct areas in the library. You can’t use magic—we had a Nonmagical patron complain a few years back that magic left a residue on the cover, so it’s a rule now—but don’t feel as if you have to finish everything before you leave. Just try to do as many as you can. Is everything clear?”

Ella nodded, taking a couple texts from a nearby bin.

“Good. If you need anything from me, I’m in the corner office with the pink door.”

Ella nodded again and saw Ms. Darby leave out of her periphery, but Ella was already focused on the book in her hand: *Transcultural stories and their meaning for magical development*. Ella gripped the spine so tightly she felt it give under her grasp. Forcing her hand open, she fixed the spine with a flick of her fingers. She gingerly set the book on the shelf then moved on. She did not want to think about such things. She did not want to remember.

Connor

Connor slid into a seat in his government class. He really could have used a nice light-refraction or camouflage spell to keep Clarisse or Ella from noticing him.

“Connor,” a feminine voice drawled.

Connor grimaced. “Hello Clarisse.”

“Why don’t you come sit by me? Get away from the window, it’s too sunny today.”

“Actually, I’m feeling kind of cold, so I think I’ll stick where I am, thanks,” Connor said as he pulled his books out of his backpack without looking at Clarisse. He couldn’t see her face, but he had a feeling she was wearing the expression she usually wore when he said no to her: scrunched up nose, slightly curled lip, eyes narrowed in a death stare.

“Are you sitting here, Clarisse?” Ella interjected.

Connor ducked his head further and poked around in his bag for his notes.

“Actually, I’m having a private conversation here with Connor, so if you could just sit somewhere else, thanks,” Clarisse said.

“I need to sit by the window,” Ella said, not moving away.

Clarisse straightened from leaning over Connor’s desk and shifted her attention. “Why?”

“I am cold. The sun coming in the window will help keep me warm.”

Connor saw Clarisse’s lip curl even further out of his peripheral vision, but before she could say anything else, the bell rang and Dr. Hillard stood from her desk at the front of the room. Clarisse reluctantly went back to her seat at the front, making room for Ella to move into the seat next to Connor. He hunched over his papers, hoping Ella’s natural reticence would keep her from talking to him. He wasn’t in the mood for her weirdly obtuse way of speaking.

Connor kept his eyes on the board as Dr. Hillard continued her lecture about early historical law codes. Connor found the notes he had from last week, starting with the laws from proto-magical societies and ending with the Code of Ur-Nammu, the first known Nonmagical law code. Adding to them, he put a star next to anything Dr. Hillard lingered on during her lecture. Before Connor knew it, the bell rang, startling him out of his concentration. He looked down at his desk; he'd covered four pages, front and back, without realizing it.

"That's more than you usually do, Connor," Li commented.

Connor peered up at his dapper friend. "I'm guessing you still did more."

"Six pages, front and back," Li admitted, his British-Indian accent making his words lilt.

Connor shook his head as he stood to follow Li to lunch. "How do you not have carpal tunnel? My hand would be dying the way you write."

"Just practice. But what's up? You're the one who says it's better to pay attention than writing everything down verbatim."

Connor shrugged uncomfortably as he opened the door outside. He held it for Li then walked over to the right-hand lunch line. "Guess I was in a studious mood today."

Li looked at him skeptically, but remained quiet as the two boys got in line.

"What're they serving today?" Connor asked.

"Fajitas with black beans, yellow rice, squash vine soup, and churros," Li answered.

"What would you like, dear?" the lunch lady politely asked Connor. Connor quickly gave his order, which the server wrote on a tray with her finger. The order glowed briefly, then the tray vanished while Li gave his order, but by the time he was done, it was back, now full of food. Connor picked it up and moved forward so Li could grab his own meal.

“Anything to drink?” the woman at the register asked. Connor shook his head, and Li grabbed a bottle of milk from the cooler.

“Go ahead,” the cashier said. Connor laid his hand against the sensor and waited until his name flashed in green. Li did the same.

“Have a nice day,” the woman called as the boys got out of line. They waved back at her, then headed out into the gardens to eat, snagging a table near the elephant topiary, which waved its trunk at them before resuming its position.

“It’s a bit bright for me today,” Li said as they sat down. “Mind if I change it?”

Connor shook his head, mouth full of food. Li double tapped the center of the table, and a small circle flipped over. He pressed the section labeled ‘lighting,’ and when it revealed a spectrum, he dragged his finger from the high end to the low. As he did so, the magic creating the microclimate in the area around the table brightened the sun, blinding the boys.

“I thought you were turning it down!” Connor exclaimed, shielding his eyes.

“I tried!” Li said, fumbling for the dial. He finally managed to dim the light, lessening the glare of the sun off the metal tabletop. Both boys sighed relievedly; Li touched the center of the circle, and it spun back into place, now matching the design of the metalwork.

“What was that?” Connor asked, peering at the sky. “One of those malfunctions Marie mentioned on the announcements?”

“Probably just turned it the wrong way by accident. So come on,” Li said as he sat down, pulling his silverware out of the napkin and laying the napkin across his lap. “What’s up?”

Connor wiped his fingers on his napkin and pulled his water bottle out of backpack. He took a drink and set the bottle on the table. He stirred his food around on the plate as he deliberated. “You know that new girl?” he finally asked.

“The girl who started three weeks late?” Li confirmed.

Connor nodded. “She’s in our gov class.”

“Right, wears black a lot. Didn’t she sit by you today?” Li asked as he ate his soup.

Connor nodded again, avoiding Li’s gaze.

“What, do you like her?” Li questioned.

“I’m not sure,” Connor admitted. “She’s interesting sometimes, but she’s annoying, too. Do you know, she did this really cool bit of magic at tutoring last week, and when I asked her to show me, she said it was impossible?”

“Well that’s a bit bitchy,” Li said.

“Right? But that’s the thing, most of the time she doesn’t seem like that much of an ass, so why would she say something like that?”

Li slowly took a bite of his fajita. Connor sat back, munching on his churro.

“Did you consider maybe she meant it’d be impossible to teach you?” Li asked carefully.

“Seriously?” Connor drawled.

“You don’t know anything about her abilities, do you?”

“Not really.”

“So maybe what she did is actually very complex magic and you wouldn’t be able to do it, since it’s some kind of inherent knack. Like trying to teach someone who’s color-blind how to differentiate among shades of green or blue.”

