

Part 2:

Diana woke up early the following day, in time to see Bella walk into the woods. After a few minutes, she saw a figure rise above the trees and fly into the distance. Diana breathed a sigh of relief. If Bella was flying away, she would be gone most of the day.

Before heading outside to forage mushrooms and plant early Spring seeds in the garden, she made some toast with jam and herbal tea. As she walked towards a cluster of mushrooms, Finnian stepped out from behind one of the trees.

Diana gasped and jumped backward, caught off guard once again. "What are you doing here?" She hissed, looking around even though she knew Bella was long gone.

"I needed to come back to see if you were okay. And you never told me your name," he smiled. Diana noticed his eyes were much more green than they were yesterday.

"Diana," she said. She hesitated before she stepped forward and stretched out one hand. He met her halfway, shaking her hand with both of his.

"Diana, it's nice to officially meet you. I'm sorry for startling you again. I know I shouldn't be back here, but I couldn't get you or this property off my mind yesterday."

"This is really dangerous. You really don't want to cross over that river."

"I saw Bella leave, I know she's gone. I know how dangerous Bella can be," Finnian said. "Is she holding you captive here? I think I can help you." His hands were still holding Diana's hand. She tried to step back.

"I - I really shouldn't be talking to you."

"No, please, let me help you. Bella has been torturing the community for decades, and this is the first time we have a chance to defeat her. Everyone knows that Bella has been growing weaker, but no one has been brave enough to stand up to her for a long time. This is the first time anyone has been able to find her property. Last year, my friend, another wizard-in-training, found her lab. He broke in and stole a ring; since then, she's grown noticeably weaker. She moved her lab to a more heavily protected location and is now angrier than ever. It's starting to scare the community and has started to affect the mortals. No one wants to stand up to her, but I finally have a chance - if you'll let me."

"But you don't know how powerful Diana still is. She can still control people - make them do whatever she wants. She's got a horrible temper, and when it flares, she can still tap into a very dark, evil side of her magic," Diana shivered, thinking about the one time that Morwenna had intentionally struck her. Bella had been blind with rage that evening and had cast a lightning

spell that burned Diana's arm. No amount of Bella's first aid spells or potions could wipe the scar away.

Finnian looked down at her arm, where the scar seemed to glow as if it could hear their conversation.

"But with my grandfather and I working with you - an insider - we can defeat her. My grandfather is much more powerful than I am and has been keen to see Bella disappear for decades. Please, let us help you." He squeezed her hand. She looked back at him, contemplating.

On one hand, she would die if she tried to do anything alone, and having two wizards on her side would be very useful.

On the other hand, if Bella caught wind of any of this, she would surely kill Diana, Finnian, and Finnian's grandfather.

"How do I know I can trust you? Are you going to free me just to hold me captive at your grandfather's house?"

Before he could answer, the otter splashed down the river, chattering every time it jumped out of the water.

"Bella is coming back. You need to leave," Diana pulled her hand away from Finnian and ran to the greenhouse. She looked back in time to see Finnian disappear into the trees.

Minutes later, Bella strode out of the woods from the other side of the property.

"Diana, can you believe I nearly forgot my lunch? Can you pack me the rest of the roast leftovers? I'm working on a new potion and must stay at the lab for at least four days, if not longer. I trust you to maintain the house and property. Just know that if you try to leave, I will find you faster than you can blink an eye."

Diana nodded, trying not to look too pleased as she packed the rest of the roast, fresh bread, and dessert. She helped Bella gather supplies for the lab and watched her leave - this time, flying straight off the property.

The rest of her day was quiet until dinner time. Finnian had seemingly disappeared, and Diana spent the rest of her day foraging and bringing in firewood. It was another dreary, cold evening. The rain had started around sunset. The wind whistled through the old house, rain slashing at the windows. She had a fire lit and a pot of chili on the stove when she heard a knock on the door. Her breath caught. No one had ever knocked on the door before.

"It's Finnian," a voice called through the door. Diana tip-toed to the door, still unsure. "Diana, please let me in. I know Bella is gone; I watched her leave and followed her to her lab."

Diana bit her lip before she unlocked the door and opened it. Finnian was standing there, wearing a black hooded overcoat, drenched from the rain. His eyes were a warm hazel green, and they shined bright despite the darkness outside and dimmed lighting inside.

He smiled, "Well? Are you going to invite me in?"

