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Author's note: Lean in this story is pronounced Le-ann, and protagonists ages are about 20.

## Chapter 1: The Fir

It was yet unheard of, an exhausted fairy. Fairies were light and dance and movement, they were fast and filled with spring, they would fly and giggle and bring excitement wherever they go. Yet, Lean was there, on the ground. Only fairy with her light going faint. She looked down at her legs, disappointed as she walked, her wings trailing down, unmoving. Her heart became heavy watching her sisters fly about, she could have done it before, she was doing it fine just months ago, yet today, it was already too much. She had to part their company, and remain lonesome on a foreign territory.

Lean found a group of tall firs, and placed her lips on the rough bark, whispering, waiting to get a whisper back. Satisfied, she lied her face on the ground, yawned and fell asleep. The trees would surely help her find her way home, once she got enough rest. Her last thoughts were of her limbs hurting, her shoulders feeling tense and tired, her arms falling asleep where she held them under her head.

It was a long time before Lean opened her eyes again. Birds were changing their song, sun travelling south, small animals passed the place of her rest, yet none of it bothered the sleepy fairy. Her small light tinkled and then grew stronger as she slept, even as it shuddered every time she stirred. Lean didn't wake as pair of dark eyes landed on her form, and kept watching her sleep. Someone was sitting on the fir right above her, curious eyes glued to the light-haired sleeper. Sleeping fairy was sight not usually seen, and Lean didn't exactly look as fairly-like as all her sisters. Even as her hair was bright, her clothing was in dark shades of green, each leg loosely wrapped in different colored fabrics. She wore no colorful petals or any kind of accessories fairies usually enjoyed, instead there was a small ring on her pinky

finger, with a black stone nobody quite recognized. It was intriguing enough for the stranger to linger, to wonder. Small flock of owls landed on the top of the firs, watching the pair from above silently, expectantly.

It was getting dark, and Lean was still unmoving. The witch landed. She frowned, and smelled the sleeping figure. With a sigh, she grabbed a stick, and hit the ground a few times. Lean was startled and woke with a jolt. A witch towered over her, watching her with dark eyes. Lean shuddered, and tried to remember how to defend herself. She wasn't often faced with a threat, not on her best day, and now her mind was fuzzy, her limbs barely responding, and she couldn't collect her thoughts to remember even where she was.

"Leave me alone." she mumbled, feigning irritation to hide the fear in her voice.

Witch didn't reply, and instead stepped back, and gave her time to get her limbs in order, and stand up. Lean appreciated the distance, felt she had enough time to rise. She got to her full height and looked over the stranger. It was definitely a witch. Dark, wild hair, with a reddish glint, flowing in all directions. Eyes she couldn't quite read, but darker than any she had ever seen. Limbs wrapped in black fabric, some of it torn, but it looked torn on purpose. They were almost the same height.

What she knew about witches wasn't a lot, fairies rarely talked about them, and barely ever socialized. Apparently witches didn't like fairies very much, they were interested in darker and more wicked things, and as fairies were bright and good, they weren't quite interesting. And fairies were supposed to find witches either dangerous, or irresistible. She wondered in which group she would fall, if that one was true. The witch still stared at her, unabashed, but as she kept enough distance, and didn't seem to make a move, she didn't seem that dangerous, at least not yet? Maybe she would prove to be dangerous later, Lean thought. They didn't exactly have a dispute with witches, it was more of a live-and-let-live situation. Yet this witch approached her, on her own. That wasn't something witches were supposed to do. Or at least, something Lean thought a witch would do.

"Why did you approach me?" Lean asked, her tone quite collected this time.

"You were about to sleep the night."

The voice surprised her, it wasn't that different from hers. She almost expected the witch to sound corrupted, even malicious, but it was just a voice, only slightly deeper than her own. Distracted, she realized the witch was quite right, the sun was setting, and she was still under the fir, far from her home, far from even knowing where her home was. Would her mothers worry? They trusted her, but then again, her exhaustion was getting worse, and it would be bad if she didn't come home before deep dark.

"So, I was." She bowed her head in gratitude. "Thank you for waking me up. What is your name?"

"Blake."

The witch seemed to not want to talk any more than to answer questions, and it only added to Lean's curiosity.

"You're a witch."

Blake grinned. "Well spotted."

Lean stopped herself from flaring up, that was a rude twist, yet she decided to keep things civil, at least until she found out more.

"My name is Lean." She was about to flutter her wing, as fairies did to greet each other, but realized in the middle of the motion it wouldn't work, witches had no wings, there was no way for Blake to return the motion. She knew nothing of how witches greeted each other, so she stayed still, wondering if Blake would help her out.

Blake, however, looked as if she was barely stopping herself from laughing. She however, got her facial expression in order, and nodded in understanding.

Lean took a step closer then, and Blake stepped backwards, as if she was now expecting an attack. Lean stopped, frowned at her.

"Why are you stepping back?" Lean asked.

Blake glared at her for a moment, seemed to think something through, then shrugged and stepped forward, and put her hand out. "Fine. If you have to do it, go on."

"Do what?"

"Your sucking thing, whatever you fairies do."

"Sucking thing?" Lean now glared at her, offended. "What sucking thing?" She started to think that maybe witches have some very offensive opinions of fairies.

"Not gonna do it? Fine then." Blake withdrew her hand, and seemed to consider that particular conversation over. She still looked at Lean as if she was contemplating something, then changed her mind again.

"Don't you have to be wherever the rest of your fairy hive is?"

Fairy hive. We are like bees to them, Lean thought. She had half a mind to lecture this ignorant, rude stranger about how fairy tribes actually functioned, and how wrong she was.

"Don't you have anywhere else to be?" Lean shot back instead.

"I am home. You slept under MY fir." Blake replied. She didn't seem to be much bothered, it was almost as if she was having fun.

"I asked the fir-" Lean argued, then looked at the fir, and pressed her hand upon the bark. She closed her eyes, trying to hear the whispers again. She got a confirmation. It was witch's fir. She really did intrude. Fir didn't whisper as much last time, but then again, she was too tired to ask. She gritted her teeth.

"I profusely apologize." She turned her back on the witch. "I'll be gone. I did not mean to impose on your territory."

"S'fine." Blake said, her voice slightly softer.

Lean was about to fly away, when Blake called after her. "Are you really a fairy?"

Lean looked back. "I am. And you don't know a lot about us. Maybe you should learn before you start judging."

"I thought.. you'd be brighter." Blake replied, seemingly lost in thought, but to Lean it sounded like an insult.

"Well, excuse me for not blinding you, I thought witches... would be more attractive." It was all she could think of to retort, as she lifted herself up. Still, she should be polite, she thought, and turned around.

"Thanks for letting me sleep there. And for waking me up. Goodbye."

Blake watched silently as she flew away.

## Chapter 2: Blake

Blake couldn't quite get it out of her mind, a fairy sleeping under her tree. She didn't find anyone except small animals intruding her space from the moment she declared it, and now this shiny little twerp was using it as her bedroom. The nerve of her! And no matter what she shiny twerp said, Blake wasn't sure it was a fairy, she has read about fairies a lot, and was assured she knew more than that little thing. Fairies were supposed to be exhausting to witches, but Blake felt nothing different, except a little irritated that she was able to find out so little. Catching fairy asleep, she should have trapped it and questioned it, until she found all of her secrets. Yet she let her go, just like that. Maybe she was a little soft this time, because the creature was so easily startled. Next time it would be different, she decided.

It was, sort of pretty, maybe. Seeing a sleeping fairy. She didn't think anyone else could enjoy the sight, fairies slept hidden. But why did the fir feel like a shelter enough? She leaned her back into the tree, whispered questions, and felt warmth trailing down her back. Fir liked the fairy, and would offer protection to her. What a treacherous tree, you were supposed to be mine, Blake thought. But, it was impossible to claim ownership on a living being, even a plant, and Blake respected that.

Only two days later, Blake was flying above the clouds, doing few of her dangerous jumps and screaming at the thrill it gave her, birds avoiding her in panic as she skyrocketed down, planning to land on the fir. She'd gotten so good she hadn't need to touch the ground, the fir itself would barely feel her land on one of the branches. She palmed the rough bark in a way of greeting the tree, and realized she was being watched. She looked down in alarm, where pair of round green eyes were trailing her.

"You let her in again?" She whispered to the fir in disappointment. "You have got to learn loyalty."

Lean was sitting down, dried green leaves resting on her lap. She watched Blake with a curious expression, it almost matched Blake's own. She wasn't saying anything as Blake got closer. So, it was going to be a staring contest, Blake decided, and she got down, stood tall and caught Lean's eyes with her own resolutely. Lean understood, grinned, and stared her down just as stubbornly, her eyes shining. Blake sat down, placed her face right next to Lean's and glared, Lean backed away slightly, and then returned the glare, until her eyes glowed with shine so bright Blake was forced to look away.

"That's cheating." Blake mumbled, rubbing at her eyes. She could see bright shapes everywhere, it was irritating.

"Hello to you too." Lean answered, smug in her victory.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Blake stood up, blinking until she could see properly again.

"I've got questions." Lean replied.

"Questions for me?"

"Questions for a witch." Lean nodded.

"Aw, and you didn't know where all the other witches lived?"

"I don't know any other witches." Lean shrugged. "Will you answer them?"

Blake considered her, and grinned maliciously. "What do I get in return?"

"You just lost, you owe me." Lean said.

Blake contemplated her, and sighed. "Alright. But, you will answer my questions too. I will not give away information to outsiders for nothing."

Lean seemed a bit affronted, but accepted what was said, and nodded.

"Deal."

Lean spread the dry leaves on the ground under the fir, and started talking.

"I've read up on witches. I didn't find much. This is about.. all we know." she pointed at the leaves with funny scribbles Blake couldn't read. "I don't understand how we don't know more, I mean, you're.. not *that* different."

"You read up on witches?" Blake was amused. "What did you find out?" She kept her retort about *not being that different* for now.

"Well, it says you take up territory and once you do, fairies aren't allowed to use it." Lean read from a leaf. "It says to keep away for some of you might be dangerous, and others use charm and secrecy to lure fairies and trap them for fun. It says- you might use fairies as an ingredient in your potions if we're not careful. But I also know- it wasn't written, but fairies sometimes talk about it, how witches are too snobbish and wicked to like us. That's why we don't mix. We're creatures of light and our light blinds witches and chases them into the dark. But then- why wouldn't we be able to take their territory?" Lean looked at Blake confused, expecting everything to be explained.

"You really don't care what happens to you, huh?" Blake was grinning, and Lean backed off, apprehensive.

This little twerp went and found out we eat fairies for lunch, and she came here to *chat with me about it*, Blake thought. It infuriated her.

"Do you hate yourself?" Blake kept provoking, and she stood up to tower over her.

"You touch me once." Lean managed a threat in her fairy voice. "I will blind you with light. You won't be able to see for days. You know I can do it."

Blake laughed, and relaxed. "For a moment there I thought you were really, really stupid."

Lean only glared at her, so Blake figured it was best to keep talking.

"Okay, so most of the shit you know is, complete bullshit, except one, we absolutely do not like fairies. You suck our energy out, and as far as I can tell, are not sorry about doing it. If we ever used a fairy part for potion that would be a lousy potion, and we never use live creatures, if anything we'd find a part of a wing you shed somewhere, not anything you need while you still breathe."

She took a pause, and then continued.

"And about you not being allowed to use our territory, that's there with a good reason, and is a result of a pact we made with your kingdom, and may I notice that even when you found this out, you went right away and violated it, and witches may now judge you as a criminal."

The last part was said with such off-handish voice Blake could tell Lean wouldn't take it seriously. Lean only used the land for sitting and sleeping, and that much was still allowed.

"You mentioned it yesterday, energy sucking." Lean continued, not to be distracted. "But I've never took energy from anything but a plant. I wouldn't even know how. I think you're mistaken."

"Well, just because you didn't do it yet, it doesn't mean you won't. And witches learned this by experience, spending time around fairies would drain them and they prohibited it." Blake bit her tongue then, she didn't mean to reveal quite that much.

"So, you're prohibited from talking to me?" Lean asked curiously.

"You know what, you got enough, it's my turn to ask questions now." Blake decided, and finally sat down again.

"Fine. Ask away." Lean held her head up proudly, as if there was nothing bad to know about fairies at all.

"How do you.. talk to trees?" Blake asked, hesitantly.

"Well." Lean was a bit taken aback. "It's how we all do it, right? We need to touch the bark, or any part of the tree, and then we can hear the warmth, and sense what kind of mood the tree is in, and if they're willing to communicate. We can tell if the tree is friendly towards us, or wants us to leave. And then... sometimes there's whispers. But not always."

Blake frowned at her, and kept quiet for a while, considering this information. She was almost about to say something, but changed her mind.

"Why were you sleeping last time? I thought fairies didn't sleep during the day."

"Oh." Lean shifted uncomfortably. "That, I'm afraid, is just me. I get exhausted, sometimes. I fall asleep. Other fairies don't."

"You're sick?" Blake inquired.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sick, okay." Lean resigned, her voice bitter. It was clear she didn't like to talk about this, or be reminded of it. Why wasn't anyone helping her if she was sick? Fairies were a cruel bunch, she concluded.

"Why do you care to know about witches?" Blake asked.

"Ah I don't know." Lean looked at her legs. "I want to know about everything. I know fairies aren't that curious by nature, it's just me. I'm really annoyed we don't have more records in the kingdom, I know other tribes have these huge halls filled with paper stuck together, and they call it *libra ris* or something like that, and that's where they keep all the knowledge. But all I could find was this." She motioned towards leafs with scribbles.

"You mean libraries?" Blake laughed at her. "We have libraries. We care about keeping records. It's your bunch that prefers to live uniformed. That's why you don't know shit."

"You have libra-ries." Lean breathed out slowly. She looked as if she was about to start begging to be taken to one, as if Blake would ever let a stranger fairy into witch's library.

"Must be nice." Lean said. She sighed.

She really isn't like a fairy at all, Blake thought. She has seen fairies before, they were fast and bright and always laughed and were generally annoying and uninterested in anything but chatter and their own light and feeding. For a fairy to get interested in witches past of accusing them of being wicked and mean was unheard of, only the Fairy Queen showed the slightest inclination for cooperation, but that was because they had to make some pacts to keep coexisting in peace.



"You are weird for a fairy." Blake said bluntly.

"Yeah. They think so too." Lean caught herself saying it, and then stood up fast.

"You know what, I should make records of what you told me. Do you mind if the knowledge is available to other fairies?" Lean asked politely.

Blake shrugged. "I don't care. I don't see how any of it could cause us harm. But I doubt fairies will allow records to be kept about anything that makes them look bad. They love to think highly of themselves."

Lean smiled as if she felt that was true, but didn't say anything. She turned away, about to leave.

"Wait." Blake said, standing up as well.

Lean stood still.

"I want to try it." Blake extended her hand towards Lean. "Touch it. Let's see if it happens."

Lean turned around, and swallowed. Her eyes were bright and apprehensive, and Blake couldn't tell what she was thinking. It felt almost as if she wouldn't do it, didn't want to find out, but then she took a step, and her trembling fingers reached Blake's extended hand, brushed over the back of her fingers.

Blake braced herself to get her energy sucked out, ready to withdraw if it happened fast. But she felt nothing but a shaky touch. Lean was frozen in the motion, her eyes wide in shock. Her entire body shuddered and she gasped before pulling away. Blake frowned at her, pulled her hand back.

"Did that hurt you?" She asked, frowning still. It was never implied that fairies, or for that matter, anyone would get harmed by touching a witch.

Lean wasn't listening, she was spreading her fairy wings, and flew away, leaving the scattered leaves with scribbles behind. Blake sighed, feeling more confused than she did before the encounter. She'd be back for those leaves. Blake was going to see her again.

### Chapter 3: Lean

Lean was trembling as she was flying. She still felt it, tremors all over her body, goosebumps and shivers that made it difficult to think, to figure out just what was going on. It must have been a mistake to touch a witch, it was stupid to even go back there, what would her mothers say if they knew. But she wouldn't tell them, she couldn't handle anyone knowing. It was dumb. She stopped, and landed panting, holding a hand over her heart. What was she going to do? How long until the tremors went away? She couldn't go

home like this, not all shivering and gasping. It was as if something inside her was broken. Fairies would surround her and ask her questions and then.. and then she would have to confess and she didn't want to. She crouched and hugged her knees, trying to take deep breaths, but it was hardly doing anything. Her body was unraveling something awful within and she couldn't stop it. Surely she wasn't.. cursed? She gasped at the idea, and rubbed her hands over her shoulders, not wanting to believe it. Oh please let me not be cursed, she thought to herself. Her heart was beating so fast, she thought she might stop breathing altogether. I'm never going back there, she decided. Never ever.

It took another half of an hour before Lean was able to take normal breaths again. She felt a sense of sadness, probably regretting that her adventures ended on such a bad note. She would now have to go home, and forget all about the mystery witch who seemed to know everything all the time.

She came home tired, and about to faint. Maybe she could pretend she was only sleeping this entire time, and nobody would know. She hid from sight, crawled into her nest. Curled up into herself, and fell asleep with an ache in her heart.

She had a dream, then. Witch was smiling at her, they were high up in the sky, higher than fairies would fly on their own. She felt the urge to go down, to get to a safe height, but witch laughed at her, and blocked her path. She decided to blind the witch once and for all, but before she even managed it, there was a hand on hers, and she froze. Witch knowingly pulled out something from her skin, something dark was forming around witch's fingers. "I told you, Lean." Witch said to her. "You know nothing about witches." The black mass formed into a person, a witch. She looked at Lean hungrily, as if preparing to eat her. Last thing Lean could see were dark fingers reaching for her, taking her light.

She woke up gasping, covered in sweat. This wasn't happening. She was trembling all over again, and she knew if she doesn't get it together, somebody would notice. She couldn't even tell why it was so important to hide it all, yet her senses told her if it was found out, it would not end well. Nothing ever did. When the fairies found out Lean was exhausted and fainting for merely staying afloat for too long, nobody seemed to know what to do. There was a general tremor of suspicions, predictions, and uneasiness. Fairies didn't like to deal with problems they couldn't solve, and no fairy was sick like this before. They suspected everything, from Lean being lacking in magic and fairy light, to Lean failing to feed properly, being cursed, being close to dying, Lean was sick of hearing about it. She knew they were all wrong but couldn't prove a thing. She was just tired. Being around fairies was tiring her out. Anything but her own nest, silence, and open fields was somehow draining her. But, she could rest and recover and pull through, so she was determined to do just that.

There were voices approaching her nest, and she could hear flutter of fairy wings, and knew it was mother Sinthia coming to check up on her.

"Child? Are you up?" Sinthia asked politely before intruding.

"I am." Lean answered, making sure her voice was composed.

"Where have you been? I haven't seen you up all day." Sinthia looked at Lean's eyes.

"I've been.. finding new places to sleep."

"You're still tired, aren't you?" Sinthia's voice was almost sad. "But you cannot keep yourself divided from the darlings, they're all worried about you."

"I don't mean to make them worry." Lean sighed. "I appreciate your concern, Mother."

She looked away, hoping it would suffice to end the conversation. Her nest was filled with scribbled leaves, small little shapes she made out of clay, and ornaments of her own making. She took one and started re-making it into something else, hoping to imply she was, in fact, busy. Sinthia got the hint, and accepted to leave her child be. Lean exhaled in relief and threw herself back on the bed as soon as mother was gone.

She laid down for hours before she could think clearly again. Her thoughts were mangled and in sort of a frenzy. She felt more sick and tired than she ever did before. *This is all witch's fault*, she thought. If she didn't use Lean for her sick experiments, or whatever that was, Lean would be just fine. Or maybe she was cursing Lean for fun, and now Lean had to go through all of that, and witch was probably just, sitting there, laughing to herself. Rage erupted inside of Lean. Why would a witch get to do this to her? She did nothing to deserve it. She was even *nice*! She would go and make sure witch would pay for this. She imagined herself grabbing the witch and shining that blackness out of her eyes until witch was lost and unseeing, it gave her pleasure. Still, actually doing it was.. sort of scary. Lean wasn't the type to indulge into every impulse she felt, and was mostly, a coward. So she spent some more time considering it, before deciding it is in fact, too dangerous. But she did remember she left the scribbled leaves under that fir. She would have to retrieve them. Well it's not like the witch is there most of the time, Lean could probably sneak and take them while witch is gone.

Some time later, Lean sat down with a set of leaves she gathered, took a small thorny stick she cut so the thorn would be on top, enabling her to make shallow cuts in the leaf. She wrote down:

Witches find fairies to be draining them of energy, and that is the reason witches dislike fairies

Witches have prohibited socializing with fairies

Witches and fairies allegedly have a pact prohibiting fairies the use of their territory. It is unclear why all the fairies are not notified of this

She thought for a bit and then added:

It is possible only elder fairies and those who decide on what land we use are aware of this

She nodded to herself importantly, and carefully put the leaves under a heavy piece of wood, knowing when they dry the writing will still be visible, and they wouldn't fall apart. She heard about other

creatures using paper, fabrics, or stone to write on, but nobody could tell her how. Finding large leaves and recording their findings in such fragile ways was enough for fairies.

Few days later, Lean was mostly recovered from her trembling episodes. She still felt a bit unnerved and on edge, but she managed through her days just fine. She attended the fairy seances, even as she didn't participate except for the bare minimum required. Her mothers insisted Lean should socialize more with fairies her own age, and Lean knew why. Most of fairies her age were starting to choose their lovers and Lean was missing out, and was getting left behind. It wouldn't do good for her future. But Lean craved solitude most of the time. Except for those times she craved the company of a witch. It was hard to admit she actually wanted to go back, even after everything that happened. Maybe it was part of the curse, she told herself, maybe the witch charmed me to come back to her.

Witch's fir was half an hour of flying away, and it was a distance Lean could just barely cover without fainting. Still, she waited until her mother confirmed her in nest, snuck out, and flew. One part of her knew it was crazy, going back after that, but there was doubt, that maybe witch didn't mean to do that, maybe it was accidental, and just maybe, even if it wasn't, it might be better being there, with the witch, than hiding from everyone in her bed.

Even as Lean did her best to sneak up, witch's eyes found her before she even came close. She was smiling. Lean landed a safe distance away, and wondered what to say. What do you tell someone after they zap you with one touch and you run away? Did witch think her a coward? But she didn't have to finish that thought, because witch called at her.

"Lean."

"Witch."

"I- witch?" The witch narrowed her eyes. "Did you by any chance, forget my name?"

"So what if I did." Lean replied, unabashed.

"It's Blake. Blake Firethorn." Blake said, unnerved.

Lean considered it, and then she scoffed.

"What?" Blake asked, irritated.

"Well, your name, it's not a very good one, is it? It sounds like you're a black thorn, and on top of that, on fire."

That was the first time Blake remained speechless, she looked shocked, and then turned away from Lean with a grimace, as if Lean was giving her a particularly bad headache.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Lean felt satisfied with giving the witch at least a bit of the shock back.

"It's-- it's a plant. Firethorn. It's a plant."

"Well, excuse me." Lean said. "Anyway, I want you to tell me just what you did to me last time. And I want my leaves back."

Blake turned to look at her with a malicious glance and Lean was sure Blake would reprimand her for blunt demands, but Blake sighed and sat down.

"Fine. I saved your leaves right here, you can have them. And, I don't think I did anything to you, at least, it was not my intention to harm you." Blake said, sounding truthful.

"I was sick for days." Lean said accusingly. "And you told me to do that, it's your fault."

"I apologize." Blake lowered her head. "I thought I was putting myself at risk, and not you. There was no way for me to know it would harm you. But I do recognize you did something I wanted you to, and paid a price for it. That's why, I got something for you, as a way of apology."

Lean was taken aback, what Blake was saying was not only making sense, but it was considerate, more considerate in fact, than she was used to hearing.

"What did you get for me?" Lean asked.

"Come here. I won't do it again." Blake promised.

So Lean, still cautious, sat on the ground next to Blake, and Blake handed her dried leaves, and then, a few pieces of white, smooth material, that felt both hard and bendy in Lean's fingers. Her eyes twinkled in delight.

"Paper!" Lean gasped.

"Yeah." Blake smiled. "You'll be able to store more information on it than leaves. And if preserved properly, it will take thousands of years to fall apart."

Lean couldn't help herself, she leapt up, flew a circle around the fir in joy, and somersaulted back on the ground, her eyes shining with delight.

"You're welcome." Blake laughed, obviously taking her joy as a reason to be smug again.

"This doesn't mean I've forgiven you." Lean said, smelling the paper, and then running her fingers all over the smooth surface.

"Oh I don't mind." Blake said, watching her with a grin. She was enjoying this way too much.

"You're not that wicked, for a witch." Lean said in observational tone.

"That's a first time someone said that to me." Blake leaned down and laid her back on the ground, relaxing.

"What, do other witches think you're bad?" Lean asked.

Blake didn't reply. She sighed and closed her eyes, and Lean couldn't tell what her face expression meant.

"Ever heard of Thornwood?" Blake asked then.

"I don't think so." Lean said.

"It's this, big forest." Blake talked with awe in her voice. "It's huge. The trees are all ancient. And there's plants you can't find anywhere else, plants used in healing, and in magic. There's water so clear and cold it turns to ice at touch. Caves so deep they run hot if you reach too far. It's dangerous as well. There's creatures, monsters that are not safe to pass by, thorns that are capable of wrapping themselves around your legs and pulling you to depths. Even some birds are malicious, and big enough to pick you up and carry you away. It's the best."

Lean was grimacing.

"You think that's the best? That's a death trap."

"I wanna go." Blake said, dreamily.

"You're insane." Lean shook her head.

Blake opened her eyes, and looked at Lean, grinning.

"Come with me."

#### Chapter 4: Thornwood

It took Blake a bit of time to talk Lean into it. She spoke of the mysteries, of all the plants and creatures Lean had never met, and could write about in her newly acquired paper. She promised to show Lean places she had never seen before, magic that was never touched. They would be explorers, charting new territory, making new discoveries. And if Lean came along, it probably wouldn't be that dangerous at all, for all they knew, all the dark creatures were repelled by Lean's light, so if Lean came with, both of them would be safe. Lean didn't seem very convinced, but the lure of the adventure appealed to her. Then she remembered she was unlikely to even get there, since she tired herself out so fast.

"I can't fly far." Lean admitted at last.

Blake seemed to already have counted on it.

"Yeah, I thought you'd say that, let's try this then." Blake said.

Blake reached up with her hand, and her broom flew down from the fir, Lean peered up trying to figure out what else the witch kept there, but Blake got her attention.

"Grab it here." Blake said showing Lean the broom.

Lean did as she was asked, and a second later Blake was in the air, Lean holding onto the broom in surprise. She wasn't even grasping it tightly, yet it pulled her up easily, as if she didn't weigh anything at all.

"Magic!" Blake explained, in a laughing tone. "You hold on and I'll get us there in a heartbeat."

Lean nodded in reply. Blake took off.

It was easy, flying like this, she thought. She could let go and fly off by herself at any moment, but she felt no urge. Being pulled along by Blake's magic was exhilarating, Blake flew faster and more recklessly than Lean ever would. It was higher up too, and Lean was enjoying the view, there were forest and mountains and rivers they passed by, the air was clear and fresh, the sun was high in the sky. The landscape got darker, taller plants of darker green were now blocking their view, and afterwards a full field of thorns was threatening below. Lean gripped the broom tighter. This was not a nice place, she thought. It was impossible to even reach further without flying, thorny bushes were preventing anyone from getting close.

Blake landed them on a small patch of grass, just at the entrance of a huge, dark forest. The grass was sparkling with dew, as if it were only morning.

"Dewgrass." Blake explained, watching Lean. "The shadows in this forest make sure nothing evaporates, which makes this grass special."

Lean tasted the dew, and her eyes sparkled with light, it was cold and delicious.

"It's good." Lean said. She looked around, and the trees were only too big to take in. It didn't seem like Lean could get far away from them to grasp them in her vision, they were enormous. Their bark alone was thick and rough enough to build nests inside of it, and its color was dark green, and on some spots, pitch black. Lean got goosebumps as she placed her hand on a patch of moss on the tree, and tried to sense it's mood. Her body went slack, and she could feel herself getting pulled in, as if she was inside the tree. She felt the energy flow through the roots, and there was so much depth and memory stored there. Sense of calm and timelessness came over her, and she didn't realize how much time has passed before Blake lightly pushed her hand off with a broom handle.

"Careful." Blake said. "These trees are ancient, and their presence is very strong. They could pull you in, and hold your mind captive inside of them for days. It's easier to sense them and see what they're made of, right?"

"Yeah." Lean nodded. "I could see inside of it. The roots and.. depth. They're all interlinked deep under the ground, these trees, they speak to each other."

Blake grinned at her, as if proud. "Yeah. You noticed it well." Blake said.

It was impossible to see the sky. Layers and layers of wood, branches and leaves were keeping them safe from any kind of bird attack, unless Lean pressed her fingers into the ground, and it was soft, almost hollow.

"The roots rise up as the tree grows, and make the ground easily made into shelters. If we have to hide, we'll use this." Blake said. "Only there might be some snakes hiding there." She added sheepishly.

They were both distracted by bird noises in the distance, and Lean quickly looked at Blake.

"How fast can they get here?" Lean asked.

"Oh, they can't see us here. Don't worry. Yet." Blake said.

Lean peered deeper into the forest.

"Where do we go from here? Do we have a plan?" Lean said.

"Actually, yeah, I'm looking for some lemongrass, and I need some crystal water. You can take whatever you like. It's this way." Blake pointed between two trees so large, they were blocking the view of everything else. Their roots were entangled to the point where Lean and Blake had to climb over them to proceed.

"You've been here before." Lean stated.

"Yeah. I couldn't get far on my own. There were.. some creatures." Blake said.

Lean stopped climbing. "I want to know now, before I'm face to face with them."

"Don't worry, you'll just blind them and we can go. They're dark creatures, we call them small demons, but we don't know much about them, we can't communicate. They only live here and.. they don't let witches pass. They're after our magic." Blake explained.

"And not after fairy magic?" Lean asked.

"I don't think they could use magic made out of light." Blake said. She looked at Lean and rubbed her eyes.

"You're even brighter than usual in place this dark. Even my eyes hurt from looking at you." Blake said.

Lean glared at her, and tinkled her light to make Blake look away.

"That's the spirit." Blake said cheerfully.

Lean was peering around every root fretfully, awaiting an army of hungry demons charging at them. But all she was seeing was beautiful, soft moss growing over all the roots, white flowers she couldn't recognize, and some mutated nettle that seemed to learn how to grow very high to catch some light, it looked almost like trees.

"Okay, Lean, there they are." Blake whispered at her, pointing her finger.

Lean panicked instantly, threw herself on the ground and peered around. Blake was shaking her head, crouching down.



"They're just there." Blake showed Lean two small, dark creatures. They looked like black frogs that somehow managed to grow human-like bodies. Lean was disgusted.

"What if it doesn't work?" Lean asked. "What if they get us?"

"There's two of us, and two of them, we can duel." Blake said jokingly.

"I have never dueled before in my life." Lean confessed, shivering.

"What do you fairies do all day, laundry?" Blake grinned at her. "Now don't worry, just jump out, and spread the light, and if that doesn't chase them away, I'll protect you. I promise."

Lean wasn't sure if she believed the witch, but this was her shot at adventure and heroism, and she was going to grab it. She gathered all the courage she had in her little fairy heart, took in a big breath, and pulled herself up. She climbed onto the root, and blasted light all over the place. From afar, it looked as if small explosion took place. Lean kept the light going for half a minute before she felt it was safe to stop, and look around. Space before her was clear, and all the noises she could hear were from small creatures running away in opposite direction.

"It worked!" Lean exclaimed, breathless.

Blake was still crouched down, hiding her entire face in some kind of black material she brought with, her eyes shut tight to not get blinded. When she heard Lean shout, she stood up at once, climbed up, and grinned at Lean victoriously.

"You did it, you shiny twerp." Blake sounded proud, and it made Lean twinkle in delight.

"I'll try to get information from the tree about where to go next, if I'm not moving throw something at me, okay?" Blake said, and pressed her palm just above the big root. Her expression turned blank and she kept standing there, as if hypnotized. Lean, still shining in her victory, took the broom Blake was absently holding, and pushed Blake's hand away from the tree, just like Blake did for her earlier. Blake immediately snapped back to reality.

"That way!" She yelled, and almost stormed off, she only turned back once to say "Thanks!" before running on.

Lean ran after her, still holding the broom, excited. After only a few minutes, they ran into a clearing, and a huge, translucent lake. The edges of the lake were freezing and unfreezing every minute, ice crystals forming and then melting. Water looked like magic, it reflected light in every direction, even the trees were covered in moving glints of light. Lean was sure there were actual crystals at the bottom, something was definitely shining from below. She opened her mouth to point it out to Blake, but Blake was already pressing her fingers to the surface of the crystal water, and then melting it as it froze to her touch. She pulled the water up with her fingers, and then poured it in a small glass vial she had been carrying with her.

Lean thought she could spend the rest of the day just looking at the lake, it was brilliant. She got close, and pressed her fingers, smiling as ice crystals spread across it. She couldn't melt it the way Blake did, so she only tapped the ice.

"I want to try drinking it, will you melt it for me?" Lean asked.

Blake considered her. "I can do that, but, I don't think it's been tested on fairies yet. I'm not sure if it's completely safe. We use it in potions for fevers, and internal injuries. Wanna risk it?"

"Yeah." Lean said. To come this far and then not try the magical water would just be a waste.

Blake nodded, and handed her the vial, careful not to touch Lean's skin.

Lean only took a few drops, and felt cold run down her body, thought she would freeze, but right after it, a wave of heat melted it away. Lean laughed, breathless.

"It's good." Lean put it back into Blake's hand. "It felt almost like a fever, but not a bad one, you know? I don't feel any weaker than before."

And that was true, Lean realized, since she entered the forest, she did not feel tired or weak once.

Maybe it was the energy of life breathing through the forest that helped revitalize her too, Lean thought.

"I really like this place." Lean confessed. The forest was strong, ancient, the air had a cold and fresh taste, the trees smelled of life and mysteries.

"I thought you would." Blake smiled at her. "I just have to get a bit of lemongrass now, it's right past here." Blake pointed to a patch of green. Lean looked at the lake once again, and noticed a small clump of rocks and pebbles, ran towards it, and picked a perfectly round, blue-grey pebble. This will remind me of the lake, Lean thought as she put it in her pocket. Then she followed Blake, watched her pick up lemongrass, and looked around, hoping to see more wonders.

"Hey, what's that?" Lean asked after wandering around, stumbling on a dark pathway, that led to a cave entrance. "Do you think someone lives there?"

Blake was next to her in an instant, and Lean could see shock on her face.

"We have to go." Blake said. Her tone was dark, and Lean knew the fun part was over.

Blake wasted no time in grabbing her broom, she only made sure Lean was holding onto it tight before mounting and flying them right through the same path they came. Few more small demons were waiting to ambush them, but had no time to do so, Blake made sure to fly as fast as she could. It was only after they crossed the dewgrass, and the fields of thorns that Blake slowed down, landed on a grassy hill, and tried to catch her breath. She looked scared, Lean realized.

"What was that?" Lean asked, feeling it was safe to ask.

"It wasn't- a natural cave. A witch-- made that." Blake was breathing hard, words hardly making out.

"There are witches living in Thornwood?" Lean asked, curious.

"There aren't supposed-- to be any." Blake waited until her breathing calmed, and then continued.

"If that witch is living in Thornwood, she is hiding. And she is hiding in a very dangerous place. I don't think if she knew we found her, she would let us go easily." Blake said, still sounding scared.

"You shouldn't mention this. To anyone." Blake said, looking Lean in the eyes.

"I won't. I promise." Lean nodded.

Blake let herself fall on the ground, soft grass meeting her fall. She took a big breath, and then rolled around, making noises of content. Lean looked at her, incredulous, not knowing whether to laugh.

Usually children and animals did this, and adults only if they were with their families or loved ones, and weren't worried about looking childish.

"Come on." Blake called to her. She sounded almost giggly now. "You do it too. It's good."

Lean laughed and complied. She lied down, closed her eyes, and rolled around a few times. Gently stumbling on soft grass with her limbs made the tension in her body ease up. She let out a breath she didn't know she was holding in, and felt she would fall asleep right there.

"Blake.. I.. I should have been home. Like an hour ago. And I think... I'm falling asleep." Lean murmured, sleepily.

"Do you wanna do this again?" Blake asked, laying in the grass a small distance away.

"Have adventures? Yeah." Lean smiled, her eyes closed. "But maybe.. maybe in a less dangerous place."

"Got it." Blake replied. "Next time, we're gonna fight a sunflower."

Lean snorted, and they both started laughing.

"I'll get you home. Trees know the way, right? They can tell me." Blake said.

"Yeah.. but I'm too tired to fly." Lean sighed.

"I'll make a thing for you to sit in." Blake decided. She took the broom, and flew away for a few minutes, coming back with a very large leaf. It was dark green, and tough enough to hold a fairy. Blake folded it so Lean could sit on it, and fastened it to the broom with ropes she had in her pockets. Lean leaned into the leaf, feeling it was pleasant enough to rest in.

"Good?" Blake asked, and Lean nodded, feeling both herself and leaf getting light as Blake had broom hover in the air.

"Hold tight." Blake said, and started flying. Lean couldn't remember much of the journey, Blake stopped a few times only to consult with trees, occasionally complaining about how secretive they were, and then she was right next to the entrance of the Fairy tribe. Blake has already landed her.

"Go on then, go sleep in your bed." Blake said.

"Thanks." Lean whispered. She couldn't think what else to say, her mind was getting fuzzy, all she knew was that she needed to sleep, right away. She didn't make it to her nest, and instead fell asleep in the garden.

## Chapter 5: The Rain

Lean didn't know just how she managed to get away with lies this time, and she didn't care much. She could tell if she mentioned to anyone she was going on adventures with a witch, in not-very-safe places, that would be a very unpleasant conversation, and as any rational person, she preferred to avoid those. It took her a few days rest before she wanted to go out again, find Blake, and see where the encounter would lead to. She realized, thinking about it later, that even if Blake mocked everything, (probably on principle), she was still kind to Lean. And she seemed to trust Lean enough to bring her to a dangerous place, and have her help out. Lean liked that, she prided herself on being reliable and trustworthy. Only thing really bothering Lean was feeling more exhausted almost every day. Fairies usually needed about 7 hours of sleep, but Lean was sleeping more than 17 hours a day. Still, nobody knew how to help her, and she preferred not to linger on it. It would go away eventually, she was sure.

As promised, next time, Blake took her to a sunflower field. Lean laughed and jabbed at Blake for "thinking she was funny", and Blake assured her she knew she was, and they spent some time playing hide and seek, Blake easily locating Lean in shiniest spot, and Lean noticing Blake as a dark patch anywhere. Heavy rain fell down on them, and Lean figured it was her time to show off. She picked a particularly nice sunflower, and sent her magic to it, making the flower grow until it was the size of a

small tree. Blake thought it was "neat", and they both took shelter underneath. It seemed they would be stuck there for a while, so Lean told Blake all about fairy seances, and just how richly informed the fairies were.

"So we light this huge fairy fire in the evenings." Lean was saying. "It's not real fire, it doesn't burn, it's our fairy lights combined, and it shines in all of the colors. We all sit down around it, and hold hands, and sing songs. Then every fairy who has something to say flies in the middle, and makes an announcement. It's how we get news about everything that has happened that day, you see. Any important event, sighting, invention or even ideas are revealed and discussed by fairies. Even child fairies get to announce what kind of animal they found that day, and what they've learned, so everyone can congratulate them on it."

Blake smiled, probably imagining it.

"On particular dates we also tell stories of the past, and there's some special events too, but that's complicated to explain. And then, when it's over, it's all of our bedtimes, except for those who have lovers. They can stay up for as long as they wish to."

"That doesn't sound too bad." Blake admitted, and Lean twinkled in delight. She was determined to make Blake think better of the fairies.

"Witches have clan meetings." Blake said, thought for a second about it, and then continued. "It's not done every day, of course, for witches time passes slowly. The head of the clan is the oldest witch in the family, and she greets all of the members, and makes sure everyone is doing fine. All of the achievements, and problems are addressed, and future plans decided. The youngest members sometimes get missions to complete, it's a chore really." Blake said, and smiled in a way that seemed less than truthful.

Blake rarely offered any information about herself, or the witch world in general, so Lean was drinking in every word. She didn't want to ask too many questions, so Blake didn't think fairies were being nosy.

"It sounds nice." Lean smiled. "Witches are really private about their affairs, huh?"

"Yeah." Blake nodded, her mind elsewhere. "Witches love keeping secrets."

"I'm keeping you secret." Lean confessed. "From the fairies. I don't think they should know."

"I'm your secret, huh?" Blake grinned. "That's a good call. I don't imagine they'd be too happy with you."

Blake paused, and then said in a dreamy voice. "A fairy with a secret."

"Did you tell anyone about me?" Lean asked.

Blake shook her head. "I'm keeping you secret too."

Lean leaned on the sunflower, smiling. It made her feel special. Lean suddenly thought it was a shame she wasn't able to touch Blake. Looking at her sitting there, with her legs crossed, watching the rain

absent-mindedly, she looked very tempting to touch. Lean imagined how Blake's fingers, and her face would feel, and then remembered the last time she tried to touch Blake, and sighed. She would definitely have to avoid it.

They sat in silence for a while.

"I think the rain is almost over." Blake said.

Blake was right, the sky was clearing up, and the field was turning gold with sunlight and raindrops showered it with twinkling light. It was beautiful. Lean sighed happily and walked out from their little shelter to admire the sight. Blake looked after her, sighing as well.

Lean gathered raindrops in her hands, walked back to Blake, doing her best to look innocent, then splashed them right in Blake's face, in the most evil way imaginable. Blake just sat there, with a grim expression on her face, and then she was standing up and Lean was running away screaming in laughter as Blake threw something at her but she avoided it, and Blake was yelling and trying to splash her back and Lean was having more fun than she could remember having in a while. Blake finally managed to gather a proper amount of raindrops while chasing Lean, and got them in Lean's hair, making Lean yell in indignation, when Blake slipped and fell right on top of Lean. They were both on the wet ground, gasping in shock. Blake was quickly pulling away, saying "Oh no, sorry, sorry, shit." and Lean wasn't moving. Her eyes were open wide, and she took a few deep breaths, and then slowly pushed herself up.

Lean looked at Blake, and slowly shook her head. "I didn't feel anything."

Blake stared at her in surprise.

"Really?" Blake asked.

"Yeah." Lean said, astounded. She failed to even realize how dirty and wet they both were, and she stood up, and extended her hand towards Blake. Blake offered hers in return. Lean wrapped her fingers around Blake's hand, and held it. She felt nothing but warmth and tingles of pleasure run up her skin. It was heaven, touching Blake, she realized.

"Do you feel anything?" Blake asked.

"Yeah. Warm." Lean said, deciding to drop out the tingles.

"It feels warm for me too." Blake said, relaxing, and her fingers gently squeezed around Lean's.

That's even better, Lean thought. She didn't want to let go.

"I'm sorry I made us all wet and cold." Blake said.

"You did. You did do that." Lean said, accusingly.

"We should probably. You know. Get warm." Blake said.

"Yeah." Lean said.

"I can create warmth, with my magic." Blake continued. "But you'd have to get closer. And put your arms around me."

Lean felt that was a very agreeable proposal, and reluctantly let go of Blake's hand, only to sneak her hands around Blake's waist, and slowly bringing them to rest on Blake's back, pressing their bodies together. She exhaled slowly, hoping Blake couldn't tell her heart was beating very fast. It was so warm, and she could feel Blake relaxing, and wrapping her arms around Lean as well.