“If she’s that advanced, what’s she doing here? We’re a good school, but if she’s a genius or something, she’d be at university.”

“It sounds like she’s not very good with social niceties. Maybe her parents wanted her to be around people her own age,” Li proposed.

Connor thought about his first meeting with Aidyn. “Maybe you’re right,” he said.

“Aren’t I usually?” Li joked.

Connor snickered. The boys started talking about the next robotics team’s demonstration.

#

Connor sat down on the bleachers and wiped the sweat off his forehead as the football team huddled up on the field. A quick glance at the scoreboard showed the home team up by thirteen.

“Remind me again why I’m here,” Re asked next to Connor, leaning on the rope demarcating the band’s area in the stands. Connor checked the field, hearing the ref’s whistle.

“You dropped your hanky!” Marie shouted on the other side of Re.

“That’s why,” Connor said.

“It’s not like she’s paying attention to me,” Re said plainly. “I’m just a warm body by her.”

“Don’t let her hear you say that,” Connor warned.

“Let who hear what?” Marie asked vaguely, turning her head, but not her eyes, to Connor.

Connor started to answer, but the drum major called the band to attention, so he stood, raised his piccolo and played the school’s fight song. When he sat back down, he saw Marie focusing on the game once more.

“Like I said,” Re told Connor.

“Come on Re, you know Ree cares,” Connor poked at his friend.

“Still with the stupid nicknames?” Re complained.

“Hey, Ree doesn’t think they’re stupid, do you?” Connor asked Marie.

“Hmm?” she hummed.

“Connor asked if you liked the nicknames he gave us,” Re repeated.

“Oh, sure whatever,” Marie said, before she jumped up to cheer as the team scored.

Connor stood up to play the victory song again, then turned back toward his friends. “Come on! ‘Ree’ to go with ‘Re’? It’s that matchy-matchy shit, like his and hers towel sets or something. This stuff is gold!”

Re snorted. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“I will.”

“Whatever. As long as you don’t give us some stupid couple name.”

Connor’s eyes and grin widened, and he relished the immediate look of regret on Re’s face.

“Oh, no, don’t do it, Connor.”

“But Rayree! It’s so perfect!”

“It sound like a character in a Japanese video game that dies really early on.”

“Exactly!”

Re snorted and Connor laughed freely.

“What’s so funny?” Marie asked, finally turning her attention to her boyfriend and friend, who were trying to calm themselves.

The boys looked at her, and each other, and burst back into laughter. Connor saw Marie look at them like they were a few loaves shy of a baker's dozen, and laughed all the harder. Before he could explain, he saw the drum major calling everyone to get ready. Pulling on his hat, he stood to follow the others to get ready for halftime, still trying to catch his breath.

#

"Morning, Connor," Ko called as she walked into the dojo.

"What's up, Ko?" Connor greeted from the floor, mid-stretch. Re waved a foot at Ko, face darkening as he held a handstand.

"Coach Nobutada's kids have an away tournament this weekend, so she asked me to step in for today," Ko explained.

"You gonna lead JV and varsity?" Re questioned as he came out of his inverted stance.

"No, Coach Kelly will be by for varsity."

"Isn't she the fencing coach?" Connor asked as he stood to shake everything out once more.

"Yes, but we're not really learning anything new today, just running stuff from the past few weeks. Nobutada filled her in, just in case, but she's mostly going to be there as supervision."

"Aw, they don't trust us," Re said mockingly, falling into a backbend.

"Blame the seniors three years ago. They wrecked the dojo trying to make the training dummies dance," Ko said.

"Why? They already move," Connor said.

“Apparently, someone thought they should be able to dance the robot,” Ko explained. The three teenagers shared a look and a concerted eye roll.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Ko said, stepping past the boys toward the changing rooms. Connor grabbed his *shinai* from the wall and started slowly moving through the basic forms. Re joined him, and kept quiet for a brief moment.

“So how’s it going with that new girl?”

Connor raised an eyebrow as he turned into the next form. “Why?”

“Marie said you wouldn’t talk to her about it.”

“We were working, you know.”

“Connor, even that one hardass librarian expects you to talk.”

“Mr. Carlson’s not that bad,” Connor argued.

“Not the point,” Re retorted. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“Really?” Re said, sarcasm thick in his voice.

“Ella and I haven’t really talked much this week.”

“From what I’ve heard, she doesn’t talk much, period.”

“Well, yeah, but I talked to her even less this week.”

“Any particular reason?”

Connor shrugged, coming to the end of his forms and starting again. “We had a fight?”

“You don’t sound too sure about that,” Re observed.

“Does it count as a fight if only one person is really in it?”

“How do you mean?”

“She said something, and I got mad and left the room.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think that really counts, Connor.”

“Exactly.”

“So what, you’ve just been avoiding her since then?”

“I can’t avoid her, she’s in four of my classes.”

“You know what I mean.”

“It’s not like she’s tried to talk to me,” Connor said defensively, setting his *shinai* down.

“From what you’ve told me, she doesn’t seem like the type to reach out.”

“What, I’m just supposed to ignore what she said and start talking to her again?”

“I think it’s called ‘turning the other cheek.’”

“That’s really not what it means.”

“Are you going to keep arguing with me or do something about it?” Re asked.

Connor scrunched his face at Re, who stuck his tongue out.

“Easy now,” Ko said, coming out in her *gi*. “Wouldn’t want the freshies to see us fighting.”

“Ko, we’re all freshman,” Connor pointed out.

“That’s Coach Ko to you,” she joked, swatting Connor on the arm. The three students laughed as a wave of teenagers filed into the dojo.

“Time for work, boys,” Ko said, striding forward to call for the group’s attention.

#

“May I join you, Connor?”

Connor looked up into the striking face of his friend Sabela. “Yeah, yeah, let me just move my stuff,” he said, grabbing his bag off the other seat and moving his notes to clear the lunch table. “How are you?” he asked, scooping up a mouthful of lo mein.

Sabela set her tray down on the tabletop and set her bag carefully next to her chair. “I’m fine, thank you. And yourself?”

“Fine, thanks. How’re you doing with the Gaelic assignment?”

“Actually,” Sabela said as she cut her noodles, “I was wondering if you could help me?”