She smiled and stepped back, letting him in. "You scared me again. You're not going to gain my trust if you keep doing that," Diana said. She stepped into the bathroom and tossed a dry towel to Finnian. "Here, you can hang your jacket over by the fire. Leave your shoes by the door, please, I just mopped this morning."

Diana returned to the stove, stirring the chili and adding spices, glancing up at Finnian over the steaming pot. He hung his jacket on a clothing rack next to the fire and shook his hair free from a tie. Shoulder-length hair fell out, and he dried it off with the towel before draping it next to his coat. She realized she had blindly trusted that it was Finnian. Something about him made her feel comfortable, but she didn't know why.

He was wearing a black hoodie and sweatpants. He tugged his hoodie off, which was also slightly wet, and Diana averted her eyes when his shirt pulled up, exposing his six-pack. Under the hoodie, he wore a black V-neck, accentuating his muscular upper arms and chest.

She grabbed two bowls and spooned chili into each, grabbing fresh cornbread from the table. She brought the bowls over and set them down on the table. She pulled a rocking chair out of the corner of the room and sat down. Finnian sat in the armchair and took a big whiff of the chili.

"Oh my..." he said after inhaling. He dipped his cornbread into the chili, using it like a spoon, and took a big bite. "Oh...my...god, Diana. No wonder Belladonna keeps you here; this is the best meal I've ever had." He picked up his spoon and continued to eat.

Diana laughed and started to eat, "Thank you. So...why are you here?"

"I'm here to gain your trust and defeat Bella," he said matter-of-factly between bites. "But first, let me finish this chili." He took a few more bites before he looked up at Diana. "Sorry for my bluntness, but are you magical? How'd you get stuck here?"

She looked at her bowl for a minute, taking a slow bite of chili, contemplating if she should open up to him. She didn't know what he'd do if he found out she was a mortal. No one had ever disappeared from her town before. Still, she had heard stories from friends that not all magical communities had a good relationship with the mortals.

She still had the strange inkling from before that he was trustworthy.

"No, I'm not magical... I'm a mortal." She looked up from her bowl. His mouth dropped open slightly in surprise before he realized and quickly shut it.

"Oh, so you're affected even worse than we are by Morwenna's powers. That explains the scar. How did she trap you here?"

Diana explained what had happened in the park and how the last few months had gone - including Bella's outbursts.

"There is one thing...I have a log of every meal I've cooked over the last couple of months, with notes on her mood, energy, and power levels. I think there's a pattern to it. Hang on, let me show you." She put her bowl down and ran to her room to grab the journal. She handed it to him before sitting back down across from him.

He examined her notes, lingering over the days she had an outburst. He shook his head. "This is perfect; it will help us so much. Do you mind if I take this to my grandfather?"

"Please do," Diana said. "I've memorized most of it, and she won't be back for days, so I won't need it. I can show you her greenhouse tomorrow if you want."

He closed the notebook and looked at her. "You'll help us?" He sounded slightly surprised and smiled. "I wasn't sure if I could get you to trust me, especially when you told me you were a mortal. My father is a mortal, and he's told me that some of you are extremely wary of our kind. I wouldn't blame you, considering..." He gestured around.

"Your father is a mortal? But you and your grandfather...?"

"He's my mom's dad. They're magical. But she fell for a mortal, and here I am! I'm actually late in my training. We weren't sure that I would ever develop anything. Most wizards start training at 16, but I was 22 when my powers finally showed. So while everyone else has been training for nearly half their lives, I've only been at it for 10." He sighed, lost in his thoughts for a moment.

Diana smiled at him and realized she felt relaxed for the first time since Bella had captured her. "Thank you for telling me that," she said.

A loud crack of thunder shook the house, and they both jumped.

"I almost forgot it was storming out," Diana laughed, breaking the momentary tension. "Do you want dessert? I made a cobbler before I knew Bella would be gone, so it's fair game."

He grinned, "Um, yes? Who would say no to dessert after that incredible dinner?"

He followed her to the kitchen with both of their empty chili bowls. "How can I help?"

"Oh, you don't have to!"

He touched her arm, "Please, it's the least I can do." Diana felt her cheeks flush under his touch. He was significantly taller than her, her head barely reaching his shoulders.

She looked up at him; his eyes were a dark blue this time. "Your eyes, they're beautiful," she said before she could stop herself.

He laughed, blushing a little. "Thank you. I hate them - they give me away. They change color depending on my mood or what kind of magic I'm using. But I'm glad someone likes them," he said before he broke eye contact, stepping away and dropping his hand from her arm.