"I'll do it then." Blake murmured, as if she half forgot what she was up to already.

Lean felt a wave of heat run through both of them, and their clothes dried in about an instant. Blake really had temperature under her control, Lean thought, and hugged her tighter, worried Blake would let go.

"I'm still a bit cold." Lean said in a small voice, and she could feel Blake nodding.

"Yeah... me too. We should stay like this." Blake said.

It was like a warm dream, Lean thought afterwards. They didn't move for a while, and Lean couldn't tell how long it was, she only knew Blake's hands were shifting to trace her spine, and gently scratch her shoulders before pulling her in closer, smelling her hair, squeezing her tight. Lean did it too, Blake's clothing was torn in places and Lean's fingers tingled where she touched the skin directly. Blake smelled like magic and rain. Lean went into a happy daze, her mind lingering on how nice it would be to kiss Blake. But she didn't know if witches were sensitive about that, and if it would ruin what was going on. Lean certainly wasn't going to break it up. She kept her eyes closed, and dreamed on.

It was only after Blake woke her up, laughing, that she realized she had fallen asleep in Blake's arms.

"You tire fast. Let's get you home. Will you be in trouble if you get home all muddy?"

"I won't." Lean said. She felt bad for falling asleep, but she couldn't help it, it was warm and cozy and it smelled so good and Blake was just there and if she could only hug her again-

"You can sit behind me, right?" Blake asked, holding her broom.

"Yeah." Lean said, happy. "Yes I can."

Blake mounted the broom and Lean wasted no time in wrapping both of her arms around her, and sticking close to her like glue. Blake looked satisfied, and brought them high into the sky. They only made one stop. Lean had explained to Blake she couldn't keep her paper, or her souvenirs at home, because her mothers might find them, so they decided to create a secret stash. A big, hollow oak that was far enough for fairies to not investigate was serving as the hiding place. Currently it contained few of Lean's leaves and pieces of paper, blue-grey pebble from the lake, and now she added in a handful of sunflower seeds. She would plant the sunflowers, she decided. Wherever she lived.

## Chapter 6: Good News

Blake was thinking, for a while now, that something was off. She could tell it was harder and harder for Lean to stay awake, but clearly nobody was doing anything to help her. Blake remembered how Lean reacted first time they touched, and it made no sense that second time was so different, so.. good. Blake was starting to think most things she knew about fairies were lies, except she still didn't want to get too close to the fairy dome, in case she got noticed. She was not supposed to be socializing with fairies, but it was unlikely that she would stop now. Why would someone write so many lies about fairies anyway? She re-checked all the books in the library, but the more she read them, the less she understood.

Apparently some, older fairies could learn to not affect witches, but Lean was young, she should not be able to have that ability. Was she hiding her age somehow? But no, Lean would know more than she did if she was older. Lean also never had a familiar by her side, and according to the books, fairies had little lights following them everywhere. She would have to ask Lean about that.

Blake was considering visiting Mjord, an old healer she knew, to ask about Lean's condition, but she didn't want to admit what she was doing, unless it was absolutely necessary. She was getting frustrated thinking about this, she wasn't used to worrying about another person this much, and not coming up with any solutions. And her train of thoughts was sometimes interrupted by wild fantasies of kissing Lean, but that was just impossible. Firstly, she was a witch and witches do not fall for fairies, it was unheard of. Secondly, Lean was too bright, and Blake knew if she even tried, her eyelids wouldn't be enough to not get blinded. Everything is too complicated, Blake concluded and went out to fly in a rainstorm, letting her frustrations go by screaming into the wild sky.

Blake realized Lean was trying to find her again, a few days later, when the trees passed on the whispers. She found Lean snooping around her fir, looking much brighter than usual.

"Find anything up there?" She knocked on the fir with her broom, reprimanding Lean.

"Did you really just hang a sleeping net on a fir and called it a bed?" Lean yelled back at her in indignation.

"Sure did." Blake said unapologetically. "Did you come into my place just to insult my bed then?"

"I've got news!" Lean said excitedly, and flew down, catching Blake in an unexpected hug.

Blake took in a breath of surprise, closed her eyes and turned her head away from Lean's shining skin, then hugged back.



"At the last seance, fairies noticed I was still not getting better, and they decided to take action." Lean said, apparently deciding to talk while holding onto Blake.

"It was about time." Blake said, with some reprimand in her voice.

"So they're calling in a meeting with representatives of all other species we have contact with, they're going to arrange taking me to all different healers, until someone can figure out what is wrong. And probably, one of them will know, and I will get better!" Lean continued, getting more and more excited as she went on.

"That is promising." Blake acknowledged, and ran her fingers through Lean's hair. It felt soft, even she Blake couldn't see it. "When is the meeting?"

"Tomorrow evening." Lean said. "I'll have to rest before that, but I feel better already." Lean said.

"Good. It's a relief." Blake said, truthfully.

Lean nodded and then pulled Blake down to sit with her on the grass, Blake letting her, feeling more relaxed already. Lean started telling her about all her best friends and fairies who stood up for her, as if she had been holding back from talking for a long time, and now it was okay to do so at last. Blake listened and smiled, even as she had to look away, but Lean eventually realized and had them lean their backs to each other, so they faced different directions.

"Fairies used to be really small, you know?" Lean was telling her. "We were the size of a hand. It was a long time ago, of course, but we still sing songs about it."

"Yeah?" Blake said, interested.

"Yeah! Apparently we were invisible for most of the time, because creatures who lived on Earth were malicious, and it was safer for us to only be visible to children, and not all the time. But eventually time sent the monsters into extinction, and we grew, and everything grew, the trees, the flowers, the mountains. It was a season of awakening for all of us. We celebrate it."

Blake laughed, realizing what Lean was talking about. "We celebrate it too. We just call it differently." Blake said.

"What do you call it?" Lean nudged Blake.

"Celebration of the Victory." Blake said.

"Victory over who?" Lean asked.

"Well, okay, you can't know this, because your tribes were hiding for the most part, but about thousands of years ago, there were creatures who looked similar to us, but evil at heart. They would pretend to be just like us, you know, and talk smoothly, but then they would enslave us and if we used our powers, they would burn us to death."

"What?" Lean said, startled. "That's- that can't be."

"Yeah." Blake said, thoughtful. "They would commit crimes of violence over our children. And.. they created wars. As in, massive killings. It's complicated. But the point is, they only saw everything as resources, the Earth, the Nature, even.. even us. They tried to convince us that we were no more than that."

"You're making it up." Lean accused her. "You're just scaring me for no good reason. You stop that." Lean nudged Blake hard with her elbow.

Blake laughed, thinking how bizarre it must sound to Lean. "Alright, alright. Well, we got tired of it, so we made sure they went extinct." Blake shortened the story. "And since then, everything started growing. The nature started recovering, trees grew back everywhere, Thornwood even, started growing right about that time. It's thousands of years old now."

"How do you know that?" Lean asked.

"Well, my mentor told me some of it." Blake said. "And I found some of it in the library."

"What's your mentor like?" Lean asked again.

"She's a tough old witch." Blake said, smiling. "She has this huge familiar, and had it spy on me one time, and I had to fight it to get some privacy. That reminds me, shouldn't fairies have familiars? How come I've never seen yours?"

"Oh." Lean said, sounding uncomfortable. "Well, we do. It's just, none of the lights liked me." Lean said sadly.

"Everything likes you." Blake said. "Even my fir likes you."

Lean shrugged. "Maybe mine wasn't born yet. Do you have a familiar?"

"I do." Blake nodded. "But she's off, starting a family." Blake said. "I expect to see her in a few months."

"Will her babies be your familiars too?" Lean asked.

"No!" Blake laughed. "I wouldn't want a bunch of drooling baby owls as my familiars, that's horrible."

Lean laughed, imagining small owls sitting on Blake's hat. "They would look cute on you."

"Yeah?" Blake said.

Lean turned around, and wrapped her arms around Blake, hugging her from behind. She pressed her lips on Blake's ear, and whispered "Yeah."

Blake's face flushed, and she hoped Lean couldn't see it. She closed her eyes, still feeling Lean's breath close to her skin. How could a fairy do this to her?

"Hey, do witches.. like kissing?" Lean asked, sounding as if she rehearsed asking that question several times.

Blake's heart raced right then, and she knew if she said yes, Lean was going to kiss her, and momentarily forgot why it could possibly be a bad idea, right this second it was irresistible. Blake nodded in response,

and felt Lean's tension fade, as if Lean was trembling onto her answer. But next thing Blake knew was light forcing its way into her eyes, and she made a sound of discontent and pulled away before Lean's lips touched her. Blake rubbed her arm over her eyelids, feeling stupid and upset with herself.

"It's too bright-" She explained to Lean, who had pulled away completely, probably feeling rejected.

And then Blake felt hands rummaging over her body, tensed a little, still covering her eyes, but Lean's fingers were digging into her pockets, searching them one by one, until she finally pulled out a bandage of black cloth, one Blake used in Thornwood.

"Are you alright?" Lean asked.

"Yeah, it will go away in a minute." Blake said. She waited until her eyes felt comfortably surrounded by darkness again, sighed in relief and leaned back on the fir, removing her arm. She could see Lean wrapping the black cloth around her hand carefully, making sure it covered every bit of light. Lean sat in front of her, thoughtful.

"How about this, then?" Lean placed her wrapped hand over Blake's eyes slowly, making sure Blake could pull back any second if it didn't work right. Blake realized what Lean was up to, and closed her eyes, felt Lean's hand cover her eyes and half of her nose, fabric stopping any light seeping through.

"Yeah." Blake said. "I can't see any light."

It was barely a second afterwards and Lean was kissing her gently, and Blake was kissing back, making a noise of pure bliss. Lean's lips were soft, and careful, easy to melt into, and Blake felt she would. Kissing Lean was making her forget just about everything, it was a place of calm and peace, like a hidden little shelter from the world. Blake was just about to relax completely into it, and slid her hand in Lean's soft hair, holding her close, which Lean took as a sign of encouragement, and kissed her more eagerly, which made Blake in return push herself up, kissing back just as eagerly, her hat slipping off, her other hand finding Lean's and holding on tight.

By the time Lean pulled away, they were both flushed and breathing hard, Lean still kept her hand over Blake's eyes, never moving it even a little.

"That--" Blake breathed out, panting. "Seemed like you wanted to do it for a while-" Blake said, making a wild attempt at sounding smug, and she imagined Lean looking at her with indignation before she kissed Blake again to shut her up.

They weren't doing much else, after that point. They eventually found themselves lying down in the grass, holding hands, except for one that Lean kept carefully over Blake's eyes as she kissed her. Blake found nothing to complain about, she was content to spend as much time as possible kissing Lean, and only made noises of discontent when Lean moved her lips away, and instead buried her head in Blake's lap. She was getting tired again, Blake realized.

"Need to go sleep?" Blake asked.

Lean nodded into her, sighing.

"Here." Blake reached to one of her pockets, and took out a small red stone. "For your stash."

Lean took it, too tired to look at it properly, and kissed Blake again.

"Can't you come with me?" Lean mumbled, parting their lips only to let out the words.

"Yeah, that would be fun-" Blake grinned, and kissed her back. "Hello fairy tribe, I have brought my witch lover for a visit-"

"Oh shut up-" Lean laughed weakly, and then leaned back, tired. She finally took her wrapped hand away, allowing Blake to see her again.

Blake opened her eyes, sighing.

"When you're healthy again, there's this swamp I'm going to take you to." Blake said. "And a mountain cave. And a spring where you can see how rivers are formed. And.." Blake trailed off, thinking of all the places she knew.

"I can't wait." Lean mumbled sleepily.

"Let's get you home." Blake decided, and pushed herself up.

They flew, and Lean was barely holding on. Then she fell asleep mid-flight, and almost fell off. Blake yelled when she felt Lean's hands losing grip on her. She grabbed both of them and held Lean on, panicking until she somehow managed to get down, and wake Lean up with waves of cold. In the end, she carried Lean in her arms part of the way. Lean promised she could get to her bed before they parted. Blake was hoping this was the last time they had to part like this, Lean looking as if she was going to fall asleep and not wake up again.

## Chapter 7: Caught

Lean wasn't back for the rest of that week. Blake assumed she was probably being taken to see all the healers, and spending all her awake time getting diagnosed and treated. The thought gave her comfort, but she wished Lean would find a way to send her a message, let Blake know exactly what was happening. Blake didn't much like to be kept in the dark. If Lean was going to be away while healing, Blake at least needed to know how long it would take before they could make out again.

After two weeks, Blake was done waiting. She wouldn't go into the Fairy dome, it was too risky, but, she could persuade one of the friendly owls to investigate for her. Her familiar was away, but Blake has

befriended most owls she met, and she found a particularly young and inexperienced one, who was easy to bribe, and didn't expect much in return. It took some time to explain to owl to find "fairy with the dark clothing", as Blake suspected Lean was the only one dressing like this, most of fairies were in light and bright colors.

Blake chose the night time, sure most of the fairies were sleeping, and thinking owl would be less suspicious visitor at night. They sneaked up close to the fairy dome, to the spot where she and Lean would part, and sent the owl to do her bidding. The small grey owl sure took its time, Blake ended up sitting high on the tree, for more than an hour, irritated. Did fairies catch it? Was she noticed? There were owls in that forest, and owl Blake chose had no sign of magic upon her, it shouldn't be that suspicious, Blake thought. At last, grey owl returned, hooting excitedly. Blake flew away with it, her heart beating fast. They landed far enough to be safe from being spied on, and Blake sat down, owl sitting on her arm.

"Did you see her? The fairy in dark clothing?"

Owl hooted in affirmation.

"Was she asleep?"

There was a positive hoot again.

"Where was she?"

Owl made a series of hoots that Blake managed to translate as "window, tower, next to big brown tree". It was something, Blake thought.

"Did she seem.. okay." Blake knew it was a dumb thing to ask an owl, and owl too, looked at her as if she was expecting way too much of her new partner.

"Okay. Alright. Thank you. Here's your reward."

Blake covered the owl in magic that would keep her from getting cold or too warm for a while, and let it fly off. Owls didn't exactly need this protection, but the youngling wanted to try all sorts of things, just like Blake liked to. So, Lean was sleeping, next to a big old tree, in a tower, and was visible from a window. If Blake wanted to find out more, she'd need to go there herself.

She went the next night. Being in fairy dome felt horrible. She could feel her energy being drained even while the fairies were asleep. Entire space was filled with blinding lights, colorful flowers that Blake didn't even recognize, and their nests were just messy, Blake thought. Fairies built them around the trees and sometimes tangled with the roots and branches, it was nothing like elegant and cozy cottages and castles witches made for themselves. There was a small stream running through the middle of the dome, rocks and unstable, shaky ground covering almost everything, it was obvious fairies did not walk. Blake

still thought she would be less noticeable on the ground. The ground was constantly close to collapsing under her feet and Blake hated it.

None of the nests looked like a tower, Blake thought. They looked as if the forest decided to grow all wrong and something willed it to form round bubbles out of every resource available. Windows were covered in small flowers and leaves, air blowing freely through. It took a while to get around the place, especially on foot. There weren't that many nests, but some were hidden secluded, and Blake was peering through all of the windows, slightly blinded whenever she would catch a glimpse of a sleeping fairy. But none of them was Lean.

When Blake was almost sure she checked every single place, she found a new path of lights, and found a higher, less round nest. It was stacked up high on a big tree with no leaves. That would make a brown tree, she thought, and when she flew all the way up, she realized it resembled a tower. There was only one window, all the way up on the top, and there she was. Hidden by leaves and flowers, a bright, dressed in green, sleeping fairy. Blake remembered the first time she saw Lean, she looked exactly the same, only curled up in her small mossy bed. Since nobody else was close, Blake felt it was safe to make noise, and knocked her broom on a tree, trying to wake Lean. Lean didn't stir. Blake tried to get in through the window, but miraculously, she was denied to get too close, branches would not let her touch. She frowned. What fairy would need this much protection? She was now beyond irritated, and resorted to yelling.

"Lean!" Blake called.

Lean stirred a little, stretched out, and then looked utterly lost in time and space. It took her a few seconds to collect herself, looking around. And then she noticed Blake was calling to her from the window, and her green eyes widened in shock, and there was something else, something upsetting on her face.

"Blake!" She sobbed, crawled to the window, and placed her hands on the invisible barrier, as if she couldn't get through either.

"What is going on with you?" Blake asked, feeling it was about time she was given some information.

"Blake." Lean sounded as if she was about to cry. "I got caught! I.. I was sleeping and they carried me and found the crystal- we forgot- we forgot to take it to the stash, and, they asked me where I got it, and I didn't think- I didn't think it was a big deal and I said, witch gave it to me, and Blake they looked at me as if I did something horrible, as if this was the worst thing in the entire world-" Lean was saying, shaken. Blake didn't say anything, instead nodded, encouraging Lean to speak on.

"And they locked me in here! I can't get out!" Lean shook her head, desperate. "I don't know what's going on, this has never happened before! All fairies are free to go wherever they please, as soon as they

turn 12, I don't understand why am I the only one locked like this. I keep asking mothers to let me out, but they keep saying it's dangerous, and that I might get taken, but I don't think they believe that's true, the looks in their eyes, I think they're... hiding something." Lean said, uncertainly.

"What about the meeting?" Blake asked. "Did you get the healers?"

"They.. cancelled it." Lean sobbed, now starting to cry in earnest.

"They what?" Blake said, dumbfounded.

"I don't know.. what they said to the fairies, but, when I insisted on going, they said there was no meeting, and that I was getting better, but it's not true Blake, I'm not. I don't know what's going to happen to me."

Lean was panting now, and she let go of the window, and sat down on the ground, looking hopeless. Blake's heart was aching looking at her.

"I thought." Lean said. "I thought I was worth that much. I thought.. we were always told how all fairies fight for each other, and they would go to any length to help one another, you know? That's why.. I was finally feeling it, being fought for, they were going to do something to help me, but now.. I don't know. It feels like.. I'm being punished for lying.. by being forced to stay sick." Lean finished, her voice small.

"We have to get you out of there." Blake said in a determined voice.

Lean looked at her, and then away.

"This is my home." Lean sounded hopeless. "I don't have anywhere else to go."

Blake felt anger swell up in her heart, but she forced it away.

"You need help. I'll take you to a healer. You can come back when you feel better, and then suffer whatever they're going to do with you for.. associating with me. But when you get better. They can't keep you here locked up and *sick*." Blake said, still sounding angry, no matter how much she tried to conceal it.

Lean looked uncertain, she glanced around, and touched the window again.

"Even.. even if there was a healer somewhere, I can't get out of here. They put up a barrier, I've never seen anything like it before. Do you think you can break it?" Lean asked.

"I'll try." Blake said, and took a few breaths, trying to calm down.

Blake tried, and quickly learned what wouldn't work. Punching had no effect, freezing it did nothing either, except maybe made it more visible with ice crystals forming all over the window. She tried to push her broom through it, only to have it repulsed from the barrier, and she had to summon it to stop it from falling to the ground. Her last resort was burning the entire place down, she focused the power of warmth to the branch around the window, and she managed to blacken a small piece of it with char.

Then she hissed and pulled her fingers away. Burning a piece of tree did not feel nice. She hadn't done it before. She didn't master it. She could burn herself as well if she wasn't careful.

"I can, but.. slowly." Blake said, leaning into the window again.

Lean swallowed, and looked around her, as if it pained her to even think about it.

"I'm going to come back, right?" Lean asked again, as if everything depended on it.

"You'll be free to come back anytime." Blake assured her.

"I wanted to show you my room." Lean said, giving Blake a sad smile. "I wanted to show you my ornaments, and my notes, and.." Lean trailed off, sighing.

"You can show it all to me later." Blake said. She felt angry again, but forced herself to act calm, for Lean's sake.

"Okay. Then.. break it." Lean said, finally.

Blake nodded.

"Get away from the window." Blake said.

Lean drew back into her bed, using a few big leaves to protect herself from whatever Blake was about to do.

Blake was concentrating, carefully, to only send heat through the heart of the branch, making it char and burn from the inside, and fall apart, destabilizing the window. The magical barrier was interlinked with the tree, and if branches would destabilize, so would the barrier. Still, it was painful, it went against everything Blake knew, burning a tree that was alive, hurting. She only did enough to get the window to fall apart, and she tried to push her broom through again, and it had worked. It was fragile, weak hole in the barrier, Blake froze it to make sure it was big enough for Lean to fly through.

"Now." Blake said, urgently. "Get through it, it's safe."

Lean gasped seeing the window branch burned and falling into pieces, but crawled to it quickly, and climbed out. She got a hold of Blake's broom, probably too weak to fly herself.

"Hold on." Blake said, and then flew them high up, her heart beating in relief from feeling Lean's hand closed around her again. She was gasping from how good it felt to get away from that horrible place.

Blake's eyes were hurting, it was slightly difficult to breathe from exhaustion she felt. She wondered if Lean felt the same due to her sickness, but, probably not, fairies felt different things.

She could hear Lean saying her name behind her, but wind was too strong for Blake to hear what Lean was saying. She landed them to a clearing, and then tried to take a look at Lean, but it was harder during night, Lean was glowing. It was fainter than her usual glow, but too much for Blake still.

"How long before they start looking for you?" Blake asked.

Lean seemed startled by the question, like she never even considered it, and thought about it.



"I think.. they will realize I'm gone at first meal. Because my mothers usually bring it to me, and tell me it's going to.. to be alright." Lean said, sounding as if she wanted to shrink down and disappear.

"Will they all look for you?" Blake asked.

Lean shook her head. "The scouts.. probably. Because they know the territory the best." Lean said. She thought some more about it, and added. "But they're not as fast as you."

Blake thought Lean sounded lost, but she didn't have time to deal with that, she needed to get Lean safe.

"How long can you stay awake?" Blake asked, bluntly.

Lean looked taken aback by the question, and seemed to try to remember.

"4 hours." Lean said, finally.

"Fly with me. It's going to be okay. Mjord will sort you out." Blake said.

Blake didn't want to mention that actually flying to Mjord will take about 6 hours at least, with Lean in danger of falling off. She was upset she didn't figure out a way to transport Lean while asleep, but right now she couldn't think properly about it, not with Lean like this.

Lean nodded, and shivered.

Blake pulled her into a hug, held Lean tight to herself, and finally felt Lean start to relax and sink into the heat. Blake scratched Lean's back gently, hoping it would be better comfort than words. Lean made a noise of content, and sighed.

"This really sucks." Lean said.

"I know." Blake said.

"Fairies don't do this." Lean said, sounding weak. "They don't.. escape."

"Well they usually don't get locked in, either." Blake said.

Lean let go of Blake, then. Blake pulled away as well, and grabbed her broom.

"Hold on." Blake said.

Blake waited until Lean wrapped her arms around her again, and tiredly rested her head on Blake's shoulder. It felt good, even if Blake was worried about everything. At least Lean was free. At least Lean was with her. Blake didn't know why Lean's mothers did what they did, and didn't have time to try and figure it out just then. They took off under the black night sky. Owls followed their flights, some of them joined to watch. Blake sent them away, preferring to travel in secret. But wind was watching them, trees would see, tips of mountains followed their pursuit. Lean's body shined them up for everyone to see under a young crescent moon.

## Chapter 8: Mjord

Lean felt she was waking up, but refused to open her eyes. She was still, so tired. She felt a hollow, heavy feeling in her stomach and wished it would go away. Events started coming back to her, her mother, Leira, angry, Sinthia apologizing, being locked up, being restrained from movement, then Blake, coming, trashing everything, freeing her. The image of how Leira would react when she finds out, what would she do, it was scary to think about. Did she make a mistake, escaping with Blake? Was she supposed to stay? But she was scared, and sick. How could Leira not care? She was her mother... Lean felt a bolt of pain in her heart, and then she felt nothing at all. *It was not a time for this*, a voice inside of Lean told her. *You have to get healthy. You have to reach a healer.*

By the time Lean finally pushed herself up, she told herself, she would forget everything that happened, and pretend to be on a field trip with Blake. Yes, that is not scary at all. Lean's life wasn't depending on some healer she didn't even know, she would get well immediately after they figured out what was wrong, nothing bad was going to happen, Lean would come home and things would go back to normal. She could live with that, and maybe things would work out that way too. There was no way to be just overly negative about this, and assume the worst. And hey, she was outside now. The air was fresh, she could eat whatever she wanted, things were already getting better. Blake was right there, looking as gloomy as possible, playing the role of a lookout, it seemed. Lean had already completely blocked out the possibility that there would be a search party - after all, every single fairy ever returned home, they would just wait for her, they must know she only escaped to get her sickness in order. Yes, that made perfect sense.

Lean decided she had to do something about Blake's foul mood, and leaned her head against Blake's shoulder affectionately, which in turn made Blake jump. She was so concentrated on something, probably something dumb, she didn't even notice Lean was awake.

"You're up." Blake said, in relief, and pressed her fingers through Lean's hair, pushing it away from her face.

"Mm and you look grumpy." Lean said, smiling serenely as she turned her head and started placing small kisses on Blake's neck. "What's the matter?" Lean murmured at Blake.

"What's the- matter?" Blake was both alarmed and blushing, and at a loss at Lean's behaviour.

"What?" Lean said, innocently.

"You are- in a too good mood for a fairy on the run." Blake criticized her.

"Don't say it like that. It's a field trip. With my witch lover." Lean grinned, and tried to find a way to kiss Blake again. "We should make out." Lean decided.

"Well I would-- love to-" Blake managed, closing her eyes as Lean was too close now. "As soon as we know you'll get better."

"I'm going to get better." Lean said confidently. She then tried placing the dark fabric of her clothing over Blake's eyes, pulling it over her hand. "Does this work?" Lean asked, curiously.

"It helps-" Blake managed, and Lean was already pressing a kiss on her lips, and Blake finally relaxed a little, and kissed her back. Lean did all the gentle nipping and licking between Blake's lips she already found out made Blake all pliant and relaxed, and didn't stop until Blake was breathing slowly, her arms loosely around Lean's head.

"We're already doing all we can to help me." Lean murmured to Blake. "Worrying is just making you stressed."

Blake made a vague sound of disagreement, but didn't seem to be in the mood to argue after kissing. Blake always looks good after being kissed, Lean thought.

Blake allowed herself to rest for a bit, leaning her head on the shining fairy, her eyes closed.

"Do you feel okay?" Blake asked after a few minutes.

"Yeah. I feel better here than I did back there." Lean said.

"That's good. Do you need food?" Blake asked.

"There's food for fairies anywhere." Lean said. "Don't worry about it."

Blake nodded.

"We should go, soon. We'll reach Mjord today, before sunset, if we go." Blake said.

"What is Mjord like?" Lean asked.

"She's this stern, serious witch." Blake said, smiling as if she was remembering something funny. "She's too strict, and fun to mock. Very dignified and proud. Her heart is good."

Lean tried to imagine it, but the idea of a strict and proud witch scared her a little.

"Will she like me?" Lean asked with some trepidation in her voice.

"I don't know." Blake said, not very comforting. "But she'll help you, if I ask her nicely."

Lean nodded, sighing.

"Although, we shouldn't really- we should tell Mjord I just found you, okay? I don't think she'd be happy if she knew how I- got you there." Blake said.

"Deal." Lean said.

Blake stood up.

"Ready to fly?" Blake asked.

"Yeah." Lean said, and they took off.

Blake flew them through the wide forests and fields, and then deep into the mountains, first covered in firs and tall pines, then rocks and lakes. If Lean wasn't feeling the exhaustion creeping up on her so fast, she would have enjoyed seeing the sights. They were reaching a green patch of trees, and mountains tops were behind them when Blake started landing. Sun was low, and lakes where Blake landed were reflecting its warm light, making Lean feel lighthearted for a second. But as soon as her feet were back on the ground, she was nervous.

"She lives here?" Lean asked, looking around as if expecting to see a witch appearing next to them any second.

"Yeah. Close. We just have a few minutes' walk from here."

Lean nodded, and followed Blake anxiously looking around. She realized that around the lakes, there were fruit trees and bushes of berries of all kinds, and most of the plants that grew looked as if they were planted there on purpose. Probably medicinal plants, Lean realized. She wanted to cling to Blake as she was led through a small forest, but thought better of it.

They walked over a small wooden bridge crossing a forest stream, when Lean noticed the home of Mjord. It almost looked like a cottage, except the roof was high, and resembled a small tower. There were gates to the courtyard, and Blake stopped there.

"I'll go in and explain, you wait here." Blake said, looking completely comfortable to be there.

Lean only nodded. She watched Blake walk forward, knock on the wooden door, and go in, and felt her stomach turn. She was going to get help, she kept telling herself. She tried to take in more details and remember them, but her anxious mind wasn't into memorizing anything at the moment. She wished Blake would come and get her already, it might have been minutes but to Lean it felt like hours.

Blake came back in five minutes, looking amused about something.

"It's okay, you can come in. And.. forget everything I told you about Mjord."

"Why?" Lean frowned, and quickly followed Blake.

"She got herself a *girlfriend*." Blake said, barely restraining the laughter in her voice.

Lean thought the house was dark, much darker than any place a fairy would live at. She was taken aback by how much shadows the walls were casting, how feeble the light coming out the window was. But there was warm firelight in the fireplace, and it helped Lean to get used to the dark.

Mjord was waiting for her in the room with a table. This is what Lean got from her fleeting impression, because she was too anxious to look properly. Mjord was a big, old, strong witch. Her hair was dark and short, her eyes radiated light even as they were as dark as Blake's. She wore clothing that made her look

like she was working with rocks and wood, and not healing. But it had to be the right witch. Lean looked at Blake, searching for confirmation, and Blake nodded. Lean stepped forward, and introduced herself.

"I am Lean Greenwood." Lean said, and fluttered her wings, even as she ought to have learned from last time it was not working out as a greeting to witches. She stopped, embarrassed.

"I am grateful to be invited to your home." Lean continued speaking. "I hope I am not intruding."

"You are not." Mjord replied. "Welcome, Lean Greenwood. I am Mjord Bluethunder. Blake has told me about you. Come drink tea with us, and be introduced to my beloved. This is Mathilda."

Lean felt a rush of relief to being welcomed so politely, and allowed herself to look at a witch standing next to Mjord. She couldn't help but feel a bit amazed, the witch was radiant. There was an adoring smile on her round face, her long hair was falling down to her waist, and her clothes were bright and elegant at the same time, it was almost like looking at the queen.

"I am pleased to meet you." Lean said, charmed, and tried to do a little bow this time, which made Mathilda laugh and come closer.

"Pleased to meet you, also." Mathilda said, and then looked at Blake. "You said it was safe to touch her?"

Blake frowned, and looked at Lean, probably remembering what happened first time she and Blake touched. "Safe for you, yes. I'm not sure about her." Blake said.

Mathilda offered a hand to Lean, and Lean touched it gingerly, and felt nothing except warmth, it was okay. Mathilda gave her a radiant smile, and then pulled her into a hug. Lean was used to being greeted by a hug - fairies did it often, and returned it just as warmly.

"What tea do you prefer, Lean?" Mjord was asking, as Lean was let free from the embrace.

"As long as it's a flower, I enjoy all of them." Lean answered politely, and looked towards Blake for guidance. Blake nodded at her, and took a seat at the table, probably noting that Lean should do so as well. Lean sat down, and watched Mathilda take a seat right across from her, while Mjord was having small flowers fly into pots of hot water, and then settled the tea in front of everyone.

Lean felt overwhelmed with novelties, it felt so official, yet everyone at the table was smiling. Blake was eye-siding Mathilda constantly, and then giving amused looks to Mjord, which Mjord completely ignored and kept her eyes on Mathilda only. Blake was about to open her mouth and comment something, when Mjord turned to Lean instead.

"Tell us, Lean Greenwood, how did you meet Blake?" Mjord said.

Blake narrowed her eyes at Mjord, it felt like they were having a private conversation of their own, and then looked at Lean and shrugged. That must have meant *tell the truth*, Lean concluded.

"I fell asleep in her territory. She found me and woke me up." Lean said.

"That is unusual." Mjord said, and looked at Blake. "Blake, did you not have a fence around your dome?"

"Fence?" Lean looked at Blake, surprised. "There was just a group of firs, I couldn't even tell it was someone's territory."

Mjord looked at Blake in indignation, as if about to reprove of her.

"Okay, so I don't like for everyone to know where I live." Blake shot at her before Mjord could say a word.

"You were always such an unbehaved child." Mjord said, shaking her head at Blake.

"You know, when she was young, she just barged in here, and tried to occupy the place?" Mjord said to Lean, who grinned, imagining it.

Blake looked very irritated the conversation turned into a "let's all share information about Blake" contest and shot everyone except Mathilda dirty looks. Mjord put her attention back to Mathilda instead.

"My beloved, does your heart desire anything?" Mjord said, her voice filled with affection.

"Only your presence and sweetness of your voice." Mathilda said with an adoring smile.

Blake buried her head on the table, as if trying not to laugh. Lean watched them with interest, felt it was a very weird, very new place she found herself in.

"Where has all your dignity gone, Mjord?" Blake finally said, giving in to temptation.

"Is that how you speak to me, you small heathen?" Mjord replied with no malice in her voice, she was half laughing.

"You know this one never showed respect for any witch." Mjord said to Lean, conversationally.

"She's not very fond of fairies either." Lean replied, smiling at Blake.

"I'm fond of certain fairies." Blake mumbled to herself, and Lean twinkled in delight.

They drank their tea in a pleasant mood, Mjord often offering something to Mathilda and giving dirty looks to Blake, who, it seemed, wouldn't stop mocking everyone even if the stakes were way high. Lean's last thought was that she was having fun, until she felt her head fall down on the table, and realized she was falling asleep.

## Chapter 9: The Curse

Blake had Lean settled in a guest bed she usually occupied herself when she was visiting, and then Mjord had asked her for a private talk. Blake could smell trouble and insisted Mathilda be present for it, and

Mathilda admitted she was curious about what was going on, so she was granted presence at this "lets make Blake feel bad" conference.

They both sat across Blake, who decided she wouldn't get intimidated, and acted as if this was completely uncalled for.

"It's just like you to do this, to bring me a sleeping fairy, do you think I specialize in fairies, Blake?" Mjord said, accusingly.

"Oh, and here I thought you were kind-hearted and would help good-" Blake was saying.

"She's good." Mathilda interrupted Blake, talking to Mjord.

"Yeah. I can never get anything through to her." Mjord smiled at Mathilda.

"I'm glad we settled that part." Blake concluded, smug, and Mjord glared at her.

"Why are you the one to bring her here?" Mjord asked.

Blake had anticipated the question.

"The fairies asked me to. They were worried Lean was getting too sick, and wouldn't get to a healer in time. It was faster for me to go and bring her here, than for fairies to organize it."

Mjord considered her, looked at Mathilda, who mouthed "she's lying", which made Blake glare at her.

"You better have a good reason for lying to me." Mjord said.

"Well I don't think you would like the truth, so just, help her, okay? I care for her." Blake said.

Mjord sighed, looked at Mathilda again, who nodded.

"She's unusual for a fairy." Mjord said.

"I know. She doesn't take energy. And she's less bright. But it could be due to illness." Blake said.

"How long has she been sick like this?" Mjord asked.

"I don't know. It's just been getting worse and worse last few weeks. She can be awake for only 4 hours.

You saw how she just falls asleep anywhere." Blake said.

"Did you see any other symptoms?" Mjord asked.

Blake paused for a few seconds, thinking.

"I don't think so. But I think it hurt her when she first touched me." Blake said.

"Well, that's just, ideal to diagnose." Mjord said, her voice tired.

"But you can do it." Blake said confidently.

"I'll see what I can do when she wakes up. Hopefully she can tell me more about the illness. Mind you, I don't know all the stuff fairies can get sick from. You go and share a room with her, and don't come near me, you're giving me a headache. And learn some manners, your fairy is better behaved than you are!"

Mjord said, then turned to Mathilda, who winked at Blake before leaving with Mjord.

That went okay, Blake concluded, and went to the guest room, where Lean was sleeping. Blake felt relieved since the moment they reached Mjord. Mjord was reliable, she would yell at Blake but help her anyway. Blake would never say this to Mjord, but she respected her power and abilities, and had deep trust in Mjord making everything work out. And fairies probably wouldn't find them here. Probably. Blake looked through the window anxiously, then pulled the dark curtains. She then went outside to check, but it was no good, glow was still visible. She came back in, covered Lean with dark fabric, checked again. It was better. Nobody should be able to tell there was a fairy sleeping inside.

Lean wasn't awake until the next afternoon. Blake spent some time outside, playing lookout and hoping Mjord and Mathilda wouldn't figure out what she's doing. It was hard to spend time with Mathilda and Mjord because they were completely obnoxious and shameless. Mjord had Mathilda sit in her lap, sweet-talked to her, worshipped her as if that was anywhere close to normal, she didn't even want to think about what they did behind closed doors and Blake could have sworn she heard a serenade at one point as well. It was somewhat lucky for Blake that Mjord had found Mathilda, because otherwise it wouldn't have been that easy to convince Mjord to help, but as Mjord was in the middle of love fever, she wasn't very likely to pay attention to small stuff like Blake being Blake.

Lean was again, annoyingly cheerful upon waking up, which was just bizarre. Blake couldn't imagine feeling anything good if she was that sick, in hiding, having recently been imprisoned, and having very few future prospects of health and safety. Lean however, was only interested in dragging Blake to bed, grinning stupidly and kissing her neck, which, was very agreeable to Blake, and she didn't complain at all. Lean covered Blake's eyes with the same fabric Blake used to hide Lean, and kissed her until Blake forgot why they were there in the first place.

"Mjord is so nice." Lean said in between kisses.

"She's nice to you." Blake replied, smiling.

"You're mean to her." Lean accused her, then kissed her again.

"I'm mean to everyone." Blake said.

"You are. You need to-" Lean paused to kiss her some more. "Fix that-"

"Oh now you're even sounding like Mjo- mppf" Blake got interrupted by kisses, and didn't try to speak again. They got interrupted by a knock on the door. It was Mjord, who somehow sensed Lean was awake. Blake didn't bother to hide what they were doing, and instead glared at Mjord, upset at being interrupted. Mjord shot her an irritated glance, then addressed Lean.

"Lean, I'm glad to see you awake. How are you feeling?" Mjord said.

"I'm doing great." Lean said, still on top of Blake.

"Blake, weren't you saying Lean should get examined as soon as possible?" Mjord said, addressing Blake.



"Yeah." Blake said, gathering herself. "Lean. Go." Blake said.

Lean pushed herself up reluctantly, and Blake followed right after.

"I'll be with you the entire time." Blake assured her.

Lean nodded, and Blake could tell she was nervous. Mjord had Lean sit down in a chair, and then asked her a number of questions about symptoms, duration of illness, how quick it was progressing, what was tried to be done. Lean had listed all medicinal herbs and remedies used that she tried, she was sleeping in different poses and places, there was some improvement when she slept away from the nests, but other than that, it was continually getting worse. Lean also mentioned some kind of numb pain in her muscles, that would appear at the same time exhaustion set in. Mjord frowned, and asked about her wings, her lack of familiarity, her eating habits. Mjord kept frowning at all the answers she got, and Blake knew Mjord was onto something, and wanted to know immediately what it was, but Mjord was giving no answers. Mjord then asked Lean to extend her hands, explaining she would check her wrists. Lean did it nervously, and seemed to shudder a little when Mjord pressed her thumbs on Lean's wrists. Blake had seen Mjord do this type of examination on witches before, Mjord could feel magic through the bloodflow, and could tell if anything interrupted or damaged it. However this time, Mjord let go within seconds, and stared at Lean, surprised.

"What is it." Blake demanded.

"Shut up, Blake." Mjord said.

Mjord cast a spell at Lean, using only her fingers, which Blake was envious of, and watched in fascination as magic was deflected from Lean, and gave no response.

"It's not working." Blake said, frowning.

Lean looked mortified. "What is not working?" Lean asked.

"That spell was supposed to show us if anything was stopping the magic flowing through your body. But it wouldn't show anything." Mjord said, and then she was thinking something to herself. Blake took Lean's hand to comfort her, because Lean now looked hopeless. Mjord noticed.

"Lean, I can't yet tell you what is wrong. But there are more things we can try. I will make a revelsphere, and it will show us anything that might be interfering with your health or magic. It will take a few hours, but you can be asleep for the examination, I just need your consent."

Lean looked at Blake first, then nodded. "You can examine me while I'm sleeping."

"Good." Mjord said. "Then go and eat, you can take anything from the garden. And you can resume your activities with Blake."

Blake was furious at Mjord for saying it, and at herself for blushing, but it was more urgent to make sure Lean was not seen outside, so she left and scouted the area quickly, before Lean got out. Lean looked

somewhat miserable, but she seemed to like the garden at least, and found some fruit and flowers she hadn't tried before. She looked as if she was forcing herself to swallow. Blake was at a loss of how to comfort her, and just stood there.

"It's going to be okay. Mjord will take care of you." Blake said.

Lean didn't reply. She took some fruit with her, and went back inside. Blake followed her, worried. Lean shut the door before Blake could enter their room, and Blake took it as a Lean wanting to be alone.

Blake was getting more and more angry at Mjord for not saying anything, and she could hear Mjord and Mathilda talking in a separate room, probably discussing Lean, she thought. Blake tried to eavesdrop, but the sickly whispers weren't reaching Blake's ears. So Blake hid, and waited until she could get Mathilda alone.

Mathilda looked at Blake in surprise when Blake cornered her, and narrowed her eyes.

"You think you can get information out of me." Mathilda said.

"Just tell me what Mjord knows about Lean." Blake said.

"Tell me the truth about why you got her here." Mathilda said.

Blake glared, and said nothing. Mathilda smiled and came closer.

"Don't you worry, you will find out in a few hours. It's really sweet how much you like her." Mathilda said, smiling. She tried to hug Blake, but Blake backed out, glaring. Lean would be asleep in a few hours. And Lean was not okay not knowing right now. Blake considered arguing with Mathilda, but she didn't think Mjord would forgive her for that, not right now.

Blake felt cornered and irritated, again. There was nothing she could do and it was driving her crazy. She grabbed her broom angrily, and went flying alone. Flying was drowning out everything, the wide sky and the winds carried her off, made her feel as if nothing else existed. She skyrocketed towards the ground as if challenging fate, only to balance at the last second, laughing at her own daring spirit. Everything else felt small compared to the sky and clouds, this was her place to be, she decided. She was panting and exhausted when she came back, she only made sure nobody found them, before checking if Lean was asleep. She was. She checked up on Mjord next. Mjord was just about to call her, finishing the sphere. Blake stared at it, it was luminous and transparent, filled with blue light.

"Get Lean." Mjord said.

Blake rushed, but still gently lifted sleeping Lean, and carried her to Mjord.

"Just carry her inside, she will float." Mjord said.

Mathilda came in, and watched Blake as she lifted Lean up, and as soon as the light of the sphere touched Lean, she was floating, her limbs lighter than air. Her body settled into the middle of the sphere. She wasn't waking.

Blake gasped at what she was seeing. Black vines were materializing around Lean's body, wrapped around her limbs, her head, her torso. After about 5 different black threads, red started to appear, and then, a few fragile-looking white ones. Lean's body was wrapped completely, only her hair was still visible and floating.

"What is that? Mjord, what is that?" Blake asked, in shock.

Mjord was staring with a similar, shocked expression, only Mathilda seemed to have stayed collected.

"Those are.. curses." Mjord exhaled. "Dark curses."

"That's what's making her sick, isn't it." Blake said.

"It.. well, they're different, it's not necessarily." Mjord seemed to find it hard to find words.

"The black ones. They are curses of restraint, they're hiding something. They could be hiding what Lean is sick from." Mjord said.

"And the red ones?" Blake asked.

"They're interfering with Lean's senses." Mjord said.