“Uh, sure, but you know it’s better to ask O’Byrne or one of the tutors.”

“They changed the rehearsal schedule at church. Choir practice is now on Tuesdays.”

“Gotcha. Well, let me see what you have so far, and I’ll see if I can help,” Connor said.

Sabela smiled and set down her cutlery. Bending over her backpack, she withdrew a green folder and pulled a paper out, handing it to him, before carefully putting the folder away.

Connor slowly read Sabela’s assignment – a personal anecdote or fairy tale, provided for Mr. O’Byrne in the original language, then translated into Gaelic – absently picking at his food with his chopsticks. He nearly dropped a bite into his lap, but it fell back onto his plate instead.

“This seems ok so far,” Connor said, flipping the next page over. “Did O’Byrne tell you to type this? Your handwriting’s gorgeous, but jeez is it tiny.”

Sabela covered her mouth to finish chewing. “He said he would take it handwritten.”

“Really?” Connor asked. “Huh, must have a really good magnifier spell on his desk.”

Sabela shrugged neatly. “Perhaps. What do you think?” she asked as she took a small bite.

“It’s ok; maybe a little... dry’s not really the right word, but you know what I mean?”

“Too formal?” Sabela clarified.

“That’s a good way of putting it. It’s not necessarily a bad thing, and you might not change it for the assignment, but it’s something to keep in mind. If you get in the habit of writing like this, you’ll get in the habit of talking like this too, and you don’t want that. You’ll sound like you’re trying to speak Gaelic, rather than just speaking Gaelic. Does that make sense?” Connor checked.

“I believe so, yes. Do you have any suggestions?”

Connor skimmed over the pages. “Take here, for instance,” he said, pointing with the clean end of his chopsticks. “This is a little wordier than it needs to be. Like saying, ‘The small young person walked very quickly over the moving body of water into the forested area on the path to the domicile of her relation’ instead of ‘The child ran over the river and through the woods to her grandmother’s house.’ And down here, where this person’s speaking, O’Byrne gave us another word to use in place of this, a less formal option you’re more likely to hear in conversation. It’s just those little things, you know? But your story’s fine,” Connor said, reading further down the page. “What is it?”

“A Portuguese folk tale my *avô* used to tell us,” Sabela confirmed, taking a short sip of tea.

“Much better than mine,” Connor admitted, handing the papers back to her. “I wrote about the time I knocked my front teeth out chasing a squirrel.”

Sabela grinned, fork coming up to cover her full mouth. Swallowing quickly, she asked, “How did you manage that?”

“It’ll have to wait; lunch is almost over,” Connor said, eating quickly.

Sabela checked her wristwatch. “You’re right. I should be going,” she said, standing up and hoisting her bag onto one shoulder. “Thank you for your help Connor.”

Connor nodded, mouth full of noodles, and waved at her as she took her tray to the garbage. Glancing at the giant clock projection hanging over the back of the building, he ate even faster. O’Byrne hated tardiness, especially at first hour and right after lunch. He’d make students conjugate the verbs from the last lesson aloud if they were late; and Connor did not feel like trying to remember the different tenses today.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ella

“My lady? Do you mind if I move these papers?”

Ella looked up. Callum stood on the other side of the table, hands hovering over her work.

“Why?” Ella asked.

“It’s time for dinner, my lady.”

“And?”

Callum blinked, and said slowly, “Normally, we eat dinner at the table, my lady.”

“I am working. Dinner must wait.”

“My lady,” Aidyn interjected gently, “it is already late. You will have to go to sleep soon.”

Ella glanced at the mass of papers covering the table’s surface. Shifting some around, she found the little black box—the phone, she must remember what to call such things—the phone Aidyn gave her. ‘In case a friend or classmate wants to talk to you,’ he had said, something like hope flickering in his eyes. Looking at the phone, Ella saw a much later hour than she expected.

“Fine,” she relented, gathering her work. Callum helped while Aidyn went to the kitchen.

“What were you working on, my lady, if you don’t mind my asking?” Callum inquired.

Ella checked the papers in her hand. “Math.”

“Ah, yes, that explains it. Cyri always calls math a time suck.”

“Who?” Ella asked, distracted as she organized the assignments in her hand.

Callum stared at Ella for a moment, before offering her the papers in his hand. “Cyrielle, my lady. My youngest sister.”

“Oh. Have I met her?”

“No, my lady.”

“Good,” she said, straightening the stack of papers in her arms before moving to her backpack. Behind her, she could hear Callum whispering to Aidyn as they set the table.

“Something is seriously wrong, Dad. She’s worse now than when she was asleep!”

“That’s the problem, Cal. She is still asleep, for the most part, and splitting consciousness has never been easy. Why do you think her work takes so long? It takes all her concentration just to keep her brain inside her skull instead of floating away, much less use the damn thing.”

“Why the hell doesn’t she just wake up, then?” Darius interjected softly. Ella saw him out of the corner of her eye, bringing some of the serving dishes out.

“She doesn’t want to. Alisdair practically begged just to get us into the library.”

“She doesn’t want to? The hell with what she—”

“Darius!” Aidyn said. Ella did not see his expression, but she felt the tension as she turned.

“Where is the other one?” she asked, pretending she had not heard everything they said.

“The other one, my lady?” Aidyn asked, tearing his gaze away from Darius.

“The one who looks like you. Except shorter.” The men looked at her; apparently that did not help. Ella thought very hard; what had been their name? “Seònaid,” she recalled.

Callum straightened a little, flicking his eyes toward his brother. “She’ll be out in a moment, my lady. She wanted to grab another book for tomorrow.”

“What book?”

“One of the pre-history chronicles,” Seònaid said, coming up to stand next to Ella. “We haven’t found anything in recent memory, so I thought we should move on to the prenom era.”

“The what?”

“The pre-Nonmagical era. The five thousand years before Nonmagical writings begin.”

“Why did you not say that then?”

“I was just using a little abbreviation, my lady.”

“Then it should be ‘prenon,’ not ‘prenom.’”

“It was chat speak, my lady. ‘Pre-NM’ to ‘prenom.’ Although it could be ‘prenim.’”

“What is chat—”

“Perhaps we should eat,” Aidyn interrupted, holding a chair out for Ella.