Diana cleared her throat, "if you wouldn't mind grabbing two bowls from that cabinet over there?" She pointed at a cabinet on the far side of the kitchen. She turned around toward the counter so she could cut the cobbler. She couldn't believe she'd let that slip...had she made things awkward?

"Here you go," he said as he placed the bowls beside her and sat down at the kitchen table. She scooped a serving of cobbler into each bowl before setting them down on the table.

They ate in silence for a minute. "Tell me about your life before here," Finnian broke the silence. "Have you always been this fantastic of a chef?"

She smiled and told him about the cafe, her life before moving to the Village, and how she fell in love with cooking at a young age. She always knew she wanted to be a chef but never imagined she would be the sole chef of a popular cafe this early in life. Despite the occasional stress, she loved it. Cooking was her passion. She loved the way it made people feel. The way it nourished and healed.

Oddly, she loved it even more now that she had access to magical ingredients. She was almost sad, knowing she would lose access to this once she escaped.

"My mom was a great cook, too. How you glow when you talk about it reminds me of her. She died last year" He paused and looked down at his empty bowl. He cleared his throat, "I should probably go home. It's getting late, and it sounds like the rain has let up. Can I come back tomorrow?"

Diana didn't push about his mom, she didn't want to upset him. She was excited he wanted to come back, though. "Yes, come back after 10, when we're sure that Bella isn't going to make a surprise visit home. I can show you the greenhouse, and maybe you can help me with some of my chores? I bet you chop and carry wood much faster than I can." She winked at him.

He laughed, "It's the least I can do for a delicious meal and shelter from the rain tonight."

Diana walked him to the door and watched him disappear into the darkness. She heard the faintest splash of water as he crossed the river. She closed the door and cleaned up. She was surprised at how much she'd enjoyed his company. Sure, she was wary about magical beings still - but Finnian couldn't be bad if he was trying to defeat Bella.

Finnian emerged out of the woods a little after 10am the next morning. It was a clear day but chilly enough that Diana needed a sweater. She showed Finnian around the greenhouse while she tended to the plants, gathering some for cooking. They moved to the barn, where she collected eggs before introducing Finnian to the cows and goats. He offered to help feed them; having grown up on a farm, he was used to farm work.

She answered his questions about the magical greenhouse, eggs, milk, and cheese before they lapsed into casual chit-chat as they worked. The animals warmed up quickly to Finnian. Diana smiled as she watched a cow nuzzle Finnian for a chin scratch.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but...how did your mom die?" Diana asked, looking up at him while a goat tried to get the hay out of her hand.

He continued to scratch the cow's chin, contemplating his answer. "It was actually... Bella... Bella and my grandfather have been enemies for years. They trained together in their teens, but she betrayed him when they finished their apprenticeships. Bella became the more powerful sorceress, hungry for power in the worst way, trying to prove something to her negligent parents. She tried to overthrow the community government, but she was banished. She settled on the outskirts of our community property, technically not trespassing since this part of the Adirondacks is free-reign."

"Since then, she's cast spells on our land - stopping crops from being fruitful, causing chickens to lay rotten eggs, tampering with the water supply, etc. But we can't move our community, either - there is an even worse evil on the other side of these mountains. A dragon. Our only choice is to reverse her trickery and cast repelling spells around our land to keep Bella out as much as possible."

"A dragon?" Diana's eyes widened. She dropped the rest of the hay and feed for the goats, and pulled a bucket and stool up to one of the cows to start milking it.

Finnian moved to the cow she was milking, and started to scratch its chin. "I'll tell you about the dragon later. Last year, though...my mother set out to stop Bella for good. There was a fight. Belladonna cast a storm worse than any of us had ever seen. Our lands flooded, and a section of the forest caught fire because of the lightning. My mother was caught in the eye with Belladonna before she disappeared. We found her wand and a shoe on shore a few miles downstream but nothing else." He sighed, lost in thought, his face dark from the painful memory.

"I think I remember that storm. I had just moved to the village...the Park was flooded pretty badly for a while. I remember reports of a fire far into the forest," Diana said. Finnian remained

silent for a few minutes. Diana didn't want to disturb him, but she could see how pained his face looked. She shivered, the hay blowing around by their feet. The animals rustled nervously.