Blake watched as more lines appeared, and realized some of them were in pieces, floating around Lean's legs.

"These are broken." Mjord said, watching them too. "Lean is strong, she has been fighting against the restraints. She broke two of them. She must have known she broke them, she would have felt it. This one- " Mjord pointed at a bright, red one "was broken recently, weeks ago. Did anything happen to Lean weeks ago?"

"I don't-" Blake said, and then remembered. "When she touched me, she was sick for days! She was trembling, like something was wrong." Blake said, amazed. "Did that do it, Mjord? Did touching me break a curse?"

Mjord thought about it, and nodded.

"It's possible. She would feel shaken."

"What are the white ones?" Blake asked, thinking those looked least dangerous.

"Powers. Someone gave her.. powers." Mjord said.

"Is it the same person, who did all this?" Blake asked.

"I can't tell. We'll have to ask Lean, maybe she can tell us." Mjord replied.

"Mjord. Can fairies.. do this?" Blake asked.

"No." Mjord said.

"This was done by a witch." Mathilda said, speaking for the first time since she was in the room.

"Blake." Mjord said. "You're going to have to tell us the truth."

Blake nodded, overwhelmed.

## Chapter 10: The truth

Mjord made notes of everything, and Blake couldn't stop staring at Lean's entangled body, floating eerily in a sphere of blue. Blake wanted to put her hands inside, and pull it all apart, see Lean free. But she couldn't do a thing. Mjord had the sphere disperse, and Blake took Lean's sleeping body back to her bed. Lean looked completely normal, only asleep, as if nothing was wrong at all. Her skin was shining just the same.

Blake was tempted to stay and watch Lean sleep, but she was soon called back by Mjord and Mathilda, both looking grim.

"Let's hear it then." Mjord said, and gestured for Blake to sit down.

"Fine." Blake said, and sat.

"They had her locked up. The fairies." Blake started talking. "I found her in some kind of barrier, its magic was interlocked with a tree, and she couldn't get out, I had to burn the tree from inside to weaken it, to get her out."

Mjord and Mathilda stared at Blake as if she said something incomprehensible. They said nothing, so Blake kept talking.

"Lean said, before this, that they were setting up a meeting with other species, to get her to healers, because she's been sick for a long time and they wanted to help. But then they found out that she's been seeing me, cancelled the meeting, and locked her up instead." Blake said, her voice angry.

"Did anyone see you?" Mathilda asked Blake.

"I don't think so. Animals and trees. But they wouldn't recognize me." Blake said.

"Blake, did you think, for a second, that this is maybe too big for you to get involved in?" Mjord said, angrily.

Blake glared at her.

"What would you do, just leave her there?" Blake blasted angrily.

"You should have.. this is not something one young witch like you can take on, this is *serious*, Blake."

"So tell me what the hell is going on." Blake demanded.

Mjord had to take a pause, and Mathilda hugged her side in consolation. Mjord kissed Mathilda's forehead appreciatively, and seemed to have regained herself within few seconds.

"We're going to have to inform the council about this, this is too big for us too." Mjord decided.

"That there's a witch cursing fairies into being sick? I would certainly hope so." Blake retorted.

"Listen, you." Mjord started, but Mathilda shushed her.

"Blake. It's time to silent down." Mathilda said to Blake.

Blake glared at Mathilda, but said nothing.

"You saw what we saw, right? Not one but several curses, and they've been there for a long time. A witch had to curse Lean when she was very young. Do you think her mothers wouldn't notice? At least one of them knew." Mathilda said.

Blake stared at her.

"This wasn't an accident, they knew something was wrong, maybe they couldn't tell it was a witch, but the fact that they said nothing to Lean, or anyone else, implies they wanted to keep it silent. Meeting with healers? It would have revealed the curses. That is probably why they cancelled it, and why they locked her up, someone out there is trying very hard to keep this a secret. She even put a counter spell to make an analysis impossible. She's breaking laws, Blake."

Blake took a moment to think, and finally looked a bit abashed.

"So.. she's dangerous. The witch who did this." Blake said.

"Yeah, and she will be coming for Lean, maybe for you too." Mjord said.

"I'll deal with her." Blake said without thinking.

Mjord and Mathilda shared a look, and said nothing. Blake looked at Mjord, this time with a worried expression.

"The curses, can you take them off, Mjord? Will Lean be okay?" Blake asked sincerely.

Mjord's frustration melted away, and she nodded slowly.

"It wont be easy, and it might take some time. I'll have to figure out just what the curses do, and I'll need Lean awake for that. But I can probably remove most of them." Mjord said.

Blake felt something heavy fall off of her heart, and nodded gratefully.

Mathilda caught Mjord's attention, and whispered something to her, Blake eyed them suspiciously.

Mjord and Mathilda both eyed Blake in return.

"You should go somewhere else until Lean is better." Mjord said.

"What?" Blake said, shocked.

"You should not be caught in the same place with Lean. You could be in danger." Mjord said.

"Like I care." Blake said, glaring.

Mjord looked at Mathilda as if saying "you see what I put up with here" and Mathilda smiled, and consolingly kissed Mjord's knuckles.

"Blake, if you don't do as Mjord says, I will sit you down, and then read all your worst fears out to you, and then.. I will tell Lean." Mathilda said, smiling serenely.

Blake swallowed, starting to realize Mathilda wasn't as harmless as she seemed, and getting worried about just how much Mathilda knew about her. Did Mjord tell her everything? Blake glanced at Mjord, wondering how much was revealed, and then looked at her feet, feeling defeated.

"You two are the worst." Blake said. "I hate both of you."

"Isn't she cute." Mathilda said cheerfully.

"Where were you all my life." Mjord said to Mathilda in a dreamy voice. "I couldn't get this brat to do a thing I wanted until you came along."

"Hush, my love. From now on entire world will do as you say." Mathilda returned the affections, and nuzzled close to Mjord.

"I'm going to vomit." Blake said.

"Blake, I have a mission for you. Go get ready, and I'll give you the details." Mjord said.

"Fine." Blake said, and stormed off, feeling glad to leave.

Blake still had to think through all the information she just got. A witch cursing Lean was ridiculous, Lean was if anything, least annoying of the fairies. And it had to happened while she was still a child. There had to be some truly vicious witch to do this. Witches weren't supposed to harm children, theirs or anyone else's. The idea of a witch cursing a small fairy made Blake angry, and she wasn't very worried about being caught, at least then she'd know who had done it. But if Mjord was this serious about Blake being in danger, she would have to figure out how to defend herself. Blake thought back to her days of training, where she neglected to learn anything but the skills she knew she needed. After all, why learn a skill you cannot use? Blake didn't expect to have to defend herself against an enemy, witches barely had any, and resolved disputes in a civil manner. But now.. maybe it was time to learn, Blake thought. It couldn't hurt. Mjord found her frowning at her own hands, trying to figure out what kind of power she could use to attack or defend.

"You should take this to Melnit." Mjord said to Blake, and gave her a small package.

"And there's a list of herbs I need, found south of Avaren mountains." Mjord said.

"Who is Melnit?" Blake said.

"You'll see. You should stay there until I send news of Lean being better. And be careful not to be seen by anyone." Mjord said.

"Fine." Blake said. "You better get Lean all better."

"Yeah, I will." Mjord said, annoyed.

"Tell Mathilda she's rotten." Blake said.

Mjord laughed. "I'll pretend you didn't say that, for your own good." Mjord said.

"Take care now. You'll be okay." Mjord said, with badly concealed worry in her voice.

"Of course I'll be okay." Blake frowned.

Mjord put a concealing cloak over Blake, and sighed. Blake studied the fabric curiously, and figured it would make her hard to spot up in the sky.

"Thanks. I'm off." Blake said, and headed for the front door, package and list of herbs safely folded in her pocket.

It was night when Blake headed off. She was sure Mjord merely wanted her out of the way, and both herbs and package were in no rush to be delivered. So she went off her course, and flew over a mountain forest instead. She kept flying until she saw a big, dark lake. She felt it was a safe enough place to practice, and landed. It was dark and wet. She only saw silhouettes of trees and rocks, and some shadows over the moonlight. Only sounds were made by bugs and small forest animals. There was nobody around. Blake picked up a fallen branch, cleaned it up, and heated it up until one side burst into fire, serving as a torch. It was about as much as she could do. Blake knew trained witches knew how to materialize fire from thin air, but Blake wouldn't be able to do that without months of training. Still, she had to start somewhere. She remembered the tree she burned from inside to destroy a barrier, that was a witch's barrier. Blake had never see anyone but her mentor make it, and started thinking about how it would work. If she could make a barrier that wouldn't let magic through, then other means of defense wouldn't be necessary. But, she had destroyed that barrier by burning the tree, so a barrier had to be aligned with a physical shield, which could be destroyed. If that shield was made out of something indestructible, then barrier might be indestructible as well. But what couldn't be destroyed by nature, or by magic? Blake looked around, thinking. Everything around her was destructible, except maybe the Sun and the Moon, but it was unlikely that Blake could use them. Instead, she picked a tree, and pressed her palm to see if she could make a barrier. *Keep out fire*, she thought, as she sent the pulses of magic through the tree, and the tree responded, the branches shuddered and emitted a blue glow. Blake felt excited, and then carefully pressed her torch close, to see if it would work, if the branches were now resistant to fire. They caught fire immediately. Blake panicked, and quickly cooled down the temperature of the tree, before much damage was made. *It's not going to be that easy*, she thought.

It was morning until for the first time, the tree's branches refused to catch fire. Blake was panting and exhausted, but thrilled. It was just a small one, just few little branch tips who were now resistant to fire. But it was a start, and Blake knew it was going to get easier from there. *What would Dart say to see me now*, she thought. Her mentor was always complaining about how she was uninspired to learn, but Blake knew she could do it if she tried. Blake waited until she recovered from her training, and then blasted

back into the sky, and towards the Avaren mountains. The search for the herbs might take few days, especially since she was planning to train as well, and then she would find Melnit, and by then, Lean would be better.

## Chapter 11: White Witch

*In retrospect, I shouldn't have done it*, Blake thought. But what was the alternative, doing what Mjord told her to? That was no way to live. Not that this was, so great. Blake was sitting in a dark cell, underground. She had been trying to burn and freeze the cold stone for hours now, and it was not working, there had to be some kind of barrier protecting it from heat and cold, making the stone untouchable. Blake was going to figure out how to get herself out even if it would take days. She was a witch, eventually she would develop powers strong enough to beat her captors. She placed barriers on parts of her own body, protecting it from harm. It was tricky, and hard to test, but Blake wasn't about to just sit down and let destiny have her. Blake was going to fight this out.

Blake was obediently hiding at Melnit's, and kept sending owls to Mjord, demanding updates, which never came. Just when she had had enough and was about to fly back, she got a letter saying nothing but "*Lean is better. Don't come here.*" So, naturally she put her cloak on, made sure Melnit was busy and flew right back. Or, she would have, had she not been followed by a swarm of black owls. Blake was a better flier than most, and almost had lost them, when two witches caught up, and closed Blake in a barrier which she couldn't get out of. They used air, Blake realized, before one of the witches touched her, and her body locked up. Barriers infiltrating the air, how did they do that? It must be similar to how witches made fire, they had to make the air itself burn. Blake resisted, but she couldn't do much. Before she knew it, she was sat down and interrogated, and refused to confess or admit just about anything. Instead, she demanded to speak with their leader, but all she got was that they were with the council, and Blake was accused of kidnapping a fairy. Blake denied it, and refused to say anything else. This crowd wasn't going to listen. They were savages, grabbing witches from the sky and going through interrogations without ever bothering to find out the truth. Blake wasn't going to give them time of the day, and would wait until Mjord or anyone came to clear her.

Surely this was not the council's way of doing things? They could have summoned her. And did the fairies come forward to witches to accuse Blake, when they wouldn't come forward to ask for a healer for Lean? They were nasty, vicious bunch. Except Lean. How did they know it was Blake, anyway? Did someone see



them? Did owls get it out from the tiny fella Blake used as a spy? It was unlikely, but still, somehow the information got through. Mjord was right about it being too dangerous for Blake to be flying back, but.. it was impossible for Blake to just, not do anything. She wanted to see Lean, make sure with her own eyes that Lean was okay. It was unlikely to happen now. Maybe if Lean is better, she would go back to fairies, and tell them to release Blake. It sucked, relying on someone else, Blake thought. She would get out before that.

It was almost a day, and Blake heard a commotion approaching her cell. She was ready to burn or trap anyone who enters her cell, and then she would escape. She hid in the space between the door and the wall, knowing it would look like the cell was empty when anyone opens it. Blake listened to the voices.

"You will not hold her in a cell, nothing has been even proved!" A voice said, angrily.

"We were instructed to hold her until information is gathered." One of Blake's captors said.

"She's not going to say anything to you, after this!" First voice continued. "You imprisoned her without even being sure if the charges are true! It's repulsive. I'm taking her out."

Blake perked up, confused. Did Mjord find out already? Did she send someone to help?

"You cannot just take her-" Captor said, angrily.

"I'd like to see you stop me."

The doors opened, and Blake was unsure what to do, she was hiding and ready to attack, but if it was the witch intending to free her, maybe..

"Oh, you weren't going to let yourself be imprisoned for long." Blake could hear the voice clearly now, coming from the cell. A witch in pure white was turning the door away, and then looking directly at Blake.

"You look just about ready to get out of here. Come with me." White witch said.

Blake stared at her. She had never seen anyone just like that. Her skin was pale and her hair almost white. It looked translucent in the dark. Her eyes were dark green, it was almost like- she reminded Blake of Lean a little. But she lacked the glow and the wings, and she was much older, judging by her clothes, a lot older. Only ancient witches were entitled to wear pure white clothing. But she didn't look past middle age. Blake felt charmed against her will. Still, after a day in the cell, she wasn't going to quietly follow anyone.

"Who are you?" Blake said, managing to gain her voice.

"I'm Lynx." White witch said. "I know what you're going through, I'm on your side."

Blake frowned. "You're here to free me, then?"

"Yes. But they might try to get you again. Look." Lynx said, and gestured for Blake to step outside of the cell. The two captors were paralyzed in the corridor, both looking angry. Blake recognized the one who interrogated her, and stepped on her toes in retaliation. Lynx laughed, approvingly.

"They can't get you if I'm with you. If you want to, you can go, but.. it would be safer to stick with me, for now." Lynx said.

"You paralyzed them?" Blake said, impressed. "You have to teach me that."

"I just might." Lynx grinned.

Blake stepped on the other captors toes too, and poked both of them sufficiently before she felt satisfied to follow Lynx.

"Your broom." Lynx showed her where her stuff was held. Blake rushed to grab it, and immediately flew through the rest of the place. It was a hidden, underground dungeon. Blake would have never noticed it was there, and she assumed Lynx only knew because she'd been captured before. Blake found the opening, and laughed as she took a breath of fresh air. Night sky showered with stars never looked so good.

Lynx followed right behind her, looking pleased.

"Thanks." Blake said, finally. "It feels good to be out of there."

"Yeah, I know." Lynx said. "What did they capture you for?"

"Kidnapping a fairy." Blake grinned. "What about you?"

"Oh, you know, spreading rumors." Lynx said. "But it wasn't me." She winked at Blake, who laughed.

"I was just going to see -" Blake started, and then stopped herself. She was interrogated on Lean's whereabouts, and now saying it to someone offhandedly felt wrong. Someone was looking for Lean, someone evil. It wasn't information that should be given easily.

"Yeah?" Lynx asked.

"Ah, but I guess. It's not safe right now." Blake said vaguely.

"That's a good guess, eventually someone will realize those witches are missing, and well. Hopefully they'll know it was me." Lynx said, smiling.

"Where's safe?" Blake asked.

"Oh, I know a place." Lynx said. "It's where I live, they can't get in there. You can hide out there until they stop coming after you." Lynx offered.

"That would be great." Blake said, figuring she might as well avoid another capture. She would send an owl to Lean when she got there, and explain everything.

Lynx flew in an elegant, charming manner, it was nothing like Blake's reckless flying. Blake would fly herself close to trees and rocks and mountains only to avoid impact in the last second, she would storm

down cliffs and fly through the clouds. She couldn't resist doing it a few times, only to celebrate being free, and sending the very clear message that nobody can keep her imprisoned, or interrogate her without punishment. Blake was sure she would have figured it out even without Lynx, but, testing that theory could wait. Her next move had to be keeping hidden, at least until Lean explained everything, and then Blake would gracefully accept apologies, with some conditions of course. Blake amused herself thinking of how much fun would it be to interrogate the captors, and then lecture them on rudeness. They were flying for hours, and Blake started feeling sleepy. She didn't sleep in her cell at all, and before that, she was flying for quite a while, and she exhausted herself with magic, she realized she would soon pass out. *This must be how Lean feels*, Blake thought.

"Are we there soon?" Blake asked.

"You must be tired." Lynx replied, knowingly. "It's not far. If you can hold on for half an hour, we're there."

"Yeah." Blake said, and focused on staying awake. Lynx helped by flying a bit faster, even if it still looked as if she was floating, untouched by wind or exhaustion.

Blake was barely conscious by the time they reached a white castle. Lynx made it easier for her by showing her a bed, in which Blake collapsed immediately. She would write to Lean when she woke up. When she did wake up, Lynx was already expecting her at breakfast, where Blake found plenty of food she had never tried before. Lots of it was sweets, and Blake enjoyed herself fully, picking her favourites, and saving some in her pockets for later. She had time to think it through, and realized if she did send an owl to Lean, it would be traced easily. Possibly the safest way to get to Lean would be to have Lynx escort her there and protect her on the way, but Blake wasn't sure she trusted Lynx just yet. Or that she was ready to accept that much help from someone who was, until day before, a stranger.

Lynx seemed in a really good mood, she showed Blake around her castle, which really was the most magnificent place Blake had ever seen. There were exotic types of cats roaming the place and resting on huge pillows, pieces of art painted on fabrics draped over the beds. Ornaments made out of crystals and special stones, that Lynx explained would bring luck, or clear the energy. Some of the rooms glittered as stars, and some were just filled with cushions, and soft materials that could easily be jumped on. Blake wondered why it was hidden so far away, this castle could easily be a great place for socializing. But there was almost nobody else around, sometimes there would be a visitor, but Lynx would see to them and send them away before Blake saw who it was.

Lynx told her all about her adventures, and showed her treasures she found at the bottom of the ocean, and buried on some islands far away. Stories charmed Blake so much, she immediately made plans to

visit all of those places, and find treasures of her own. Lynx seemed to have same spirit as Blake, even if she was older, it only meant she had spent more time out there, exploring the world.

It was after dinnertime, when Blake and Lynx were both relaxing on the cushions, both with a big cat in their laps, when Lynx asked.

"So, did you really kidnap a fairy?"

Blake laughed. "No, of course not, why would I? They're annoying."

"You're right about that, I can't stand more than few seconds around them." Lynx said.

"Well, this one was different, she wasn't exhausting me at all." Blake said.

"Really? So you were friends with her?" Lynx asked.

"I- well. You could say that." Blake grinned sheepishly, remembering how many times Lean kissed her.

"So what happened to her?" Lynx asked.

"She got sick." Blake admitted. "I was just trying to help out."

"Did you find out what's wrong with her?" Lynx asked.

"Yeah." Blake said, and looked at Lynx, wondering how far could she trust her.

"She was cursed." Blake said, finally.

"Cursed? By who? " Lynx frowned.

"I don't know." Blake scratched her head. "A witch."

Lynx looked stricken for a moment, and then she resumed her gentle expression.

"Well, she must have trusted you, if she went with you willingly." Lynx said.

"Yeah." Blake said. "I miss her." She added.

"It's a repulsive thing to do, to curse a fairy." Lynx stated.

"It is." Blake said, anger rising in her voice.

Blake was wondering if Lean was already flying back to the fairies, except, maybe she couldn't, maybe it was too dangerous. Did Lean know Blake was captured, and hiding now? Blake couldn't tell. Mjord would hear from Melnit that Blake escaped, but didn't reappear, so they would know something was off. Maybe they would realize she was accused of kidnapping. How were they going to clear Blake of accusations if Lean had to be kept hidden? How would Blake get to her again, without anyone seeing her? Blake sighed, wishing she never left Lean's side.

"I have to go outside, for a bit." Blake said.

"Of course. Just don't go past the boundaries of the castle." Lynx said.

Blake nodded, and grabbed her broom, flying out of the window. The grounds around the white castle were huge, filled with exotic trees and flowers. Blake found the biggest, older fir tree, and sat down under it. She placed her palm on the bark, and closed her eyes. *I'm here, Lean. If you're looking for me,*

*I'm safe. I'm okay.* That would have to do. The fir's branches shuddered, and Blake knew if Lean tried to ask the trees, she would get the message, maybe even the location. She trusted trees not to tell anyone else.

## Chapter 12: Reunion

Lean was awake. For more than 16 hours now, she hasn't felt sleepy or tired. Lean didn't remember feeling this awake, this good in ages. This kind of energy, she last had it as a child, when she was flying around recklessly and bargained to not have to go to sleep. It was ecstatic to feel that good, that powerful. And yet, Lean looked at her own hands as if they didn't belong to her, as if they weren't a part of her body. The relief of feeling healthy quickly became overshadowed with new knowledge of herself, new realizations that were just too powerful for Lean to take in. Things Mjord slid in conversation when she was being healed, information she was slowly fed until finally, it was discovered.. Lean couldn't think about it. Not now. She closed her eyes, and blocked that part of thoughts on purpose. It couldn't be true anyway, Lean was sure of it. She just had to forget it, and life would continue as usual.

There was so much else to think about, so much she could do. She had to acknowledge just how scared she was that she was going to die, but Mathilda was there to help her through it. Mathilda was talking to her every day, as if she knew exactly what Lean was thinking and feeling. In absence of Blake, it was biggest help she could get. Mathilda felt so warm and comforting, and Lean didn't mind being wrapped in her arms and comforted at all. Mjord, on the other hand, kept being a source of distress.

Lean kept wondering if Blake disappeared because she shut a door in her face, earlier when she'd been upset. Lean had gotten no chance to apologize, and Mjord and Mathilda convinced Lean that Blake had to go, that they both forced her to. It was weird, Lean almost felt relief to know that Blake wasn't around to watch her sick and breaking down. But, what if Blake was tired of it all? Blake had done so much for Lean too, and Lean never thanked her at all. And in acknowledging just how scared and desperate Lean was, she was forced to admit to herself that she hasn't been exactly honest with Blake, and it hurt her. Apparently, Blake wasn't very open with Lean either, because according to Mjord, there was a lot of information Blake didn't share about herself. But then again, Lean was asleep a lot. Maybe if she gave Blake a bit more time, Blake would open up to her. Blake never did reject her, but somehow, Lean was starting to grow afraid that she would.

Mjord had sent word to Blake that Lean was better, but they heard nothing in return, for days now. Lean wanted to see Blake, but Mjord kept telling her it was safer for both of them to be apart, and that Lean was far too visible to go flying on her own, especially now they were sure she was being searched for. Witches could utilize a number of birds and small animals to look for someone, and sometimes even trees could pass the information. Lean couldn't help but to be a bit scared of whoever would place those curses on her, but it was far less scary now that she felt strong and awake, and she needed to find out just why it was done. She felt desire for answers outweigh the fear, and was sure she would go looking for the witch sooner or later. Still, she didn't want Blake to be involved. Blake had already done too much, and got herself in trouble for it.

Lean noticed a small grey ruffled-looking owl, while she was staring through the window contemplating her and Blake's fate, and figured it must be news from Blake. She got to it first, and unwrapped a small letter.

Blake got your letter, and escaped, she should probably be there already, unless she's gotten caught. I don't know what you were thinking when you wrote "don't come" that kid does exactly the opposite of what she's told. Keep her hidden, I've seen black owls fly around here. Melnit

Lean read it twice, and panicked. Blake was supposed to be there already. She got caught. Whoever did this to Lean now held Blake. Was Blake going to be cursed next? Lean couldn't stand the idea, if anything happened to Blake it was only because she helped Lean. The witch wanted her. Lean felt her blood rush with adrenaline, she couldn't stand still this time, she could fly as far as she wanted. Maybe she could find Blake. Maybe she didn't need to get anyone else involved. Lean placed her palm on the first tree she could reach, and sent rushed demands for information. *Where is Blake, find her, tell me.* It felt different, she realized. After curses were stripped, she could feel every vital point of the tree pulsing, she could almost dive into the tangled web of roots and chase any information she wanted. And that's exactly what she needed, she closed her eyes, and felt herself underground, travelling through the deep running roots, and there it was, travelling towards her, answering her demands. *"I'm here, Lean, if you're looking for me."* Of course I'm looking for you, Lean thought angrily, and didn't wait for the rest of the message, but followed the trail of it, pointing to where it came from. It was enough to go on with, and Lean flew away, faster than she could ever fly before. Mjord and Mathilda should probably stay unaffiliated with her, it would be best for them both to stay safe. She was strong now, she felt she could free Blake with her own hands, even if she was... just a fairy... She wasn't going to think about it now. Hell, she didn't care what she was anymore.

She made pauses only to check if she was flying in the right direction, it was far, just how far away have they taken her? How long was she captured already? The owl didn't come for days, perhaps it was

delayed by something. Lean felt she needed a plan, a way to contact Blake, to escape together, but nothing useful came to her mind. If Blake could have sent a message, it meant she was close to a tree, and Lean could send one back. "*I'm coming.*" Lean thought, pressing the message into a fir, knowing it would reach Blake before she did. It was hours later she found it, a white castle. Lean felt uncomfortable, entire place felt familiar, yet scary. Wide grounds of exotic-looking trees looked too tamed, too.. unnatural. Blake must be captured within the walls of the castle, maybe dungeons, Lean thought and checked the web of roots beneath, maybe some of them were close to Blake, maybe she could tell where it was. Yet now she was here, there was no more information. She would have to get into the grounds to find out anything. There was a wall of magic protecting the place, and Lean wasn't sure if it would let her through. Still, she had to try. She flew as low as possible, wanting to go through undetected.

"You came." She heard Blake's breathless voice.

Before she could gather what was going on, Blake was pulling her into a tight hug, laughing and letting out big sighs of relief.

"You're okay! You're awake. You're here!" Blake was yelling, excited.

Lean was stunned, but relived to find Blake so lively and free. She wrapped her arms around Blake as well, and held her in a tight embrace.

"Weren't you captured?" Lean mumbled into the hug.

"I was! I was interrogated, and held in a cell for an entire day!" Blake chattered, as if entire thing was, incredibly funny. "But I got out! Lynx helped me, but I would have gotten out on my own, those council witches are just, lame-"

"Council witches?" Lean asked, refusing to let go. It felt so good to be holding Blake again, her touch was even better than she remembered it.

"Yeah! Instead of summoning me, they took me down from the sky! The nerve!" Blake was laughing again. "But I showed them." Blake said, smugly.

"I thought..." Lean started, but then Blake started talking about Lynx, and Lean was amazed to hear that such a great witch had lent Blake her help.

"But what about you? What happened after I left?" Blake asked Lean, letting her go only to take a better look, and then she pulled Lean onto the soft moss, and embraced her again. Lean was tempted to skip talking and kiss Blake, but she did want to figure out what was going on.

"Well, Mjord and Mathilda took care of me. They told me I was-- it was curses." Lean said, and buried her face in Blake's neck.

"That was scary." Blake said, remembering how awful it looked, all tangled around Lean.

"Yeah." Lean mumbled into Blake. "Mjord had to do a lot of tests, she asked me to try doing different types of.. magic, and asked me about every single thing I ever felt, or tried to do and failed. Eventually she realized what one of the curses did to me, and after that, it was easier. She figured out the rest easier. She removed them while I was sleeping." Lean said.

"I knew Mjord could do it." Blake said, proudly. "She has cured every single thing she ever looked at."

"Yeah." Lean nodded. "And Mathilda talked to me, and reassured me I'd be alright. They were both a big help."

"Mathilda?" Blake said, scrunching her face. "She's a rotten little demon."

"Don't say that." Lean nudged Blake, smiling. "Don't let Mjord hear you talk like that."

"You're okay now." Blake said, happily.

"Yeah. After all curses were stripped, Mjord did a simple analysis, and figured I had a sleeping sickness, which she cured in about, an hour. I've felt great ever since. It's just..." Lean mumbled, and then stopped talking.

"What happened?" Blake asked.

"I can't say yet. It's not- I don't want to think about it." Lean said.

Blake nodded, and asked no more questions.

"There was a witch, from council, she came to take a look at me." Lean said, suddenly remembering.

"What?" Blake tensed, alarmed.

"Yeah, it was to confirm I've been cursed, and it was true. She also said they would summon you for questioning, but, you say they captured and interrogated you?" Lean said, confused.

"Yeah they did!" Blake shouted indignant. "I have lost all my faith in the council, and I don't care for their laws anymore." Blake concluded.

"I'm sorry you got captured because of me." Lean mumbled apologetically, and stroked Blake's jaw gently.

"It's- it's not your fault." Blake said, blushing.

"You really did a lot to help me, and I.. " Lean started.

"Forget it, okay?" Blake said. "You would have done it too, if situation was reversed."

Lean thought about it, and nodded.

"There's still one thing. " Lean started.

"Out with it, then." Blake said.

"Well. I didn't realize it back then, but, I was really scared, and kind of desperate, back when I didn't know.. if I would get better. And I think.. I might have been kissing you to make myself feel better."



Blake frowned, remembering it. "Yeah I.. I thought you were acting weird. If kissing me was comforting, then-"

"No, I mean, just to distract myself from.. everything else." Lean admitted, and pulled away from the hug anxiously, looking at Blake's face.

"You mean to say, you didn't want to kiss me, but did it anyway?" Blake frowned at her.

"No, I wanted to, but.. more than I wanted to kiss you, I wanted to not think about what's going on."

Lean said, her voice heavy with guilt.

"So, you're saying you used me?" Blake said, frowning.

Lean nodded. "I'm sorry."

"I don't like that." Blake said, pulled away, and turned her back on Lean.

Lean was left without words, and swallowed, a ball of guilt forming in her throat. Blake was right to be angry, Lean wouldn't like if someone did that to her either, but Lean wouldn't have done it if she wasn't desperate, and it wasn't on purpose either. Anything she could have said to Blake now, would just feel like pointless excuses, and maybe, maybe Blake would forgive her, after a while.

Lean curled up and waited, the tall trees throwing shade over her twinkling face. Her heart was hurting, but she couldn't do anything, it was up to Blake now. She looked at the castle walls, wondering if this Lynx person already knew she was there, if she was permitted to stay. Blake did say they were safe here. Blake wouldn't want to leave her because of this, right? It was hard to think about it. But still, she knew she had to be honest.

Blake was unmoving, her arms locked up, Lean could hear her angry breathing. Yet she said nothing.

They just laid on the moss for a while, when Blake spoke.

"How do I know you won't do it again?" Blake said.

"I won't. I promise. I wouldn't-" Lean said, tearing up.

Blake sighed, and turned to look at the sky.

"You were really scared." Blake said.

Lean nodded, and brushed a tear away.

"You were alone, with only me on your side, and you didn't even know if you could trust me, and.. you were imprisoned before that. You were a mess." Blake said.

Lean said nothing, felt guilty that Blake was now, trying to understand it, instead of being angry.

"It's no excuse." Lean said. "You were helping me, I shouldn't have-"

"You won't do it again." Blake concluded.

"I won't." Lean confirmed.

"I won't let you get in another mess like that." Blake said fiercely.

Lean looked at Blake, shocked, and couldn't think of anything to say. She was really going to start crying, she thought, but Blake was pulling her close again, kissing her cheek.

"I'm still angry." Blake said, and Lean nodded quickly.

"Did I hurt you?" Lean asked, worried.

"Yeah." Blake admitted.

"How do I make up for it?" Lean asked.

Blake thought about it for a moment.

"Say, I pledge allegiance to Blake Firethorn, the wisest and most powerful of all witches to ever live."

Lean smiled, and leaned close, whispering to Blake's ear. "I pledge allegiance to Blake Firethorn, the wisest and most powerful witch."

"Good." Blake said, approvingly. "Now we're like a clan, two of us."

"Did you trick me into joining your coven?" Lean asked.

"Sure did." Blake stuck her tongue out at Lean.

"You didn't." Lean smiled.

"Okay, full ceremony would require some blood rituals." Blake admitted.

Lean laughed, and then thought about it.

"Have a witch and fairy ever done it before?" Lean asked.

"I don't know." Blake said, thoughtful. "I was joking, are you considering it?"

"Maybe." Lean places her head on the moss, and sighed.

"What do we do now? I don't know if I can go back home." Lean said.

"Don't go there." Blake said, seriously.

"You think Lynx would let me stay here?" Lean said, hopeful.

"Yeah, I'm sure she will." Blake said. "What did Mjord tell you when you went looking for me? Wait, how come they let you go alone?" Blake said, frowning.

"Oh... I didn't tell them anything. I found the letter from Melnit, and just.. came here." Lean said sheepishly.

"Great, I bet she's going to yell at me." Blake said, shaking her head.

"Should we let them know we're okay?" Lean asked. "They'll worry."

Blake shrugged. "You can send them a tree message."

Lean nodded, got up, and pressed her palm on the nearest tree.

"Mjord, Mathilda, I apologize for flying off. I found Blake, we're both fine. We're at the white castle of Lynx."

Blake watched her do it, and stood up too.

"You're really alright, aren't you?" Blake said.

Lean grinned and nodded. "Not sleepy at all." She flew around Blake to prove it. Blake grinned back, and grabbed her broom, flying up.

"Let's get in, I'll introduce you to Lynx!" Blake said, and flew towards the castle windows.

Lean felt uneasy, but sure Blake wouldn't fly her into danger, so she followed. The windows were big enough to easily fly through, even with Lean's fairy wings, and it was luxurious inside. Lean felt it was much lighter than Mjord's home, but somehow there was less warmth. Blake flew around different chambers, looking for Lynx, but after a while she gave up, and landed.

"I don't get it, she was here few hours ago. She must have went somewhere." Blake said, frowning.

Lean felt a bit relieved, it meant she was alone with Blake in this huge empty castle.

"Let me show you the cats instead." Blake grinned, and then they were cuddling with about five different big cats, forgetting about everything else. They spent entire day exploring the castle on their own, tasting food they found hidden around, and by the end, Lean thought maybe it wasn't that bad to not be home.

### Chapter 13: Lynx

Blake's mood had significantly improved since Lean had joined her, and proved to be healthy and well. Mjord had really done it, she thought. She considered, maybe, acknowledging Mjord deserved a decent amount of respect for this, but then remembered Mathilda, and thought, *nah*. Mjord was currently too gross to show any kind of respect. If Mjord and Mathilda had a child, Blake would help them take care of it, she decided. But, maybe Mjord wouldn't let her, since Mjord would say she's a bad influence. *I would be the best influence*, Blake thought.

Only thing Blake felt was less than great, was how Lean was respectfully not kissing her, apparently worried that Blake would feel she was being used for comfort again. Blake did mind that, a little, but, looking at Lean so lively and free, it was hard not to want to be kissed again, and her doubts about it were falling short in her desire to have Lean's lips again. She would have to do it herself, then, but, it was not as easy as it felt it should be. Lean made it look so easy, she would just cover Blake's eyes and do it, but whenever Blake thought of just, walking up to Lean, she would immediately blush and look away. Then for the next few seconds she would convince herself that she's not a coward, and this, in reality, was courageous task she couldn't take lightly. For once, she'd have to have her eyes covered, and Lean would know exactly what she was up to, and that was just, too embarrassing. She was sure Lean would have a harder time if she was so easily blinded by Blake.

Blake was secretly still practicing barrier-making, and even though her barriers weren't big, or permanent yet, she did come across this great idea to place one over her eyelids, which would then cancel out all Lean's light, and Blake would only have to keep her eyes closed for kissing. But, she would need a few minutes to put it in place. She glanced at Lean, who was playing with a big grey cat on the cushions, she was distracted enough. Blake closed her eyes and covered them with a hand, turning away from Lean, and placing a barrier on her skin. If Lean did notice, she said nothing.

Blake shuffled closer, and tried to remember just how Lean would approach her, surely there had to be a trick to do it. Lean would usually touch her ear, whisper something, or kiss her neck, Blake remembered. But Lean was so bright, Blake felt she would have to close her eyes before she could aim properly. But if she used her hands, and felt it out first, then..

Lean was now watching her, apparently trying to figure out what Blake's intentions were. Blake blushed, and gathered her courage, leaning close and touching Lean's cheek. Lean didn't pull away, but smiled, and Blake had to close her eyes then, because she was pressing her lips to Lean's ear, and exhaling slowly, letting warm air tickle Lean's skin. Blake felt Lean shiver, and then a hand wrapped around Blake's shoulder, holding her close. Blake pulled them both down into the pillows, then brushed her fingers all over Lean's face gently, until she found her lips, and kissed them passionately. Lean made a noise of delight, and kissed back just as eagerly, her arms wrapped around Blake, holding her tight. Blake finally relaxed, grinned, and thought of nothing more but kissing Lean for as long as possible. They kissed until they both fell asleep, Lean's arms still around Blake, while Blake was drooling on the pillow happily. Blake was woken up by a cat who nuzzled into her face next morning, and frowned. Lean wasn't there, apparently now she needed even less sleep than Blake did now, it was infuriating. Blake pushed herself up, and was surprised to find Lynx watching her.

"Hey." Blake said, taken aback.

"Good morning, Blake." Lynx said.

Blake rubbed her eyes, and took a moment to gather herself.

"Lean came here yesterday, it's okay if she stays here, right?" Blake asked.

"Me and Lean met, yes." Lynx said. "It's safest for her to stay here, I agree."

"We couldn't find you yesterday." Blake said.

"I had some issues to take care of." Lynx said.

Blake thought that was quite an evasive answer, but didn't push for more information.

"How do you like Lean?" Blake asked.

"She's... very polite." Lynx smiled.

"Isn't she?" Blake grinned.

"Blake, I think she should stay here, with us. I become lonely easily, and I would love to have more company around here. Will you make sure she doesn't leave?" Lynx asked, endearingly.

Blake felt a flinch of irritation, and looked at Lynx, feeling suddenly uneasy.

"I don't think she'll want to leave, but, if she does, I can't stop her." Blake replied, honestly.

Lynx's eyes narrowed.

"Blake, just think for a second what would happen to her outside, if she's caught. The curses made her so sick, if the witch who did it once, does it again to her, do you think she'll survive? I'm asking you this for Lean's own safety, and because I've grown to care for the two of you."

Blake was taken aback, and thought there was something off with Lynx, going this far for Lean's safety, it made little sense. Blake didn't even know Lynx for more than two days.

"I'll make sure Lean is safe." Blake settled on a reply, that wasn't exactly what Lynx was looking for, but wasn't a lie, either.

"I'm glad to hear it, Blake. You're the only one I can trust with this." Lynx smiled, and turned away, few of the cats following her, meowing affectionately.

*That was weird, Blake thought. I better find Lean.*

Blake found her outside, looking different.

"Lean!" Blake called, and landed right next to her. Lean was keeping her palms on the fir.

"Are you sending a message to someone?" Blake asked.

"I- y-yeah." Lean stuttered.

"What's wrong?" Blake asked, concerned.

Lean shook her head. "I don't think I can stay here. I have to go see my mothers."

"Why?" Blake asked.

"I'm sorry, I can't say." Lean said earnestly, and Blake didn't feel she could push her to reveal more.

"I'm coming with you." Blake announced.

"You've involved yourself too much with me already." Lean said, looking away.

"I've done that out of my own will." Blake said. "Besides, Lynx is being weird, I want to get out of here too. It's best if we're together. You can blind witches, and I can stop fairies." Blake concluded, optimistic.

Lean laughed, weakly. Blake hugged her close.

"Come on, we'll have some new adventures, finally." Blake tempted Lean. Lean nodded.

"Let's go." Lean said.

They didn't turn around. They blasted through the magical barrier and disappeared into the sky. It was the first time they flew side by side, Blake speeding up through the trees, Lean flying above her, just as fast, lighting up the sky. Lean seemed brightened by the wind and the sky, just like Blake did, and Blake took a chance. She flew close to Lean, tapped her foot, and yelled.

"Race me to that rock!" Blake was pointing at a cliff, few kilometers away, high above the forests.

Lean laughed, and instead of replying, flew faster, getting a headstart.

"Hey!" Blake yelled, indignantly, then laughed and speeded forward, enjoying herself. It wasn't easy to catch up, Lean really had it in her to win races, Blake thought, and grabbed her broom tighter, flying as fast as she could. They were flying with similar speed, which was incredible, because fairies weren't supposed to be *that* fast. However, Blake wasn't above cheating, she would bump Lean's foot to throw her off, made noises just to distract her, and tried to turn around and make silly faces to make Lean laugh. By the time they reached the cliff, they were both laughing, and landing together.

"I should have won." Lean claimed, narrowing her eyes at Blake.

"Oh yeah? Well let's call it your win then." Blake said.

"What do I get for winning?" Lean said, looking at Blake with a grin.

"You can have me." Blake announced, smug.

Lean eyed her with a mischievous look, and traced a hand over Blake's jaw.

"And what exactly, can I do with you?" Lean asked, wrapping a hand around Blake's waist.

"I'm sure you'll think of something." Blake said, blushing slightly.

Lean kissed her, and Blake kissed back, smiling. There was a view of forests and rivers, surrounded by mountains and clouds beneath them, and they sat down, and kissed for a while.

"Are you okay?" Blake asked, remembering just how upset Lean looked earlier.

"Yeah, I think, I just need to get some answers." Lean nodded.

"Did Lynx say something to you?" Blake asked.

"You could say that." Lean said, bitterly.

"There is something off about her, she is not as cool as I thought." Blake admitted.

"You thought she was cool?" Lean laughed.

"What- she helped me get out of a cell, that was a cool move." Blake defended herself.

"That is true. I wonder why she.. did that." Lean said, thinking.

"You know something." Blake narrowed her eyes at Lean.

Lean looked at her, and narrowed her eyes right back.

"You know what, we talk about me too much." Lean said.

"What?" Blake said, taken aback.

"I don't know almost anything about you." Lean accused Blake.

Blake thought about it for a second, then shrugged.

"Okay, you got me. What do you wanna know." Blake said.

Lean sighed, apparently expecting Blake would just start talking on her own.

"Well, tell me about your clan then." Lean decided.

"Oh, that. Okay." Blake took a moment, and then started. "So I might not have one, at the moment."

"What do you mean? What about your mothers?" Lean asked, surprised.

"Well. They disappeared. Both. When I was small. I don't remember them." Blake said, fast.

Lean looked stricken at first, then she sighed, and looked down.

"I'm sorry." Lean said.

"I just don't like talking about it." Blake said. "I don't care about that anymore, I got used to it. I just wish, I could get more information on them."

"What do you mean?" Lean asked.

"Well, it has to do with powers." Blake said. "You see, all witches are capable of learning most ways of using magic. But there are skills you can only inherit from your mothers, sometimes both of them, and that is magic you can really excel at, sometimes without even trying. And when I found that out, I was trying to get witches who knew my mothers, to tell me what powers they excelled at. But nobody would tell me a thing, it's like they didn't want me to know. It really pissed me off."

"It does sound like they're hiding it from you." Lean said, her face grim.

"Yeah." Blake said.

"So what is Mjord to you? By the way you two get along, I thought she was family."

"Ah, Mjord." Blake grinned. "Well, I found out about her when I was on one of my journeys, you see nobody could stop me doing whatever I wanted, since I wouldn't join another clan- but anyway, I found her, and she was this powerful, solitary witch, and she was so stern and vicious, I wanted to be just like her." Blake said reminiscently.

"So, you tried to take her house?" Lean asked, curious.