Ella shrugged, taking the seat. She looked at the food as Aidyn pushed her in. “What is it?”

“Beef stew with fresh bread, my lady. I wanted to help as much as I could with the research, so I set up the slow cooker earlier. Minimal effort required,” Callum said, pouring water into everyone’s glasses from a heavy jug filled with ice. Callum served Ella first.

“Why did you give me this?” she asked.

He stopped in the middle of scooping something onto his brother’s plate. “My lady?”

“I do not need to eat.”

“Oh,” he said, shoulders falling. “I’m sorry, my lady, I didn’t know. I’ll take it away.”

“My lady,” Aidyn said, drawing Ella’s attention. “Why don’t you have some?”

“I do not need to eat, Aidyn. As I just said.”

“Just because you don’t need to doesn’t mean you don’t want to or you shouldn’t.”

“Why would I do something I did not need to do?” Ella asked. That seemed pointless.

“Even if your body doesn’t need sustenance to function, my lady, the right smell or taste might bring a memory back. You did tell Alisdair you would try to remember more.”

Ella stared at him, but took a bite, the meat scalding in her mouth. She lifted another forkful, then noticed the others watching her. “What?”

“Is it to your liking, my lady?” Callum asked, fidgeting with his silverware.

Ella glanced at Aidyn, who subtly nodded at his eldest. She looked at Callum. “It is fine.”

Callum smiled, and the rest of the table settled in to eat. For a while, the only sounds were of the ravenously hungry. Ella finished first and stood. The rest of them stood at the same time.

“Finished, my lady?” Callum asked. “There’s ice cream if you would like some.”

“I do not.”

“I’ll be up shortly, my lady,” Aidyn said as Ella stepped out from the table.

“Why?”

“To pick your outfits for the week, my lady.”

“Why?”

“Because you cannot wear the same thing every day, my lady.”

“I will wear this,” Ella said, gesturing to her many layers.

“Those are your pajamas, my lady.”

“I do not understand why that is important.”

“You cannot wear your pajamas to school, my lady.”

“Why not?”

“It is not socially acceptable, my lady, not for high school.”

“Then I will wear what I wore last week.”

“As I said, my lady, you cannot wear the same thing every day.”

“Why not?”

Aidyn sighed a little. “My lady, would you please trust my judgment? I will not pick anything you would not wish to wear.”

“You always pick something too revealing.”

“My lady, you don’t have anything in your closet here that could be called ‘revealing.’”

“You only pick one thing to wear.”

“Most people do not wear seven layers in such humid heat, my lady.”

“I get cold. Besides, the colors you pick are not suitable.”

“The only color you have found suitable thus far, my lady, is black.”

“Yes.”

Aidyn watched Ella carefully. “How long will you mourn, my lady?”

Ella ignored him, heading toward the stairs.

“My lady?”

“What, Aidyn?”

“Do not forget you do not have your shift at the library on Friday this week.”

“Why not?” Ella asked, one foot on the stairs as she turned back.

“The library will be closed for renovations. Your shift will be on Tuesday instead.”

“Why must I go on Tuesday?”

“The library requires you to work a certain number of hours each week.”

“I have tutoring on Tuesdays.”

“You can go to the library after tutoring.”

“That is too much in one day.”

“On the other hand, it is the only day you will have to go out after school.”

Ella debated a moment. “Fine.”

“Very good, my lady. Good night.”

Ella said nothing, heading slowly up the stairs.

#

“Excuse me.”

Ella looked up from her work. A statuesque girl stood in front of her desk.

“Are you the tutor?” the girl asked.

“Yes.”

The girl smiled. “Could you help me? I’m having some trouble with the assignment.”

Ella nodded. The girl pulled a desk closer to Ella’s and sat down, opening her textbook to where a loose piece of paper stuck out. “I don’t understand this construction, you see,” the girl said, pointing to a paragraph on the page.

“No.”

The girl blinked. “No? What do you mean, ‘no’?”

“I do not understand what you do not understand.”

The girl had that look on her face, the one Ella was coming to realize meant she probably had said something wrong. Just to be sure, she peeked at her shoulders from the corner of her eyes. No, no extra head or appendages. She brushed her forehead; no extra eyes or anything. She had said something wrong then.

“Sabela, what are you doing here?” Ella heard from behind. Twisting in her seat, she saw Connor lingering inside the classroom door.

“Hello, Connor,” the girl, Sabela, said with a smile. “The choir director has an appointment, so practice was moved, and I wanted to come to tutoring since I had the chance. How are you?”

“Fine,” Connor said, shooting a glance at Ella, who gazed back. “Hi, Ella,” he mumbled.

“Hello.”

“So what’s up, Sabela?” he asked as he slid into the seat in front of her.

“I was just saying I do not understand this part of the lesson,” Sabela said, turning the book so Connor could read while she peered at Ella out of her periphery.

“What don’t you understand?”

“Why is the possessive here,” Sabela said, pointing to the middle of a sentence, “instead of here?” She pointed earlier in the sentence.

“Because—”

A clearing throat interrupted Connor. All three students looked to Mr. O’Byrne at his desk.

“Ella,” Mr. O’Byrne said. “Stand up.”

“Why?” Ella asked.

“Because you’re the tutor, not Connor, so do what you’re here for.”

“Why do I need to stand up for that?”

Sabela and O’Byrne frowned at Ella.

“It’s fine, Mr. O’Byrne,” Connor said, turning to face the girls. “Go on, Ella, explain.”

Ella looked at Connor. She moved her book and flipped back a few pages to show Connor and Sabela a previous lesson. As she spoke, she had the strangest feeling she owed Connor thanks.

“I’ve got to go,” Connor said some time later. Ella checked the clock on the wall.

“I also need to leave,” she said, gathering her things together.

O’Byrne looked up from grading papers. “Ta, Connor.”

“Bye, Mr. O’Byrne. Have a nice day,” Connor said, waving as he left the classroom.

Ella was nearly out the door when the teacher called her back. She turned to look at him.

“Listen, Ella, Alisdair told me you’re not like other students. Fine; but when you’re tutoring for my class, you do what I tell you. No more of this cheek, understand?”

Ella actually did not understand what “cheek” meant, but she thought this might be one of those times Aidyn talked to her about when she had to seem like a normal teenager, so she nodded.