Finnian looked up - his eyes were blazing, a warm green tone with sparkling flecks of orange and yellow. "My mom's death haunts us and the community everyday. She was the strongest one after my grandfather - she was our Mayor, for lack of a better mortal term. The whole community loved her and rallied behind us after her death."

His eyes softened, and the mood shifted in the barn. One of the baby goats bounced up to Finnian. He bent over to pet it, and the mood relaxed even more. He looked up again, his eyes returning to a normal blue green color. "Remember how I told you that my friend, Ero, found Bella's lab and stole that ring?"

Diana nodded, "Yeah, didn't you say that was when Bella's powers started to fade?"

"Yes. Ero set out to find Bella's lab after my mom died. My mom practically raised Ero with me, so he was just as hurt when she died. Bella threw a fit when she discovered it was missing - but the storm she cast was mild and we were able to force her into hiding for a couple weeks. She somehow keeps coming back slightly stronger, but hasn't found the ring yet."

Diana gasped. "My cooking! It's only helping a little - it must be good enough to give her some strength back, but not enough to replace the ring, right?" Finnian nodded.

"Ero gave the ring to my grandfather. We've been studying it for months - and I think your recipes are a key part of figuring out what the ring does. All we know is that the ring boosts her power somehow."

Diana could feel how deeply Finnian was hurting and was determined to help - for both his sake and her own. "I hope seeing the greenhouse and collecting some plants helps. I wish there was a way I could come see your grandfather, but Bella has me under a curse. I can't leave the property without her knowing. If I get close to the border, my skin starts to burn, and as soon as I cross the line, Bella somehow knows."

Finnian nodded. "This was very helpful, and my grandfather was pouring over your notebook all night. He still was when I left this morning. I'm working on trying to break her concealment spells and to reveal any other curses she left on this place."

"Do you think you'll be able to lift them?"

"That's the hope..."

They fell silent as Diana moved around the barn, finishing up her tasks. She grabbed the basket of ingredients she had collected, and before she could grab it, Finnian picked up the bucket of milk.

“You really don’t have to stay and help with my chores,” Diana said, despite enjoying his company.

They walked across the yard into the house. “I really don’t mind. Besides...it’s rare that I spend time with anyone other than my grandfather and Ero these days. My dad actually lives full-time in your village now, so I don’t get to see him as often now that I’m training. You’re a really nice change in company.”

He put the milk down on the kitchen counter before muttering a few words. His hands glowed and 3 milk jugs floated over from the drying rack. He snapped his fingers and the milk poured itself cleanly into the jugs. Diana watched in awe.

“Can you chop some wood next?” She grinned.

He rolled his eyes, “you’re lucky I’m magical.”

They spent the next two days with each other. He helped with the heavy lifting, she cooked and gardened. As much of an introvert as she was, it was nice to have someone else around. He continued to use his powers to help with chores - enchanting the gardening shovels to dig up potatoes; talking to the otter in a foreign tongue to get more fish.

While they worked around the property together, Diana asked him to tell stories of the magical community, and he asked about her childhood and life as a mortal. He helped her with lunch and dinner every day, letting her lead in the kitchen and order him around. They sat next to each other during meals, often finding an excuse for their knees to touch or for subtle arm touches.

When they’d be working in the barn or garden together, if they needed to pass something off to the other person, their fingers always touched - almost lingered. Finnian started doing charming magic around her, not in a showy way, but to make her smile and laugh. He’d make the flowers dance and sing lightly into the breeze, or chatter with the otter to do some tricks in the river. She watched in amazement every time he cast a new spell or used his magic in a new way. Maybe it was just her imagination, but he seemed more confident and his spells seemed stronger the more time they spent together.

On their fourth night together, he brought her down to the waterfall. “I know Bella is probably coming back tomorrow. Ero has been keeping an eye on her in the lab - she’s almost done with her potion. I wanted to show you something special, since this might be our last night together. Stay here,” he said, leaving her on the shore of the river. He slipped off his socks and shoes, rolled up his pants, and stepped into the water.

He bent over and touched his fingertips to the water. His body started to glow. Diana gasped. Finnian stood back up, still glowing, and came back to the shore. The water remained

illuminated where his fingers and legs had been. He grinned at Diana, who was staring in amazement at the scene before her.

He faced the waterfall again. He glanced over at her before he raised his hands, and flicked his fingers. The water began to dance and illuminate with light blue, green and purple lights. Diana gasped, smiling widely.

“Finnian, what is this?” She gasped.