"Well, she wouldn't mentor me!" Blake said, indignant. "I tried to get her to be my mentor, and teach me arts of healing magic, but she kept going on about me not being old enough to make such a choice and blah blah, whatever else she said, it was pissing me off so I thought I'd make her take me anyway."

"Did she?" Lean asked, smiling.

"Nope, she stuck to her word. I had to fix what I broke in that house." Blake grinned, remembering. "It only made me want to be like her more. Except for her personality. You didn't see her before Mathilda

came along, she would yell so much at me, she was way more serious. Now Mathilda's turned her into a pathetic sap, it's repulsive." Blake said.

"I think they're sweet." Lean said.

Blake gave Lean a look of disgust and betrayal.

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that." Blake said, looking away.

"I'm glad you told me." Lean said, and wrapped her arms around Blake again.

"W-well I didn't know- you wanted to know." Blake said, clumsily, and leaned into Lean.

"Of course I want to know." Lean said.

"Will I learn your secret soon?" Blake asked.

"Yeah." Lean said, seriously.

"Should we go?" Blake said.

"Yeah." Lean said.

They soared back in the air, Blake constantly checking if they were followed. But there was nothing behind them, no trace of any bird or animal moving towards the big cliff, or away from it as they went. Blake followed Lean, who seemed to learn the way back by sometimes brushing against a tree. Blake couldn't think of anything Lynx would tell Lean to make her rush home, but she was sure fairies wouldn't be dangerous to Lean as long as Blake was around as well. Whatever Lean was after, Blake hoped she found it there.

## Chapter 14: Reveal

Blake could tell Lean was getting nervous, she made more stops, and in the end, quit flying altogether.

Blake landed as well, and they walked through the forest together, Lean looking grim.

"Blake, no matter what happens, you'll still like me, right?" Lean asked suddenly.

Blake stopped, surprised.

"Just what is going on? And when did I say I liked you." Blake said.

"Blake." Lean said, seriously.

"Okay, you figured it out. I don't see how I would not like you. You're very likeable." Blake said.

"Tell me more about that." Lean said, walking nervously.

"Okay, well. You're brave enough to go on adventures with. You have.. soft skin. You're good at kissing.. "

Blake started, then got lost in thought. "It's hard to describe! I know it when I look at you, and think of you, there's something." Blake said, clumsily.



Lean sighed, and turned around.

"I don't wanna go yet. Let's.. let's do something first." Lean said.

"Well, that's specific." Blake said.

Lean shot her a look of exhaustion. Then she remembered something, and looked down at the ground.

"No.. I promised not to do that anymore." Lean said.

"You wanted to kiss me to make yourself feel less nervous?" Blake took a guess.

Lean nodded.

"Come here." Blake said, and sat down on the ground, leaning her back on a big tree.

Lean followed, and sat down next to Blake. Blake pulled Lean close, and gestured for her to put her head in Blake's lap. Then Blake threaded her fingers through Lean's hair slowly, and waited for Lean to relax.

"It's not going to go away if you kiss me." Blake said, gently. "But if you talk about it, you might feel better. And then, when you're no longer upset, you can kiss me all you want." Blake said.

"I can't talk about it." Lean was persistent, even as she nudged her head closer to Blake's hands, evidently enjoying the gentle touching. Blake responded by tracing her fingers around Lean's ear, and then pressing them into Lean's scalp, until Lean sighed in relief.

"Okay. But you'll find out what you need to know soon. And if they try to hurt you, I'll jump in." Blake said, brushing her fingers against Lean's cheek, before diving into her hair again.

"I think.. you should wait outside, until I talk to them.." Lean murmured, her voice fading.

"Are you sure?" Blake asked.

"Yeah. If I don't come back in an hour, then you can go and get me." Lean said.

"That's a brave plan." Blake smiled, and traced fingers over Lean's nose and forehead.

"You did say you liked how brave I was." Lean said, smiling weakly.

"I do." Blake said.

Lean closed her eyes and seemed content to spend the entire afternoon just lying in Blake's lap, while Blake played with her hair and touched her face. Blake wasn't eager to move either. The sunset caught them unprepared, and Lean pushed herself up noticing the change in light.

"I need to get there before the light fire." Lean said, alarmed.

"Go." Blake said. "I'll wait."

Lean nodded, gathered her courage, and flew. Blake looked after her, and made a circle in the ground, put some magic in it, so it would inform her when an hour has passed. She leaned back into the tree and waited, feeling nervous to have Lean on her own, with the fairies. Surely they wouldn't trap her again, they already learned that won't work.

Blake remembered they never checked back with Mjord after Lean announced they're safe, and pressed her palm onto the tree, searching for a reply.

*I'm gonna end both of you when I get my hands on you.*

Blake laughed. Well, Mjord was always angry at her anyway, it was no different than usual.

*If you're safe, stay wherever you are, but I hope it's not the same Lynx I once knew.*

Well, at least I did exactly opposite of what Mjord told me to, Blake thought, and then responded.

*"Yeah Mjord, we didn't stay, I'm with Lean at fairy tribe, hopefully not gonna stay here either."*

The sunset was brilliant through the branches and the clouds, Blake watched it, wishing life would be as serene. Half of the hour has already passed, and Blake got up and flew around the trees, found all the homes of owls and mice, sniffed out a fox, and was annoying local bugs.

"Blake."

Lean was evidently back, and sounded miserable. Blake landed, and quickly scanned Lean for injuries.

She seemed in one piece. But she was trembling.

"What is it. What happened." Blake demanded.

"Let's.. let's sit." Lean said.

Blake pulled her down to sit on a big root, and sat right next to her.

"I just talked to Leira. I.. had some suspicions, and, I wasn't sure if it was true, but it's all true, Blake, and I.. I'll tell you everything now."

Blake said nothing.

"Remember when.. I was at Mjords, and, she was healing me? We discovered something." Lean said weakly, staring at the ground.

Blake watched her intently.

"When Mjord was.. removing the curses. First, it was just curses that were, disabling my senses, making my eyes less sensitive, making my abilities... impossible to use. Some of it was to prevent me from physical sensations too. Those were painful when removed." Lean flinched remembering it, and paused.

"The black ones were bounding my powers and when those were released, I felt so much more alive. But then, when she started removing the white ones, the powers.. my skin stopped shining. My wings disappeared. I couldn't- I didn't know what was happening."

Blake watched her wide-eyed, not comprehending.

"It just didn't make any sense! My skin was always glowing, all fairies glow. All fairies have wings. There was no reason why my skin wouldn't glow except... except." Lean said, tearing up. "If I'm not a fairy."

Blake stood up, fast. Lean swallowed her tears, then pressed a hand on her skin, and muted the light until there was none. Blake stared at her, unbelieving. Lean's skin was only few tones lighter than Blake's.

If she wasn't sitting right next to Blake, she would be almost unrecognizable. Blake covered her eyes, and laughed, helplessly.

"That's not- how is that even possible." Blake muttered to herself, and sat back down, her legs feeling weak.

"I don't know. I didn't want to believe it. I asked Mjord to teach me how to make myself look like I did before, so I could pretend it was all the same." Lean said, shaking.

"But then, your mothers?" Blake asked.

"I couldn't be their real daughter, that's what Mjord said, at least one of them was not a fairy, and that's why I needed to go back, and ask them if they knew. Leira just... confirmed it." Lean's voice was shaking.

"Leira's not a fairy either."

"What is she then?" Blake asked, feeling overwhelmed.

"She's a witch." Lean said.

"Are you-?" Blake asked.

"Yeah." Lean said weakly.

Blake stared at the ground too, blindsided. There was no sense in this, no reason why there would be a witch pretending to be a fairy. Why they would insist on Lean not knowing who she was.

"This is insane." Blake said.

"I was sure it was all wrong, and it would get cleared up. But the longer I thought about it, the more I looked for evidence.. it started falling into pieces. You said it too, when you saw me first time, remember? You didn't believe I was a fairy."

Blake thought back on it, and remembered.

"You weren't exhausting. You talked to trees the way witches do."

Lean nodded. "Yeah. And there's more too. I could never.. make my wings disappear when I wanted to, even though all other fairies could. And fairies often have more than one pair, but I never grew any other, or shedded these. The fairies just thought I was special and.. didn't judge me for it."

Blake was feeling uncomfortable reality settling down, and her mind was opening up so many questions and doubts.

"But then, when you touched me, it broke a curse didn't it? What was that?" Blake asked.

"It was- Mjord explained it to me." Lean said, sighing. " It happened because I've never touched a witch before, Leira made sure I didn't. And Mjord said witches needed the touch of each other, or they would suffer touch starvation. And the curse was preventing me from feeling that, so I wouldn't know anything was wrong. But when I touched you, it was so shocking and intense for my body, the curse broke, and I had to feel that loss, and that's why touching you afterwards.. felt so good. It was healing me."

Blake thought about it, and nodded.

"Mjord said you broke two curses, what was the other one?" Blake asked.

"It was one preventing me from having my energy drained by fairies. It probably wore off over time, and that's why I was so tired, and started to avoid them. It's also why I felt better outside the tribe." Lean said, breathing slowly.

"That is torture." Blake said. "To have a witch living there, Lean, just from spending a few minutes there I felt sick, you had to spend your life like that, I can't even.. imagine that." Blake said, feeling dizzy.

Lean nodded. "But I didn't feel it for most of the time, it was only later it.. caught up to me."

"Who did this to you?" Blake asked, anger in her voice.

Lean shook her head. "I still don't know. Leira swears it wasn't her."

"But she knows who it is." Blake was certain. "She made sure you don't notice, she was helping them."

Blake suddenly remembered. "That is why they locked you up, isn't it! They thought around a witch, you'll figure it out!" Blake said.

"Yeah." Lean said, her head down.

"Your mothers suck." Blake said savagely.

"I don't think Sinthia was involved." Lean said, cautiously. "She was really sorry about it all, and she kept apologizing. She even tried to break me free, but couldn't."

"Okay, then we hate Leira." Blake concluded.

"I can't just.. hate her." Lean said, sadly.

"I'll do that for you." Blake said fiercely.

"I'll get the truth out of her, let's go." Blake said, standing up again.

"Blake, wait." Lean said.

"What." Blake said.

"Maybe we could get something out of Sinthia. I don't think Leira is willing to say anymore." Lean said.

Blake nodded, impatient, and marched towards the tribe with Lean looking unsure, but following on her side. Her skin was glowing again, and Blake guessed she didn't want fairies to see her any differently.

Blake went straight for the tower-like home where she found Lean captured, but Lean showed her to a different entrance, apparently the tower wasn't a living place. It felt just as tiring and strange as the last time, Blake could feel this place is unnatural to her, unwelcome. Leira and Synthia were together, one of them looked fierce, other one terrified. They both emitted glow so similar it was impossible to make a difference of it. Blake only looked at them once.

"Which one of you is Synthia." Blake said sternly.

Lean grabbed Blake's sleeve and pulled her back.

"Blake, you can't talk that way to my mothers." Lean said.

Blake looked at Lean in shock, and was about to start an argument, when one of the mothers spoke.

"Lean, you brought a witch in this home? After everything we've done, to keep witches away? See her out." Mother said.

Blake looked at Lean expectantly.

"Well?" Blake said.

"Well what!" Lean said, frustrated. "I'm not going to kick you out!"

Blake glared at her. "Aren't you gonna tell her she can't talk that way to me?"

Lean gave Blake a look of utter exhaustion, and decided to deal with her later.

"Synthia, we just want to talk to you." Lean said, looking at one of the mothers. "Please come with us."

"She's not going anywhere." Leira said, and stepped forward.

"Leira." Synthia said. "You cannot make this decision."

"You're going to talk to this witch? You think that is safe? She took Lean, she'll take you too." Leira said.

Blake opened her mouth but Lean grabbed her elbow and pulled her aside.

"Leira, I can vouch for her safety. We'll only take a moment." Lean said.

Leira looked livid, but allowed Synthia to step ahead.

Synthia joined them reluctantly. Blake thought she looked like a fragile, weak creature. She was pulling away from Blake fretfully and walking with Lean. Blake flew out, and Lean and Synthia followed. Blake landed in the shadow of a big cliff, and watched the two land after her.

"And now." Blake announced. "You're going to tell us the truth."

## Chapter 15: Synthia

Evening shadowed over Blake, making her look like fiery eyes gleaming in the dark, but Synthia and Lean only glowed brighter, their light making it hard for Blake to glare directly. Synthia looked intimidated, and stuck close to Lean, who glared right at Blake.

"Blake." Lean said, angrily. "I told you not to speak to my mother like that."

"Fine." Blake said, and sat down on the ground, looking away resentfully.

"She's not going to do anything to you, mother." Lean reassured Synthia.

Synthia was still watching Blake carefully, but when Blake didn't move or look in their direction, she relaxed a little, and pulled Lean into a hug.

"I missed you." Synthia whispered. "Are you alright? I was.. worried."

Lean was surprised, but hugged Synthia back.

"I.. I'm just shocked. I'm not sick anymore." Lean said.

"Thank heavens." Synthia said, and pulled away to check Lean all over.

"Mother, I need you to tell me the truth. Leira told me.. I'm not a- a fairy. She told me you're not my biological mother. Is this true?" Lean said.

Synthia looked down, and nodded with a heavy heart.

"I wanted to tell you. Leira said it's better.. to wait. She wouldn't say why. I'm sorry." Synthia said.

Blake was glancing at them, but said nothing.

Lean's eyes were fixed on Synthia, but unseeing. Something felt broken in her heart. She couldn't say it to Synthia looking like that, looking miserable and guilty and apologizing. But her heart felt colder, betrayed. Synthia lied to her too.

"You have to tell me everything." Lean said, this time with a stern voice.

Synthia looked taken aback, and Blake moved closer, listening.

"Fine." Synthia said, resigned. She glanced at Blake fretfully, then sat down as well.

"Leira wasn't originally from this tribe, she arrived here 19 years ago. Sometimes fairies choose to live in other tribes once adult, and Leira told me she was from a west tribe, and.. I fell in love with her. She kept you a secret at first, but when I told her I would do anything for her, she showed you to me, and you were so small, so much like her, I instantly loved you too. She said someone tried to take you away from her in the past, and that's why she kept you a secret. It was.. a lot of time later I realized you weren't a fairy, but what did it matter? You were our child, and Leira didn't like being questioned about it. I thought.. it was fine. You were happy, and all Leira wanted was for both of you to have a good life here. I started worrying when you got sick.. but she wouldn't tell me anything."

Lean felt her heart ache, but said nothing. If this really was all Synthia knew, then she wasn't guilty, wasn't participating in whatever Leira was trying to achieve.

"Did Leira tell you she's a witch?" Blake asked, surprising them both.

Synthia shook her head.

"I.. suspected it. But I couldn't just.. ask her that." Synthia said.

"You're scared of witches." Blake said.

Synthia looked at Blake, then at Lean.

"Why do you trust her?" Synthia asked Lean.

"She saved me." Lean said.

Blake lift her head up smugly.

"She did?" Synthia frowned. "How?"

Blake glared at Synthia again.

"She helped me get free, when Leira locked me up." Lean said, her voice resentful.

"And she took me to a healer, who treated me until I got better." Lean said.

"That's not what Leira told me." Synthia said.

"That's the truth." Blake said, bitter.

"What did Leira say?" Lean asked.

"Well, she only came back today, and she told me you were coming home. I thought she was looking for you all this time, she wasn't with the tribe. I thought she found you." Synthia said.

"Well, that explains why she didn't want you talking alone with us. She didn't want you to know she lied to you." Blake said.

Synthia sighed and looked at her feet. Lean felt a bit sorry for her. She could tell Synthia would forgive Leira almost anything. And Lean wished she could, too, but.. it wasn't that easy. Before now, Lean didn't doubt her mothers, and felt there was every reason to trust them both. It didn't feel like that anymore.

"I don't like this." Lean said.

"I'm sure Leira had a good reason for all of this." Synthia said.

"Oh, like what?" Blake said, her voice bitter.

"Blake." Lean said reprovingly.

Blake glared at her, and looked away.

"She'll explain." Synthia said, determined.

Lean sighed.

"Is that everything you know?" Lean asked Synthia.

Synthia nodded.

"I'm sorry I kept it a secret. I didn't think.. it would end up like this." Synthia said.

"I'm sure you didn't." Lean said, but her voice was empty.

Lean looked at Blake, who seemed to be irritated at the entire situation.

"I'm not staying here. I'm going to go with Blake." Lean said, still looking at Blake.

"With her? Where are you going to go with-" Synthia started.

"Anywhere. I can't.. look at your or Leira right now." Lean said, her voice painful.

Synthia looked stricken, and wanted to argue, but Blake moved to stand next to Lean, and Synthia backed away. Lean would feel bad about Blake scaring her mother, but this time, she really didn't want to hear arguments. She grabbed Blake's hand, and pulled her up, urging them to fly away. Blake took the hint and wrapped her legs around the broom, and they flew, leaving Synthia behind.

They didn't go far. As soon as Synthia and the tribe were out of sight, Lean lost her strength and landed, wrapped her arms around her knees and hid her head. Blake was beside her within seconds, Lean could hear her land, and then sit next to Lean, close enough for them to be touching. They said nothing. Blake wrapped an arm around Lean gently, waiting to see if Lean would pull away. When she didn't, Blake's arm squeezed her closer. Lean felt the tension in her body break down, and felt helpless to do anything but hide into Blake's arms and start crying. Blake's body felt warm, Lean could feel hands stroking down her back as something warm and painful was spilling inside of her. Lean was worried that Blake would be still irritated, even upset, but Blake said nothing, and let Lean cry her heart out.

Lean couldn't tell how long it was before she started to regain bits of composure. Her arms were shaking where she was clutching at Blake, and she let go, only to have Blake pull her into a hug. Blake smelled good, Lean thought and let herself be embraced until her body stopped trembling. Then she just let her head rest on Blake's shoulder, feeling exhausted.

"You've.. had a rough day." Blake said, gently.

Lean felt almost like laughing, except her lungs still hurt too much from all the crying, so she just shook a little, and pulled Blake down so they were both lying on the ground, Lean's head still on Blake's shoulder.

"I really trusted them." Lean said.

"Yeah." Blake said.

"They both lied to me. Synthia isn't even my...." Lean said, and her eyes filled with tears again.

Blake brushed the tears away.

"Where am I going to go, Blake?" Lean sobbed. "I don't.. belong to the fairies anymore."

"Well, since nobody said it yet.." Blake brushed Lean's cheek with her lips. "Welcome to the witch club."

"That's not funny." Lean said, smiling weakly. "I didn't decide I want to be in your witch club."

"Well we want you." Blake said.

"I don't feel like a witch. I don't feel like anything." Lean said.

"Were you really happy with the fairies?" Blake asked.

Lean nodded, and teared up again.

"I.. still have so many friends in the tribe, and fairies were kind to me. I still feel like one of them, I was raised there, it's.. all I know." Lean said.

"But you don't have libraries." Blake reminded her.

"Well, thats.. I wasn't going to leave because of that." Lean said.

"They were draining your energy." Blake said.

"You're only looking at bad parts." Lean scolded her. "I'm sad because there was so many good parts. I don't know if I'll have that anymore. I would feel.. like a fake if I tried to join my friends now."



"If they liked you as a fairy, they should love you as a witch. Witches are irresistible to fairies, don't you know?" Blake said.

Lean would laugh, if she wasn't feeling so low. "I didn't think that one was true." Lean said.

"Sure it is. They'll be crazy about you." Blake said confidently.

Lean thought about it, and shrugged, uncertain.

"You're okay with this." Lean said.

"You're still Lean. I stopped caring about what species you were a while ago." Blake said.

"Yeah? When?" Lean asked.

"When I thought.. I was falling for a fairy." Blake admitted, flustered.

"I like you too." Lean said, and gently nuzzled Blake's neck.

Lean could only see Blake blushing because her light was falling on Blake's cheeks so strong. Blake covered her eyes, smiling.

"You're still going to be all sparkly, huh?" Blake asked.

"I feel more comfortable like this." Lean said.

"But I can't look at your face like this." Blake complained.

"Well, if you're going to be *annoying* about it-" Lean teased, and then muted her glow slowly, until only light falling on both of them was moonlight. Blake's eyes were used to the dark, and she pulled Lean so they were both on their sides, facing each other. Lean's eyes were dark green, and her hair was still light, almost same color as the moon. Blake traced her fingertips over Lean's nose, touched her cheeks and lips, and hummed in satisfaction.

"You feel the same. You're the same." Blake said.

Lean gave a sigh of relief. Her heart was lighter now that Blake knew. She wasn't even aware of how much she was stressed over it, but fears were soon forgotten when Blake pulled her into a kiss, and this time Blake wasn't holding back. Her hands were in Lean's hair, pulling her closer, and Lean could only think about how hot Blake's mouth was and by the time Blake let her go, both were panting.

"You-- were really bothered by that light-" Lean managed, realizing what had happened.

Blake narrowed her eyes and kissed Lean again, taking her breath away, it was almost as if Blake had waited for a while already to do this. Lean felt fingers stroking down her waist and flushed, Blake was gently kissing her ear and neck and Lean shivered, arms wrapping around Blake. She felt heated and her heart was beating faster. Blake paused to look at her again and Lean urgently whispered "*don't stop*" to which Blake laughed and sneaked her fingers under Lean's shirt, brushed her sides lightly, and then kissed her stomach, making Lean tremble.

Blake took her time kissing every little bit of Lean's stomach and waist, and was pushing Lean's shirt up slowly, until Lean lost her patience and just pulled it off, then tugged at Blake's clothes, and Blake took hers off as well. Lean pulled her in for another kiss, and realized just how warm Blake's body was, her skin was emitting heat, and Lean couldn't tell if it was magic, or just how Blake was at all times. Blake was soon back to kissing every inch of her skin and it made Lean shiver, Blake's lips met her chest and Lean trembled and moaned, her fingers digging into Blake's shoulders.

"Lean-" Blake mumbled, and Lean realized Blake was affected by this, she was flushed and panting and watching Lean nervously.

Lean took the chance to gain her breath, and then brushed her fingers over Blake's sides gently, watching how it made Blake shiver as well.

"Lean- " Blake said again, watching Lean with so much desire in her eyes Lean flushed.

Blake trailed a hand down Lean's side, and then brushed over the hip, and dipped her fingers into Lean's pants, watching her earnestly.

"Can I?" Blake asked.

"Yes." Lean said, feeling her heart beating loudly against her chest. Blake kissed her while she stripped her down completely, both were nervous and shivering with excitement. Blake seemed to want to go slow, and made a show of kissing Lean's thighs until Lean was trembling and making desperately needy noises. By the time Blake finally put her attention between Lean's legs, Lean was wrapping her legs around Blake, pulling her closer and crying out in passion. She could feel Blake's moaning, and knowing how much Blake was aroused by this made it impossible to hold out long. Blake's fingers were still trailing all over her body, brushing at her waist, holding her hips and stroking her thighs, until Lean couldn't take it anymore and came crying Blake's name into the night sky. Blake kissed her thigh again, then laid next to Lean and kissed her shoulder gently, giving Lean a chance to collect herself.

As soon as world stopped spinning and Lean regained some control over her trembling limbs, she climbed on top of Blake, kissed her, and proceeded to do exact same thing Blake did to her. Blake let her, and Lean learned how sweet it was to have a trembling, moaning Blake under her, gasping and crying her name, holding onto her and shivering with pleasure.

Words they exchanged afterwards, and kisses they shared were sprinkled with giggles and laughter, Lean couldn't remember ever seeing Blake looking that smug, or that embarrassed at the same time. They fell asleep still softly talking to each other about the stars, journeys they would take, and plans they could make together.

When Lean woke up next morning, she was surprised at how warm and comfortable she felt. Blake was tangled around her, and both were covered in clothing they failed to put back on. Blake must have put

some magic to keep them both warm and cozy, because Lean felt as comfy as in her moss bed. Lean stared at the morning sky, not wishing to wake Blake just yet. She thought, after everything that happened, her heart would be heavy and worn out, but she could still feel Blake's mouth everywhere on her, and her heart felt warm. Maybe this wasn't so bad, Lean thought. Maybe, if Blake stick with me, I can pull through. She looked at Blake, thinking about how much she depended on the witch already. Blake was reliable, Lean realized. From the moment Blake took her out of that barrier, to confronting her mothers, Blake was always around, unless she was in trouble herself. And she always watched out for Lean, even if she was disrespectful to.. everyone else. Lean wondered what would it take to have Blake respect authority, a miracle probably.

## Chapter 16: Surprise

Blake woke up to Lean tickling her. She laughed and sleepily attempted to get her revenge by tickling back, but Lean was too fast for her, and caught her wrists before Blake got anywhere.

"You little-" Blake growled at Lean, and with an effort rolled on top of her, grinning.

"Good morning, Blake." Lean said, grinning back.

"Is this how you wake your lover up?" Blake demanded, still grinning.

"Oh, I'm sorry, how would my lover like to be woken up?" Lean asked.

"Like this." Blake leaned down and kissed Lean gently. Lean kissed back, and used the moment of Blake's distraction to tickle her again, causing the kiss to end with laughter.

"Hey!" Blake said indignantly, laughing.

"I like the sound of you laughing." Lean said, and hugged Blake.

Blake didn't have a reply for that, so she just blushed and hugged Lean back.

"You look better today." Blake commented when they parted, and she lazily started putting her garments back on, Lean had already dressed herself.

Lean blushed and looked away.

"Well, I had some really good time yesterday." Lean said.

"Yeah? With who?" Blake teased her, causing Lean to throw Blake's hat at her. Blake caught it, laughing.

"You're even worse than usual." Lean concluded.

Blake grinned and leaned down to kiss Lean's ear, making Lean blush.

"I'm glad you're feeling better." Blake said. "It's all thanks to me."

Lean shook her head in incredulity and pushed Blake down on the ground.

"I can't have you losing your head over sleeping with me like that." Lean said, climbing on top of Blake, who still looked completely unapologetic about everything.

"Yeah? What are you gonna do about it?" Blake teased her, grinning.

Lean slid her hand under Blake's shirt, and Blake closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth spreading over her stomach and torso, gasping when Lean touched her chest, feeling her face heat up.

"That's.. not going to help." Blake said, embarrassed.

"It's helping." Lean assured her as she kissed Blake's stomach, and Blake made a shy noise.

Lean kept touching her and probably enjoying how much less smug Blake sounded with Lean's fingers tracing down her sides and reaching between her legs. It's not that Blake didn't feel smug about it - she very much did, but the noises she made were far from. Lean's fingers felt so gentle and eager, Blake's thoughts melted just as her body did, until she was panting in Lean's arms, feeling satisfied with a warm glow in her heart.

When Blake caught her breath she kissed Lean until both were breathless again, and proceeded to touch her all over.

"Do you think we'll ever want to do anything else?" Lean asked after they were both flushed and tangled with each other.

"No." Blake said, grinning, and looking smug again.

Lean nudged Blake's face with her lips. "You're too smug."

"I'm smug because I see you're happy. I like that." Blake kissed Lean back.

Lean apparently didn't think of anything to say back to that, so she just buried her head in Blake's neck and rested there.

"Actually, I have plans for you today." Blake said.

"You do?" Lean said, dreamily.

"Mhm." Blake said.

"Do we have to get up from here?" Lean said.

"Yep." Blake said.

"I respectfully refuse." Lean said, but Blake was already laughing and pushing herself up, tickling Lean all over until Lean cried "Okay! I'll get up!" and used Blake as support to pull herself up.

Blake helped Lean get dressed again, and they grabbed fruit from the nearest tree for breakfast. Blake tapped a tree and then pointed to the north sky.

"Follow me." Blake said.

It was a sunny morning and wind was blowing in their faces as they flew above the fields and forests. Blake wouldn't tell Lean where they were going, and kept calling it a "surprise", and Lean eventually just speeded up past her, impatient. Blake had fun chasing her, and then directed them towards the snowy mountains. Blake was getting more excited closer they got, and kept looking at Lean with a knowing grin, while Lean probably, suspected nothing.

They landed in the foot of the mountain. It was a big, open space between the rocks and forests, and almost every bit of it was covered with bright green moss. Blake motioned towards the mountain. The rocks were arranged in a neat way, almost like stairs someone could climb. Lean considered it curiously, and followed Blake.

"We're almost there." Blake said, grinning at Lean.

"Is this a magical witch mountain?" Lean asked, looking around as if she expected something to jump out at them."

Blake laughed and nodded. "Yep, that's exactly it."

Blake climbed on top of a cliff, and waited for Lean. There was an arch made of stones, with words carved into them. Blake knew Lean wouldn't be able to read those, and she refused to translate just yet.

"Just put your hand here." Blake instructed Lean, and pulled her hand towards a seemingly empty rock. The moment Lean's hand touched the stone, it glowed and moved backwards, revealing an opening and a hallway. Lean stared at Blake in shock, and Blake nudged her inside.

"Go." Blake said, grinning.

Lean eyed Blake suspiciously, then cautiously peeked through the hallway, and stared in awe.

It was a library. Huge, ancient, hidden library. It must have been as big as the mountain itself. Rows and floors of books were stacked high into the ceiling, and somehow light was still falling through, as if mountain was made out of windows and not stone. It was magic, making the stone translucent from the inside. Most of it was made out of wood, shelves and cabinets and polished tables meant for writing, each containing a small lamp. The middle of the library was a round nook, containing several cozy-looking couches, big enough to lie down. Ceiling contained drawings and charts of the stars and planets, some of the twinkling like fairies.

Lean froze at the entrance, trying to take it in.

"Lean, now that you are a witch, you have certain privileges." Blake announced, standing right behind her.

"That's a library." Lean mumbled, awe in her voice.

"This is the biggest library." Blake grinned. "Biggest, secret, hidden, most Ancient Library of Witch Wisdom. That's what it says on the stone arch outside."

"This is.." Lean was lost for words, and took a step inside, then resumed staring open-mouthed.

Blake flew around Lean, then started pointing at various sections and explaining what they were about excitedly, until Lean finally moved from her spot, and flew towards the "Ancient Plants and their Powers" section, took the first book Blake handed to her and smelled it.

"There's a book on Thornwood here." Blake said. "And on firs and cedars, and about trees that grew thousands of years ago."

Lean was still looking at the first book, carefully touching each page and admiring the print.

"They're preserved by magic!" Blake informed her. "They can wear out but they will never fall apart, and letters will stay visible even after thousands of years. They're nearly indestructible."

Lean looked a bit dizzy, so Blake took her hand and pulled her to sit on the couch.

"Are you okay? Was it too much?" Blake asked.

"It's just.. I didn't even know this existed." Lean said, already working on calming herself down. Blake helped her by wrapping her arms around her.

"It's a lot, I know. Did you ever hold a book before?" Blake asked.

"Not like this one. It's.. perfect." Lean said, still examining it. "How do you make it?" Lean asked.

"Well, big sheets of paper are produced, and then folded into pages when the letters get printed, we have machines doing it. The covers are specially made to fit each and every book, you see how the letters are carved into this one? There's a witch who does that. And then entire thing is sewn together, and protective charms put on it." Blake explained.

Lean nodded, and once her fingers felt every bit of it, looked a bit defeated at Blake.

"I can't read it." Lean complained.

"Yeah, don't worry, we have a section here written in fairy script, you'll be able to read those, and I know there's a book translating our letters into fairy script, once you learn the alphabet you'll be able to read all of these." Blake said.

Lean sighed in relief, and looked visibly relaxed. Then she narrowed her eyes at Blake.

"Why do you have books written in fairy script?" Lean asked.

"Because we collect all of the knowledge. Witches don't throw writings away." Blake said.

"What if it's just something unimportant?" Lean asked, curious.

"Then it wouldn't have gotten written down, would it?" Blake replied.

Lean thought about it for a moment, and then nodded. She looked around once again, then extended her hand towards Blake.

"Take me to the fairy-script section." Lean said.

Blake grinned and obliged at once, they flew through the high rows of bookshelves, Lean looking around breathlessly, and then Blake landed them at the small corner, and Lean immediately recognized the fairy writings, they were preserved by witch magic and organized, some of them even pressed into paper and sewn into books.

"Are we alone here?" Lean asked, realizing she didn't see any other witch around.

"For now, yes. But any witch can come visit the library at any time." Blake replied.

"What if they see me?" Lean asked, bit frightened.

"You're a witch! You have the right to be here." Blake shook her head with a smile.

"They won't ask me anything?" Lean asked.

"No. You can just glare at them and they leave you alone. That's what I do." Blake bragged.

"Of course you do." Lean sighed. "Just, tell me if someone's coming."

"Okay." Blake said.

Lean grabbed a book called 'Fairies and Flowers' and curled up on the closest little couch, smelling and hugging the book before opening it up.

"You know I'm not going to go anywhere until I'm done with all of these, right?" Lean said.

"I expected that, yes. We have all the time in the world." Blake smiled, then flew off to get her own book 'Mysteries of the Sea' and curled up right next to Lean, their hair tangling together as they dove each in her own world.

It turned out Lean was not a very silent reader, and was excited by every bit of new knowledge she gained, which, would be terribly annoying for Blake if it was anyone else, but seeing Lean with excited glint in her eyes made Blake feel like she would have done anything to keep it there. So she let Lean teach her all about how fairies grow flowers in different ways than witches do, all the rituals they make to ensure flowers would grow big and strong each year, and how they use them for fairy magic.

"You're still a fairy at heart aren't you?" Blake asked.

"I can't just change into a witch overnight." Lean said, shrugging.

"You're glowing again." Blake noticed, there was a subtle shine on Lean's skin, not as bright as it used to be, but there nevertheless."

"I don't want everyone to see me as a witch yet." Lean said.

"But I can?" Blake asked.

"You can." Lean nodded.

"Our little secret." Blake concluded.

"You love secrets." Lean accused her, smiling.

"I do when I know what they are." Blake said.

"Is that why you come to the library? To learn all the secrets?" Lean asked.

"Yes." Blake said. "That's exactly what I'm doing."

"We should live here." Lean decided.

"There's a secret department where we can hide when it's crowded." Blake said.

"Then it's settled." Lean said. "And I will forgive you for not telling me about the secret department if you show it to me right this second."

"I forgot!" Blake defended herself, but flew Lean to the back side of the library, where the shelves moved at Blake's touch, and opened up a passage, where Lean found a hidden room.

"How did you find this?" Lean asked, impressed.

"I spent a lot of time in herewhen I was a kid. I fell down on this shelf ,actually. Luckily nobody realized what I've done. This is how you close it." Blake pressed her hand to the wall, and the library closed behind them. The small room had a couch, a closet, and lots of small twinkling lights making it look magical.

"Who else knows about this?" Lean asked.

"I'm sure librarian knows. I don't know who else." Blake said.

"Librarian?" Lean asked.

"Yeah, she's always around, but she'll only appear if you try to damage or steal a book." Blake said.

"You did try to steal a book didn't you?" Lean teased.

"Of course I tried to steal a book." Blake rolled her eyes. "But it's no use. You can check one out still. If you don't return it by yourself they summon it back."

"Did they ever lose a book?" Lean asked.

"I don't know. I'll ask the librarian. That will really piss her off." Blake said, excited.

"You're really awful." Lean laughed, and sat down on the couch, still holding her fairy book in her hands.

"And yet you slept with me twice." Blake retorted.

"I might do that few more times." Lean said and pulled Blake down for a kiss.

"A few?" Blake mumbled offended and was shut up by Lean's tongue licking her lips, and forfeited the conversation.



## Chapter 17: Tracked

They only went out to get more food, and they gathered enough to build a stash of it in the secret room, and got to work. It only took Lean one afternoon to learn how to read witch's alphabet, and Blake felt a little bit proud of her, and found her easy books to read. Lean in return kept shouting information she learned, as if Blake didn't already know it all.

"We could totally make our own coven." Lean called at Blake, her head buried in 'Witch Clans and Covens'.

"It says here you only need two witches to start one, and they don't need to be blood related, and they can do it in secret without formal registration." Lean kept going on.

"You should know all about them before you just start one. There's dangers to it too." Blake said, shaking her head.

"You're a buzzkill." Lean said and kept reading.

Blake sighed, and then took the book away from Lean, and sat down looking directly at her.

"I think I should have told you this before." Blake said.

"What?" Lean said, flustered.

"These are the words my mentor said to me, before I entered the library." Blake said.

"Oh." Lean sounded a bit put down, but listened carefully.

"Not everything written in here is the truth. All of this information is shared by witches, for witches, but those who wrote books didn't know everything. Sometimes, witches shared wrong information on purpose. Sometimes, they presented their opinions, as facts. Some of these books will try their best to make you believe things that aren't true, for some of the personal agendas their authors had. Before reading anything, you have to think about who wrote it, and for what reason. Some books really are just witches spreading information that is true and might be relevant. But it's always only written as what they thought was the truth." Blake said, exhaling.

Lean frowned at her.

"So how do I know what is true and what isn't?" Lean asked.

"You don't. Until you have enough experience and wisdom to know better than the authors themselves." Blake said.

"Fine. Then tell me, miss Wise and Experienced, who wrote this, and for what purpose?" Lean glowered.

Blake took the 'Witch Clans and Covens' in her hands, and checked the cover.

"This is an ancient book, written for witch children. All of the information might be true, but it is misleading. It assumes we're supposed to live in clans and covens. You see? It talks about clans and covens as if they're primary way of life for witches. And while reading it, you might forget there's other ways to live as a witch. You don't need to be in a coven." Blake said.

"But aren't covens better than being solitary?" Lean asked.

"Well, sometimes, yeah. But.. from what you've been telling me, living in tribes isn't bad either." Blake said.

"Do witches live in tribes too?" Lean asked, excited.

"I don't know. But maybe that's because nobody ever wrote a book for witch children about living in tribes." Blake said.

Lean considered this.

"I could write that." Lean said.

Blake looked at her.

"I should have expected this." Blake grinned. "Yeah, you'll definitely write that."

Lean grinned back.

"So, should we make a tribe then? You and me?" Lean suggested.

"I think we will need more witches for that, we're more of a coven." Blake retorted.

"You're unbelievable." Lean stared at Blake offended, then grabbed the book back and pushed Blake's face away.

Blake laughed and let Lean read on.

"I want that book about Thornwood, when can I read that one?" Lean called an hour later.

"You can try reading it, but it's dense with writing." Blake called back, from another part of the library. They were mostly completely alone, and nobody reprimanded them for yelling yet.

"Show me where it is!" Lean flew in Blake's plane of sight, and Blake took her to the 'Ancient Plants and their Powers' section, and taught her how to locate certain books. Lean smelled the book all over and settled back in one of the couches.

"Blake, did you know that Thornwood grew so large because predatory animals took refuge in it?" Lean was yelling half an hour later.

"I kind of assumed it." Blake called back.

"How did you assume that?" Lean glared towards Blake, suspicious.

"Well plant-eating animals and bacteria easily destroy small trees before they get a chance to grow tall, so only way a forest can grow to that size would be if predators keep the area protected, and I think

Thornwood also has a specific bug types that keeps the roots and bark protected from underground." Blake said.

"You already read the book, and now you're showing off." Lean said.

"And I thought you liked how smart I was." Blake teased her.

"I do like how smart you are." Lean murmured to herself.

"What was that?" Blake got closer, grinning.

"I said you were insufferable." Lean said.

"You're really starting to get less and less polite every day as a witch. I miss how you were all sweet and innocent when we met." Blake said reminiscently.

"Didn't you wake me up and then act like I was some kind of energy-sucking intruder?" Lean asked, smiling.

"Yeah. Good times." Blake said.

Lean laughed and shook her head.

"I was told I shouldn't talk to witches back then." Lean said.

"Yeah, I bet it was hard not talking to yourself-" Blake managed before Lean swatted her with a wing.

"How come you can fly with wings still?" Blake asked, touching one curiously.

"Mjord put a flying spell on them. She said witches can charm anything into flying, and I was already used to wings, so she just tweaked it a little so I could still use them. Why do you use broom?" Lean said.

"Tradition. Witches used to fly on brooms centuries ago. It's one tradition I like. Besides, it's practical, one object for flying and sweeping." Blake said.

"Did you ever, even once, actually use that broom for sweeping." Lean demanded.

"I don't recall, no." Blake said.

"Is that why you live on a fir tree? So you don't have to clean?" Lean asked.

"That's one of the reasons." Blake stated proudly.

"You're still a mystery." Lean admitted.

"You can figure it out." Blake said gently, and took up playing with Lean's hair.

Lean sat down, pulling Blake with her so Blake's head was in her lap.

"You've been alone a lot, with no parents and stuff." Lean said.

"So you've been reading a lot too. You want to know everything. And you've been harassing Mjord as well, because you wanted to be a healer. But you gave up on that?" Lean asked, absently touching Blake's hair.

"Well, I had to. I haven't made up my mind about other thing I want to be." Blake admitted.

"So you go and make a fir your home. Was it a special tree?" Lean asked.

"I learned how to make trees stronger, using that fir. It was one of the first things I learned to do." Blake said.

"You use same powers fairies do?" Lean asked, interested.

"No, it's different." Blake said. "Fairies use their power to make flowers and fruits grow very fast, and sometimes, this can be draining for the plant. Fairies use up the plant's energy to get growth, it can weaken the plant and make it dry out if done more than once. Fairies depend on plant as an energy source. Witches do too, but we don't use our magic to make them grow fast, we make them strong instead. It can mean even slower growth in some cases, but then the plants might grow ancient. We share the same life energy with plants. That's why fairies like to latch onto us like we're a life source, it's very effective for them to get energy from us directly."

Lean took a bit of time to process that. Then she looked away, her hands grasping Blake's hair tightly.

"I know you don't want to think about it. It's okay." Blake said, almost reading Lean's mind. Lean's face looked pained, Blake knew she was remembering how living with fairies drained her in the last months of her illness.

"Fairies are bad for plants, then?" Lean asked, sighing.

"Nah. Some plants would have trouble growing big flowers without fairies. They're good if they don't overdo it. Plants like fairies most of the time. They even offer them homes. And strong plants especially like taking care of fairies. They're like pets then." Blake said, smiling.

"Pets? Plants keep us as pets?" Lean replied, incredulously.

"Not you. You're a witch, Lean." Blake reminded her.

"Oh, right." Lean laughed weakly to herself.

Blake waited until Lean spoke again.

"I really love this library." Lean said.

"I could tell." Blake said, grinning.

"It's worth being a witch for this." Lean said.

"You have more powers now, too." Blake reminded her.

"Mjord told me I won't be able to use them until I get trained though." Lean said.

"Well, we can get a mentor assigned to you when you want. But it's a drag." Blake said.

"Why is it a drag?" Lean asked.

"They expect you to actually, train." Blake said with disgust in her voice.

"Oh I see how it is. The nerve of them." Lean indulged her.

"Yeah!" Blake agreed passionately.

"I was supposed to be figuring you out." Lean remembered. "So you hated your training, but you liked your fir, and made it your home. And you learned how to control the temperature." Lean said.

"Yeah I was cold once. Didn't care for it." Blake explained.

"What else did you learn?" Lean asked.

"I learned all about plants, and which ones to eat. I learned all there was to flying. I didn't get to learn much healing, but I got the healing plants down. I was bad at everything else, and never figured out what my inherited skills were. So I ditched the training.. and I started learning on the go instead. I figured out how to make barriers recently." Blake said.

"Yeah? What did you need them for?" Lean asked.

Blake blushed, and looked away.

"What? Is it embarrassing?" Lean asked, intrigued.

"I had to learn it because of you. So you don't blind me with fairy light." Blake admitted.

Lean thought about it for a second, then had a realization.

"You were able to kiss me without covering your eyes! Back at the castle. I thought it was weird!" Lean said, comprehending.

"You only figured it out now." Blake said, offended.

"Well I just thought you got resistant to it or something." Lean said.