“Good. Off with you, then.”

Ella left, nearly bumping into Connor, who was blocking the entrance to the main hall.

“Sorry,” he said, moving out of the way.

Ella’s phone beeped in her backpack. She dug around for it in the bottom of her bag while she headed toward the front of the building. Finding it, she studied the message on the screen.

“You ok, Ella?”

Ella looked up at Connor, holding the outside door open.

“I am going to the library.”

“The public library?”

Ella nodded. “I have to volunteer today.”

“I didn’t know you worked at the library. So do I.”

Ella said nothing.

“Um, were you going to walk there?”

Ella nodded.

“I can walk with you. Or, you can walk with me and Marie. She has a shift today too.”

“Marie and me,” Ella said.

Connor gave a tight, twitchy grin. “Right. This way.”

Ella followed him to the gate of the school, where a pretty girl with long red braids stood.

“Marie,” Connor called. The girl looked up, focusing on Ella.

“Marie, this is Ella,” Connor introduced. “Apparently, Ella also volunteers at the library. I figured she could walk with us.”

“Sure,” Marie chirped, studying Ella. “Nice to meet you.”

Ella nodded, following Connor as he took off to the right.

“Is this your first day?” Marie asked Ella. “It’s pretty strange to start so late.”

“No.”

Marie studied Ella, like she wanted Ella to say something else.

“It is not my first day,” Ella elaborated.

Marie frowned prettily. “Then why are you coming in today?”

“The library will be closed this weekend.”

“Oh, so you’re coming in to make up the shift. I see.”

Ella did not think there was much to see, but apparently Marie thought otherwise.

Marie called to Connor, walking ahead, “So how do you know Ella, Connor?”

“She’s in our government class,” he said briefly.

“I’ve never noticed,” Marie said. She directed her attention to Ella. “You don’t talk much.”

“No,” Ella confirmed.

“Will you help with setup? We could use it,” Marie said, shifting the subject abruptly.

“What setup?” Ella asked.

“For the monthly special,” Marie clarified.

“What is that?”

“Oh, that’s right, you haven’t been here very long. Well, every month, the library puts on an event celebrating a different country or culture. This month it’s France, so the adult section is discussing notable French authors and philosophers, and there’ll be French art around the building, and the youth section—that’s us—is showing *Cinderella* and having some French food.”

“Why?”

“Well the library thinks it’s very important to celebrate world cultures and to offer the public all sorts of interesting information. A few months ago they did Australia, and I learned so much; and of course they have other events, about music and history—”

“Not why is the event going on. Why are you showing... whatever it was?”

“*Cinderella*?”

Ella nodded.

Marie cocked her head. “You don’t know the story of *Cinderella*?”

“No.”

“But it’s such a popular story! I mean, there have been so many remakes or retellings and such. How can you have missed it?”

Ella shrugged. Connor peeked back at them, but remained quiet.

“Well, it’s the story of this young girl, *Cinderella*, who’s very beautiful and kind, but has a callous, vain family who treat her terribly. Her fairy godmother helps her go to the ball, where

she meets the prince, and he falls in love with her and finds her with the glass slipper and they live happily ever after,” Marie gushed, smiling brightly at the end.

Ella stared at her as the three came to a crosswalk. “That makes no sense; and what does it have to do with France?”

“Well it’s originally a French story, you know,” Marie said as they crossed the street.

“I do not.”

“Yep,” Marie chirped, “*Cendrillon*, by Charles Perrault in 1697.”

“You know a lot about it.”

“Well I was born in France, so my parents read me a lot of French stories as a child, but really, I just love fairy tales. Who doesn’t love a happy ending?”

Ella started to say she did not, but Connor pulled up abruptly.

“Here we are,” he said, holding the door open to the library.

“Thanks, Connor,” Marie said, flashing him a smile.

Ella nodded at him as she walked through, following Marie toward the back section. She nodded at Marie as well when she held the door to the volunteer room open. Setting her bag inside the cubby, she pressed her name tag to her sleeve and headed out.

“Where are you going?” Marie asked as she fiddled with her own badge.

“To the stacks,” Ella said.

“Aren’t you going to help us set up?”

“No.” Ella walked away. She thought Marie might have said something as she left, but the cold distracted Ella. She pulled her jacket tighter and made for the quiet shelves.

Connor

“Marie thinks you should give up.”

Connor looked up from his pasta, slurping as Re sat down at his table with Li. Swallowing quickly, he asked, “Give up what?”

“On that girl you’re crushing on.”

“I am not crushing on her!”

“Who are we talking about, again?” Li queried as he sipped his lemonade.

“Ella,” Connor said, “but I do not have a crush on her.”

“Why does Marie think he should give up?” Li asked Re, ignoring Connor’s denial.

“She thinks Ella is rude. Not a good fit for our precious little Connor,” Re teased, avoiding the spatter of sauce Connor sent his way.

“Ella’s not rude. Not intentionally, at least. I think,” Connor said.

“You can’t tell?” Li asked.

“You were the one who pointed out she wasn’t good around people.”

“I haven’t actually talked to her, though. You have.”

“Yeah, well, in her case it doesn’t really help,” Connor joked.

Re opened his mouth, then froze. He stared past Connor, shock plain across his face.

Connor looked over his shoulder. “Ella,” he said nervously, as she walked by them. “Hey.”

“Hello,” she said, stopping in front of Connor. She looked at Re.

“This is Li, and Re,” Connor said, gesturing to the other boys. He shared a look with Li, who seemed just as confused about their friend.

Ella tilted her head to the side as she studied Re. “Have we met?” she inquired.

Re gaped, opening and closing his mouth like a broken nutcracker.

“Is something wrong?” Ella asked.

Re shook himself, then jumped out of his seat. “My apologies. Would you care to sit?”

Connor goggled at Li; what in the hell was up with Re?

“No. I am going to the library to work. See you later, Connor,” she said, and moved on.

Re stared after her. Connor called his name several times, but Re didn't respond. Finally, Li tugged Re's arm, nearly toppling him.

“Dude,” Connor said, “what's up?”

Re gazed blankly at the table before giving himself another shake and looking at Connor. “Nothing,” he said unconvincingly. “She just...it's nothing.” Re gathered his things. “In any case, I'm sure she's not being intentionally rude. You should make up with her.”