“I finally mastered the Elements,” he said. He looked down at her, still conducting the water. He watched her face light up with the colors as she continued to watch the show. A few songbirds had joined in, flying and singing in conjunction with the water. He was falling for her. He found himself making excuses to feel her warm skin, and doing chores that allowed him to steal glances at her throughout the day. The otter and rabbits had emerged from their homes to watch the show from afar.

“Diana,” Finnian said. He waved his hands and the show continued without him. He turned towards Diana, and she looked up at him.

“I think you are the reason I was able to do all of this,” he said, gesturing back at the water, causing it to dance even more enthusiastically. Diana noticed that his eyes were a dark blue with green flecks in them. Despite the cool colors, they felt warm and inviting. She felt truly happy for the first time in a long time, and welcomed the butterflies that had popped up in her stomach.

“Your cooking... your presence... you’ve given me a reason to finish my training and help defeat Belladonna.” He lifted his hand and brushed a strand of hair away from Diana’s face. He stroked her cheek before dropping his hand again. “I’ve noticed a difference since I found you. I know it’s only been a few days, but my training has sped up significantly, especially since I started eating your cooking. I can control my emotions better, too.”

He looked down, hesitating. “I haven’t told you something.”

Her brows furrowed, nervous about what he was going to say. “Part of my special powers includes being able to control the atmosphere - the mood - in any given situation. I swear, I’ve only used it once around you, though. I know Bella controls you sometimes, I wouldn’t dream of doing that to you.”

Diana stepped back. “You did it to me once, though?” She couldn’t help but feel hurt and a little scared. He’d manipulated her mood? Her knees burned, her body ached as she flashed back to the last time Bella had controlled her.

“Diana, let me explain, please.” She shook her head, but he grabbed her hand, preventing her from stepping back any farther. “I promise, I’m not doing it right now. The one time I did it was

when I came that stormy night. I needed you to let me in so I could earn your trust. But as soon as you let me in, I stopped. That's one of the reasons my eyes change color. I thought for sure you would figure me out when you commented on them in the kitchen."

He stepped closer to her, still holding her hand. "I promise, I will never do that to you again." He dropped her hand. There was a light breeze and Diana's hair blew in front of her face again. Finnian reached up and brushed it behind her ear again, looking into her eyes the entire time. "I promise I would never do anything to hurt you," he said.

He stepped slightly forward again. She was looking up at him, his hand was still on her face.

"I want to trust you," she said. He felt a pang of guilt when he saw tears welling up in her eyes. "But I've been through so much with Bella. Why didn't you tell me sooner? How do I know you won't do it again? What if you're doing it right now to control my reaction?"

"I wanted to tell you right away, but I didn't know how to bring it up without scaring you. Please, believe me - I am not doing it right now. My eyes would give me away. I can't imagine how traumatic being under Bella's control must be - I don't want to contribute to that trauma. I love spending time with you in your natural state, I have no desire to change you or the mood when I'm with you." He wiped away a tear that flowed down her cheek.

"Diana, you can trust me. I care about you more deeply than I probably should." She looked into his eyes, they were still the same dark blue with green flecks. Maybe he was telling the truth. She did want to trust him. She'd started falling for him, despite the seriousness of her situation. They had spent a lot of time together over the last four days. She understood why he had been nervous to tell her.

"I trust you," Diana whispered. His fingers nudged her chin up slightly. Diana leaned up on her toes, closing the gap and kissing his lips. Finnian's fingers raked through her hair, his other wrapped around her back, pulling Diana in closer. She ran her hands up his chest before she wrapped her arms around his neck.

They kissed for a few minutes before Diana pulled away. "You can't ever do that to me again - the mood control thing."

He shook his head, "I promise." Diana looked up at the moon, which was far above them. "It's late...I should really head home." They didn't know when Bella would be home. Ero was supposed to send a signal, but they didn't want to cut it too close.

Finnian pulled her close again, their foreheads pressing against each other. "Promise me that next time you come back, you'll set me free?"

“I’ll do my best. My grandfather thinks he is close. I’ll come back as quickly as I can, Diana.”
They kissed again before Finnian broke away. She fell back onto her flat feet and let go of his neck. He stepped back towards the water.

“I’ll come back again when I know it’s safe. My grandfather and I are getting very close to getting you out of here - hopefully next time I see you, we can leave.”

“Be safe, see you soon,” Diana said. He splashed back across the river and disappeared into the forest. The water stopped dancing when he disappeared, only the moonlight left to illuminate her path back to the house.