"Unbelievable, the things I do, and then you-" Blake started to rant, but didn't get to finish because Lean was pulling her in for a kiss, and Blake figured it wasn't worth to insist on speaking just then.

"Well, okay, it was worth it." Blake concluded once Lean was done with her.

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Few days later, Blake sneaked up on Lean who fell asleep with a book in her lap, took the book away and towered over Lean in her usual witchy way, waiting for Lean to wake up. When it turned out it might be a while, she sniffed at Lean's hair, nuzzled her cheek, and whispered at her ear.

"Lean, wake up."

Lean opened her eyes just a fraction, to glare at Blake.

"What." Lean said, dispassionately.

"It's time to get out. You haven't seen sun for days." Blake whispered affectionately.

"Who's going to make me." Lean challenged her, and crossed her arms on the couch.

"Come on, we could go to a big forest, find all of the plants you read up on. Make some potions." Blake teased her, hoping it would sound like a temptation.

Lean gave it a thought.

"I still have books to finish, Blake." Lean said, argumentatively.

"You don't wanna go out there and experience the world? There's adventures out there just waiting for you to live out. I could show you-" Blake kept on whispering temptingly, and kissed Lean's ear.

Lean squirmed against Blake and then pulled her away from her ear to glare at her.

"You know what, I've had enough of you taking me places you already know everything about, and then constantly gloating about how smart you are. Let's go somewhere you've never been."

Blake was taken by surprise, but grinned immediately.

"You know, there is a place like that." Blake said.

"Yeah? Let's go." Lean said.

"We can't just go, we need preparations. That place is across the ocean. And we can't *fly* there. We need a boat." Blake said.

"You mean to tell me, we have to go out on the ocean?" Lean asked.

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Blake said victoriously.

"So why can't we just fly across?" Lean asked.

"Have you ever been to the ocean?" Blake asked, laughing.

"I've been on a beach before." Lean snapped, offended.

"Ocean is too big for us to fly across, if we get tired and fall asleep, we could easily fall into it and drown. It would take more than a few days. And the place we're heading for, it's an island I've only heard legends of. Witches are saying dragons live there. It has a volcano, and an underground forest, and water currents around it are so dangerous hardly anyone ever landed there." Blake said quickly, her eyes glowing with excitement.

Lean took a moment to process it, then joined in Blake's excitement.

"We have to go there!" Lean yelled.

"Okay, let's get our stash, and I'll check out a few books, and I know an old boat that's been sunk once but we can drag it out and fix it and then it's ours." Blake made plans on the spot.

"Great!" Lean was flying in circles from excitement, and then rapidly gathered all the food they had left in a cloth bag Blake gave her, and they were at the exit of the library within minutes.

"I'll miss this place." Lean said looking back. "Are you sure we can only take six books?"

"Yeah, I've tried to take more, librarian got angry." Blake shrugged apologetically. "We'll come back tho. We'll come back for all of the rest."

Lean nodded, and pushed the door open.

Sun was blinding. It was a bright morning, and Lean smiled at the smell of fresh air and green forests, dew shining in the sight before her. Blake only took a moment to observe, then flew up excitedly.

"Come on!" Blake laughed, and flew, Lean catching up easily.

It turned out to be just what they needed, wild and reckless flying into new adventure. Blake was showing Lean just how to locate the ocean from the type of birds flying, and vegetation that was growing only close to salt water, and talked excitedly about sea sicknesses and sailing. Lean forgot to be upset about Blake bragging on and on about her knowledge and instead took it all in, wondering just how it would feel to drag a boat from underwater and then sail in it.

It was all going great, until, Blake stopped in midair, changed direction, and flew down, towards a sheltered clump of tall plants. Lean followed her, confused. Blake put a finger over her mouth, gesturing Lean to stay silent, and pretended to gather some plants from the forest ground.

"We're being followed." Blake whispered, not looking up.

"By who?" Lean whispered back, looking a bit nervous.

"I couldn't tell, but, it could be the same witches that followed me last time, when I got.. locked up."

Blake said silently, giving Lean a plant to inspect.

"So what do we do?" Lean asked, frightened.

"Okay, well I think they've been following us for a while already, and they're not attacking, so maybe they're waiting for us to split up, maybe they only want one of us. Last time it was me alone who got caught, maybe they're only after me." Blake said, thinking fast.

"We're not splitting up then. Can't we fight them?" Lean asked.

Blake sized Lean up and shook her head. "They're trained in battle. But.. we might be able to out-fly them. Get somewhere safe." Blake said.

"Where could we go? Mjord's?" Lean asked, hopefully.

"I don't know, I don't want to bring this folk to Mjord's place. Maybe Lynx, she helped me last time. She's stronger than them." Blake said.

"Lynx? But.. " Lean looked hesitant.

"I know she's weird, but we won't stay there for long, just until they give up." Blake said, reassuring.

"Blake, there's something about Lynx I haven't.. told you." Lean started.

"We have no time now, you can tell me along the way." Blake tapped a tree to get directions, and pulled Lean towards her. "We'll fly through this shrubbery, they won't be able to track us if we go through the forest, and by the time we're out they'll have a hard time locating us. We'll talk when they're off of our tails."

Lean nodded, looking sour.

"We were.. we were gonna go have adventures at sea." Lean said, tearful.

"We'll still go. We'll go." Blake said, and kissed Lean gently.

"Now!" Blake squeezed Lean's hand and flew through the greenery, Lean following her lead, and lowering her glow so they'd both be near invisible in the shadows of trees. They were flying fast and close to the trees, leaves and shrubs blinding their path, it felt like ages until they were in the clear air again. Blake kept flying until the forest itself was out of sight, then gestured to a small, underground cave as a temporary hiding place. Lean followed her in, and Blake made a barrier at the entrance, ensuring they're both safe.

Blake looked at Lean.

"Let's hear it then."

## Chapter 18: A Bad Call

Lean sat down on the rock, and sighed.

"I really wanted to forget all this." Lean said.

Blake waited.

"Okay.. well, when we were at Lynx's castle, I was just, looking around, and Lynx found me in one of the chambers. And she.. recognized me. She knew my name." Lean started.

"How did she recognize you? Do you know her?" Blake asked, surprised.

"She had the same ring on her hand as one I do." Lean extended her hand, and Blake saw the black crystal ring from up close.

"I always wore that, it always fit me. Now I realize, it was charmed to fit." Lean sighed again.

"Anyway, Lynx started crying, told me she was my mother, that I was taken away from her and she could never find me, went on about how long she searched for me, how she never expected me to be disguised as a fairy, and you know.. things like that." Lean said clumsily.

Blake stared at her.

"Oh." Blake said blankly.

"But I don't like her." Lean said, curled up her legs and buried her head in her knees.

"But you just... when were you going to mention this?" Blake asked.

"Well.. now." Lean said, still hugging her knees.



"Do you think she's telling the truth?" Blake asked gently.

"Blake, I look like her." Lean said, depressed.

"Okay, that, and the ring, makes sense." Blake said, thinking.

"When she told me all that I just assumed she was lying, I still believed I was a fairy, I didn't want to hear that, I didn't want even more evidence that I could be.. a witch, so I had to fly back to my mother's, and ask them directly, and as it turns out Lynx was telling the truth, but I still didn't want to think about it." Lean mumbled.

"Well.. it does explain a few things." Blake said, thinking. "After talking to you, she asked me to keep you safe, I thought it was a creepy thing to do, she was all 'don't let Lean leave!' and I assumed she's a nutcase, but if she is your mother, maybe then, it makes a bit of sense. And I thought she was mean to you."

"I don't want her." Lean said, brooding. "I would rather have Synthia."

"Why don't you like her?" Blake asked.

"I don't know. I just feel... weird next to her. Like I owe her something. And I don't want to." Lean said.

"Okay." Blake said, and rubbed Lean's back soothingly.

"Do we still have to visit her?" Lean asked.

"Well.. it would be the safest place. But if you don't want to. I won't force you." Blake said, and Lean relaxed a little.

"There's something suspicious about the entire thing." Blake said, frowning.

"What?" Lean asked, scooting closer to lean on Blake.

"Well, it's a bit too much of a coincidence isn't it? You go to one castle and it just happens to be the place where your mother lives. The odds for you to go there out of all places is low." Blake said.

Lean frowned. "Okay, yeah.. that is weird. Do you think she.. no, but how could she get me to go there? I only went there because you called me."

"And I called you because I've been rescued by Lynx, but she didn't know why I was captured, she even asked me if I really kidnapped a fairy, so I don't know how she could have saw you coming." Blake said.

"Well then.. it's a coincidence then." Lean concluded.

"Something is weird about Lynx. Maybe she's involved in what was done to you. It is not that easy to take a witch's child from her." Blake said.

"It's not?" Lean asked.

"Witches are most fierce and protective around their children, even getting close to the children without their approval is dangerous. It's how most injuries happen." Blake said.

"Do you think someone tricked her, or overpowered her?" Lean asked.

"Maybe. Or maybe she gave you away." Blake said.

Lean looked at her.

"Do witches.. do that?" Lean asked.

"I don't know." Blake said. "I'm going to check if they've caught up."

Blake stood up, and monitored the sky outside, leaving Lean to her thoughts. It didn't last long.

"Lean. I can see them. We have to go."

Lean stood up abruptly and flew toward the exit.

"They're too close. If they get close enough to make a barrier, we won't have a chance. Can you still do the light explosion? There's a chance their eyes aren't protected against light." Blake spoke quickly.

"We're fighting? Yeah, I can do it." Lean said, sounding frightened.

"Just giving them a shock before we escape. It will only last a second. Come on." Blake pulled Lean's hand, and they flew directly at their chasers. Blake was still holding Lean's hand as she covered her eyes, placing a barrier. Two witches in dark cloaks were flying right at them rapidly, gaining height.

"Lean, now!" Blake yelled, and turned her head away.

Lean's body radiated sun-like blaze of light, blinding everything and turning world to white. It lasted few seconds before Blake tugged on her hand and pulled her away, yelling "Let's go!"

Lean didn't have time to think, she ended the glow, and let Blake pull her away. She was trembling, and couldn't think of anything but Blake pulling her onwards, to safety.

"It's okay." Blake called at her after they flew for a while. "We lost them. You blinded them. Good job."

Lean released a sigh of relief, and threw her arms around Blake, who yelled and lost control of her broom, and would have gone plummeting to the ground if Lean wasn't holding her up.

"Hey!" Blake said indignantly, when Lean wouldn't let her go.

"That was scary." Lean said, and hid her head in Blake's shoulder.

"Yeah." Blake clumsily wrapped an arm around Lean, trying to comfort her.

"Let's.. go to Lynx. Just for a bit. I don't want to be chased like this." Lean said, sighing.

"You sure?" Blake asked, thinking of how unwilling Lean was just minutes ago.

"Well, just until they give up the chase." Lean said, and let go of Blake, who managed to stay afloat with effort.

"You don't have to talk to Lynx." Blake said. "I'll keep her occupied, you can just play with her cats."

Lean laughed weakly, and nudged Blake forward. "I have a feeling Lynx won't be that easily distracted."

"So blind her and she'll leave you be." Blake suggested.

"That's not polite, what if she kicks me out?" Lean said.

"She says you're her kid, you can rebel." Blake shrugged.

"Is that what you think rebelling is?" Lean shook her head.

"Anything is rebelling if you're not supposed to do it." Blake said importantly.

"Only you can get away with this stuff." Lean said.

"I will teach you." Blake said.

"You're a horrible role model." Lean scolded her.

"I'm a great role model" Blake said, holding her nose up.

Lean sighed, and pecked Blake's cheek.

"Let's go before I change my mind."

It didn't take as long as last time, and Lynx's castle was just as they left it. Barrier let them through, and Blake told Lean to stay back and went to find Lynx, but there was no need. Lynx came out to greet them, smiling serenely.

"Blake, it's so good to see you. And Lean is with you! I'm so glad to see you're both fine. Are you hungry?" Lynx said, her voice warm.

Blake looked back to Lean, motioning her to stay put. She watched Lynx carefully for signs of approaching Lean, but Lynx stayed perfectly still, smiling at Blake.

"We're being chased. We'd like to stay until it's safe again." Blake stated.

"Of course you can stay! You always have a place here, Blake." Lynx smiled serenely.

"Could we have a room to ourselves?" Blake asked cautiously.

"I'll arrange it." Lynx said, and winked at Blake, to which Blake smiled nervously. Lynx probably had the wrong idea in mind. However she turned around, apparently guiding them towards their room. Blake motioned Lean to follow, and Lean obliged, still looking bit fretful. Blake stared at Lynx carefully, thanked her when she was brought to the chamber, and waited until Lynx went on to invite Lean to join her inside.

"This place gives me the creeps." Lean said, and tried to shake off invisible dust from herself, before curling up on the bed.

"I like the place." Blake said, honestly. "Lynx is creepy, though."

Blake joined Lean on the bed, and rubbed her back.

"At least we're safe here. I don't think the barrier would let them through, it's probably set up to stop intruders." Blake assured Lean.

"It didn't stop me last time." Lean said, sighing.

"Well, you weren't intruding, you were invited, I called you there, remember?" Blake said smiling, and nuzzled Lean's ear.

Lean lied back onto the bed, and pulled Blake on top of her, sighing softly.

"You should kiss me." Lean said.

"I'm on it." Blake murmured and let her lips melt down into Lean's, and for a moment Blake couldn't think. Lean was nipping and licking at her lips, sliding hands up her back and then under her shirt and it was enough to send shivers up her spine. "Lean-" Blake started, but was shut up by Lean pulling her back down for a deeper kiss, licking her lips and pushing her tongue inside, making Blake blush so much she forgot they were being chased, hiding, and in home of a highly suspicious witch.

Lean rolled on top of Blake and kissed her ear and neck until Blake was moaning and clutching at Lean's shirt, breathing fast, and had no complaints when Lean stripped her of her shirt and threw it on the floor, kissing all way down Blake's cleavage while holding her hand. Blake's heart was beating so loud Lean could probably feel it through her lips, and Lean lingered there, closing her eyes and listening, while Blake felt like she would burst from the heat. It was embarrassing, and yet when Lean's fingers feathered over Blake's sides and dipped into her pants, tingles made her tremble with desire. Lean seemed to notice it too, because moments later she was pushing her lips over Blake's inner thigh so gently, Blake could feel it as almost tickling through her clothes and she couldn't take it, she pulled her pants down on her own, closing her eyes to not look at Lean's smug face as she undressed. Lean kissed down her stomach, probably just to see her squirm and moan some more, but it was nothing to how noisy Blake was once Lean was spreading her thighs gently and kissing just the gentle skin in between her thigh and crotch. By the time Lean was using her fingers to gently spread her out and lick the most sensitive parts of her, Blake was gasping and holding onto bed with trembling fingers, her moans broken with small shivers. Blake couldn't resist but to wrap her legs around Lean and hold her close, even as Lean trailed her fingers over Blake's body, touching and lovingly stroking every part she could reach. Lean kept her hot mouth licking and sucking on Blake's sensitive skin until Blake clenched and moaned Lean's name loudly to the ceiling, shuddering in pleasure. Lean nuzzled up to her, and kissed her cheek gently, until Blake slowly found her way back to moving, flushed and satisfied, and pushed Lean down to do the exact same to her.

They fell asleep in each other's arms, Lean curled into Blake, and Blake wrapped protectively around her. Blake was woken by fingers running down her back and playing with her hair. She stretched with satisfaction and traced a hand down Lean's side affectionately.

"Morning." Blake said, sleepily.

"Good morning." Lean replied, and cuddled into Blake's chest cozily.

"Feel better?" Blake asked, smiling.

"Yeah. Lynx did leave us be." Lean said, relaxed.

"You think she gave up on pursuing her mother-child relationship with you?" Blake asked.

"Or maybe she's waiting for a good chance to try again." Lean reasoned. "I don't want to think about it until I have to."

"Good call. Improvising will definitely get you out of that one." Blake said.

Lean tugged on Blake's hair lightly.

"And what would you do, if she did it to you?" Lean asked, curious.

"Well, I would tell her, that I, as a free spirit, can just not handle having any relations and must, thus, be expelled from the family and excused from all future gatherings." Blake said in a bragging voice.

Lean laughed and shook her head. "Only you could get away with something like that." Lean concluded.

"What about getting information out of her?" Blake asked. "We should check if she knows something while we're here." Blake said.

"Good idea. I'll hide out here, and you can question her all about how she lost her baby to bunch of fairies." Lean said sarcastically.

"Okay, so that might not be.. the best conversation." Blake sighed, defeated.

"Let's just stay together. We'll check in a few days if we can fly without being followed." Lean said.

"Alright." Blake agreed.

It was few hours later they decided staying inside one room was too much, and Blake peeked outside the door and sniffed the air.

"Coast is clear, let's go." Blake said.

They sneaked outside of the castle, checked the sky for trackers, and all windows for sign of Lynx, but everything seemed clear and solitary. Blake and Lean stretched their limbs on the grass, surrounded by colorful flowers, a fountain and flocks of oddly shaped birds. Sky was deep blue with big, grey-white clouds, it looked as it might rain later.

"Do you miss home?" Blake asked after a while of lying down in silence.

Lean took some time before she replied.

"Not really. It's weird, I thought I would, but, it's kind of a relief." Lean said finally.

"Yeah?" Blake asked, interested.

"Well, I wasn't planning on staying there forever, even though I had good times with fairies, I felt a bit off, like I wasn't doing something right. I was secretly dreaming of finding a distant fairy from another tribe and moving there with her." Lean admitted.

"So you had a plan of escape." Blake commented, amused. "Did you find a fairy you liked?" Blake asked.

"No, I seemed to have developed a taste in other types of magicals." Lean nudged Blake grinning.

"I do miss feeling safe, though." Lean sighed, looking at the sky. "I keep expecting them to appear at any moment, I already want to go back in."

"We'll have to find out why we're being chased, but I don't want to get caught in order to find out." Blake said.

"Do you think it's witch council? Maybe we did something against the law." Lean suggested.

"We didn't." Blake said. "But someone might have accused us of breaking it. Just like last time, I was accused of kidnapping you, even though.. nobody was accused of holding you against your will." Blake said, frowning.

"Who holds a grudge against us?" Lean wondered.

"Well, lots of witches are pissed at me for no good reason." Blake said, shrugging. "But someone is after you, whoever cursed you might be trying to get to you now when the curse is off."

Lean curled up into herself.

"Hey, we already ruined half of their plans, now we just need to finish them off and you'll be free." Blake consoled her.

Lean nodded, looking not so sure.

Blake cheered her up by flying around the castle grounds, and bringing her unknown flowers. Soon she discovered Lynx's property was filled with secret entrances, hidden caves, hollow trees and animals she couldn't even recognize, so she invited Lean to go exploring together, and Lean soon forgot her anxiety, and instead was trying to out-do Blake in finding secret and hidden places. They found a trap-door that would land them in pillows, old bits of treasure hidden in hollow trees and caves, underground passage that would lead them all the way inside the castle, and a place under a certain tree that would render you invisible if you stood very still. They spent the day playing hide and seek, and forgetting their trouble, until they got tired, and sneaked their way back to the room, out of Lynx's sight. They were still carrying enough food with them, from their sea-trip plans, so they ate in their room, and fell asleep together.

Blake woke up in the middle of the night, feeling something was wrong. Door to the chamber was opened, she could feel the breeze coming in, but she could see nothing, not even a tiny speck of light coming inside the room. Blake rubbed her eyes and tried to get an image, but everything was pitch black. It was never this black, some light should be getting in from the window, where was the moonlight? And her eyes weren't adjusting to dark either. Blake focused on creating a bit of fire, just enough to light up the room for a second, and she felt heat forming at her fingertips, but there was no light. Blake panicked, and reached to wake up Lean, but it was too late. Blake lost consciousness before her hands found Lean. By the time Lean woke up, Blake was gone.

## Chapter 19: Leira

Blake was lying down in a dungeon cell, brooding. This was beyond frustrating, and list of people she could blame this on was getting shorter. Why did she think going to Lynx was a good idea? Why didn't she go to Mjord? Even if Mjord didn't have a castle and a protective barrier, at least this wouldn't happen. And what the hell has such power to make her temporarily blind? That was not fair, using those sort of powers, or even having them, was not fair. Who could fight, blind? Who could protect against blindness?

She knew these were Lynx's dungeons, recognized them from all the exploring earlier. She was unconscious while being dragged there, but she was sure she never left the castle. What about Lean? Was Lean captured and imprisoned too? Or was Lynx just separating them? Blake has already roamed the place for any hint of a root or plant she could use to get in contact with Lean, but to no avail, place was secluded in cold stone, all plant life out of reach. It had to be a crime to cut a witch away from plants. Blake had just about enough and was going to go directly to council the first chance she got, and yell at them. How could she be getting chased while evil mongrels like Lynx could just live in castles? Why didn't she realize Lynx was dangerous before? The witch was screaming suspicion, and by now Blake was pretty sure Lynx was in on whatever happened to Lean, she had to be, nobody this shady can just claim to be innocent. And to think Blake brought Lean here for safety... Blake groaned in frustration and used as much heat as she could gather on the rocks blocking her cell. It was warming the cell up, at least. What was Lynx likely to do next? She couldn't keep Blake in there forever, it was more likely she wanted to do something with Lean and Blake would get in the way. Blake was sure Lynx wanted to keep Lean in the castle, but for what? Maybe Lean had some hidden powers Lynx knew about and wanted to use. Maybe... if she really was Lean's mother, why would she imprison Blake? Maybe she needed them both? Blake wasn't going to do anything she was told, no matter what she was threatened with.

Blake kept trying to make sense of what was going on, and practiced making barriers again, now it only took seconds to make one, but it wasn't doing her any good at escaping. Lynx wasn't visiting her, she could sometimes hear noises from other side of the wall, but nobody answered her calls to who is there, so she was stuck with her own thoughts. Hopefully Lean wasn't imprisoned, and was looking for Blake. Or maybe Lean was in similar situation, unable to reach out to Blake. Blake took the time to test the strength of every part of the cell, tried to weaken and push the stones out, and in the end managed to poke small holes in between them. She decided on attacking the wall that was most noisy, pushing her fingernails between rocks until she found a spot where binding material was wearing away. Her fingers

started hurting after a minute, so she took breaks, and used a button off of her clothes to keep chafing. She could hear something every time she pressed her ear to the wall, and it kept her determined to go on. She put barriers on her fingers to keep them safe, and after half an hour there was a hole, only as big as Blake's finger, but enough for Blake to press her ear and listen carefully. Someone was crying on the other side of the wall.

"Lean?" Blake said the first name on her mind.

"Hey, is that you? Lean!" Blake pressed her mouth to the wall and yelled. The crying stopped.

Blake could hear shuffling noises, getting closer to the opening she made.

"Who is this." The woman asked.

It wasn't Lean's voice. Blake sighed in disappointment, but it could be a good thing, maybe Lean isn't imprisoned. Blake thought she heard that voice before.

"My name is Blake. What's yours?" Blake said loudly through the hole.

The woman actually scoffed, and moved away from the opening. Those are horrible prison manners, Blake thought.

"Why were you crying?" Blake asked, trying to engage the woman in conversation.

"That's none of your business." Woman replied angrily. Where did Blake hear that voice?

"Hey, I won't judge." Blake said conversationally. "This place sucks, I'm sure lots of people would cry here."

"Shut up, *Blake*." Woman said.

"You know who I am." Blake realized.

"And I'm not talking to you." Woman said.

"Just tell me who you are." Blake said.

"I'm the mother of Lean, who you hoped would be in here." Woman said.

*Oh, goddess, what were Lean's mother's names?* Blake thought hard, she could remember Synthia, but it was not Synthia's voice, and the other one, who only said few rude words to her, was..

"Leira. You're Leira. How- what are you doing here?" Blake asked, perplexed.

"You know what? I'm not going to discuss my personal matters with a savage witch who kidnapped my daughter." Leira said.

"Come on!" Blake hit the wall with her palm in frustration. "I hate you, I know you hate me, but since we're imprisoned, I think we could team up, for a second, until we get out of here."

"You're not going to get out of here. I am." Leira said, confidently.

"Then why were you crying a minute ago?" Blake asked.

"I told you to shut up." Leira said.



"How do you plan on getting out?" Blake asked.

Nothing.

"Hey!" Blake yelled and thumped the stone.

There was no response. Blake pressed her ear to the stone, heard shuffling of clothing, moving away.

Leira was not in the mood to share any more information.

Blake sighed and slumped against the wall. What kind of cruel trick was this, being locked up, again, and then having only that for company? And why was Leira here out of all places? Was Lynx now just locking up anyone connected to Lean? But if Leira really was Lean's mother, then they would both be.. Leira and Lynx? Well, they did both have bad personalities, Blake supposed they could have bonded over that. So if they were, lovers, or whatever sick thing was going on, why would Lynx lock Leira up, unless, Leira did steal the child, and Lynx had only caught her now? That would be a big betrayal. That was possible, Leira was Blake's number one suspect before Lynx locked her up. But Leira is sure she's getting out, so maybe she has an accomplice, someone to help her out of this mess. If that's the case, Blake had to get on their good side, and get out of here. And Leira was also crying.. which means maybe it's not the best time to make friends.

Blake laid down, contemplating her options. The stone was definitely not going to get broken by Blake's attempts. She couldn't ambush Lynx at the door, because she couldn't even see the door, it was all stone. And Lynx wasn't visiting. At least not for now. Maybe she wanted to wait until Blake got hungry and desperate for company to visit. Well, that was not going to happen, Blake would get out before that, she decided.

Leira was quiet. Blake waited for a few hours, then stood up and knocked at the wall politely.

"Hey, are you not bored in there?" Blake asked.

There was no response. Blake tried again.

"You took Lean didn't you?" Blake said.

Leira was still silent.

"Well, I can see how you hoped to get away with it, seeing you made her a fairy and all, and I probably messed it up a little, when I took her with me and took off the curse, and brought her to Lynx, okay, so I guess I'm sorry about that?" Blake didn't feel sorry.

Blake could hear angry breathing from the other side, so by now Leira must be pretty pissed. *Fine*, Blake thought, *if you wont respond when I'm nice, I'll provoke you instead.*

"I bet Lynx hates you pretty bad huh? You really shouldn't have gotten involved with such a horrible mongrel." Blake said boldly.

There was a roar of rage from Leira's side of the wall, and Leira actually blasted fire through the small hole, so that Blake ducked out of the way.

"DO NOT SPEAK OF LYNX TO ME!" Leira shouted, enraged.

*Oh. Must have struck a nerve.*

"Okay, sorry, didn't realize you hated her so much." Blake said in what she hoped sounded apologetic voice.

Leira was silent for few moments, and Blake thought she was going to ignore her again. But then she heard Leira burst into tears again. Blake was shocked.

"I don't hate her." Leira managed through tears.

*What?*

Blake contemplated this, but it made no sense. It was unlikely that Leira was playing a game on Blake either, the anger and tears sounded very real.

Blake tried to get Leira to speak again, shouting apologies and asking why she was crying, but it was no use. Leira ignored her, and sobbed so brokenly Blake was starting to get both sorry and annoyed. It was no fun listening to someone you hate cry like that, it just made you feel bad for them. But if she did all that to Lean, she deserved to be locked up and crying. She should be crying because of Lean though, not because of... whatever the hell was bothering her, that she wouldn't share with Blake. It had to do with Lynx- but if she didn't hate Lynx- there was still option of loving Lynx, but that would be insane? If she had feelings for Lynx, she wouldn't take her child away. Maybe she regretted what she did. Maybe she felt remorseful now that she got caught.

Blake waited until Leira stopped crying and the air was silent again.

"Do you know where Lean is?" Blake asked, hopeful.

Leira didn't reply right away, but Blake could hear her moving.

"She should be with Lynx." Leira finally said. "Lynx wants her."

"Thanks." Blake replied, relieved. So Lean wasn't imprisoned. Maybe Lean could find them.

"Do you know what Lynx wants with her?" Blake attempted another question.

"What do you think?" Leira said, irritable. "She wants to have her daughter."

"What if Lean doesn't like her?" Blake asked.

Leira made a frustrated noise and stomped the floor.

"You know what? I'm not talking about this with you. This is all your fault. If you didn't get involved, none of this would've happened. You should be lucky you're only locked up. Lynx wants you dead." Leira said.

"Well, I think I would win in a fair fight." Blake said, joking.

Leira scoffed.

"You wouldn't last a second against Lynx. You don't even know her powers. Nobody can fight her." Leira said.

"So tell me, what are those amazing powers nobody can beat?" Blake asked, hungry for information.

"You'll find out." Leira said ominously.

"How did you take Lean away from her then?" Blake asked.

"I didn't." Leira said, her voice weak.

"You didn't?" Blake asked, surprised.

"No." Leira said.

"Who did?" Blake asked.

There was no answer.

Blake sighed. Leira could be lying. But she didn't sound like she was. She sounded vulnerable and sad.

Maybe entire being locked up really got to Leira. Maybe if Blake got her to talk more, she could put the pieces together. If Leira really didn't take Lean, it had to be someone else, maybe Synthia was lying, or it was Lynx herself. Blake was tired of guessing. Leira knew exactly what happened, and was right there, and wouldn't tell her.

Blake curled up on the floor, thinking. She couldn't hear Leira anymore, and her brain had gotten foggy, tired of thinking. She wondered what Lean was doing, and if Lynx was scaring her. Blake felt guilty for not being around, after she promised Lean they'd stick together. She was starting to miss Lean. She fell asleep thinking of her.

Blake couldn't tell how long she had slept. Looking at dark stone was getting depressing. And she was rather hungry by now. She could use her powers to freeze and melt the water from the air, but there wasn't much to do for food. She couldn't let the gloom take over, so it was back to pestering Leira.

"Hey, how long have you been in here?" Blake asked, knocking on the wall.

She could hear Leira moving slightly, but no reply.

"Have you been crying again? Don't worry, I won't tell anyone." Blake said, guessing Leira was still in a bad state.

"You'll get really bored if you don't talk to me. Tell me what you're sad about." Blake kept talking, hoping she could get Leira to loosen up.

"Has Lynx been visiting you? I haven't seen her since I got here." Blake kept going.

There was a pained sound on the other side, and Blake knew she said something Leira didn't like.

"You're upset about her, aren't you?" Blake guessed. "You want her to visit you. Is that how you hope to get out? Lynx will forgive you and release you?"

"Shut up." Blake could hear Leira's angry voice.

*There we go*, Blake thought.

"Okay, if you tell me a few things, I will totally shut up, and let you be miserable in private, how's that?"

Blake offered.

"I'm not bargaining with you, Firethorn." Leira said.

*Firethorn? Where did that come from.* Blake wasn't used to being addressed with her last name.

"Is there something wrong with my last name? And I'm not asking for much, just a few little pieces of information for your piece of mind." Blake said.

"What do you want." Leira said, annoyed.

"Tell me who took Lean. Tell me what powers Lynx has. Tell me how you're getting out." Blake demanded.

"No." Leira countered.

"At least tell me who did that to Lean. Come on. Do you not care about Lean at all?" Blake demanded.

Leira was silent, and Blake opened her mouth to taunt her again, but was cut off.

"Lean is my child. How dare you question it." Leira hissed.

"So why didn't you tell her the truth? How could you watch her suffer like that?" Blake demanded.

"It was for her own good." Leira argued back.

"You locked her up. She was sick and scared. You call that good?" Blake countered, repulsed.

"You have no idea what you're talking about." Leira said.

"So, explain." Blake demanded.

Leira stayed silent.

"You're protecting someone, aren't you? Is it Lynx?" Blake asked.

Leira didn't reply.

"She locked you up in here, and you're protecting her? She cursed Lean, and you're still on her side?"

Blake said indignantly.

"You wouldn't understand!" Leira shouted.

"Try me." Blake challenged.

"I love her." Leira confessed in a whisper, and then quieted down again.

Blake took a lot of self control not to yell at Leira, she really wanted to. But challenging Leira's dumb feelings would definitely not give her more information. How could Leira love someone like that? And wasn't she married to Synthia anyway? Did Synthia know about this? Lean definitely had no clue.

"I.. I do understand." Blake lied through her teeth. "But, since she locked you up, you could share some information on her as a revenge?" Blake suggested.

"I don't want to." Leira said, stubbornly.

"Come on, I'm locked up in here, and you said it, I can't beat Lynx, I just want to know what's going on."

Blake tried coaxing Leira.

"She didn't tell me everything." Leira whispered frantically, as if she wasn't sure in what she was saying.

"She used to tell me everything, and now, I just don't know. She used to love me, I know she did, she was the only one, and then we had Lean, and I was happy, it was all I wanted! But she got sick of me, of Lean, and she sent us off to live with the fairies. I hated it, but she promised to come visit, and that we could be together, once it's all over, once her plan has succeeded. We were so close, but then you had to ruin the curse, and took Lean away, and now Lynx is blaming me for everything! You're the reason I'm locked up, it's you, I should be with Lynx and Lean right now. It's because of you Lean is..." Leira trailed off, her voice trembling with fright.

Blake listened, shocked.

"Lean is what?" Blake demanded.

But Leira said nothing, Blake could hear her trembling.

"What were you going to say? Lean is what?" Blake asked loudly.

There was no reply.

Blake was about to ask again, but she felt the walls around her vibrating. It was almost shaking, Blake assumed it must be an earthquake. She tried to hold onto the wall, but ended up on the floor. There was a loud crash just beyond the wall. Leira's cell was broken into.

## Chapter 20: The Council

Blake pulled herself up, yelling "What's going on?" and tried to look through the small hole to see if the cell collapsed.

"Leira!" Someone was screaming.

"What the hell are you doing?" Blake heard Leira yelling, enraged.

"Come on, we're getting you out!"

"I'm not going anywhere!" Leira screamed back, stubborn.

The shaking finally calmed down, and Blake banged onto the wall, and yelled "I'm trapped here, take me with you!"

"Who's there?" Another voice yelled.

"I'm Blake, I need to get out of here!" Blake yelled back.

"Get away from the wall!" Blake could hear yelling and jumped back into the corner, just in time, because the wall vibrated, and crashed, crumbling into a heap of rocks on the floor. Blake protected her eyes and mouth with a barrier, and saw the intruders. Two witches in uniforms were looking at Blake, offering a hand. Blake took it, relieved. Behind them, Synthia was pulling at Leira's hand, urging her to go. Heap of crumbled rocks was filling the cell, and Blake could see light falling down from a big hole leading outside.

"Is there anyone else imprisoned here?" Witch who pulled Blake up asked.

"I haven't seen anyone else." Blake said. "But Lean is still in the castle. We need to get her out too."

"It's too dangerous." Witch replied. "We can try and get her later. I'm Dareena."

"I'm not going without Lean." Blake demanded.

Dareena and her colleague glanced at each other and laughed.

"Two of them, and none wants to go."

"Listen, we can't have two witches locked in a dungeon, you two are going with us, and we need to know exactly how and why you're here. Then you'll be free to go as you please." Dareena said to both Blake and Leira.

"What about Lean? She might get locked up too." Blake kept arguing.

"We'll come back before that happens. You'll have to trust us on this one, Blake." Dareena said.

Blake glared, then nodded, deciding to split from the group as soon as they were outside and make a run for Lean.

Leira and Synthia were still arguing, but Dareena's colleague put an end to it by pulling them both into the air and upward, holding her broom with just one hand. Blake was mildly impressed, but a second later she was pulled as well, Dareena flew them out, holding Blake's hand tightly. Blake was blinded by the sun, fresh air felt so good, but she didn't have time, she struggled to get free of Dareena's hand, looking back at the castle where Lean was held.

"Lean!" Blake yelled, struggling violently.

"Let it go, Blake." Dareena said, gently. "We'll be back. You can't get her now."

"Well help me get her then!" Blake yelled angrily. "Lean!"

"No, Blake." Dareena sighed and secured Blake's arm so that Blake couldn't get free. It must have been some kind of sticking charm, because Blake wasn't able to move from Dareena's grip. Blake doubled her efforts in protest, until she got too tired to move. Leira and Synthia stopped arguing as well, and allowed themselves to be dragged along.

They flew a direction Blake never took before, and she watched the forests and rivers change places. They flew across the small desert, and towards the sea mountains. Blake saw their destination, a tower, and when they got closer, she realized it was an entire castle.

It was the exact opposite of Lynx's castle, dark and gothic, towers reaching high up in the sky. It demanded a sense of admiration, it was by far the largest castle Blake saw, it did seem kind of magnificent. Black spikes extended above every terrace, making it look very well defended. They landed in the courtyard, and Blake was surprised to find herself in almost-night atmosphere, even as she knew it was the middle of the day, the castle was veiled in night. Only lights were coming from the magic fire, burning in purple from the torches set along the entrance. Blake felt a tiny sense of respect, strongly against her will, and then quickly brushed it off.

"What is this dump?" She asked Dareena, who had finally let her go.

"This is the Witch Council." Dareena announced, entirely ignoring Blake's lack of manners.

"I didn't need you to get us into this trouble." Leira turned on Synthia, who looked mortified.

"I couldn't stand it. You knew I couldn't stand it." Synthia said with her head bowed down.

"So you went to them?" Leira motioned the castle. "You had the nerve to involve the entire Witch council? You think this is what I wanted?"

"You didn't tell me what you wanted!" Synthia yelled, tearing up.

"Hey." Their witch companion interrupted them. "You can talk inside. We have rooms prepared for you. You two must be hungry." She looked at Leira and Blake.

Blake was still trying to glare everyone down, but she went inside as instructed. Doors were so tall, Blake was straining her neck to see the decorations on the top. Then she noticed Dareena was watching her, and quickly went back to glaring everyone down.

Insides were, surprisingly, cozy. Corridor was well lit and filled with paintings of powerful witches, and it let them into a large circular space with floors that seemed to be made for sitting. Warm fires and candles made the place look homely. There were small round tables at the side, and food waited ready for Blake and Leira, who both sat as far as possible from each other. Synthia was escorted to the other corridor, probably to her room.

It had been a long time since Blake had cooked food, and she liked it a lot. She easily downed three plates and proceeded to stuff herself with fruit that was unattended. Leira still looked pissed, and Dareena was just watching Blake eat.

"So who do I need to talk to, to get out of here?" Blake mumbled at Dareena with her mouth full.

"We'll gather the conference." Dareena said. "You sure you don't want to rest first?"

"Lean is waiting for me!" Blake stood up angrily. "Gather it now."

"You won't be able to get Lean on your own." Dareena warned Blake, standing up too.

"I'd like to see you stop me." Blake said menacingly.

"Alright, alright." Dareena put a stop to it, and then made a gesture that was probably some kind of summoning charm, because witches started to gather in the middle of the room, and sat down in the circle on the floor.

"We'll hear what Blake has to say first." Dareena said to Leira, who seemed to be in no hurry to speak.

"Blake, sit down with us."

Dareena sat within the circle of about 12 witches, and there was enough space for at least 10 more.

Blake joined them grumpily. They all wore similar colors, dark blue and purple robes with silver lining.

Blake thought there must be the main one, the queen witch or whatever, she vaguely remembered Mjord mentioning her. But all of the witches in the circle looked pretty much similar.

"Is the head of the council not gonna join us?" Blake asked.

"Right here, Blake." A witch two places left the left of Blake spoke.

"Oh." Blake said, surprised.

"I'm Dana." She introduced herself. "You were summoned by this council once before, but you never showed up. I assume you failed to get the invitation?" Dana asked politely.

Blake fired up immediately.

"You call that summoning? Your witches were CHASING me, and then locked me up!" Blake was already pushing herself up, ready to fight her point, but Dareena pulled her back down.

"Nobody from the council chased you, Blake." Dana said calmly.

Blake glared at her. "They said they were with the council."

"What happened next?" Dana asked.

"They put me in an underground cell, tried to get me to talk, when I refused, they kept me locked up, until Lynx found me, and realized I was falsely imprisoned, and..." Blake trailed off, remembering how she was first brought to Lynx's home.

"It was likely her people who imprisoned you." Dana concluded.

Blake buried her forehead in her palms, mortified. She knew at once Dana was right. It was too good of a setup. They looked nothing like the council witches. It was unlikely that anyone would have found her in that cell, underground, except if they already knew she was held there, and only the person who was holding her could know that, so it had to be Lynx.

"It's okay, you're not the only one this happened to." A witch from the circle reassured her. "Lynx has been doing some shady stuff for a while."

"So why are you not stopping her?" Blake glared at the witch.



"We'll get to that. Could you tell us what happened with you and Lean? We got some information from Mjord, but I'd like your side of the story." Dana asked politely.

Blake considered her, and sighed. "Fine."

She got comfortable in her seat, and started feeling a bit self-conscious for the first time.

"I thought Lean was a fairy when we met. We were hanging out, then she disappeared, and I knew she was sick so I got worried. I went to find her and she was locked up. I helped her out, brought her to Mjord, who took the curse off, and we eventually found out Lean was a witch."

"That confirms Mjord's story. So it's true, someone cursed a witch into appearing as a fairy." Dana said.

"It was Lynx." Blake said and was immediately attacked by Leira, who obviously expected Blake to keep that part quiet. Dareena kept Leira at a safe distance, and then they decided it would be better if Leira wasn't present for the next part of the story. They waited until Dareena got back in the circle, then Dana spoke to Blake again.

"Do you know why Lynx did it?" Dana asked.

"No. But Leira told me, while we were in the dungeon together, that Lynx sent both Lean and Leira off to live with the fairies. She wouldn't tell me why, just said Lynx was getting sick of them."

"How is Lean connected to Lynx?" Dana asked.

"Lynx and Leira are both Lean's mothers." Blake said.

There was a look of shock from the witches in the circle, and they all frowned and started discussing it.

"That is unexpected." Dana said. "For a witch to curse her own daughter."

"That is worse than we imagined." Another witch filled in.

"But she wants Lean back now." Blake kept talking. "She told Lean she was her mother, and probably lured me in her castle just to get Lean there, and she wanted to keep Lean there at any cost."

"Is that when she imprisoned you?" Dana asked.

"No, that time we flew away. We visited the fairy tribe, because Lean wanted to confirm if she was Lynx's daughter, and then.. we were about to go to the sea, but we were followed, and had to run to safety, so ... I thought we'd be safe with Lynx." Blake said in a defeated tone.

"It was Lynx's witches following you again." Dana said, and once again, Blake could see it was true.

"It's possible she was tracking you from the moment she knew you were with Lean." Dana continued.

"She locked you up when you got there?"

"No, it was two days later. Me and Lean were sleeping, and she did something to knock me unconscious, and I woke up in the dungeons." Blake finished her story.

Witches listened to Blake with interest, and stopped to discuss it. They were concerned about Lynx's methods of luring people to her home, and what happened to them once they were there.

"Was Leira imprisoned with you?" One witch asked.

"No, I have no idea when she was imprisoned, by the time I was in the dungeon, she was already locked up." Blake said.

"Leira will tell us, if we can persuade her. Or maybe Synthia will." Dana said.

"So, can we go and fight Lynx?" Blake interrupted them, impatient.

"Do you know what powers Lynx has?" Dana asked Blake.

Blake shook her head, frustrated.

"She can control the sunlight. That's her inherited talent. She can stop the light from hitting the ground in a wide area, rendering anyone completely blind. Or, she can blast the sunlight and blind you permanently." Dana said.

Blake was taken aback. That must have been some sort of cheating. Nobody could have a claim to that much power. Then she remembered the feeling just before she was knocked unconscious.

"She used that on me." Blake realized. "When she came for me, I couldn't see anything."

"Now you know why we can't just overpower her. It's likely there would be victims, or even that our attempt would fail. But now we know something we didn't before. Tell me, did Lean ever show powers of manipulating light?" Dana asked.

"Yeah!" Blake said, thinking about Lean blinding witches who tracked them, and those demons in Thornwood. "She's good at blasting light."