“Re, where are you going?” Li asked.

“I have to talk to the headmaster,” Re said, shoving his food toward Connor. “Have mine.”

“But I don't—”

“Later!” Re called, rushing away.

Connor stared after him for a moment, then turned to Li, who was brushing off leaves from the lion topiary's mane. Connor thought that almost as strange as his friend's behavior; the garden figures didn't usually bother the students or make a mess. “What was that about?”

“No clue about the lion. As for Re, talk to Marie,” Li said, shrugging.

“Right,” Connor said, glancing back in Re's direction.

“Can I have that?” Li asked, reaching out to Re's abandoned food. Connor leaned back and let Li at it, wondering what Ella could possibly have done to scare Re.

#

“Ree,” Connor called quietly, distracting his friend from her warmup before orchestra rehearsal. She looked at him, turning slightly while she went through her chromatic scale.

“Have you seen Re since lunch?” Connor asked.

Marie lowered her flute. “No, why?”

“He freaked out when he met Ella.” Marie sniffed before rifling through her sheet music.

“Ree, she barely said anything to him and he looked like that Munch painting.”

Marie squinted at him. “Are you sure?”

“I can tell the difference between petrified and pissed, Ree.”

“Well, what happened?”

“She was walking by us. He got a super weird look on his face. She talked to him, and he got up and offered her his seat. She said no and left. He stared after her, then grabbed all his stuff and ran off to talk to Dr. Benson. And he actually called Dr. Benson ‘the headmaster.’”

Marie raised one brow. Apparently that was of more concern than a strange expression.

“There’s an away game tomorrow, so we’re going out. I’ll talk to him.”

Connor nodded, and turned to Dr. Grant on the conductor’s podium. He could wait a day.

APPENDIX A: BASICS OF MAGIC

Basic Terminology

“Magical” (M) refers to a person born with magic. “Nonmagical” (NM) refers to a person not born with magic. “Amagical” (AM) refers to a person from a magical family born without magic. Some AMs may possess an ability to sense the use of magic, or if a person possesses magic.

Definition of Magic

The ability to manipulate matter or energy via organic means. NMs are capable of manipulating the world around them, but Ms don’t need as many outside tools.

How Magic Works

If a NM is walking in the woods and comes across a fallen tree in the middle of the path, they can walk around the tree; go over the tree; go under the tree; move the tree with brute strength or simple mechanics, if possible; or take a different path. If a M is walking in the woods and comes across a fallen tree in the middle of the path, they can walk around the tree; go over the tree; go under the tree; move the tree with brute strength or simple mechanics, if possible; take a different path; use magic to destroy the tree; or use magic to move the tree.

Magic, in daily life, is not an external force; it is a person’s internal ability to manipulate their surroundings.

- In some cases, if a person is attempting to manipulate their surroundings in a major way—i.e. changing the past, turning back time, changing something on a global or cosmic scale, etc.—there may be a visible manifestation of the energy being used to effect the change, but this is not ‘magic’ as traditionally thought.

- In terms of attempting something on a global or cosmic scale, very few Ms ever even make the attempt; the history of such efforts is full of failures by people who overreached.
- These efforts are easier to achieve as a collaboration, but such group attempts require absolute and unshakeable trust among the members, making such cooperation exceedingly rare.
- Any successful attempts on such a scale, when made by a single person, often end up as acts of legend or myth (e.g. Merlin).
- There is a danger, if a single person tries to make a global or cosmic effort, and fails, of the energy used in the attempt creating a backlash which can have serious, if not fatal, natural effects, such as famines, droughts, freak weather, and so on. This further decreases the likelihood of people making the attempt by themselves.

Mechanics of Magic

Since magic is an ability to manipulate one's surroundings, physical gestures or vocal utterances often play a part in acts of magic, though not always. Physical gestures may include using the hands and/or fingers to create symbols or patterns, or movements involving parts of, or the entire: arm or arms; leg or legs; abdomen or chest; spine or back; pelvis; or any combination thereof. As a rule, physical gestures can only be aborted by external forces; a person using such gestures as part of an act of magic will not or, depending on the scale of action attempted, cannot cease the flow of necessary physical movement.

Vocal utterances may include articulating the intended action; articulating the desired effect; describing the process by which matter or energy is being manipulated; invoking the

abilities or spirits of mortals or humans, magical or otherwise; invoking the abilities or spirits of immortals or non-humans, magical or otherwise; or any combination thereof. Vocal utterances may be, and often are, in a person's native tongue, but can also be in a foreign language; the person using magic does not necessarily have to be fluent in the foreign language so long as they understand how the words correspond to the act of magic. If a person is using vocal utterances as part of an act of magic, any break in concentration, such as mispronunciation, being interrupted, using an inefficient or incorrect rhythm of speech, or the like, will disrupt the act.

The size, type, and importance of physical gestures and vocal utterances depend upon the nature of the act of magic; typically, acts of magic on large scales involve both physical and vocal components of varying breadth and intensity. Any disturbance in either physical movement or vocal utterance during an act of magic may, depending on the scale of magic, create a backlash of energy. Such backlash may affect only the person performing the act of magic, or the person responsible for the disturbance, or anyone in the caster's environs, or any combination thereof. In some cases, the effects of the backlash depend upon the caster or person affected by the backlash.

Effects of Magic

Magic, as a biological trait or ability, affects the body. A M person develops about one-third faster than a NM person. Where a NM infant begins speaking around eighteen months, a M infant begins speaking between twelve and fourteen months. AMs develop at the same rate as NMs, but generally display cognitive function more in line with Ms. The most notable difference in physiology between NMs and Ms is in the brain; the rest of the body and its systems do not differ greatly. Exceptions include if a person's magic lends itself toward a specific expertise. For

example, a person who finds it easier to manipulate thermal energy may develop skin more resistant to burns.

The brain of a M develops more quickly in utero and onward to accommodate the ability of the person to manipulate their surroundings. Again, this development can differ depending on an area of expertise. If, for example, a person finds manipulating auditory or vocal occurrences easy, the area(s) of the brain dealing with sound, speech, and/or language, as well as the muscles necessary for sound production in the throat and mouth, may develop more quickly than usual.

Magic is an inherited ability; it is possible for someone born to parents who have magical ability not to have magic. It is not possible for someone to have magical ability if no one else in their family has the ability. It may be several generations between magical members, and the relation might be very distant, but it must be there. Magic cannot be gained; a person can become proficient in its use, but to actually acquire the ability is impossible. Magic is inherent.

Dangers of Magic

In utero

Due to the need for more rapid development in M fetuses, defects can occur, including scoliosis, malformed extremities (usually one leg or arm being significantly shorter than the other), defects in the small bones of the hands or feet (resulting in claw-like fingers or club foot), blindness, and occasionally malformed facial features (one eye significantly lower than the other, an extremely large or misshapen nose, malformed ears, and the like). Such birth defects are the root behind the myth that ‘witches’ or ‘warlocks’ are ugly, and thus, in relation to the philosophy of beautiful features covering a beautiful mind or soul, evil or in league with the Devil.

Infancy

Rapid development of the brain in M infants can result in sensory overload, which can cause setbacks in the infant's overall development. Occasionally, if infants are overwhelmed by the development of cognitive abilities, they will focus their attention on one or two specific areas; this can lead to savant-like abilities in a particular field, at the detriment of other subjects.

Childhood

Until the development of higher cognitive function—mainly in terms of ethics and morals—M children can inadvertently cause damage to their surroundings or themselves through the unconscious or unlearned use of magic to attain their desires. For example, a child sees a jar of cookies on the top shelf. Trying to get a cookie, the child uses magic to pull the whole jar down. The jar shatters on the floor, creating a mess and possibly injuring the child. Advanced mental development can also lead to emotional handicaps. A child with the ability to, for instance, animate their dolls or create worlds out of words may find little use for “real” people.

Adolescence

Fluctuating hormones can interfere with a person's ability to use magic, especially for any task where fine control is necessary. Difficulties with use of magic can cause emotional or mental issues in M teens, especially if puberty sets off physical changes beyond the norm as well (as in the development of burn-resistant skin or the like).

APPENDIX B: HISTORY SKETCH

I. Prehistory

a. Ella

- i. The very first consciousness
- ii. Created the first worlds and all subsequent worlds
- iii. Created the first living thing; responsible for all later life

b. Current Earth

- i. M societies existed for about 5000 years before the first recorded societies
- ii. With the rise of NM societies, some Ms took advantage of NM perception of magic, presented themselves as gods
- iii. NMs eventually overthrew the “gods” and the remaining Ms settled into a hidden existence

II. Enlightenment: 1620s-1780s

a. Magic enters NM society – known as The Spill (1667-8)

- i. Seeing how NMs are focusing on logic, Ms decide to reveal their abilities
- ii. ‘The Spill’ – Ms first revealed themselves to NMs in England; leaders of the London magical community were able to secure an audience with John Locke and the First Earl of Shaftesbury; they proceeded to tell the two men about their hidden society. When Locke and Shaftesbury did not believe them, the group decided a demonstration was necessary, so they caused a nearby pitcher to overflow, flooding the room in several feet of wine. When Shaftesbury protested, the group immediately vanished the wine and returned the room to its pristine condition.

1. 'The Spill' also refers to the rate of magical pervasion in NM society. After the first incident with Locke and Shaftesbury, when the London magical leaders were not killed for their abilities, Ms across Britain and Western Europe (and Eastern Europe to a lesser degree) began 'coming out' in increasing droves; by the time things settled, Ms comprised roughly one-third of the population

iii. Magical creatures

1. Magical creatures did not agree with Ms' decision to reveal themselves
2. Majority of magical non-human species are long-lived; because of this, they tend to extreme caution in any major decisions. Attitude is, "let's wait to see how the NMs take things"

b. Ms face persecution in Europe (1670s-1720s)

- i. Upon their emergence into NM society, Ms face a choice: admit to being magical or face severe punishment for hiding it
 1. Every country has their own governmental body that deals with Ms; mostly the judiciary, who register Ms and assign any punishments for magical misdeeds, which are defined by the legislative or executive branch of the governmental body, depending on the country
 2. Most Ms 'came out' shortly after The Spill (1668-70), so they can't really avoid registering as magical with their government

3. Those who attempt to hide their status face severe monetary sanctions or physical labor as punishment; some AMs use their ability to detect magic as a way of gaining power with the government, by seeking out people who try to hide their status
- ii. Eastern Europe
 1. Politically and culturally anti-M; “we don’t want Ms here”
 - iii. Western Europe
 1. Politically and culturally anti-M, though in some areas, the cultural aspect was less pronounced; “Ms can stay, but can only have very specific jobs, and the government’s going to regulate them harshly.” Such jobs generally involved extreme physical labor or inhuman working conditions
 - iv. Ms flee, mainly out of England, Germany, Spain, Italy, Romania, Russia, Hungary, and other Eastern European countries
 - v. Ms also face dangers from NMs who envy their abilities; there is some history of NMs attempting to gain power by taking it from Ms
 1. Many NMs believed incorrectly that stealing power from a M was similar to consorting with Satan to gain power
 2. Since magic is an inherent ability to manipulate a person’s surroundings, these attempts invariably failed; it would be like trying to rip out someone’s spine and use it for yourself

- a. In the mid to late 1900s, some researchers were interested in the idea of transplanting magic, in the vein of organ transplants, but since no Ms wanted to risk losing their abilities, legitimate research died out very quickly
 - c. M emigrants settle in North America; some go east to China, Japan (1720s-1800s)
 - i. The existence of Ms in China and Japan is somewhat of an open secret; no one actually says anything about Ms, but they're acknowledged as helpful members of society, and thus generally left alone
 - ii. Ms fleeing Europe who settle in China and Japan were generally welcomed by native magical communities; the refugees are more than happy to return to a secretive existence
 - 1. Though the refugees do face some xenophobia from Chinese and Japanese NMs, the native Ms are less prejudiced; as a result, the refugee Ms tend to avoid contact with native NMs

III. US Colonies and early statehood (1730s-1800s)

- a. Ms settle into society, not as slaves, but not higher-class; they share the middle class because many emigrants had to sell their possessions to afford passage to America, or leave their possessions behind
- b. Ms are not written into constitution, not even as part of the 3/5 compromise
 - i. Pro-Constitution Ms want to be written into the Constitution; anti-Constitution Ms are fine as long as the US government doesn't try to interfere (similar to federalism vs. states' rights)