"That means Lean inherited them too. Lynx's powers probably won't work on Lean. Lean controls sunlight as well, so she is immune." Dana said.

"So Lean can take her on." Blake decided, excited.

"Maybe, if Lean was fully trained, and as experienced as Lynx. But Lynx made sure Lean couldn't get any training or experience. It might be that she considered Lean a future threat, and that's why she wanted her gone." Dana said.

Blake shook her head, shuddering. "That's insane."

"Yeah." Dana said. "It is."

"If this is all proved, we have enough information to propose formal banishment." Dareena said, and witches in the circle made noises of agreement and approval.

"So we do." Dana agreed.

"What is the formal banishment?" Blake asked.

"There's a way for us to take power away from a certain witch, if we deem her practices dangerous and harmful to our kind. It is not done lightly, and it is not done without consensus of the witch's victims. You and Lean will have a say in this." Dana explained.

"You can count me down for yes." Blake said.

"Taking power away from Lynx will not be simple." Dana sighed. "We will have to get Lean free first, from what we gathered she's being held against her will, and she might be used as a hostage. We'll have some planning to do, Lynx already knows we broke into her dungeon, and might increase the barriers."

Blake glared at Dareena accusingly, as if she blamed this all on her.

"Blake." Dareena said. "We would have ended up in another cell. And you will too if you go alone."

"Blah blah I'm so scared of being in a cell I can't even save someone." Blake mimicked her in ridicule, then resumed on glaring.

"Blake, we need you to show us the cell you were held captive the first time, we need to check if there's anyone else trapped there." Dana interrupted her.

"Fine." Blake replied begrudgingly, and stood up. Dana stood up as well.

"We'll question Leira later, but we can assume she was an accomplice." Dana said.

"She is." Blake confirmed it, and then followed Dana up the stairs, and into a private room.

It was a small, round chamber, with a desk, chair, closet and a bed inside. Dana sat down, and looked at Blake with a glance just a bit too serious for Blake's liking.

"What?" Blake asked, annoyed.

"Mjord told me.. you're a Firethorn child." Dana started, her voice unsure.

"I am." Blake said, challenging.

"What do you know about it?" Blake demanded.

Dana sighed. "I imagine, nobody told you much about your mothers." Dana said.

"Tell me what you know." Blake insisted.

Dana considered her. "It would be a lot to find out in one day, Blake. But, I can tell you one thing. You didn't find out what your inherited powers are, did you?" Dana asked.

Blake was doing her best to stay calm, but she was outraged, she knew Dana knew something, and she wanted to hear it all. But she would take anything at this point, knowing nothing of her powers or her mothers was making her angry for a long time already.

"Tell me." Blake managed through closed teeth.

"Firethorns were known for their power over darkness." Dana said, and Blake frowned.

"What does that mean?" Blake demanded, thinking of Lynx's powers.

"It's not what is Lynx is doing. The way she uses her powers is against nature, she stops the light from reaching the surface, and the intensity bends to her will. But what Firethorns can do is absorbing the light, and creating areas of night. You saw the veil of night around this castle, didn't you? That's only an example of what you can do." Dana said.

"What if I didn't inherit it?" Blake asked, suddenly concerned. She could not remember creating anything like it.

"Have you tried making a barrier to block out the light before?" Dana asked.

"Yeah." Blake said. "But I've been making barriers for a while, and I'm not great. I can only make them around a physical container, I've blocked light from my eyelids."

"It was Lean's light, right?" Dana guessed.

"Yes." Blake admitted.

"It's good you know the theory. Using power of darkness is similar, only don't try to keep the light out, try to suck it in instead. If you have inherited the powers, it will be easy. And it's unlikely you would try this on your own, it's not covered in any basic training." Dana explained.

Blake took a nervous breath, and looked at her palms. Was it possible she would finally get to use her power? There was not much light in the room, only torches and candles. Blake closed her eyes, and extended her hands towards the floor. *Absorb the light. Create darkness.*

"Open your eyes." Dana instructed her.

Blake did, and the room was different. Lights went out, but Blake could see. Dana was still in the same spot, but the space between them was filled with something living, moving. Blake could feel it in her fingertips. Fire was burning yet no light came out of it, only shapes and vibrations. Blake pulled her hands back, curling them into fists, and spell was broken. Blake stared at the room in wonder. It had worked.

"Congratulations." Dana said.

"I can't wait to show this to Lean." Blake grinned, wondering what Lean's reaction would be.

"What can I use this for?" Blake wondered, trying to do it again with her eyes open.

"Well, it would be pretty useful when you're faced with Lynx. Although it wouldn't help you if she shut the light out, you still won't be able to see. But if she blasted the light at your eyes, you could absorb it instead." Lynx explained.

"That's why you told me." Blake guessed. "You want me to fight."

"It is why I told you." Dana confirmed. "I would prefer not involving you, but I have a feeling you're going to fight no matter what. But, Blake, don't tell others you can use this. Only do it if you're faced with Lynx."

"Why?" Blake frowned.

"It's not a good time for you to hear it. I will tell you once Lynx is taken care of." Dana said.

"I will fight you if you don't tell me right now." Blake threatened, and reveled in turning the room dark again.

"It's not going to give you much of an advantage against me." Blake could hear a smile in Dana's voice. Before Blake could do anything, Dana was behind her, holding both of her arms behind Blake's back. Blake broke free easily, but withdrew the darkness, disgruntled.

"That was not fair." Blake murmured, aware Dana wasn't going to fight her seriously.

"It was not." Dana agreed. "You can practice in your room, Dareena will take you. We'll need a few days to plan getting Lean out, and in the meantime, you'll show us where you were held." Dana said.

"What happens if I go rescue Lean anyway." Blake mumbled grumpily.

"Well, we won't be able to get you out that fast. This time we went there because Synthia, the fairy came to us, insisting a witch was trapped in there. You were lucky we found you." Dana said.

"How do you plan to get Lean out then?" Blake asked.

"We'll discuss that tomorrow. You're in no state to go anyway, you need sleep." Dana said.

Blake did feel increasing exhaustion, she probably did not get a lot of sleep in that cell, and her body was not used to using new powers. Her heart was aching to go get Lean, right now, even if she knew about Lynx's powers, it couldn't be that bad. But Dana, who could overpower Blake in a second wouldn't even go alone.

In the end, Dana got tired of watching her struggle with herself, shook her head and tapped Blake's shoulder, to which Blake immediately fell asleep.

## Chapter 21: Rescue

"You should have known it was over, what were you thinking! If you knew about Lynx, why even stay with me?"

Blake was woken up by Leira's shouting voice, coming from the next room.

"But you chose me! You picked me out, and you opened your heart to me, you trusted me with your child when you wouldn't trust anyone, you lied in bed with me! That meant something!" Synthia was shouting, on the verge of tears.

"You just gave it meaning on your own!" Leira's angry voice broke through the walls.

"You came to me and left Lynx!" Synthia yelled.

"You don't understand!" Leira yelled back.

"I do. I love you. And I know you love me. I don't even care that you're a witch." Synthia was now crying, and Blake had heard just about enough, and shut her ears with her hands.

Lean was living with this? They were both about the worst role models, even Mjord and Mathilda looked respectable next to them. Blake only hoped their ill nature to fall for the most evil person around didn't rub off on Lean. But, Lean liked Blake, so that was okay. Lean, who was trapped with Lynx right now. Blake shot up from the bed, angry. Dana must have had her forcefully put to sleep. Otherwise Blake would already be out there, getting Lean. There was only a shred of feeling of responsibility that made Blake open all the drawers, where she found what she was looking for, a map, and she marked an "x" on the place where she thought maybe the underground prison was (they're witches they'll find it). And she was off, there were brooms stored in the place where Blake could see them, and just about nothing stopped her from grabbing one and flying out of the window. Unlike Lynx's castles, there were no barriers at the council, and Blake found her way out of the eternal night and into the green forest. She landed next to a tree, checking if Lean sent a message, even if she was trapped there, she had access to trees. Blake felt the roots spiraling deep into the ground, and there it was, Lean's words, waiting for her.

"Blake, where are you? Lynx said you got a lead on the curse origin, and had to fly, but I don't trust her. Why wouldn't you take me with you?"

"Blake, it's been two days. And I can't leave and search for you. I wanted to go after you but Lynx did something to the barrier. She keeps saying the magic is disrupted but she's lying, I know she did this. Blake, I don't like this."

"Why aren't you saying anything? Has Lynx done something to you? On what world are you where there is no trees? Lynx is trying to convince me you don't want to talk to me, otherwise you would, and I don't want to believe that. She keeps saying.. weird things about you. I don't want to listen but.. she wont stop. I can't keep hiding from her."

Blake's hands curled into fists in anger, and she sent back:

"I'm coming. I'm fine. I'll be there. I'll get you out."

With that, Blake got the direction to Lynx's castle, and flew. She would need a plan. She obviously wasn't strong enough to defeat Lynx, but she could distract her, make her think about something other than trapping Lean for long enough that Lean can go. There must be something that would make her take down the barrier. Lynx was probably expecting the council to come back for Lean, but she wouldn't expect Blake to come alone, probably. Would barrier react differently based on who's trying to cross it? Blake was sure it would be set up against anyone who wants to take Lean away, so she would have to let Lean out on her own, willingly. What if it was Leira standing outside the barrier? And she wouldn't come in, because Lynx has imprisoned her recently, but Lean wished to go see her? It would be a bit of an

"obvious evil" to not let a child see her mother, and Lynx seemed to be bent on pretending to be some kind of saint in front of Lean. If Blake could get to talk to Lean to set it up...

Blake stopped, and sent another message.

"Listen to me, pretend you didn't get a message, don't get excited, don't look happy. Lynx can't know we're communicating, and she's probably watching. Look down, and don't smile. I probably can't get through the barrier, so we'll do this. I'll pretend to be Leira, she won't be able to see if I hide my hair under my hat, and you tell her Leira is outside and won't come in, but you want to see her. Make it clear that it's cruel to deny you to see your own mother, or act like she'd be your favourite if she just does this one favour for you, whatever gets you out. And she knows Leira won't want to come in on her own. I'll explain later. Anyway as soon as you're out I'm taking you away, okay? Now look sad and broody."

Blake wasn't completely sure it would work. But she was out of time and ideas, and Lynx was good at hiding her affiliates, and Blake knew nobody Lynx trusted. But Lynx had no reason to believe Leira would take Lean away, since Leira was on Lynx's side. So if this didn't work, nothing would.

It was an hour later Blake landed, to check if Lean sent anything back.

"Blake! I'm so relieved you're okay, what happened to you? Where have you been? I hate Lynx but I don't know if I can lie to her, I am not that good at lying and she's scary, but I'll try."

Blake sighed in relief, Lean was still okay, and was going to follow the plan. Blake supposed it was weird that anyone could miss Leira out of all people, but Lean did seem to care about both Synthia and Leira, for some reason.

"You can do it. Just think about being free again. She only has to believe you'll be happy and like her if she lets you see Leira, that's all."

Blake was getting nervous, what if Lynx came out together with Lean, to see Leira? What if she doesn't trust Lean's word? If it comes to it, Blake would battle Lynx, after all, she could be sure her eyes will be protected, even if her powers of darkness weren't really.. well, Blake didn't yet figure out how to use that against Lynx. What's night compared to stopping the sunrays and making you blind? Maybe it wouldn't come to a fight, Blake decided.

It was about noon by the time Blake arrived. She found the barrier, and as she expected, she couldn't pass through. Her eyes scanned the place for Lean, but she was nowhere in sight. Maybe Lynx is forcing her to stay inside, Blake thought. She tied her hair up, and hid it under the hat, and then covered the pieces of her clothing with darkness, making it seem as if she was in a large black dress with a cloak. It was easy, using this amount of magic to change her appearance. She made sure her face couldn't be seen. She sent another message to Lean, saying "I'm here."

It took a minute before Lean was rushing, flying around the castle grounds, noticed Blake's figure and had to stop herself from crying out her name. Blake put a finger in front of her lips, hoping to remind Lean to keep quiet, to act. Lean got it, and forced herself to act calm.

"Tell her Leira is here." Blake instructed Lean, using a low voice, she didn't know if Lynx was listening.

"Okay." Lean said breathlessly, pushing the barrier, unable to come through, to reach Blake. She looked desperate, scared.

"Calm down. It's going to work. We'll get you out of here. Come on. You can do this." Blake mouthed, as close to the barrier as she could get. Lean looked soothed enough, nodded, and turned her back on Blake, flying back to the castle, looking for Lynx.

And then Blake saw her. Laughing. Lynx was in the sky, watching them.

She was launching at Blake before Blake could do or say anything. Light disappeared. And this time Blake knew why sunrays were no longer touching her, why the air was cold and empty. Blake snarled, furiously, and decided she would fight.

"How long did it take you to make up that plan, Blake?" Lynx laughed condescendingly, and Blake blasted heat in the same direction, but instead heard a voice behind her. It was disorienting, seeing nothing, not even the swirls she saw when she closed her eyes. Her pupils strained to catch even a small glint of light but there was nothing. It wasn't natural, it wasn't normal to be in this environment, and Blake's eyes complained.

"How could you think that would work?" Lynx was whispering, taunting her.

Blake realized she was an object of amusement. She forced herself to calm down. If Lynx was about to throw her back into the cell, fine, Blake knew she was taking that risk. But for Lynx to play with her anger, to gain satisfaction from Blake's misery? That was no deal.

"I could say the same thing to you." Blake said, determined to stand her ground.

"All of my plans work out, Blake. Sooner or later." Lynx replied viciously, and Blake felt her hat being taken away, her hair being pulled back.

"Lean will never want you." Blake uttered coldly. She could tell right away she hit a nerve. Lynx snarled with rage and Blake was thrown to the ground so fast, she couldn't catch her breath.

There, now you see how fun it is to provoke me, Blake thought, even as she gasped for air, her back itching with pain where she fell.

"You will see." Lynx whispered, threat in her voice. Blake couldn't tell where the voice was coming from, saw nothing at all. Did Lean realize what's going on? Was she still looking for Lynx, in the castle? Could she see that the world has gone dark? No, Lean would be yelling and trying to help if she knew. Lean



didn't see Lynx. She was probably still looking for her. If only Lean could escape while Lynx was busy with Blake. But, the barrier would stop her still. Was there a way for Blake to have Lynx strip it down?

"Show me then. Stop holding her against her will. Let her leave." Blake said, pushing herself up.

Lynx laughed, and Blake felt uncomfortable goosebumps on her back, hair on her neck stood up.

"You still think you can get away with it, don't you? No, Blake. This is the end for you." Lynx's voice was coming from all around, and Blake was straining to pinpoint the source.

"Oh yeah? Think you can end me?" Blake feigned toughness, but she was starting to panic a little. Lynx didn't seem as if she was just going to lock Blake up, not that being locked up was fun, but what if Lynx had something worse in mind? Blake's instincts started turning inwards, telling her to run, to escape.

Blake realized she still had her hand wrapped firmly around the broom, and she crouched down to check where the earth was. She only had to not collide with Lynx. Maybe Lynx wasn't as fast. She remembered Lynx flying, it was graceful, fast, deadly. But Blake had to try.

"Oh, not me, there's someone out there who wants to see you ended, Blake. All I have to do is let them."

Lynx said ominously, and Blake was momentarily distracted, what the hell was Lynx talking about? She must be making things up to scare me, Blake concluded, and waved her hand around, trying to see if Lynx is close enough to reach. She wasn't. So Blake pushed herself off of the ground quickly, and flew as fast as she could, praying she wasn't about to launch herself into a tree, hoping she could out-fly Lynx's powers, grasp the daylight. It wasn't even few seconds before she felt a blow to her head, and fainted.

## Chapter 22: Doubt

Blake woke up, her body hurting in weird places. How much time has passed? Her head was filled with numb pain, her elbow bruised, and something about her knee felt off. Was she dragged on the floor? She looked at her clothes, dirty. She probably was dragged. There was a colorful carpet underneath her. Blake frowned. She wasn't in the cell. She was inside of the castle. Blake didn't recognize this room. Windows were opened, air blowing in. Blake shot up rapidly, intending to escape. Her head sent her staggering with pain, but before she reached anywhere close to the window, they all shut down. Blake looked around, and realized there was a throne-like chair in the room, and someone sitting on it. Lynx.

Blake froze. Lynx looked deadly. Blake could feel hatred, agitation, desire to harm, the air was so tense it was hard to breathe. Blake felt a wave of fear wash through her. What was going to happen now? Lynx stood up.

"How did it feel, Blake?" Lynx's voice was poisonous, filled with hatred.

Blake swallowed, having no clue what Lynx was talking about. She felt it would be dangerous to ignore, or provoke Lynx right now.

"How what felt?" Blake asked, making her voice small. She hated hearing her own words wrapped with fear.

"TAKING WHAT IS MINE!" Lynx yelled so loud Blake flinched.

"This is the second time, Blake, you took from me, and it will be your last." Lynx threatened, her voice threatening.

"I never took anything from you." Blake said blankly. She still had no idea what Lynx was so angry about. She caught Blake. Blake didn't manage to take Lean.

"DON'T LIE TO ME!" Lynx screamed, and Blake flinched again, and tried to back into a corner, feeling Lynx might get violent any second.

"I know you've been working with them, those justice rats, who thought of it, huh? Did they tell you it was going to be safe for you to be the bait? Because it won't, Blake, they've been lying to you, you are nothing close to safe, they abandoned you here. Or did you think if you sacrificed yourself for her, she would love you, did you actually think that?" Lynx was now walking towards Blake, and Blake's breathing became light, fast, she was scared.

"I- I don't know what - " Blake started, but she couldn't finish it, her brain was screaming, telling her to run, to escape. Lynx's words made no sense but what was more alarming was the rate she was getting close, what she could do.

"Is this a part of your plan too? Are you happy to be here?" Lynx was now at arm's reach.

"Stop it." Blake managed, backed up against the wall. "You ruined my plan, okay? You could just let me be." Blake felt the plea in her own voice.

"And what was your plan?" Lynx demanded, stopping to listen.

"I just going to pretend I'm Leira so you would let Lean see me, and then ... she could escape. But you caught us." Blake admitted, feeling too scared to lie.

Lynx glared at Blake, as if trying to read something from her face.

"You're not lying." Lynx said, as if disgusted by something.

Lynx turned her back on Blake, for which Blake was grateful for, and walked back to her throne. Blake looked around for escape routes, the door was far behind the throne chair, so she had no way of getting

there without passing Lynx, and Lynx has already proved capable in catching Blake... unless Blake did launch herself into a tree that time.

Lynx laughed again, something sick in her voice. She turned to look at Blake.

"You really are just a stupid, imbecile child." Lynx said menacingly. "I can't believe such a child has managed to ruin my plans. Why did you have to get involved, Blake? You could have lived your life, never interfering with mine. But that wasn't good enough for you, was it? You just had to become a thorn in my eye. That's where you went wrong, Blake. And you will regret it."

Blake was slowly starting to gather her senses again, feeling more secure with Lynx sitting down and talking. She still made no sense whatsoever, and Blake wanted to understand just why did Lynx hold such a huge grudge. Of course she would try to rescue Lean, that much was obvious, and she didn't even succeed.

"I never did anything to you." Blake said, her voice finding her argumentative tone again.

"You don't even know what happened here today." Lynx looked down on Blake.

Blake said nothing.

"Your little gang of witches who dare to call themselves 'the council', as if they're worthy of any such title, used you. While you were distracting me, they broke through the barrier, and took Lean. When you tried to flee, you lured me out of the barrier, and that's just what they've been waiting for, a moment I wouldn't know where Lean is. It took them seconds to get her out. And they left you here, and you didn't even know their plan. Pretty two-faced of them, ha?"

Blake's eyes widened, and she let out a big sigh of relief. Lean was safe! Lean wasn't here anymore! Dana or someone must have followed Blake and freed Lean. Blake could feel nothing but gratitude for it right now, even though it did seem a bit weird they didn't let Blake in on that. It also explained why Lynx was so mad.

"You shouldn't look so happy, Blake." Lynx said, angry.

"Well, you can't blame me for this one, I had no clue." Blake said, blatantly cheerful.

"Oh, but you're the only one left here, Blake. And it's time you felt what my anger is like." Lynx said.

"I can tell you hate me. And I hate you too. But I've done nothing to deserve this." Blake said, determined.

Lynx glared at Blake with malice, and then took in a big breath.

"So you don't even know. Alright, Blake. Let me make you understand." Lynx started.

"I gave birth to Lean, because I wanted her. There was no child so wanted and cherished as Lean was, and I gave her my every waking moment, my every breath. But Lean wasn't like me, she wasn't like us, Blake. She couldn't love. Even me, her mother, she couldn't stand. She would cry from my touch,

demand Leira or anyone else to hold her, as if I, her mother, was not good enough. I could see it then, Lean growing to become my enemy, a hateful little monster in my life. I couldn't let that happen, I was her mother, I was responsible for making her good, for making sure she can feel what she should feel towards me. I had to make steps, and Blake, don't think this was easy for me. This hurt me more than it hurt Lean." Lynx said.

Blake listened, her pupils blown wide.

"Only way to make Lean appreciate me, love me as she should, was to show her just how much better I am for her, how better I can love her and fight for her, she needed to know I was the one who was on her side, not Leira, not rest of the world, it was me she should be grateful to, I, who gave birth to her. I had no choice, Blake, I took her powers away. It was only a matter of time before she used them against me, and it would be a sin, to turn against her mother. I helped her stay pure, I did that. I put her with the fairies only because I knew she would hate fairies, any witch does. She had to endure living a hard life, with those she doesn't fit in, with those who do not accept her, who take from her. She needed to learn respect. I didn't tell Leira what I planned, but she listened, she knows it's better if she does. I parted with two loves of my life, my wife, and my child, all for Lean, all to make sure she was a good person. I had Leira teach her how to behave, how to obey the rules, how to appreciate those who would help her. I knew she would start fighting against my powers when she reached adulthood, she would start getting suffocated, she would feel cornered, but I had no choice, she had to feel that. She had to know how hard life could be for her, so she could appreciate what she would have with me. You see Blake? I taught my own child by best methods I had. I had her learn through experience. I have her humility and manners and gratitude, when she had none. And then... we were close, so close. Only thing left was to make her sick. Because Lean never appreciated the life I gave to her, she had to know she could lose it. Sleeping sickness was completely harmless, but it did her so much good, Leira was giving me updates, telling me Lean has quit her social life, was lying in bed, falling asleep anywhere, and this Blake, this was where I would come in. I would find her, my lost child, when she needed me the most. I would cure her, I would take all the curses off, I would give her life back. I would reveal her powers to her, and save her from the world where she'd live suffocated, unknowing, weak and sick. I would become the greatest hero, her saviour, I would be the one she had to thank for everything. She would finally see me, as I deserve to be seen Blake, because I am the only one who can make sure Lean lives as she really should live. I am the one responsible for any capability of love she has, because she was born without it. But, what I didn't know, was that she already met a witch, that she was leaving the tribe in secret, to meet the witch, and Leira, that idiot, was scared to tell me, until you had already run away from her, and undid everything. Do you understand now, Blake? You took everything I worked for away from me. Everything. All the love

and effort I put into Lean, and you come in at the right moment, and take credit for it all. You took Lean's love through a setup, and it wasn't even your setup. You had to know, Blake, you're not that stupid to believe Lean could actually care for someone like you, you simply took my role, what I had intended to do, you robbed me of it. You should have known none of this will be forgiven."

Blake was speechless, and sick to her stomach. This had to be a really sick joke. Lynx was sick. If she really did do all this to Lean, for that kind of reason.. she was a twisted, sick witch.

"You're insane." Blake whispered weakly.

"You don't understand, Blake, you've never had a child. You'll understand one day. You'll understand why I had to do it. Maybe you'll have to do it too." Lynx said.

Blake rubbed her fingers through her hair, agitated. It was no good listening to Lynx, she was obviously out of her mind. Blake felt the need to explain that to her, that she wasn't right in what she's done, that it was far out of the realm of things witches would actually do to their children.

"You were wrong." Blake said. "Lean didn't hate the fairies. She did feel suffocated, but she liked them. You were wrong. And she didn't start.. liking me because of all the, curses, and sickness and whatnot. That's not.. how things work. We liked each other for who we are. It had nothing to do with you."

"Really, Blake? You think Lean liked you for who you are? What makes you so sure of that?" Lynx asked.

"I- " Blake stuttered. It was hard to explain. Lean never told her exactly what she liked about Blake, and Blake liked to think she was extremely likeable as a whole, and didn't need clarifications on this.

"It's the time we spent together, okay? We like being together, it's not because of some.. insane setup, we start liking other people because of how we feel around them." Blake managed, unsure if she described it well.

"And how exactly do you think Lean felt around you? Safe? Happy?" Lynx kept interrogating Blake, apparently enjoying that Blake was struggling to make answers.

"Yeah. I think she did feel safe and happy. And more." Blake said, clenching her fists. She was not going to let Lynx tell her about love, when she knew absolutely nothing of it.

Lynx laughed, and shook her head.

"It's inexperience, Blake, not understanding the first thing about the conditions under which you and Lean met. You were the only witch, only one of her kind she had met up to that point, except for Leira, but Leira was making a good pretense of a fairy. Oh, I can see it, were you the only one she had things in common with? Only one who thought the same way? First one she ever found? Do you really think, Blake, she would fall in love with first, evil little witch she found?" Lynx said menacingly.

"What are you trying to say about me?" Blake glared, offended.

"I'm trying to say, Lean had no choice, you were the only one of her kind, and then she was sick, and you saved her, and then she was alone, and you were all she had. She didn't choose you, you were just whatever was available. She was cornered into attaching herself to you to survive. You don't see it like I do, Blake. Lean has no capability to love, she can't feel anything towards you, she just used you, to feel something, to have someone who will run to save her over and over again. It's all she wanted from you, and you're a fool to think otherwise. Who would want you, Blake? Not even your mothers did."

Blake gaped at Lynx, shocked. She found herself at a loss of reply, felt her fingers shake, and turned her back on Lynx so she couldn't see the expression on Blake's face. That hurt. Blake bit her lip to calm herself down, that was a lie, how would Lynx know anything about Blake's mothers anyway? Blake was not abandoned, but nobody has actually clarified it, and Blake told nobody about secret nights when she wondered, if they saw her small baby form and walked away from it, leaving her behind. But it wasn't time to think about that, Lynx couldn't know anything about this, and if Blake was unlikeable, Lean wouldn't keep wanting her, and, besides, Lean wasn't just using Blake, Blake would know if that was the case, Lean was just in a bad situation, and Blake helped her, and..

But it was too hard to untangle from the mess of her thoughts.

"You see it now, don't you? Lean came to you as her last resort. If there was anyone else, any other witch, she would have left a long time ago. You were the only one stupid enough to chase her." Lynx continued.

"Shut up!" Blake yelled, pained.

"What is it, does it hurt to know the truth? You only feel a small fraction of pain I felt when Lean didn't care for me either, now you know how that feels. Lean isn't what you think she is, she is an evil, wretched, selfish, hungry little-"

"SHUT UP!" Blake yelled louder, now burying her face in her palms, upset. It wasn't true, none of what Lynx was saying wasn't true. Lean wasn't like that. Lean wouldn't do that.

"Come on, Blake. You think someone who cares about you would bring you into this situation? You're only here because of her. Because of what you get when you get involved with witches like her. She brought this onto you."

Blake shut her ears with her hands, and refused to listen.

"I'll let you think about that for a bit. Have fun." Lynx said, and walked out. Blake sat on the floor, trying to make something out of general mess in her head.

Lynx left Blake alone there, locked, for long periods of time. Sometimes she would bring food. Blake would refuse to eat in front of Lynx, and would demand to be freed, which Lynx ignored, and kept on pushing the doubts in Blake's mind. How come Lean wasn't trying to help her now? Lynx repeated over

and over Lean didn't want to see Blake, and Blake was finding it harder to argue back, because she started feeling a bit abandoned as well. Council would come rescue her eventually, right? They might be bitter that Blake ran back, right after being freed from the cell, but they would still come help, right? Why wasn't anyone coming?

It was hard for Blake to tell the time, Lynx kept the light outside dimmed to the point where Blake was always surrounded by twilight. To protest this, Blake summoned night-time into the room, and decided it was going to be night instead, at least Blake could control that much. Lynx seemed very cheerful when she found Blake wrapped in her own little night, and clapped for her, right before launching into a long monologue about how Blake's mothers might have wanted her if they had known what Blake was capable of. About how even Lean would maybe want her now. Blake curled her fists and tried to tune it out. It wasn't fair. Why did she have to listen to this. It was painful enough avoiding thinking it herself. Why did her mothers disappear? Why didn't they find Blake worthwhile taking with? If Blake was somehow unlikeable, then it made sense Lean wouldn't like her either. Lynx wouldn't stop going on and on about just how cornered and isolated Lean felt, and how she would run into the arms of anyone who'd be on her side, and Blake remembered, that time when Lean was sick, she was kissing Blake to ease her own pain, and Blake's heart ached. She wasn't going to be used. Blake wasn't going to get used.

## Chapter 24: Kinship

Lean was beside herself. One moment she was looking for Lynx, scared, worried, anxious, using all the courage in her chest to prepare to lie to Lynx, and the next moment a witch she had no knowledge of, grabbed her hand, yelled "Come on, it's our only chance!" and dragged her outside on her broom, out of the boundary, even as Lean was yelling and trying to pull away, frightened. The witch was heaving, not listening to Lean, looking at something black above the castle, groaning.

"What is that?" Lean yelled, pointing at the black sky.

"That's.. we have no time, we have to go. Shit." Witch said.

"Where's Blake?" Lean asked, confrontational.

"We have to leave her. Come." Witch said.

"No." Lean stood her ground, and witch rolled her eyes, exhausted.

"Listen, Lean, Blake got here to help you out, and if we stay, both you and Blake will be captured. Blake would want you to leave with me, now." Witch said, and pulled Lean with her, dragging her away from the castle. Lean still tried to pull away, her wings apparently not much use when flying against witch's broom.

"How do you know me? You know Blake too. Who are you?" Lean said, taken aback.

"I'm Dana. I'm the head of the council. Blake told me everything. We'll come back for her. I promise." Dana said.

"Why can't we take her with us now?" Lean asked, her voice desperate.

"We can't escape Lynx if she notices us." Dana answered, pulling Lean harder.

"I don't want to go without Blake." Lean was stubborn, but soon she realized it was no use. Dana wasn't listening anymore, and their speed became too much for Lean to resist.

"We were supposed to leave together." Lean whispered, looking back at the black sky, castle fading from view.

"I'm sorry." Dana said. She sounded sorry.

"Where are you taking me." Lean demanded.

"To a safe place. Once we get there, we can make a plan to rescue Blake. She's going to be alright. She's a tough one." Dana said.

"Was this a part of her plan?" Lean asked, wondering why Blake wouldn't tell her.

"I don't think so, no. She didn't know I followed her." Dana said.

"You followed her? Why?" Lean asked.

"To stop her from getting caught." Dana sounded less irritated the further away they were from the castle.

"She was demanding to go back for you pretty much entire time, since we freed her from the cell. I knew that's where she'd go." Dana continued.

"You freed her from the cell? Why was she locked up?" Lean asked, upset.

"Lynx did it. Probably to stop her from interfering with you." Dana said, sighing.

Lean went silent. She closed her eyes, and curled her fists in pain. This was now a second time Blake was locked up in a cell, because of her. Lean knew it was all because of her, she and Blake being chased, having to cancel their adventures, and go seek a shelter.. all because someone wanted Lean.

"Someone is after me." Lean said, her voice trembling. "Someone cursed me, and now.. everyone who gets involved with me, end up suffering."

"It's Lynx." Dana informed her.



"It is her, isn't it." Lean sighed in acceptance.

"I thought.. it must be her, she feels so.. wrong, like there's something.. off in the air around her." Lean tried to describe the uncomfortable, anxious feeling she got every time Lynx got close to her. Like there was someone standing above her, watching her every move, waiting to attack."

"What did she do to you? Blake was worried about you." Dana talked, apparently without thinking much about what she was saying, she was focused on getting them away from the castle.

"Not.. much. Talked to me. I don't know. I just felt like I was always doing something wrong, thinking wrong thoughts, having wrong feelings. She made it seem as if.. there's something wrong with me. Like everyone should hate me. But she wants me, so .. I should be grateful. But I'm not. I can't." Lean said.

"I see." Dana said shortly.

"When can we get Blake?" Lean asked, tentatively.

"You're just like her." Dana smiled. "We'll hear out your story first, we need you to confirm some things about Lynx, and we might have some information you don't, so we'll fill you in."

Lean didn't reply. She needed the information, but getting Blake safe felt more urgent, wasn't it selfish for Lean to fly away when Blake needed her? Lean tugged herself back again.

"Forget it." Dana said. "Even if you went back, you can't do anything to Lynx. She's too powerful even for me. And you're not even trained. I've heard you've lived as a fairy for most of your life."

Lean couldn't take it anymore, and she burst into tears. It took Dana by surprised, and she slowed down, stopped, looked at Lean, sighed, and gently palmed Lean's cheek.

"Don't worry. We will get her. I promise. This is out of your hands. I know it must hurt. We'll help you get her. You won't be alone." Dana said, soothingly.

Lean's breathing was stuttering, and tears still falling down her cheeks but she nodded, still feeling like things couldn't get much worse. Just how much longer will Blake have to suffer, for her? Why was it always like this? Blake always rescued her, but when Blake was in danger, Lean could only cry about it? How much longer will Blake tolerate this? At one point, Blake will realize, that Lean is just much more work than she's worth, and give up.

"Come on." Dana spoke again, petting Lean's shoulder. "You can do this. You'll be safe with me."

Lean looked down, heavy rock on top of her heart. She followed Dana's lead halfheartedly, letting Dana pull her along. Lean missed Blake so much. Lean couldn't find her place, not with the fairies, but not with the witches either, but with Blake, it felt like she was home. Blake made her feel like she belonged. Being pulled along and comforted by a stranger made Lean feel weak, like a child who knew nothing of the world, had no strength to take anything on her own. With Blake it was different. Blake made it feel like it being weak or strong didn't even matter.

The castle of eternal night left no impression on Lean, she let herself be guided inside, depressed and failing to pay attention to her surroundings. She did notice the place was made to be comfortable, warm, friendly, but she didn't care.

Hearing voices of her mothers, however, took her by a complete surprise. She looked around wildly, trying to figure out where they were coming from, and found it was a closed off room, and Synthia and Leira were arguing. What were they doing here? And they were yelling! Lean had never heard her two mothers yell like this before. Leira was usually winning everything over with her sweet talk, and Synthia had never even told her no before, Lean could feel some tension sometimes, but Synthia would reassure her everything was fine. Now, however, there were teary voices and shouts and blame being exchanged between the two. Lean heard her own name mentioned, and opened the door, determined to find out just what was going on.

"Lean!" Synthia yelled and breathlessly ran to give Lean a hug. Leira glared at both of them, unmoving. "Are you okay? Are you hurt? I heard you were with Lynx, what happened?" Synthia swarmed her with questions, but Lean didn't feel like explaining it.

"What is going on here?" Lean demanded instead.

"Lean." Synthia pulled away, and put her hands on Lean's shoulders, looking at her anxiously.

"This doesn't concern you." Leira said off-handedly, and looked away.

Synthia gasped in disbelief, and turned to Leira again.

"You are not to speak to her like that! Your own daughter, she has the right to know!" Synthia yelled at Leira, and Lean was shocked, she had never see Synthia yell like that. Synthia was timid and smiling, and had never even raised her voice at Lean before.

"You tell her then! You tell her just how much you knew, did you know Lynx was visiting us, too? Did you know what we did, right under your nose? Tell her how much you hid from her too, let's see if she still likes you then!" Leira yelled back furiously.

"Lean, I didn't!" Synthia said desperately looking at Lean.

"I don't care." Lean said to both of them. "Just tell me what you're doing here."

Synthia looked at Lean shocked, pain evident in her eyes.

"Lynx had me in a cell. Synthia felt it was on her to contact the council to bring me here. And now I can't leave here, because they like keeping me prisoner too." Leira said, looking at Lean coldly.

Lean had more questions, but right now, she couldn't stand one more second of her mothers, and she slammed the door shut, leaving them to argue it out. She could hear Synthia heading after her, and then Leira stopping her and saying something about how Lean's had enough of that today.

Lean's world felt different, destabilized. Her mothers not only lied to her, but now they also yelled at each other, hid things from each other, knew about Lynx, and Leira was in a cell, apparently. So nothing made sense anymore. Nothing was ever going to be normal again. And Blake was...

Lean rubbed her eyes, and realized Dana was still standing next to her, apparently about to comfort her again.

"Don't." Lean glared at Dana, and Dana was about to say something but they were interrupted by another witch walking in on them.

"Hey, Dana! Where were you, we were looking for you? We can't find Blake either, we think she went back for Lean again! Who's that?" Witch asked, greeting Dana with a friendly shoulder tap.

"This is Lean. We lost Blake. Lynx has her now." Dana replied, grim.

"Oh." Witch was a little taken aback. "Yeah that kid wasn't gonna sit still. Nice to meet you, Lean. Blake was really pissed we made her wait before she went to get you. I'm Dareena, I got her out." Dareena said.

Lean refused to look at her, and stormed right past the both of them, reaching a big circular room with seats, tables and food. There were more witches there, and Lean felt more irritation. She wanted to be alone, she wanted a room to break down, to yell at herself, at the world. She didn't want any more witches, or fairies, or anyone who wouldn't give her whatever she needed to get Blake out.

"Is there any place I can be alone?" Lean turned back, looking directly at Dana.

"Come." Dana said, and lead Lean to a solitary, room where here was a map with a small x on it laying on the table. Lean shut the door, and threw herself on the bed. It smelled like Blake.

Lean buried her face into the pillow and cried her heart out.

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It was a while later Lean was starting to collect her thoughts. It was helplessness that bothered her most, and after crying about it, she was ready to do something about it as well. She would find a way to rescue Blake if it's the last thing she did.

Lean also felt guilty, for acting out on witches who essentially, saved her. She knew it was rude to storm off, refuse to talk. She had hurt Synthia too. She had a lot to apologize for. Yet, she couldn't help doing it all, when she was as far on the edge she couldn't be expected to act polite, right?

There was a knock on the door.

"It's Dana." Lean could hear through the wood.

Lean sighed. That was a first chance to apologize.

"You can come in." Lean said.

"Thanks." Dana said after she opened the door. "Are you alright?"

"I will be." Lean said. "I'm sorry for.. earlier. I shouldn't have acted like that."

"That's quite alright." Dana said, and sat down. "Blake was in this room."

"Yeah I... realized that." Lean said.

Dana looked at her, trying to figure out her face expression. Then she sighed.

"I can tell this is all overwhelming for you. You were not raised as a witch, so this must be alarming. But, we need you to tell us your side of the story. We need to know what happened to you, in order to plan our actions. Can you tell us?" Dana asked.

Lean nodded, looking down.

"Come to the big room you saw earlier, when you're ready. We'll be waiting for you." Dana said.

"I'm ready now." Lean said, and stood up.

"After me, then." Dana stood up as well, looking relieved, and guided Lean to the circular room, where witches were already joined in a circle, all looking at Lean, not hiding their curiosity.

Lean felt as if she was analyzed, and it made her self-conscious. She was tempted to start glowing again, just so all of them would be forced to avert their eyes, but decided she shouldn't be rude, again. They stood up as Lean approached, and greeted her in a friendly way.

Lean couldn't smile back at them, but shook a few hands, and sat down. Dana sat next to her, and held a hand on her shoulder.

"Blake told us when you two met, you were living as a fairy, and fairly ill. Could you tell us how it happened, for you?" Dana asked, carefully.

Lean felt uncomfortable, sitting with the witches. Feeling of not belonging there was even stronger than one she had with the fairies, it was unfamiliar. Circle was too tight, there was nobody in the center. She stood up.

"Can I make the light fire?" Lean asked, turning to look at Dana.

Dana looked back with some surprise, then nodded, saying to the rest of the witches "Fairies make them, they're beautiful. Move back."

And the witches scooped away, giving Lean space so she could cast a bright, colorful light, shining brighter than all the fires in the castle. Lean realized right away witches had trouble looking at it, their eyes sensitive to light, so she toned it down, and flew above. Now that felt better, familiar. It was like story night in the fairy tribe, except the crowd was smaller, and less loud, less shiny. Lean was used to telling her stories like this, flying in the light, proudly announcing her new learnings.

"I lived as a fairy." Lean started talking.

She told them about her mothers, Leira and Synthia, and how much she loved them. Fairy tribe was her home, and she was happy with her life, except for a few things that were off - her wings, her lack of

familiar, her thirst for knowledge, for adventures. Her sickness. She talked about meeting Blake, feeling better, then falling critically ill, being locked up, then rescued by Blake, and saved by Mjord. Her heart hurt when she was explaining how close to death she had felt that time, how narrowly she was saved from it. She shook, and Dana looked as if she was about to fly up, but Lean stopped her.

Then she continued, telling them about Blake getting tracked and trapped, Lean flying to find her, meeting Lynx for the first time, hearing the truth about her parentage, flying back to verify it. Her mothers admitting it. It got hard to talk again. She focused on happiness she felt when she found the library - she missed the library, and she was about to go to sea, when they were tracked, flew to Lynx again, and then Blake disappeared, and Lean was trapped, until now.

"That's all I know. Dana told me, on the way here, it was Lynx who cursed me in the first place, and I need to know why." Lean looked at Dana, and flew down, closing the light fire.

Lean felt lightheaded, dizzy from everything she just said to these complete strangers who presented themselves as "Council" and wanted her story. And yet her heart felt lighter, as if some of the burden fell off with her words, her story wasn't only hers to carry anymore, surely some of these witches would help, would know more.

"Thank you, Lean." Dareena said, and took Lean's hand as she landed. "You should hear it, we are happy to have you. You are a part of our world, Lean, and council will be there for you, whatever you need." Lean frowned.

"But I am not like you. I don't know how to be a witch, I only know how to be a fairy. I don't think I fit in with you at all." Lean said.

"That's not your fault. We're all responsible for not realizing there was one of us hidden within fairies. We should have claimed you as our own long before this, I, on behalf of the council, apologize for not being there where you needed us." Dareena said.

Lean was confused, and a little alarmed. These witches were declaring kinship based on being the same kind, but Lean was not like them. She was a bit like Blake, but that was it. This wasn't a place for Lean, it was place for witches raised witches, with their culture and clans and, whatever witches knew. Lean had only a bit of idea, and hoped the rest didn't expect her to assimilate or anything. Lean wished to stay Lean.

"That's okay." Lean said, frowning. "I am grateful for being rescued from Lynx, anyway."

Dareena looked at Dana, apparently annoyed with something.

"This one is too polite." Dareena said, as if reprimanding Dana for it.

Dana shrugged in a 'this is not my fault' manner.

"Don't worry, you're one of us, and you'll feel it in time." Dareena assured Lean, and then sat back down, apparently satisfied.

"We have some idea of why Lynx did it." Dana said suddenly, watching Lean, who sat down as well, still feeling a bit edgy, but focused on Dana right away.

"You can use the power of light. You inherited her powers." Dana said.

Lean thought back, and remembered, back in a different timeline, Blake sitting on a mountain, telling her about inherited powers, and how she couldn't figure out hers. So Lean did inherit powers too, and it was, light.

"You mean, this isn't fairy light?" Lean asked to make sure, and emitted slight glow from her fingertips.

"It's not." Dana assured her. "Blake told us you were able to make explosions of light, this is not something fairies can commonly do. Lynx's powers can control the sunlight, she can intensify the light to the point of blinding anyone in her presence, permanently, and she can shut it out so the rays of light no longer hit the earth, causing complete darkness. We can assume you can do it too."