- ii. One argument is that Ms are protected under the religion part of 1st Amendment; opposing opinion is magic does not necessarily count as a religion, more of an inherent quality or ability, like the ability to sing
 - iii. Since they are not written into the Constitution at this time, Ms are not allowed to vote, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, religion, or age
- c. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Ms become accepted part of American society, pretty much middle class, and comprising roughly one-third of the population of the United States
- i. Ms occupy middle class because of laws restricting their ability to conjure or magically create things like money or certain foods
 - 1. Elements of society and government fear if Ms produce too many of their own products, since they make up one-third of the population, the economy might suffer proportionately
 - 2. Ms are only allowed to use magic to speed the process by which they produce items that could be introduced into the market, not to actually create the items
 - a. This means if Ms need, for instance, a new plow to farm, they aren't allowed to conjure one; they would have to buy or barter for the materials necessary to make a plow, which they could then assemble themselves, or buy a plow from someone else

- b. The enforcement of these laws, up through the Civil War, is a state power; in some states, the laws are strictly upheld by a police force of AMs and NMs; in other states, the laws are rarely enforced, and so long as no one is seen blatantly breaking the rules, such activity is generally ignored
 - i. After the Civil War, the enforcement of any laws pertaining solely to Ms becomes a federal matter, and laws are strictly upheld

IV. 19th century

- a. 1837-1841: Anti-M sentiment rises during the Van Buren presidency because Van Buren is AM
- b. 1861-1865: Civil War
 - i. Ms on both sides
 - ii. Confederate Ms think if there's a new country they can overcome/avoid the anti-M sentiment.
 - 1. History of white Ms using ability to control slaves, including M slaves
 - 2. M slaves suffer particularly brutal treatment, so they have to focus their ability on healing themselves and keeping alive, rather than fomenting rebellion or attempting to escape
 - iii. Union Ms think better the government they have than the one they might end up with

1. Abolitionist Ms think ending slavery will help pave the way for equality for Ms too
 - c. Union still wins, but magical equality does not happen as hoped
 - i. Black adult men get vote, but not M black adult men
- V. 20th century
- a. Prohibition: some Ms rise in socioeconomic status because of their ability to circumvent laws
 - i. Loopholes in Prohibition laws allow for Ms to produce their own liquor, which they can then sell
 - b. World War I: very few Ms fight on Allied side, some for Central Powers as conscripts, mostly from Germany
 - c. 1920: adult women get vote, not M adult women
 - d. The Great Depression: spike in anti-M sentiment, since Ms can summon/create basic necessities (see history of Ms as mainly relegated to production industry)
 - i. FDR: AM, helps lower anti-M sentiment
 - ii. Ms help speed along some aspects of several New Deal projects
 1. Ms reduce the need for heavy machinery because they can lift loads, pour cement, dig foundations, etc.
 2. Ms can also detect faults in a building, which saves time and increases the structural integrity of said building
 - e. World War II: Ms one of Hitler's target groups
 - i. Hitler disliked Ms, but he was not above using them for his own gain

1. Few Ms still lived in Germany in the 1930s, so when Hitler began conquering Europe, he offered a choice to Ms in the invaded countries: work for the Nazi party, or die in a camp. Most of them chose to live
 2. Hitler chose the most capable of any Ms he captured to be his personal guards; they were to protect him from any magical interference or attack, on pain of death for their families
- ii. Many Ms in Central and Eastern European countries, who had lived for the past few centuries mostly in hiding, were discovered and sent to camps
 1. Ms on Axis side restrain any prisoners' magical abilities to prevent them fleeing camp or inciting insurrection
 - a. This includes restricting any combat abilities Ms might have, as well as the ability to conjure basic necessities like food or clothing
 2. By end of war, M population of Central and Eastern European almost nonexistent
- iii. Pearl Harbor has large M community, seen as twofold attack
 1. By this point, Ms comprise about one-fourth of the US population
- iv. Lots of Ms on Allies' side, including some Scottish/Irish/Welsh who had been seen as second-class citizens
 1. Anti-M sentiment in Britain not as strong as in US, but regulations on Ms' socioeconomic opportunities still fairly harsh

- v. Atom bomb solely a NM invention
 - 1. Ms refuse to work on the Manhattan Project
 - a. Ms invited to work on Project fear the repercussions of using magic on such a large scale
 - b. Anti-M sentiment increases as not participating in the Project is seen as unpatriotic/traitorous
 - 2. Tension between anti-M sentiment at home for not contributing to atom bomb, and pro-M sentiment on battlefield
 - a. Ms especially helpful as field medics – far fewer amputations necessary, better general care and conditions
 - b. Ms also make good scouts, and can lay traps or defenses which only affect enemy troops
- vi. Allies win; a portion of the Marshall Plan funds in each country goes toward any remaining magical communities
 - 1. Some countries, whose magical communities were not heavily affected, allocate those funds toward rebuilding the magical communities in other countries
 - 2. Some countries, whose magical communities were completely obliterated, use these funds to offer bonuses to Ms who are willing to re-establish magical communities
- f. In post-war prosperity, Ms demand vote
 - i. Ms crucial to war effort abroad, also kept things safe and secure at home

- ii. 1949: 22nd Amendment prohibits discrimination based on magical ability
(all subsequent Amendments increased in number by one), allows for
voting and greater civil rights
- g. 1959: legislation passes to allow for magical curricula in public schools
 - i. Previously Ms:
 - 1. went to school with NMs, then did an apprenticeship in their
preferred area, magical or otherwise
 - 2. attended private magical schools then apprenticeships
 - 3. did not have formal schooling, learning everything from family
members and trade masters
 - ii. Segregation based solely on magical ability not an issue; Ms still had to
deal with segregation based on race, ethnicity, etc.
- h. 1960s and on: Ms' place in American society expands
 - i. Curricula evolves to encompass growing approach to viewing magic as
something quantifiable and precise, rather than something mystical
 - 1. Magic and technology converge to form technomancy
 - 2. Magic and mathematics converge to form numeramancy
 - 3. Magic and mechanical sound production converge to form
audiomancy
 - 4. Magic and organic sound production converge to form
choromancy

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