Lean doubted this. It was true she could make intense light when she wanted to, but to shut out sunlight? That was insane.

"You don't have to try it right now." Dana said, assuming Lean was going to try. "But it gives us a bit of insight in what Lynx is thinking."

"So what if I inherited her powers?" Lean asked, still not understanding.

"Power to control the sunlight is one unrivaled by anything else, there's bare few who could oppose her. But you have the same power, and this makes you immune. She might be seeing you as a danger to her, it would certainly explain why she sealed your powers, and made you believe you had none in the first place."

Lean gaped at Dana, shocked. To even imagine Lean could be a danger to anyone, was ridiculous. Lean was as harmless as a fairy, all she could do was cast a bit of light. Blake was more efficient to deal with danger, but, even together, most they could do was run. To think that someone would seal Lean off, just for the assumption she was dangerous, was.. it was too stupid.

"That can't be it." Lean said, dismissive.

"She does look harmless." Dareena said to Dana, in a humorous tone.

Dana cast her a glare, and turned back to Lean.

"I'm not saying we know this is the reason, it's just a theory. We'll find out more, but we are fairly sure she's the only one who had the power to do this, and it turns out, one of the few who even knew you existed. Nobody knew Lynx had a child, she kept you hidden from the start. It's possibly only Lynx and

Leira knew about your existence, and from what we got from Leira, she was complicit, but not knowing why this was being done to you." Dana said.

Lean's expression turned dark thinking of Leira, she felt betrayed all over again. Leira knew exactly what was going on, it was probably part of the reason her and Synthia were fighting now.

"I don't want to see my mothers while I'm here." Lean said, her heart painful.

"We'll make sure you don't." Dareena said, understanding.

"Thanks." Lean said.

"About Blake." Dana said, catching Lean's attention right away.

"We think Lynx took her to stop her from helping you reach your full power, she is the one who caused the undoing of the spell, it's probable Lynx never intended for you to know you were a witch. If she thinks Blake is trying to rise you to power, she would separate you two with any means possible." Dana said.

"Is that why Lynx had her locked in a cell?" Lean asked, angrily.

This was all, so stupid, both Lean and Blake put through all of this, for some imaginary power they didn't even have.

"That's what we think." Dana said, unsure. "We were contacted by Synthia, who informed us there was a witch in the fairy tribe, and this witch was being held captive by Lynx. She urged us to rescue her right away, and we tracked her magic to Lynx's cell. Blake was in there too, so we took them both. We barely got Blake to talk to us, she was in a rush to rescue you." Dana explained.

"Leira was in Lynx's cell too." Lean said, trying to put pieces together. "But why?"

"From what Leira is saying, Lynx blames her for letting you escape. Lynx isn't known for fairness. She was on our radar for a while, for weird experiments on animals, but we had no proof of her doing anything this severe until now."

It was difficult, trying to imagine Leira being imprisoned by Lynx. Leira didn't seem like someone you could punish, or blame for things. And it turns out, even that was Lean's fault, because Lean went where she wanted. Lean's heart felt heavy again.

"Do you think.. if Lynx got me, she would.. stop doing this to people? She would let Blake go?" Lean asked quietly.

Dana and Dareena both looked at Lean in alarm, and other witches in the circle all tried to explain at once, it was not the case. "Lynx would keep doing it no matter what." Dana said at last.

Lean still felt uncomfortable.

"We will banish her, but first we have to make sure she has no hostages. Once she's banished, she will no longer have any powers, and to witches at least, she will be harmless. She'll be forced to leave her castle and live isolated from our kind." Dana explained.

"What can I do?" Lean asked.

"First we have to make sure Lynx never captures you again. It's possible she's keeping Blake only as bait, because she knows you're likely to come for her, as you once did. You are not to come anywhere close to Lynx, or our hope of defeating her is grim." Dana replied.

"But I need to rescue Blake." Lean insisted.

"If we do what Lynx is most afraid of, you will play a vital role in rescuing Blake, and banishing Lynx."

Dareena said, winking.

"What is she afraid of?" Lean asked.

"You claiming your powers and using them against her." Dana said, and stood up. "There's a place in here you can use for training, and I can show you how."

Lean doubted she'd be able to do anything against Lynx, and looked at Dana nervously. Did Dana seriously expect of Lean to suddenly be able to stop the sun?

"If I am your only hope, we're doomed." Lean said ominously.

"You're not." Dareena smiled at her, and tapped her back. "We'll figure this out, it would just be easier with you on our side. And you do want Lynx banished, don't you? You get a say, you're the victim of a fair part of her crimes."

Lean thought about that, and nodded. "I don't want her to be able to do things like this again."

"There you go." Dareena grinned. "Dana, why do you get to train her? I want to see."

"It's dangerous." Dana said, and then looked at Lean. "Not for you. But whoever is with you. Wish we had Blake to do it, she can guard off the light."

"You can't?" Lean asked, confused. Blake seemed to have easy time covering her eyes with barriers to not get blinded.

"I can't. Blake has inherited power of night darkness, she can stop the light in ways we can't." Dana said.

"Oh." Lean said. So Blake did find out what her powers were. Lean wondered how Blake felt about it, she must have been thrilled. Lean would ask her about it later.

"There's a chance." Dana said, in a warning tone. "That Lynx will come here for you. If this happens, you must stay out of her sight, at any cost. If she takes you, we might not be able to get you back. Last time it only worked because she was preoccupied with Blake."

Lean nodded, thinking she wouldn't want to get in Lynx's vision of sight anyway. She felt haunted, tainted by her connection to Lynx. Lynx was making Lean a liability to everyone. If they only surrendered Lean, as



maybe they should, everything would be okay again. Even if they all argued against it. And Blake would be safe too. Did Blake blame Lean for all this too? Lean hoped not, but wouldn't blame Blake if she did. Lean was lost in her thoughts, failing to notice the meeting had already ended. By the time she looked up, only Dana was standing there, waiting.

"You need to eat and sleep. And then, whenever you're ready." Dana said.

Lean stood up without saying anything, and let Dana lead her to a meal, and then back to her bed. Even as she was exhausted, her head was so full of worry, it took hours to fall asleep.

## Chapter 25: An offer

Dana had taken Lean all over the castle, introduced her to every witch, and showed her every room and object witches used. Lean knew Dana wanted her to feel at home, but Lean didn't. All the fairy things were missing. The canopies, the moss beds, the transparent ceiling, the domes made out of living trees. Witches did have books though, and if Lean wasn't so anxious to start training, she would have read them all.

Dana made sure Lean was properly rested and fed, before bringing her into a big empty room filled with light.

"Before we start." Dana stopped in the middle of the room, and turned to look at Lean. "You should know this power goes against nature."

Lean frowned. She didn't like going against nature, nor having powers that would allow her to do so.

"If you use it without regard of what you're doing to the world around you, nature might turn on you, the way it did on Lynx." Dana continued.

"What do you mean?" Lean asked.

"Well, by the nature of your power, you can deny light to the trees, the plants, the earth. You can also use the light to scorch them, and harm them beyond growing again. Lynx already did this, and trees will no longer talk to her. She cannot communicate with plants anymore, or grow them with her own will. If you use your power, even once, against nature, you will lose your bond to it." Dana said.

"How do I make sure I'm not doing it?" Lean asked.

"You only use it for short periods, for seconds. You never use the light to full capacity, never to overheat a plant. You make sure you never cover the ground with darkness for more than plants could endure." Dana said.

"Lynx used it to destroy plants?" Lean asked, nauseated.

"I don't think Lynx cared for a second what happens to plants." Dana replied.

"Wouldn't it be better if I don't use a power like that at all?" Lean asked.

"You can do whatever you like with your powers. They're for you." Dana replied. "If you want to help us get Blake, we'll need your powers though."

Lean nodded, and they started the training. Dana explained that she would be completely blinded if Lean used the full capacity of light, so Lean would have to figure that one on her own. If she removed the light completely, once again, Dana won't be able to see anything, but Lean would.

"You're not trying to absorb the light, but stop it completely. You need to lift a barrier from the ground upwards, and forbid the light to fall. Have you tried making a barrier before?" Dana asked.

"No." Lean answered.

It turned out, for Lean who never used witch powers except the light, it was hard to start with barriers. Dana sat down on the ground with her, and gave her complex explanations to how she could create a space light couldn't penetrate, integrate it with a physical barrier, or even a living thing, to create boundaries and keep it from dissipating in the air. It reminded Lean all too well of barrier once made around a small room in a tower, where she was locked up, sick, and Lean knew it was how it was made, knew it was Leira who put it in place, and now she, Lean, was learning how to do it. It made her nauseous.

By the end of the day, Lean had a clue to why Blake didn't like training, it was exhausting, slow, and Lean could barely dim the lights a little, in glass box Dana had given to her for practice. Lean took it with herself to the bedroom, and tried to do it over and over, until she fell asleep. By that time half of the box was somewhat darker, but light rays were still flowing through stubbornly. How did Blake learn this?

Third day practicing, Lean was exhausted, and desperate. All of her fears were true, she was no use. Even if she could do this, she didn't see how exactly it would help her defeat Lynx, wasn't Lynx immune to this, just like Lean was? Lean waited for Dana to lose patience with her, to give up and tell Lean to just forget it, but Dana was still encouraging and optimistic, as if Lean was doing great. Lean knew she wasn't. She could create light easily, even intensify it to the point where whole room was as bright as if the sun was inside, but shutting the light out was next to impossible.

Dana kept thinking of new ways to try it, told Lean to get angry at the light, try to communicate with it, think of reflected light which also had to be shut down in order for complete dark. Lean was already

exhausted with attempts, when there was a call for Dana, and Dana acted bit weird, looked at Lean, forcefully grinned and promised to bring snacks on her way back. Lean looked at her leave hurriedly, and didn't feel like staying here was a particularly good idea. She went for the door. Locked. Dana locked her in.

Something was going on. Lean ran toward the window, trying to see if something happened, and there was a patch of the sky that felt wrong, empty, as if the sky was refusing to exist around the that piece of pand. It was Lynx, she was there, and Dana didn't want Lean to come out. But what if Lynx found her anyway? Lynx could blind them all in more than one way, what if she penetrated the castle and found Lean locked in here, unable to escape? And what about Blake, was she still in the castle? If Lynx was here, maybe Blake was left unguarded, maybe Lean could go save her now. Yes, that had to work, distracting Lynx with the council, and saving Blake, wasn't that how Lean was saved too? Lean tried to break through the window, but her powers did just about nothing to glass, and it turned out window was protected against breaking by magic. Great.

Click. Lean turned towards the door, realized they unlocked, Dareena was peering inside, and motioned Lean to come and follow her.

"Lynx is here." Dareena whispered when Lean got close, and Lean nodded, already knowing.

"It's going to be alright, I'm just going to take you where she can't find you." Dareena said. "Don't worry, Dana will keep her occupied."

"Okay." Lean said, and waited for her opportunity to fly where she wouldn't be seen. She was going to the castle, her heart was set.

"You're not thinking anything rash, are you?" Dareena stopped and looked at her face suspiciously.

"I- no." Lean attempted at lying.

"Tell me what you're about to do." Dareena demanded, and gripped Lean's hand.

"Hey-!" Lean struggled, and glared at Dareena. "If Lynx is here we can get Blake!" She revealed her plan, half-angry that others haven't thought of it yet.

Dareena sighed, and shook her head, sadly.

"I think.. Blake is with her." Dareena said, and Lean's heart jumped.

"Let me see her! Is she hurt? Is she alright?" Lean demanded.

"We can't see her, Lynx has her in some sort of.. dark sphere. Maybe you could see her, I don't know."

Dareena whispered, trying to catch the sounds from below. "But anyway, we have to fly, if Lynx gets in we have to make sure you're not around."

"I'm not going anywhere without seeing Blake." Lean said angrily.

"You're in danger here, Lean, you can't help Blake if Lynx gets you." Dareena tried to reason.

"I can't help anyway! I can't even- Just let me see her!" Lean yelled, and Dareena looked alarmed, Lean's voice carried.

"Okay, okay, just, talk silently, if she hears you- come." Dareena said, and pulled Lean into a room with big closets, then rummaged around them, looking for something. She pulled out a big blue cloak.

"Put this on. I don't think Lynx has strong tracking powers, she shouldn't be able to tell.. " Dareena said, sounding stressed, and Lean put on the cloak, covering her entire body, and her head as well. Her vision was limited, but at least she was well hidden. Dareena put some kind of barrier over her, Lean was about to ask what it did, but Dareena shushed her and pulled her into the corridor that led to the front tower.

"You'll be able to see them through the window. But you have to promise me, you'll stay inside. If you come out, you're lost." Dareena said, her voice grim.

"I'll stay." Lean said, unsure, not meaning to say it like a promise.

Lean peeked through the window, and she couldn't see anything at first. It was eternal night outside, and her eyes took a bit to adjust to the dim firelight, lighting up the visitor. She realized Lynx was standing there, only few feet below, could hear her voice.

"... still haven't changed the ambient, but I do find it charming." Lynx was saying.

"We consider it our trademark." Lean could hear Dana's voice, but couldn't see Dana, maybe Dana was somewhere protected, talking through a barrier.

"You've gotten so much stronger, Dana." Lynx's voice continued. "I'm starting to worry you would feel the freedom to try to steal some of my visitors, but you wouldn't do such a thing, would you?"

Lynx's voice was elegant and sweet, yet it made hair on Lean's neck stand up. It was threatening. Lean looked around for Blake, but there wasn't anything to see, the space behind Lynx was too dark.

"I'm sure I wouldn't." Dana said.

"That's reassuring. Now, I happened upon a witch I felt you might know, and I'm willing to trade it for... something of mine you have." Lynx said, and Lean realized Lynx was talking about her.

"I can't say I have anything of yours." Dana said, confident in her words.

"You would be wise to rethink that. Otherwise, I can't say what could happen to... this one." Lynx said.

And Lean saw it then, a large black sphere, it was too dark to see through, but Lean could feel it, everything, the shape of Blake's hair, her face expression, her black clothing, the curl of her fists, her body wrapped in itself. Dareena had to stop Lean from shouting out, whispered a strong "SHHH" with her hand on Lean's mouth. Lean was shuddering. Blake felt wrong. Lean knew if Blake was anything close to herself, she would be fighting, fired up and yelling rude things at anyone around, but Blake was instead curled up, her face in her arms, as if she'd given up.

"If something happened to her, you could make an enemy of the council, I'm sure you wouldn't want that." Dana said, calmly.

"It must be killing you, Dana." Lynx said. "That you can't defeat me. You're the only barrier-breaker strong enough to break mine, but you can't lift your finger against me, can you? And you're supposed to be head of the council. That must be painful for you. Such a weak, useless head, you can't even protect one of your own. Can you even see her? She doesn't even reach out to you. She knows you'll fail her."

"Don't project your shortcomings, Lynx, it doesn't fit you." Dana said, and Lean could hear a hint of a smile in her voice.

"We both know I could blind you in an instant, but I don't want that, Dana, I only want my beloved daughter, and you should know better than to keep a child away from her mother. You don't want to be testing your strength against me today, do you?" Lynx threatened.

"I wasn't aware you had a daughter." Dana said, with some hint of surprise. "How old is she?"

"Do not pretend, Dana. I will curse the entire council if needed, to get her back. And your young one will not be grateful for you to never even try to help her, you're all she has, and she really doesn't have a lot, does she?" Lean could see Lynx's head moving as she laughed.

"You could say she has nothing." Lynx continued, taunting Dana.

"One may say anything they please." Dana agreed, and she sounded different, Lean felt her voice sounded wrong.

"I don't know how you live with yourself, helpless like a little fly, just watching those you swore to protect wither away. Least you could do would be to free this child, and then maybe, you'd have something to be proud of. Keeping what's not yours and denying others their own is.. selfish of you." Lynx said.

Lean would have jumped out if Dareena wasn't holding her tight, and Dareena was shaking as well.

"Let's go." Dareena said, pulling Lean away, but Lean was only looking at Blake, horrified.

"What's wrong with her? What did Lynx do?" Lean whispered desperately at Dareena, wanting answers.

"I don't know." Dareena said, sounding just as upset.

There was light outside, and Dareena hid her eyes, and crouched down, leaving Lean to run back to the window, just on time to see the sky glowing, and Lynx leaving, taking the dark sphere, and Blake in it, with her.

Lean opened the window, yelled, but nobody seemed to hear her. That must have been what Dareena was putting over her, sound barrier, but Dareena could evidently hear her, because she gripped her, and didn't allow her to fly out, to follow.

"I need to check on Dana." Dareena said, and took Lean with her, apparently conscious that Lean would fly away immediately, if unsupervised. Lean let herself be pulled, Blake's sunken form still flickering in her mind.

Dana was lying down on the floor, right at the entrance, looking at the ceiling. Other witches swarmed around her, but she tried to shoo them away with movements of her arms, and Dareena told them all to make space, and kneeled next to Dana, taking her hand, tapping her shoulders, checking her torso and legs for injuries.

"She knew." Dana said, still staring at the ceiling.

"She was just guessing." Dareena said, and put her hand on Dana's cheek. "She was wrong."

Dana looked away, pain evident on her face. "I hate her."

"We should get somewhere private." Dareena said, and easily scooped Dana up in her arms, and carried her, still holding onto the edge of Lean's cloak. "Lean, you can come with us. If you fly away now I will not forgive you."

Dareena carried Dana into a private room, placed her to sit on the bed, and then pressed their foreheads together, hands sliding through Dana's hair.

"It was all lies. None of it was true. You were great back there. You let nothing show." Dareena talked gently, and Lean felt like an intruder, it was obviously a private moment, but Lean wasn't allowed to walk away from there either.

"But I feel horrible!" Dana protested, pulling away to look in Dareena's eyes. "I couldn't even.. goddess, I want to beat her so badly!"

"You don't have to do it alone." Dareena said, and then, unexpectedly, she kissed Dana, and Dana kissed back. Lean blushed and looked away, but she could hear them, lying down on the bed, kissing, Dareena murmuring soothing words and Dana accepting them, calming down.

"That was the last time she spoke to you like that." Dareena said fiercely.

"She really.. got me." Dana said, taking a shaky breath, and then burying her head in Dareena's neck, groaning. "Uh.. all of this in front of Lean, huh.."

"Hey, Lean is still here." Dareena said, sounding back to her spirits. "That was the whole point. You did it babe. The fairy witch is safe."

"But the night witch isn't." Dana murmured into Dareena, who kissed her again.

"She will be." Dareena said softly, but with promise.

Lean felt it was safe to look at them again, they were talking about Lean and Blake after all, but Lean didn't feel like joining that conversation. Is this what Lynx had been doing to Blake? It only took few minutes to bring Dana into this state, and apparently she guessed exactly what words would distress

Dana the most. Is that what Blake was listening, for days? But Dana had Dareena, who consoled her immediately, and Blake.. was still alone with her.

Lean imagined what Blake must be going through, and for what reason, and felt heat rising up inside of her. She was enraged. Lynx did this to Blake, for no reason at all, no reason that Blake has to be alone, suffering and broken. Lean had seen enough now, enough to know that Lynx needed to be dealt with.

Dana's voice was still trembling a little as she answered to Dareena, and it made Lean angrier. Dana, too, there was no reason for this either. Lean raised her hands, and the room went pitch black.

Both Dana and Dareena gasped. Blake was right, this was easy. Lean just wasn't properly angry before.

But now, she felt that every particle of light in the castle came from Lynx, and anything from Lynx had to run from Lean's rage.

"Lean? You did this?" Dareena asked, sounding worried.

Lean remembered others saw nothing with the absence of light, but Lean could see them both, not as if light reflected off of them, but as if they were masses made out of heat and edges and noises and pulse. She could see the layout of the room, even if not very clearly, enough to walk securely, enough to not bump into anything. Lean wanted more, to shut off entire castle from light, it was helping rage in her get satisfaction, and as her fists curled, she knew light was escaping everywhere.

"Lean?" Dana asked, now sounding scared, and Lean realized they both thought Lynx was back.

"Sorry." Lean said, and came back to herself. She pulled the barrier back inside, and realize she was gasping for air. It pulled a lot out of her, a lot of rage was inside the barrier of darkness, and Lean hadn't even known it was there.

Dareena and Dana both gave out a big sigh of relief, and hugged each other close again.

"You did it." Dana said, talking into Dareena, but Lean knew it was for her.

"How do I use it to beat Lynx?" Lean demanded.

"You're not going to fight." Dana said softly.

"What?" Lean asked, outraged.

"Hey, calm down." Dana said, sounding uneasy. "You are the only one who can even the ground. If she tries to blind us with her light, you can block it. If she blinds us with lack of light, you can introduce the light back in. She's fully trained, and very experienced, so she could win against you within seconds, but if we all fight, and she doesn't have the advantage of light.. we can get her."

"When are we going?" Lean asked.

"See, now she sounds more like the night witch." Dareena sneered at Dana, who shut her up by nipping at her lip.

"When?" Lean asked again, angry.

"As soon as we test your abilities and.. gather the party." Dana said.

"Who else is coming?" Lean asked.

"We asked for some volunteers, and.. Mjord and Matilda are coming, they want to help." Dana managed, between Dareena's kisses.

Lean ran towards the window hearing this, wanting to see if they were already close.

"Mjord and Matilda, when are they coming?" Lean asked, feeling her heart ease up. Mjord and Matilda meant safety. It meant things were going to be fine. Lean felt nervous about seeing them again, last time she was a fairy, and now, she could stop the sunlight from reaching the ground.

"Soon." Dana said.

"You're not going to fly without us now, right? You can- you can go-" Dareena said, with devious intentions.

"Wait, don't tell anyone- about this." Dana said, pulling away from Dareena to speak.

"What, that you're secretly so passionately protective you'll never be sure you're strong enough?"

Dareena teased her, earning a nudge in her torso, to which she responded by kissing Dana again, murmuring "But I love it."

Lean muttered something sounding like "Don't worry I won't tell" and she was out of there, letting Dareena use whatever method she wanted to comfort Dana. Lean would do that, and more, the second she had Blake by her side again. And it would be soon. Lean glued her face to the window, waiting. Two flying figures appeared at the horizon.

## Chapter 26: Soul Stone

Mjord and Matilda both hugged Lean so tight she couldn't remember being hugged like it before, and Mjord reprimanded her for not calling them for help before, and then launched into a long rant about Blake and how many times she got in trouble before, that Mjord didn't think it was even serious until she got word from Dana about Blake being actually imprisoned.

"I was already indebted to you." Lean said, sighing.



"Lean Greenwood, you cannot be indebted to me. If you're in trouble I want to know. All of us feel bad for not freeing you of the curse before, you can count on us." Mjord assured her, but Lean felt uneasy still.

"You have a place in Mjord's heart, Lean." Matilda said, and squeezed Lean's hands. "Have you gotten used to witch powers?"

"I..." Lean started, and realized she didn't have an answer. "I only learned to use them now."

"You learned your inheritance?" Mjord asked, interested.

"It's light, I can stop it, or intensify it, like Lynx." Lean said.

Mjord and Matilda both looked stunned, they shared a glance of realization, and then stared at Lean.

"You- didn't inherit them from Lynx, did you?" Matilda asked.

Lean sighed.

"I did. Lynx is my mother." Lean said.

Mjord had to sit down, and hold her forehead in her palms, trying to deal with tough news.

"Dana didn't tell me about that. Where is Dana?" Mjord asked.

"Busy right now." Lean said quickly, avoiding their stares.

"Curses were then also, Lynx's." Matilda concluded, and Lean nodded.

"I am so sorry, child. This is not supposed to happen to witches." Mjord said, looking at Lean, concerned.

"It's okay." Lean said, and then added. "I mean, there's nothing we can do now."

Mjord frowned at Matilda, and Matilda shook her head.

"So what does Lynx have to do with Blake, then?" Mjord asked after a while.

"Dana thinks Blake is just a bait to get me. Lynx wants me.. I'm not sure what for, Dana says I'm a threat, but I don't know." Lean said, uneasy.

"Whatever it is, she can't have you." Mjord decided, and stood up. "We're gonna make sure Blake is safe, too. They could banish Lynx for this."

"They will." Lean said.

"Good." Mjord said darkly.

Lean felt uneasy again, it felt like Mjord and Matilda were trying really hard to avoid saying this was somehow Lean's fault, but Lean knew it was all happening only because of her. She couldn't say it though. Matilda looked at her suspiciously, as if she knew exactly what Lean was thinking, but she said nothing. Lean held her feelings inside and looked away from both of them.

"What are your powers?" Lean asked them both, avoiding their eyes.

"I'm a healer and cursebreaker. And Matilda is a reader." Mjord replied.

"What does that mean, reader?" Lean asked.

"I can see someone's true nature well before others could." Matilda replied, confirming Lean's suspicions.

"You would only use that on your enemies, right?" Lean asked, hopeful.

"Of course." Matilda smiled.

Lean sat down in silence, thinking. Mjord and Matilda were quietly discussing something, and Lean didn't bother to listen in.

It was a while before Dana and Dareena came through the hallway, both looking a bit flushed. Lean looked at them impatiently, and Dana nodded at her.

"Mjord, Matilda! Welcome." Dana said, and hugged them both, Dareena shaking their hands afterwards.

"You're here just in time, we're just waiting for Dock and Manderwild and we'll start a meeting." Dareena said. Lean sighed. So there was going to be a meeting first. Couldn't they just figure things out on the way?

"I need you to come with me." Dana said to Lean, who got up right away.

Dana took her outside, and asked Lean to demonstrate just how far she could extend her barrier of dark. It was easy, at that moment, for Lean to send it miles away, and Dana seemed satisfied by this. Lean then had to block only the part of light, making the area visible but not bright. That was a bit harder, and took Lean a few tries to make it happen. Dana nodded at her, and said it would have to do. Then she took Lean over her strategy of keeping the field visible from far away, where Lynx wouldn't be able to see and attack her, making sure the rest of them could fight. Lean didn't much like it, it meant she wouldn't even see what's going on, much less participate. Dana had to convince her over and over again it was the only and best way to get everyone out of there unharmed. In the end, Lean had to admit she didn't have a much better alternative, if she didn't want to get caught.

"It doesn't feel right, taking you with us." Dana said, frowning. "But I don't think we have a choice."

"You don't. If you don't take me I'm going without you." Lean said, angry.

"Okay." Dana said.

They flew back to the castle, where a small company of colorful witches waited for them.

"We're ready." Dareena said.

"Good. We'll have the meeting along the way. Let's fly." Dana said.

"Lynx is good at narrowing down someone's weak spot." Dana said, while flying in front of the group.

"She figured out mine in the matter of seconds after seeing me once, Matilda, can you do the same?" Dana asked.

"Yes." Matilda said, and asked for more details about Lynx.

They kept talking about every possible weak spot the group could have, and everyone was rather reluctant to share theirs, but Dana explained it would be way worse if Lynx acted on it later, than it being shared now. Matilda knew right away just what angles could be used against every individual, and Lean realized Matilda is quite scary. Dana spared it no thought and simply came up with counter-strategies, even Lynx couldn't attack them all at once without light, and she would rely on the light the most. If one of them was singled out, all of them were to defend.

"Do you know Blake's weak spot?" Dana asked Lean, and Lean thought about it.

"No." Lean said, realizing she couldn't tell. She knew Blake was annoyed and upset about some things, but she seemed always strong and decisive.

"Blake is scared of being weak and used.. and there's abandonment." Matilda said.

Lean felt weird hearing it. If that was true, how come Lean didn't know. Maybe Blake wasn't ready to open up about it yet, but maybe Blake didn't trust Lean enough to tell her. It was hard to tell.

"Lean, when we get Blake, it's possible Lynx has already used this against her. Blake might not be in a good shape. I just want you to be ready for that." Dana said.

Matilda flew close to Dana to tell her something the rest of the group couldn't hear, and Dana nodded.

"Lynx is scared of being overpowered and defeated." Dana shared with the group. "She will fight with desperation, and might lose it if she realizes we can win. She might attack anyone randomly, be ready for that. I'll try to take her powers before that happens."

"How can you take her powers?" Lean asked.

"This." Dana flashed a glowing something in her hand, Lean took a good look and it was something like a rock with glowing parts.

"It's a soul-stone, we started a ritual on it, and when it's done, I only have to touch Lynx with it once, and her powers will be contained. She can be banished afterwards, but we will question her first." Dana said.

"Oh." Lean said. So it was all just to touch Lynx once. It felt like there should have been easier ways to get that done.

"Will it be that hard?" Lean asked.

"We're just making sure nobody gets hurt. It should be fine." Dana said.

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Dana let Lean away from Lynx's castle, all the way up in the tall trees where Lean would barely be able to see anything. Then she had another witch place a barrier around her, making her invisible, and Dareena had erased her voice as well. Lean was getting annoyed, like she actually needed this much security.

"You will see immediately if Lynx is using her powers, because she sends her barriers off high into the sky, she believes it's more impressive." Dana said. "It would be ideal if you could control the light before

it even happens, but don't start yet, wait until we enter the castle. I will send you a sign, I'll have a sign of fire appear above that tower. Don't leave this place no matter what, okay? Mjord will stay with you."

"Mjord should go with you." Lean said, but Dana narrowed her eyes at Lean and shook her head.

"I already had Blake escape from me, I can't lose you now. It will be over soon."

Mjord stepped into the invisible barrier, and the rest of them got to work. Last thing Lean could see was Dana breaking the barrier and causing spectacular show of light and sparks before they entered Lynx's ground. And then she waited. Mjord was saying something, reassuring Lean, but she wasn't listening. Her eyes were glued to the tower, waiting for the sign of fire.

It happened so quickly even Mjord gasped and before any of them managed to say a word, Lean casted a barrier of almost-darkness all over the area. That was vital, making sure the sunlight can't blind anyone in there, and then, she had to lighten it a little, enough for vision. Lean could sense Mjord backing off, she probably didn't like this power. And then that was all Lean could do. Lynx's white castle was enveloped in Lean's darkness, and Lean made sure it stayed that way. She could feel some particles of light resisting, fighting, but it was no use. Lean forced them to stay right where they were.

Lean stared at the castle, realizing Dana never told her when to stop. Would someone exit the castle and tell them it's okay? She looked at Mjord, upset, but Mjord was staring at the castle too. What was taking them so long? Surely they had enough time to touch Lynx once. Lynx couldn't even use her powers! After 10 minutes of waiting, Lean was done and ready to leave her invisible barrier, but Mjord held her back.

"No. Wait until it's safe." Mjord said.

"It's taking them too long. Something is wrong." Lean said, and struggled.

"No, it's okay, they might be just talking." Mjord said, and her fingers tightened around Lean's shoulder.

"What if she's using Blake to stop them?" Lean asked, frightened. "What if she's holding her as a shield and they can't get near? I should be there!"

"They can handle that." Mjord said, and wouldn't allow Lean to go.

Lean was about to start yelling, but then a witch flew out of the window and waved in their direction.

"Wait!" Mjord said urgently. "Don't stop, wait."

Lean waited, holding her breath.

Mjord flew out of the barrier, and into the castle so quickly, it was barely few seconds before she was back, yelling.

"It's okay! You can stop now!" Mjord was yelling, and Lean let out a breath, ended the barrier, and let full light fall on the castle again. She flew out anxiously, feeling something stuck in her throat. There was Blake, just inside. She was going to be okay now. It was going to be over now.

"Wait, don't go in yet." Mjord yelled after her, but Lean wasn't listening, she flew right inside, and started searching the corridors. There was noise somewhere in the room above, she flew inside and caught a glimpse of Lynx, falling unconscious, Dana standing right next to her, letting her fall. The rest of witches looked shaken and horrified. Lean froze, feeling the heavy weight of the dark atmosphere in the room. Something horrible happened here. Lynx did something to all of them, judging by their expressions, it was enough to terrify them.

"What happened?" Lean asked, looking around. "Where's Blake?"

"That room." Dana said, pointing at the half-opened door. "But wait, we need Mjord. Goddess.."

Dana let herself fall down weakly to the floor, taking shaky breaths.

Lean didn't wait to confirm what took place, but rushed into the room, and she saw Blake. Still trapped in the orb, still expressionless and empty.

"Blake!" Lean yelled, and Blake didn't look at her, didn't move at all.

"Mjord will get you out." Lean said, turned around and rushed back to where Mjord was. Mjord had already found the room, and was holding Matilda's hand gently, Matilda pulling her into a hug.

"Mjord, Blake is trapped, you have to help." Lean was talking fast, and almost pulling Mjord with her, ignoring everything else.

Mjord only nodded, picked up Matilda in her hands and carried her gently. Matilda curled up and pressed her head on Mjord's chest. Everyone else in the room started huddling together as well, witches hugged each other and some of them rested their head on other's shoulders, sighing and shakily exclaiming things like "That was much worse than we expected" and "What was that?".

Mjord didn't let go of Matilda while breaking the curse Lynx had put on Blake. It took several minutes, and Mjord was obviously struggling with it. She still did it with one hand, the other one gently wrapped around Matilda. The orb around Blake was falling apart, small pieces of darkness hitting the floor, and then dissipating into the wooden floor. Lean pressed her hands on the orb too, hoping it would help speed it up, or at least, that she would be able to catch Blake before she falls. Blake, however, hovered gently in the air, and then landed sitting on the floor. Lean swallowed, took Blake's hand, put her other hand on Blake's shoulder, and gently shook her. Blake blinked.

## Chapter 27: Weak Spot

"Lean." Blake said, opening her eyes.

Lean was watching her anxiously, but Blake blinked a few times, then looked around.

"Where's Lynx?" Blake asked.

"Dana got her, it's okay, she's unconscious." Lean said quickly. "Are you-"

But Blake was already struggling to get on her feet, closing her eyes and shutting them again as she tried to get used to the light.

"Dana's here?" Blake asked, and Lean was trying to help her get up, but Blake resisted.

"Yeah, she's- in the next room, and half of the council too. Blake, what did Lynx do to you?" Lean asked, still looking anxious and worried.

"I have few things to settle with her." Blake shakily stood, and then noticed Mjord and Matilda. "Mjord."

"Blake." Mjord said, sparing a glance for Blake before turning back to Matilda. Blake only nodded to Mjord, and then walked away, Lean following her tracks.

"Dana." Blake went right for her, eyes narrowed.

Dana was still in embrace with Dareena, both were whispering to each other, and Dareena perked up first, seeing Blake.

"Blake! She's alright, look!" Dareena pointed out Blake to Dana, who smiled weakly, and sighed in relief. Blake didn't smile back.

"Were you the one who came after me, and took Lean?" Blake asked, looking directly at Dana.

Dana blinked, and nodded.

"Did you use me as a bait on purpose, without telling me?" Blake asked, voice stone cold.

Dareena reacted first, glaring.

"Of course she didn't, she went after you to stop you getting caught!" Dareena said, and gripped Dana tighter.

"I want to hear you say it. Tell me just how it ended up that I was used as a bait." Blake said to Dana, relentless.

Color paled from Dana's face, and she gave a distressed look to Dareena, who frowned, and glared at Blake again.

"Can we discuss this some other time, Blake? Dana is not in best shape, none of us are. We were just fighting to help free you, not that it seems to matter to you right now." Dareena said.

Dana tugged Dareena's shoulder to stop her, but it was too late. Blake spread the night through the room. Lean and everyone else in the room gasped and looked around, now only seeing silhouettes of each other.

"Wait." Dana said, as Blake already turned her back on them.

Blake stood still.

"I didn't mean to use you as a bait, I knew there was a chance you'd fly off, so I followed you as soon as I realized you were gone. I got there as fast as I could, but you were already noticed by Lynx, and I couldn't help you. And then you flew off, and it gave me a moment of opportunity to take Lean, so I.. just tried to get the best out of a bad situation. It was never my plan." Dana said.

It didn't ease Blake's anger, not by much.

"Thanks for saving Lean, anyway." Blake said, her voice without emotion. The night was still looming over all of them, and Lean was right behind Blake, but silent. Nobody tried to get Blake to stop it.

Blake opened her mouth to say something, and then closed it again, and walked away. Lean still followed her, and Blake knew she had to talk to her, but it was too hard. Seeing Lean's face was too much already. Blake was already on the doorway, and then she made a decision, and stopped again. Her hands were shivering.

"Did you know about my mothers?" Blake asked.

Dana realized right away she was talking to her. There was a silence, and then:

"I did." Dana said.

Blake froze for a second, and then looked around, grabbed the nearest broom, and took off.

"What did Lynx tell you-" Dana was trying to ask, but it was too late. Blake wouldn't listen to anyone, or hear any explanations. She needed to be away from everyone, from the castle, if only she could be away from her own thoughts.

It was a while before she realized, Lean was still following her. Blake felt a twinge of guilt. Lean still didn't know anything, probably couldn't understand any of this. She probably had the same worried look she had when Blake came to. It wasn't okay to leave her unknowing. Blake would have to talk to her.

Blake landed, feeling like there's a heavy rock on her chest. Lean landed right after her, and they stood in silence for a few moments. They were in a dark green forest, Blake still spreading an aura of night around her, just big enough to extend past her toes.

"Blake." Lean said, sounding lost.

"I'm okay." Blake said. "You don't have to worry about me."

"Can I.. hug you?" Lean asked, and Blake felt more guilt. Lean sounded scared. Blake knew it was her fault.

"Lean, I'm- uh." Blake tried to find some words, but it was too much. She sighed, and sat down.

"I'm sorry." Blake said, finally.

She didn't look up to see the look on Lean's face, didn't want to.

"They probably told you already- it was Lynx who did all of the curses." Blake decided it was the best to give explanation, once Lean knew it all, she would understand.

"But I also know now, it was a part of the setup. Lynx wanted to save you from all that- from sickness and curses, so you would see her as a hero, and grow to love her. And I just.. took her place in that setup. That's what all this is. You were scared, and you were alone, and you were sick, so anyone who was there at the right time, who helped you- you would feel gratitude and feel like you have to stick around. But I don't want that. I don't like.. setups." Blake said, her voice getting heavy at the end.

"What?" Lean's voice was confused, as if nothing Blake said made any sense to her.

Blake still wouldn't look up at her. This was painful.

"We can stop doing this now. It was all just because of Lynx." Blake said.

"What are you saying? Blake, you don't sound like yourself. What did Lynx do?" Lean asked, and came closer to Blake, who still looked stubbornly down.

"Nothing." Blake said quickly. "It was nothing, she just, told me some things I didn't know."

"Things like what?" Lean demanded.

"I don't want to talk about it." Blake said, now irritated.

"You believe that? What Lynx told you?" Lean asked.

"I'm not- " Blake groaned, it was ridiculous, she didn't have to explain to Lean that she wasn't stupid, she wasn't someone who just believed everything they've been told, even if they're told again, and again, and again.. Blake shook her head, distressed. She didn't want to think about what happened in the castle, and Lean kept making her.

"I know some things make sense." Blake said, finally.

Lean sat down on the ground, and clutched her own shirt, her hands shivering. Blake felt bad, but there was no helping it.

"You believe that everything.. from the moment we met.. was just a setup Lynx made?" Lean said, her voice shaky.

Blake said nothing.

"What about everything we've been through together? What about Thornwood? The sunflowers? You promised we were going to go to the sea together! Lynx had nothing to do with those." Lean said.

Blake closed her eyes, and remembered. It was fun, those memories were good. And they weren't set up. But then...

"I was the first one of your own kind that you met." Blake said, and there was sorrow in her voice.

"So what?" Lean asked.

"It's just- you can't just go with the first of your own kind that you meet. You only knew me, and I was the only one you could feel close to, because of that. And then the whole, helping you get rid of curses



and illness- it just made that feeling grow, but it's not- you didn't have any other choice but to like me. I don't- I don't want that." Blake said.

"Are you saying I can't have feelings for you, because I'm not offered more options to choose from?" Lean said, now offended.

"Maybe I'm not the best choice for you." Blake said, quietly.

Lean clenched her fists angrily now.

"So everything that's in my heart right now, means nothing to you?" Lean asked.

Blake swallowed.

"That's not true. I just- you might like someone else better." Blake said evasively.

"But I want you." Lean said.

"You haven't even met other witches your own age, how can you tell I'm the best for you?" Blake asked.

"So you think there's a witch out there that's better than you?" Lean asked.

"I- " Blake started, and then stopped herself. "Maybe."

"What do you want me to do? To go and try all others so I could make a choice that you would say is real?" Lean stood up now, angry.

"Well how else are you going to know! You can't just trust my word for it!" Blake retaliated, and stood up as well.

"Look at me already!" Lean demanded, and Blake couldn't stop herself from getting a glimpse of Lean's face, and it hurt. Lean still looked worried, anxious, and now on top of it, hurt by Blake. Blake knew she had to get away from Lean, as soon as possible, but Lean wouldn't let go.

"Tell me what's going on." Lean said.

"I- you didn't choose me." Blake said finally, feeling she was getting too close to the truth for comfort. "I thought- at first- that you did, because it felt like, among all of the fairies, you choose me, and I wasn't even your kind, and it made me feel.. special." Blake hid her face by night. "But you didn't, you had no other choice, I was all you had. It's not.. I don't want that. After being abandoned, I wanted to be chosen." Blake said, quietly, feeling her voice was going to break any second. "I have to go."

Blake couldn't see Lean's face, but Lean's hands were shivering, and she was moving closer, too close, until Blake could smell her.

"Look at me, in the eyes, and tell me you don't want me." Lean demanded. "And I'll leave you alone."

"I can't do that." Blake whispered, feeling shaky and weak.

"Then why does it matter? If we both- " Lean started.

"Please." Blake said.

"Blake, you're not okay. If you just-"

But Blake wasn't listening. It felt unbearable to be so close to Lean, and to have Lynx's words pop into her head. She needed to be alone. Lean got enough of explanation- more than Blake was planning on giving her- and Blake decided it was time to go. She grabbed her broom, and took off again. Lean was saying something, but Blake tuned it out. It was only after a minute of tense flying, Blake looked around to find, with relief, that Lean wasn't following her anymore.

Blake didn't fly for long. She found a tree with roots big enough she could crawl underneath, and she lied there, hidden. It was a while before she was sure that nobody was after her, and no animals were sharing her shelter. Then she buried her face into the ground, and cried for a long time.

## Chapter 28: Tough

Lean couldn't believe what just happened. She expected Blake to be in a bad state, but the kind that would require Lean to hold her, kiss her and listen to her talk about it for days and then comfort her, Lean still felt the desire to do all of those things, because Blake was not okay. But every Lean's movement, her every word felt as if it caused Blake pain, Blake wouldn't even look at her, unless forced to. And on top of that.. Blake now claimed that Lean shouldn't care for her, shouldn't have all these feelings because Blake didn't want her to. That was just.. infuriating. What Lean felt was special, it made Blake special. Lean knew, if none of this had happened, and she just met Blake, and they talked, they would still end up together. What Blake was saying was all ... so utterly stupid, except maybe the part where Blake wanted to be chosen, but Lean had chosen her!

Lean considered for a moment, finding other witches out of spite, then shoving it in Blake's face that they don't measure up, but that would be a lot of wasted energy on spite. Still, Lean thought, that's what she told me to do. Was Blake always that dumb? Blake always seemed smart, even smug about how smart she is, which was bordering on annoying, but now she was just a dumb idiot who said wrong things, things that should not be said.

Lean thought about all the times they had before they met Lynx, before any of this happened, and wondered if things will ever be like that again. Her heart hurt for a minute, thinking that Blake could say all of that was a setup, but she shrugged it off. Blake would change her mind, she was probably just influenced by Lynx, and saying things she didn't mean. That had to be it. Still, how could she say that!

It was hard to find the balance between concern and anger, Lean wanted both to hold Blake and to yell at her for being stupid. She was trying to figure out how she could do both at the same time, when Dana and Dareena found her, sitting in the forest, muttering to herself.

"Lean!" Dana said after landing. "Blake isn't with you?"

"No." Lean said, irritated.

"Did she talk to you?" Dana asked.

"You could say that." Lean answered.

Dareena frowned, watching both of them.

"What did she say?" Dana asked.

"... Bunch of nonsense." Lean said, bitterly. "She won't tell me what Lynx told her, but, she thinks we have no reason to be together, because it was all a setup so why bother."

"That doesn't sound like the little punk." Dareena said.

"It's not. Last time she was fighting us whole time just to get to you." Dana said to Lean.

Lean felt a bit encouraged by that.

"Do you think she'll get to her senses later? She didn't want me to follow her." Lean said.

Dana and Dareena looked at each other.

"I don't know. She was with Lynx for days, and there was enough time for Lynx to manipulate her into thinking anything." Dana said, rubbing her forehead. "We can assume Lynx didn't want her to stick with you anymore, so she pushed at anything that would make Blake stay away."

Lean sighed.

"I think we should leave her alone for now, she looked.. like it was hurting her to talk to me." Lean said.

"Yeah, we won't get far trying to bend night witch's will." Dareena said. "Do you wanna come with us, Lean? We're cleaning up Lynx's castle, apparently she was hiding loads of exotic animals as pets, we have to try to reintroduce them into wild. It's a lot of work."

"No." Lean said. Lynx's castle was last place she'd want to be.

"You can come back to the council if you want to, Mjord and Mathilda are going back there." Dana offered.

"What happened during the fight with Lynx?" Lean asked suddenly, remembering.

"Oh, you were great." Dareena said, with a smile.

"Yeah, you were. But as soon as Lynx realized she'd be unable to use her powers, and that I would break all the barriers immediately, she descended into madness. We all thought we were ready for the worst, but we were not. She attacked everyone so fast and so vicious most of us went into shock, it felt like our worst nightmares are coming true." Dana said.

"Yeah, only Dana kind of, knew what to expect, so she hurried up and took her powers. Then we sent for you to stop, and Dana threw her unconscious before she could attack you too." Dareena filled in.

"What kind of attacks were they?" Lean asked.

Dana and Dareena shared an uncomfortable glance.

"Threats, mostly. But very effective ones. She threatened to torture and kill our loved ones, and it felt like she would do it, any second. She seemed mad enough." Dana said, shuddering for a second.

"I don't want to think about what Blake was going through." Dareena said, frowning.

Lean was taken aback, Lynx did not seem that scary when Lean was around her. Sure, she was always going on about obligations and guilt and tried to pressure Lean into liking her, but Lean didn't expect her to be terrifying, definitely not to make insane threats.

"None of us is used to threats" Dana said, closing her eyes and leaning into Dareena, who immediately hugged her close. "But she can't do anything anymore. We'll make sure of it."

Lean watched them, thinking she should be with Blake right now. Why did Blake want to be alone when everyone else was reaching for comfort? Was it that Lean wasn't good enough to comfort her? Lean didn't want to start thinking it, it had to be something else.

"What did Blake mean when she asked if you knew about her mothers?" Lean asked.

Dana looked uncomfortable.

"Mjord can tell you." Dareena said, and Lean understood she didn't want Dana to be put through any more hardships today.

"Where is she?" Lean asked.

"She and Mathilda are staying in council until Lynx is dealt with, Mjord says she won't be at peace until she sees her banished." Dareena answered.

"Okay. I'll go find them." Lean said, and lifted herself up in the air. Dana and Dareena waved, then flew in another direction.

It felt like she forgot something, flying back without Blake. Maybe Mjord would know what to do. It didn't sit well with Lean that Blake should be alone right now, not when Lean needed to be by her side so much. Where was Blake going to go alone? Lean landed on a tree, and tried to get Blake's location. There was nothing. Blake didn't want to be found. And trees wouldn't tell. Another sense of emptiness in Lean's heart, as she flew, a bit slower this time. Why would Blake hide from her? Was it wrong that Lean wanted to be by her side? Lean shook her head, trying to shake off the bad thoughts.

She found Mjord and Mathilda together, whispering to each other on a comfy bed.

"Hey." Lean said, reluctantly.

They both glanced at her, and sat up, Mathilda still in Mjord's lap.

"Lean! Where's Blake?" Mjord asked, looking around as if expecting Blake to appear around the corner.

"You look awful, whats happened?" Mathilda asked.

"Blake ran away." Lean said, feeling it was the closest to what happened.

"She did sound kinda grumpy there." Mjord said, frowning.

"Come here." Mathilda said, and shifted a bit so she could pull Lean in a hug.

Lean accepted it, Mathilda's warm hands around her making her realize just how tense she was.

"This isn't your fault." Mathilda said gently.

"Lynx did something to her." Lean said, feeling her breath catch in her throat. "She's acting weird, she said, we shouldn't be together because I didn't choose her, and-"

"She wont let you comfort her." Mathilda said, knowingly.

"Yeah." Lean said with a shaky voice.

"It's hard to imagine Blake easing up around anyone." Mjord said, frowning. "That kid acts too tough, doesn't know when to quit it."

Lean let go of Mathilda, and looked at Mjord.

"What am I supposed to do then?" Lean asked.

Mjord didn't seem to have an answer ready.

"You used to be like that too." Mathilda said to Mjord, to which Mjord grinned, obviously remembering something.

"Well, that was before I met you." Mjord answered. "You were the fire that melted my heart."

"Blake needs to find out there are situations where acting tough isn't necessary." Mathilda turned to Lean again, after placing a kiss on Mjord's cheek.

Lean thought the chances for that are not high, but she could try to talk to Blake about it at least. But would Blake even want to talk to her?

"I'm not sure if- if she wants to talk to me anymore. It felt like talking to me was hurting her." Lean said in a pained voice.

"That is a problem." Mathilda said.

"Lynx did something to her, and she wont tell me what, just keeps repeating Lynx's words and, saying things like, it's all a setup. It's not making much sense to me but.. she seems to believe it." Lean said. Mathilda looked at Mjord and sighed.

"Blake would get away from anything that's been set up, wouldn't she?" Mathilda asked Mjord.

"She will do exactly the opposite of what anyone wants." Mjord confirmed.

"So maybe Lynx played on that. But, there had to be some little bit of truth in it, or Blake wouldn't buy it." Mathilda concluded.

Lean considered it, and it was hard just thinking about it. To think that someone could influence Blake to walk away from her, it didn't feel fair. Why wouldn't Blake fight it, instead of buying into it?

"I don't get it." Lean said, and dragged fingers through her hair. "She shouldn't have believed it."

"Sometimes, when you're very scared of something, it's easy to convince you it's true. When we get emotional, it's hard for us to catch lies, especially those with bits of truth mixed in." Mathilda said wisely.

"There was no truth in it!" Lean claimed loudly.

Mjord offered a hand to Lean's shoulder, and squeezed it.

"You'll figure it out. I've seen the way she looks at you. You're special to her. I've never seen her let someone touch her the way you did." Mjord said.

That thought pacified Lean a bit, and she sat down, mulling things over. There was something else she came here to ask, but it didn't seem like something anyone wanted to talk about.

"Do you know what happened.. to Blake's mothers?" Lean asked, lifting her head.

She could tell right away it was a sore topic by the way Mjord's expression changed.

"Yeah. Dana explained to me, some time ago. I was wondering how its possible for two witches to just disappear, and leave their daughter." Mjord said.

Lean waited.

"According to the records, they were both banished. There was a long list of crimes. Blake was a baby when it happened. Witches who handled it thought it best for Blake to not know, they waited until she was older, then tried to reabsorb her into another clan, but.. Blake refused them all. That's all I could find out." Mjord said.

Lean's thoughts went blank, trying to process this.

"That's... horrible." Lean said, stunned.

"If Lynx was the one to inform Blake of that, I can see why she'd be pissed." Mathilda said.

"Well how would I tell her this? Hey Blake, your mothers were rotten criminals and got banished, that's why you have no family now, here's some tea." Mjord said, glaring.

Mathilda stroked Mjord's jaw gracefully.

"We don't know if that's what Lynx told her." Mathilda said. "It would be easy for her to change that perspective into something that would give Blake much more grief."

"I have to go find her." Lean said, standing up. If this was all true, she couldn't let Blake just be alone with this.

"I don't think it's a great idea." Mathilda said.

"I'm sick of doing nothing for her." Lean said, angrily.

"Now, that's not the truth. Without you, we wouldn't have been able to free her." Mathilda said gently.

Lean shook her head.

"That's not, it's not fair. She was there for me, every time I was in trouble. She would come. And now, I know she needs my help, and I can't do anything? I can't bear it." Lean said, her fists clenched.

"Then go." Mjord said. "But if she doesn't want to be found, it will be hard."

"I'm okay with that." Lean said, and walked out.

## Chapter 29: Alone

Blake was lying down in a field of grass, looking up at the sky. Her limbs felt weak and heavy at the same time, she didn't want to move. It's not like anyone could spot her, anyway. Tips of trees were arching up at the tips of her vision, the sky was overcast, light and grey at the same time. Mix of small plants and ground under her body was soft and warm, and Blake found it soothing. It was okay to be there, plants and ground, and sky, were all safe to be around. Flock of birds flew above, and Blake followed their flight with her eyes, feeling the familiar desire to join them. That's what she used to do, find her place among birds on the sky. It was why she made her home on top of a tree, she wanted a nest, wanted to live in the sky with all the rest of flying creatures. It used to feel like she belonged there, and birds liked her just fine. And now, she wasn't sure if she could feel that anymore. If going up there would make her heart light again. She didn't want to find out.

Thinking didn't use to hurt so much, Blake thought. Her brain was urging her to make some sense, to clear up everything she wasn't sure about, but Blake couldn't bring herself to do it. Just remembering how badly she didn't want to hear what Lynx was saying was painful, and then thinking through every one of those things, it didn't feel safe. Blake knew she'd have to do it, couldn't live with herself not knowing. It meant she would eventually have to fact check some things, and talk to Dana, and maybe Mjord... Blake closed her eyes, feeling miserable.

*It's council's fault you have no mothers, no family, who do you think made them disappear? Do you think they cared a child will grow up without mothers, without anyone? They did this to you, Blake. Do you think it's a coincidence they kept this a secret from you?*

Blake clenched her fists, angry at the attempt of manipulation. She had seen the council, and they had saved Lean, and Blake, so if they did banish Blake's mothers.. then they warranted banishing. Then they didn't leave Blake, as she once thought, but had no choice but to go. But it also meant, they were not respectable witches. Blake had a bad feeling already, because witches had odd face expressions upon hearing her name, Firethorn, it was never a good reaction. Blake still kept saying it, spitefully, wanted to

throw it in everyone's face. Now their reactions made sense. If her mothers were, in fact, doing something horrible enough to be banished, then everyone knew Blake was child of criminals. They could have told her, they could have explained, but nobody did. Did Mjord know it? Surely she couldn't have known. Mjord would have told her. Blake wished Mjord had told her, it would have been better to hear it from Mjord, than.. like this.

What about her powers then? Were these powers sourced by some kind of evil? They were the powers of night and darkness, and Blake wasn't sure she wanted to inherit them anymore. Was everyone refusing to tell her because they were scared Blake was going to use them in the same way if she knew? What had her mothers done with it? What if Blake did end up doing the same?

Blake looked back on all of the things she's done, and remembered all the reprimands and criticism she received, and ignored. But it was just disobedience, Blake just liked doing what she wanted. It didn't cause anyone any harm. Okay, maybe to Mjord, a little bit. But Mjord was okay with that. She did help Lean, she was trying to-

But that was another topic Blake didn't want to think about.

*She was only using you to feel something. If there was anyone else she wouldn't look at you twice. She doesn't feel anything. There's nothing about you she could want. Look at yourself, not even your mothers wanted you.*

None of that could be true, Lean was a good person, she wasn't someone who would do this. But Blake felt sharp pain in her chest just by imagining it. She felt like a coward. She couldn't gather the strength to even look at Lean, save asking her if any of this was true. Blake was too scared to find out. To think that she gave even a little bit of trust to someone, and it could turn this bad.. Blake didn't think she could handle that. And.. accusing Lean was too hard. It was hard to bring herself even to tell Lean to leave her be, to consider that maybe Blake isn't the best - and that's something Blake was now contemplating too - but to accuse her of using Blake? It would make Lean sad. And probably disappointed. She would realize Blake wasn't really as great. And then she would hate Blake. And Blake didn't want to handle that, either. Blake looked at the sky helplessly, wishing for things to be simple again, to not have to second guess everything. She wanted to go back to her fir and remember how it felt just having a home and place to sleep and knowing nothing horrible is about to happen. Being imprisoned really sucked. Blake used to contemplate what she would do if someone tried to trap her, had thousands of plans for fight and escape. In reality, none of that had worked. Being trapped turned out, isn't a challenge to beat, it was a situation to avoid. Blake didn't like that, she wanted to have a plan ready for everything, way out of every situation. Why couldn't she have that? How could something be so out of her power? Her feeling of invincibility was gone, and replaced by vulnerability Blake didn't want.



Maybe if she went and trashed Lynx's castle, revenge would have to give some power back to Blake. Nobody could do this and go unpunished by Blake personally. But she was tired and unwilling to move until her limbs felt normal again. Maybe that's a plan for later, when Blake felt better. She sighed and took in the smell of ground and the grass. She rolled over to a tree and pressed her palms against the rough bark, closed her eyes, and felt as if she was inside as well, protected by the layer of bark, hidden from anyone who would try to harm her. The tree took in her unease, took it away. It felt easier to breathe again, for a second.

Hours went by, and Blake gathered the strength to get up, but couldn't figure out where to go. If she returned to the fir, it was possible Lean would find her there, and she didn't want to risk it. Hiding from Lean felt like a cowardly move, but it was better than pain she felt by seeing her. She considered going to Thornwood, but no, last time she was there, Lean was with her, and Blake didn't want memories to start bursting in. Somewhere.. underground would feel fitting right now.

Blake eyed the broom she stole, it was not like the one she owned, the one Mjord helped her charm, but it was okay. She couldn't fly as fast, but it didn't matter. There was nobody to compete with.

She flew low, until she found what she was looking for, an opening of a cave. Huge tree roots embraced the entrance, seemingly holding the rocks and pieces of ground together. Blake traced the roots with her fingertips, sighing. It felt good.

Inside was filled with rocks and Blake could hear water stream somewhere close, but couldn't see any. She went in deeper, startling a few bats and laughing as she protected her hair with a barrier. Soon there was barely any holes with light prodding through, darkness became so thick Blake could barely see. *But Lean could light this place up.* No. That was a stupid thought.

It wasn't soon after that Blake no longer felt up to exploring. She sat down, tired and unwilling to move. Lynx wasn't getting out of her head. Why was she so distressed about this? Blake was used to diving into adventures and forgetting everything, and that's what she was trying to do now, not think, not remember. How could Lynx do something to her that would later make her unable to enjoy adventures? That couldn't be. Blake couldn't be hurt that bad. It was just a few days of being trapped and fed some information, Blake would snap out of this.

But hours later, she still felt miserable. Half of her head was busy calculating what were the odds Lynx was right about things, and other half wishing Lean was here. Bugs and roots around her no longer made her feel anything. Blake felt she had to do something to make this go away, something that would let her know once and for all what is the truth. She couldn't go on not knowing. Lying in the dark being scared of the truth, that was not like Blake.

She would have to talk to Dana. And she would have to talk to Lean. If Lean would even talk to her, after that last time. This was stupid. Blake wished she could just grab Lean's hand and take her somewhere, like she used to. Lean always seemed to trust her, and went to places she didn't know were safe, just because Blake led her. Even back when she thought she was a fairy. Blake missed that. Even if Blake wasn't sure it was okay for Lean to be with her.. Blake missed her. Ah great, thought Blake. *Now after saying all that, I miss her.*

Blake lifted herself up, feeling heavy, but determined. She had to feel her way towards the light, and then it was easy to find the exit. Blake found the small stream hidden just beneath the entrance. She tasted the water and it was clean and colds, tasted like rocks and minerals. Blake liked it, and took some with her. Maybe Lean would like it too.

Blake's nervous brain kept suggesting bad scenarios on her way flying back to the council. By the time she reached the castle, she realized Dana might not even be there. She felt stupid knocking on the door, and like she shouldn't be doing this at all. She was greeted by a witch she didn't recognize, but who immediately knew who Blake was, and yelled "She's here!" into the hallway. Mjord and Mathilda came out, looking relived.

"Where were you?" Mjord asked her, and Blake rolled her eyes.

"None of your business. Where's Dana." Blake demanded.

"Why do you have to be such an infuriating cretin?" Mjord demanded, and Mathilda rubbed her back consolingly. "We were worried about you, Lean is still out looking for you, and you, you didn't even bother to contact me one time since you-"

"She's still in Lynx's place, clearing up the animals." Mathilda filled her in, and Blake eyed her viciously.

"So you're still around, huh?" Blake said to Mathilda.

Mathilda refused to grace that with an answer, and Mjord glared at Blake.

"You're even worse than before." Mjord said.

"She's just taking out her anger on us." Mathilda said wisely. "Lynx must have aggravated her pretty badl-"

"Shut up." Blake said. It was the truth, but Blake didn't want to hear any of that right now.

Mjord sighed, and tried to hug Blake, which Blake evaded and glared.

"Did you know about my mothers?" Blake asked suddenly, and regretted saying it instantly, before Mjord even started to form a response.

"I found out recently." Mjord admitted. "Dana told me, after she found out you've been involved with Lean."

Blake felt another sharp stab of betrayal in her chest, and turned her back on them, so Mjord couldn't see her face.

"Any.. reason you didn't share this with me?" Blake asked, struggling to keep her voice steady.

"It was cowardice. I didn't want to be the one to let you know." Mjord said, honestly.

"I see what you mean." Blake said, coldly. "This was much better way of me finding out."

"Blake." Mathilda said, and Blake was already getting ready to lash out at her. "I already told her that." Mathilda finished.

"I don't want to talk to you." Blake said to both of them, with her back turned. She grabbed the stolen broom again, and flew out of the castle, feeling sick to her stomach. That did not go well.

If Mjord was the one to told her, Blake would still flip out and get angry at entire world, but it would be different, she wouldn't have to hear Lynx taunting her with it, or Lynx taking advantage of her shock to immediately convince Blake she was just as evil, just as sick as her mothers were. Blake slowed down, and landed. She didn't feel up to facing Dana anymore. This was just getting worse.

Lean was looking for her, according to Mjord. Blake felt guilt again, and wondered if Lean was angry with her, and just wanted to get to yell. But Blake already regretted most of the things she said. It was only to get Lean away from her, because Blake knew if Lean was around, Blake would end up telling her, maybe everything, and would be horrible. It would make Blake look weak and insecure and hurt and Blake didn't want those parts of herself to be reflected in Lean's eyes. But Blake had to admit to herself she was feeling alone, and needed someone to be on her side of this. And not having Lean there was making things worse for Blake.

Blake leaned on a tree, wanting the company of a living creature who couldn't talk or judge, who would only console her. The trees understood that Blake was sad and upset, they wouldn't make her feel small and defeated. Blake felt close to tearing up again, but clenched her fists and refused to cry, all of this was not that bad, it was not worth crying over.

It was a while before Blake heard a noise that wasn't the part of the forest or the wind. Someone's footsteps were closing in, brushing against the grass and the leaves. Blake suddenly felt alert and tense, staring in the direction of the sound. Light was fading from the sky, and it was difficult to see, long shadows of trees hiding the witch's features. The witch stopped, and she must have realized Blake couldn't see her properly, because she light her skin up. Blake blinked, bright light shocking her eyes. It was Lean. She was standing safe distance away, looking at Blake, waiting for a reaction.

## Chapter 30: Help

They stared at each other, neither saying a word. Lean looked reluctant, unsure if she could get closer. It was almost like that first time, when they were strangers, and didn't know if the other one was safe to approach. But this time Blake was on the ground, feeling unwell, and Lean was watching her from above, shining. *Ah, she looks amazing*, Blake thought, her eyes finally used to the light. Lean's eyes and hair were bright, she looked like a star in the night.

It was Blake who finally broke the silence.

"Hey." Blake said.

"Hey." Lean said, in a much softer voice.

Blake sighed.

"So, you found me." Blake said, as if admitting defeat.

"Yeah." Lean said.

This is ridiculous, Blake thought. Eventually someone would have to say something that matters, but it was too hard.

"I missed you." Blake admitted, and looked away. Suddenly it felt painful to look at Lean again.

"Me too." Lean said, and she seemed to relax a bit.

Blake bit her lip, and wondered how to continue this conversation without touching any of the painful topics.

"You look nice. Glowing in the sunset, I mean." Blake said.

Lean looked taken aback by that, and it made Blake smile.

"Thanks." Lean said. "The glow is actually the power I inherited, you know? I can control the sunlight."

"Oh." Blake said, remembering when she was told Lean might have the same powers Lynx has. "You can? Can you make it dark, too?" Blake asked.

"I can." Lean said, and then turned her hand towards the sky, making complete darkness fall over them.

"Wait-" Blake said, alarmed, and Lean stopped it, wide eyed.

"Sorry, I- " Lean started.

"No." Blake said, feeling sick again. It was too much like Lynx, the darkness was the same Lynx used to blind Blake, and Lean could use it too, Lean could-

But Blake looked at Lean, and she seemed horrified at her own mistake.

Lean realized it too, that Blake couldn't handle it now. Blake couldn't stand a second longer being seen like that.

"I can make it night." Blake said, fast. Lean looked at her, and nodded.

"That's a cool power." Lean said.

Blake wanted to show it off too, but remembered, Lean had already seen it, back in the Lynx's tower, when Blake clouded the entire castle in night because she was angry at Dana-

Lean was probably thinking it too.

It was not a good topic.

Talking to Lean was never this hard, how were they doing it before? Was it just because there were now too many painful things for Blake to talk about, or did things between them change, so drastically? Was it because of all the things Blake had said to Lean?

"I'm sorry." Blake said, finally, hoping it would make something okay.

"For what?" Lean asked.

"All the things I said the last time. I.. was wrong." Blake said, heavily.

Lean's expression seemed annoyed for a second.

"You were wrong." Lean nodded. "But I'll deal with that later."

"Then, what about right now?" Blake asked, feeling strangely at loss.

Lean took a moment, and then sighed.

"Can I sit next to you?" Lean asked.

Blake nodded where she was sitting down, still leaned into a tree. Lean sat down carefully, not touching Blake. The trunk was big enough for both of them to sit almost side by side, even though they were angled to look at different directions. Blake felt a bit pacified by Lean sitting close to her.

"I want to know what Lynx did to you." Lean started, and Blake opened her mouth to interrupt, but Lean continued talking. "And if you can't tell me right now, I'll wait. But I can't leave you alone now. This was all my fault, you were trapped there because of me. Because you were protecting me. I.. didn't even thank you for doing that. So you should know I.. I'm really grateful."

Blake said nothing, and looked away instead. There were things she wanted to say, but couldn't bring herself to.

"You were always helping me when I was alone and scared, and I want you to know that I can do that too. Just let me." Lean said.

Blake didn't think anyone could help her, but she wanted Lean to keep sitting there, keep talking. Lean's perspective on the situation seemed to be different than Blake's, and hearing it made Blake's heart ease a little.

"Okay." Blake said.

"Whats on your mind?" Lean asked.

Blake kept quiet for a while.

"Your mom sucks." Blake said, finally. Lean laughed weakly.

"Yes, she does." Lean confirmed.

"She wont ever be able to do this again, right?" Blake said, hoping she didn't give away a bit of fear in her voice.

"No. Council is keeping her very locked up, and she has no powers anymore." Lean said.

"That's a relief." Blake said.

"Yeah." Lean said.

"Do you feel.. bad about being connected to her?" Blake asked.

"I feel bad for what she's done to you." Lean said. "And to me. I wish I had no connection to her. But.. it's over now. She wont be able to mess with any of our lives."

Blake thought about it, and didn't say anything for a while.

"My mothers were both banished." Blake said quietly.

Lean didn't say anything.

"And it turns out everyone already knew, and kept it away from me. Lynx told me." Blake finished.

"That must have been a shock to find out." Lean said, also quietly.

Blake nodded, and felt the anger of betrayal all over again.

"Dana knew, and she wouldn't tell me while I was up in the castle, and Mjord also knew! I would have thought, Mjord, and you know what else? They all thought I would probably grow to be just like them, and that's why..." Blake trailed off.

"Why what?" Lean asked.

"Nobody wanted me to have these powers. Nobody would tell me what they were. Witches looked at me wrong when they heard about my last name. They all.. expected me to be just like my mothers.

That's why I was so sick with everyone and decided to live alone." Blake finished.

Lean frowned.

"But you're nothing like them." Lean said.

Blake looked at Lean with mixed annoyance and gratitude.

"But how would I know? I don't even know what they were like." Blake said.

"You're not." Lean said, sounding sure.

Blake sighed, feeling a bit of relief even though she couldn't explain why. Lean being so sure in Blake, when Blake herself wasn't, was helping.

"Okay." Blake said. "I still have to talk with Dana, and find out why they were banished. Lynx seemed.. to know them."

Lean looked at Blake, surprised.

"You think your mothers and Lynx were.. friends?" Lean asked.

"Maybe." Blake said, uncertain. "Maybe they just worked together. I don't think Lynx can have friends."

Lean thought about it, and sighed.

"All of our mothers suck, then." Lean said.

"All of them." Blake agreed.

Blake remembered Leira and Synthia, and realized Lean must have seen them in the council.

"Have you seen the other mothers?" Blake asked, knowing Lean would know what she meant.

"Yeah." Lean sighed. "They've just been arguing. It seems Leira was cheating on Synthia with Lynx for a while, and Synthia knew."

"I got that same impression." Blake said.

"I think they should just break it off." Lean said.

"Will you still talk to them?" Blake asked.

Lean thought about it, she forgot about her mothers for a while, she had more important stuff to worry about.

"I don't want to talk to Leira, not soon. But maybe Synthia." Lean finally replied.

Blake nodded.

"Would you talk to your mothers, if you could?" Lean asked.

"Yeah. I know it would be best not to, but, I would like to ask them, why didn't they pick one, having a child, or being criminals. If they were going to be banished anyway, then having me was..." Blake trailed off.

"Irresponsible. Yeah." Lean agreed.

"Unless they thought they wouldn't get caught." Blake said, thinking about it.

"Or they thought they would get to keep you, even while banished?" Lean suggested.

"But then.. would I be banished too?" Blake wondered.

"They wouldn't banish a baby." Lean said.

"Yeah. So we couldn't stay together." Blake said, and sighed.

"Well, it doesn't matter, I'm going not going to end up like them, I'm going to make my own clan, and it will be better than whatever they had in mind." Blake said, feeling some of her old self.

"Yeah!" Lean agreed, sounding pleased.

Blake looked at Lean, feeling some warmth in her chest, but the inside of her head was a mess again, and she wanted to ask, wanted to know, but was there was of asking without revealing her thoughts?

"You're still hurt, aren't you?" Lean asked suddenly, and Blake swallowed, wondering if Lean guessed what she was thinking.

"What do you mean?" Blake asked, trying to sound as if she didn't have a clue.

"That you were left behind. And.. " Lean looked at Blake, and then away again. "Well, what Lynx did to you. It must still hurt."

Blake wanted to deny it all, but the way Lean said it, it didn't seem like she thought Blake was weak, or easily hurt. Lean was trying to understand. Blake pulled her knees closer to her chest, and wrapped her arms around them, sulking.

"Okay. Yeah." Blake finally admitted.

"Where does it hurt?" Lean asked.

Blake put her hand on her chest. "Here, mostly."

"She used words to hurt you. I saw her doing it to Dana. And other council witches looked very hurt after only few minutes with her." Lean said.

Blake didn't feel consoled by that. Her chest was hurting worse instead. She couldn't handle it anymore, she had to find out, even if it did turn out to be what she was scared of.

"Where were you.. after Dana took you?" Blake asked, holding her breath.

"I was at the council." Lean said, a bit surprised by the question. "Dana took me there, and they had me tell my story, and explained some things about Lynx. I wanted to go back for you, but they held me back."

"Who did?" Blake asked.

"Dana and Dareena, mostly. They told me they wouldn't be able to free you, without my powers. So Dana taught me how to use them, and I was horrible at it, until.." Lean trailed off.

"Until what?" Blake asked, tense.

"Lynx visited us, and, you were there. I saw you. It was- I could use my powers after that." Lean said, and shuddered at the very thought. "I wanted to fly out to get you, but first Dana locked me in, then Dareena held me back."

"What happened then?" Blake kept asking.

"Dana said we could go and fight, we only waited for Mjord and Mathilda to come help, and I had to control the powers better so we could.. get you out." Lean finished, awkwardly, remembering how Blake reacted.

"That's all that happened?" Blake asked again.

"I think so. What was it like in that dark sphere? Were you conscious?" Lean asked.

Blake felt unwelcome memories coming back, but maybe it was better to answer that question for now.



"I was, but I couldn't see anything. Lynx only did that after I tried to escape too many times, she got annoyed with it. She kept taunting me, so I would just pretend to be unconscious most of the time so she'd get bored with me." Blake said, wondering if she said too much.

"Oh." Lean said, with pained voice. "That sounds awful."

"Yeah." Blake admitted. "But I got out alright."

"You didn't seem.. alright when we got you out." Lean said, tentatively.

Blake turned away, silent. Lean didn't move, wasn't insisting on a reply. But Blake couldn't stand not speaking out what was on her heart, even though she knew, once she started, there would be no end to it. She couldn't bear Lean to see her face, so she turned to the other side of the tree, and took a shaky breath.

"Lynx said.. well, she told me you wouldn't want to come help me. She kept saying that you just used me and wouldn't even think twice about me if you had... any other choice. She told me about the setup she used to get you to like her, and accused me of stealing that, stealing your affection, but now you were free and didn't need me anymore. The council all knew I was a daughter of criminals and they would find it convenient to use me as a bait and then ditch me here, they were probably feeling lucky it was nobody relevant so they wouldn't have to bother rescuing me. I didn't buy any of that! I kept telling her she was lying and that she was insane, and in the end I would just pretend to not hear her, but she didn't stop, for a long time, she kept saying it all over again, and I knew it was no use arguing but I couldn't not hear it, and.. nobody was coming to get me. And then Lynx said she was going to take me to the council, and that you were there, but you.. you wouldn't even come out to see me. She said they would all know I was there, and wouldn't even try to help. I thought she was wrong, I thought for sure, if we went there I would get free, and we would banish Lynx, and things would be okay, it had to work out that way! I needed to see her proved wrong. But then.. we went there and nobody did anything. Nobody even came out, except Dana, and she didn't even tell Lynx to let me go. She didn't even try. It seemed like Lynx was sure you were there, and I didn't want us to switch places, I didn't want you to get caught, but you wouldn't even.. try to.. " Blake paused, to rub her eyes, but didn't wait for long enough for Lean to start talking again.

"And I didn't understand why, and I got angry. I didn't think you were coming. By the time you came, I already.. didn't think any of you were on my side." Blake finished, her voice heavy.

Blake was breathing audibly, trying to calm herself down, but it wasn't working. Lean now knew. What was she going to say? How would things ever be okay after this?

But Lean wasn't saying anything, instead, Blake could hear Lean standing up on the other side.

"I'm going to kill Dana and Dareena for this." Lean said, her voice filled with rage.

Blake turned around the tree to see Lean spreading her wings fast.

"Wait!" Blake yelled.

But Lean wasn't listening, she was already mid-air, zooming forward towards Lynx's castle.

"Lean!" Blake yelled again, then grabbed her broom to follow, but she felt weak and her breathing was heavy, she realized she wouldn't be able to catch up.

"Lean, come back." Blake said weakly.

That wasn't what Blake expected to happen, and it didn't make sense. How were Dana and Dareena responsible for any of this? Except for using Blake as a bait, and generally not helping, and Lean mentioned they held her off at Lynx's castle, but that felt like a small obstruction in Blake's mind.

Did Lean just make an excuse to leave? Maybe Lean really didn't want to deal with Blake like this. Maybe Blake was wrong to say anything.

But then a shining witch flew back, gasping for air, startling Blake.

"They held me back when I wanted to fly out for you!" Lean was yelling, almost sobbing, and she landed right in front of Blake, extending her hands, wanting to hug Blake. Blake pulled away, overwhelmed and startled.

"I could see you, you looked so horrible in there! That's why I was so worried! I wanted to go after you but they kept saying stupid things and locking me up and making me silent so I wouldn't- I couldn't- Blake I really wanted to come out and help you!" Lean was tearing up, and pressed her arms against the tree when Blake wouldn't accept a hug.

Blake had never seen Lean out of control like this, but things she was saying, fell right where they were supposed to on Blake's heart. Blake sat down on a big root coming out the ground, and tried to accept what Lean was telling her.

"You were trying to come." Blake said, her voice filled with recognition.

"I was! They kept telling me we'd both be captured but what does it matter? I should have just fought them and came to you anyway!" Lean clenched her fists against a tree, and looked at Blake.

"I was so stupid, Blake, I didn't realize- I should have come." Lean said, and sat down, looking exhausted and miserable.

"How did they- what did they say to stop you?" Blake asked.

"They said I was helpless against Lynx as I am. But if I learned to use my powers, I could free you. If I went before that, I would only be imprisoned as well, and hopes of saving any of us would be slim." Lean said, as if all of this was nonsensical now.

"Oh." Blake said, remembering Dana saying similar things to her before, and getting the idea that they really couldn't fight Lynx.

"I was so stupid to listen to that." Lean said, mortified. "From now on, I will not listen to anyone, or anything."

"How did you end up freeing me in the end?" Blake asked, realizing she never really understood what happened.

"Well I stopped Lynx from controlling the light, I made it constant, so she couldn't blind anyone, and everyone else could fight her. After that it only took minutes for them to get her." Lean said, still sounding bitter.

"Okay, well, it does seem like if you didn't use that power, she would have blinded everyone." Blake said. Seeing Lean so distressed helped Blake feel a bit more calm.

"We would have found a way! Blake, anything would have been better than- abandoning you like-" Lean said, looking at Blake, and she looked as if she was going to cry.

Blake finally felt a bit of relief. Lean was upset over Blake being hurt. Lean wanted to prevent it. She was trying to help.

"I am starting to understand you didn't abandon me. It was just.. " Blake started.

"Dana said Lynx was only there to try to get me, that only thing to think of was making sure I'm not taken, she was wrong! We were all wrong, it wasn't meant for me at all, she did that to hurt you! And we all played along, we all acted as if you being imprisoned didn't matter!" Lean said, angry again.

"I really need to go there and end them both." Lean decided, and turned towards the sky again.

"Wait." Blake said, and took a hold of Lean's sleeve.

"Blake-" Lean started, but she didn't move, her eyes landing at Blake's hand holding her shirt.

"I want to go too." Blake said, then looked away, embarrassed. "I can't fly very fast right now."

"Oh." Lean said.

"Yeah." Blake said. It felt like a weird reversal, reminded Blake of when Lean was too tired to fly.

"I could carry you." Lean offered tentatively, but Blake let go of her sleeve and glared at her.

"Or we could fly slow." Lean said quickly, and Blake sighed and nodded.

Blake took her broom and lifted herself up, carefully, feeling light-headed and for the first time, unsure in what she was doing. She realized Lean was watching her with concern, so she made a grumpy noise, and flew upwards. Lean stayed behind only to press her palm on a tree, probably to check where Dana and Dareena were.

"They're back at the council." Lean said, flying up to Blake, and Blake let out a sigh of relief. She really didn't want to go back to Lynx's castle to talk to them.

"Okay." Blake said, and they both flew, Lean shining and lighting the way, turning around every few minutes to check on Blake, which Blake found annoying.

"If you see Mjord and Mathilda don't talk to them." Blake said conspiratorially.

"... Okay." Lean said.

Blake thought Lean maybe wouldn't go through with that if Blake wasn't under the weather, but she'd take it.

## Chapter 31: Fault

The council castle's spell of night didn't seem out of ordinary in the dark. Lean landed first, and knocked. They were immediately invited inside, and Blake glared around for the sight of Mjord or Mathilda, but they were gone. They found a bunch of witches, together with Dana and Dareena in the big room with round tables, same one they used for meetings. They all looked tired, and were laughing and chatting about their day, from what Blake could hear, they spent entire day at Lynx's castle. Blake didn't very much want to be seen by anyone, except maybe Dana, because she still had questions, so she kept lingering in the hallways, hiding herself. Lean, however, stormed directly inside and started yelling before she even reached the circle.

"Dana! Dareena! You were all wrong about Lynx, she wasn't trying to get me, she was trying to torture Blake, and now thanks to you, she succeeded! You should have just let me go!" Lean yelled, and all of the witches turned to stare at her, Dana and Dareena looking surprised.

"You only thought about what was convenient for you, and now Blake isn't okay, and it took me this long just to find her, and this is all your fault!" Lean was staring them both down, glaring, and Blake thought for a moment Lean was going to attack them. Dareena certainly thought so because she put a hand over Dana, and was about to open her mouth, but Dana shushed her.

"Lean. You found Blake?" Dana asked, apparently still trying to make it a conversation.

"She can barely talk to me! You saw what Lynx was like, and Blake was alone with her for DAYS! If I went there at least I would have let her know we were coming for her, but no! You just had to stop me, with your stupid excuses, and stupid ideas, what is wrong with you? Blake is a witch, it should have been a priority to save her!" Lean kept yelling, ignoring all the witches staring at her in shock.

Blake kept just standing there, hidden, daring to only take an occasional peek, but she felt weird.

Someone yelling at group of people because of Blake, that's not something that ever happened before.

Lean kept on yelling, demanding for Dana and Dareena to admit they were wrong, that they should apologize to Blake and never allow anything like this to happen. It was hard for Blake to tell who was

right, but Lean's angry yelling made her feel weirdly cared for. Lean was on her side, pretty passionately on her side.

"But it was all we could do to save her!" Dareena interrupted, and Blake's heart sank. It would turn out after all, that Blake's suffering was justified in the end.

"No, wait." Dana said, and Blake could see her standing up and holding Dareena back.

"She's right." Dana said, and Blake hid again, listening intensely.

"Of course I'm right! There's a witch out there really hurt right now, and you could have stopped that!" Lean wasn't done yelling.

"What do you mean she's right?" Dareena asked, offended.

"I'm saying it's true." Dana said. Lean finally stopped yelling, and Blake took a peek to see Dana sit down, sighing.

"I.. do admit I thought I was doing the right thing at the time. But if what you're saying is true, then I did allow Blake to get hurt, in order to protect the council from danger. It felt wrong. I didn't know what would happen to Blake but I risked it." Dana confessed.

Blake finally came out of the corridor, but nobody was looking at her. Dana looked angry with herself. Blake could see the guilt on her face.

"I didn't say yes to that." Blake said, quietly, and Dana looked directly at her.

"I know." Dana said. "I'm-"

"If you had asked me beforehand, I might have." Blake said angrily, interrupting.

Dana looked at Blake, a bit surprised, and then Lean grabbed a plate of untouched food, and carried it towards Blake.

"Blake wants to speak to you in private, follow us." Lean said, aimed at Dana.

Lean pushed the plate in Blake's hands, whispered "Eat." and lead Blake out of the room. Dana stood up again without saying anything, and followed.

Blake followed Lean feeling confused, looking at the food right in front of her she realized she was actually very hungry, her stomach was just too tense until just then to acknowledge it. Lean led them to the same room Blake was sleeping in, Blake could vaguely remember it. It was empty, Lean motioned for Blake to sit down, and she did, feeling oddly out of control of the situation. Dana entered after them and sat on the bed, looking at them both.

"Eat." Lean said, noticing Blake was staring at Dana, and not touching her food.

Blake started eating tentatively. It was good. Cooked food was good.

"Now, what were you saying about being wrong? You can continue." Lean ordered Dana.

Dana sighed.

"It was wrong to not put more energy in saving Blake without your powers. We might have been able to manage it, but I.. didn't want to risk anyone's eyesight. I didn't realize Blake would get permanently hurt, and I should have." Dana said, apologetically.

Blake winced at the mention of "permanently hurt" and felt a potato stuck in her throat.

"What did Lynx do to you?" Dana asked Blake, and Blake looked at Lean with panic.

"That can remain private." Lean said with finality in her voice.

Dana didn't argue.

"That must have been awful, then. I'm sorry. If I can do anything to make up for that- I can promise to not do it again." Dana said, and she sounded genuinely sad about her actions.

Blake could think of a few things she wanted from Dana, but she kept eating instead, figuring her stomach is the priority.

"Blake has some questions for you." Lean said. "But it can wait until she's done eating."

"Fine." Dana said.

Lean watched Blake eat, and still glared at Dana occasionally, apparently to remind her to keep looking sad and guilty. Blake didn't object to that.

"Tell me about my mothers." Blake said, when she finished eating.

Dana looked reluctant.

"Blake, maybe we should wait with that until you're a bit-" Dana started.

"No. You will tell her now." Lean said, threateningly.

"What happened to you?" Dana asked Lean now, taken aback.

"I want to know." Blake said.

Dana looked at them both, and sighed again.

"You won't like this." Dana said.

"Say it anyway." Blake said.

"Alright. I was not the head of the council back then, and I wasn't aware of them. All I can tell you is what I found in the records when I went to check." Dana said.

Blake and Lean waited.

"They were prosecuted for number of crimes. Some of them were forbidden experiments, kidnappings, massive harm to plants and animals, and obstruction of daytime for several months to a certain witch clan. They were extremely evasive and eluded capture for months." Dana said.

Blake kept a straight face, but inside she felt a big ball of horror. Her mothers did that? She came from flesh and blood of witches who did that?

"It gets worse." Dana said.

"Go on." Blake said, her stomach and fists clenching.

"They had been hidden for months, and when council finally found them, they had a newborn baby. They thought if they were new mothers, they wouldn't be banished. Council recognized them as dangerous for the baby, and banished them anyway. They kept the baby name, Blake, and council was supposed to look after you." Dana finished.

Blake's face was blank with shock. That was, so much worse than she imagined. She felt her eyes tearing up and rubbed them quickly.

Lean looked just as shocked and she seemed to want to touch and comfort Blake, but thought better of it, and looked at Dana instead.

"What happens to witches who are banished?" Lean asked.

"They're stripped of their powers, and forced to live far away from any witch clan. If they're seen by witches they would be in danger, so they know better than to interact with us again. They have to find a way to survive on their own." Dana said.

"They're still alive, then." Blake said quietly, and Dana looked at her, alarmed.

"Don't think of trying to find them." Dana said quickly.

"I don't want to see them." Blake said, her voice heavy with pain.

Lean looked at Blake, concerned, but Blake looked away.

"Do witches think.. I'm like them?" Blake asked, quietly.

"There's some.. who don't understand that evil witches can bring forth good children. But some of us do know. You're nothing like them." Dana said, gently.

Blake stared at the floor. For a while she didn't move, and everyone kept silent.

Then, Blake broke the silence.

"This sucks." Blake turned to Lean, with complaint in her voice.

Lean smiled weakly. "It does."

Dana stood up, apparently to leave.

"I assume you two want to be alone." Dana said.

"We're not done with you." Lean said, and both Dana and Blake looked at her.

"You really changed." Dana said, thoughtful.

"You can leave for now." Blake said to Dana, and Lean didn't object.

Dana nodded, and went for the door. Blake felt relieved to be left alone with Lean again. She felt the urge to hug Lean, to go and ask Lean to hold her hand, but resisted. Something inside of her still felt reluctant and hard, making Blake feel it's the safest to stay away.

Lean turned to Blake, looking annoyed.

"They're all just bunch of wannabe's, *didn't want to risk their eyesight*, well I would risk my eyesight for you-" Lean started.

"Lean, no!" Blake interrupted, startled.

"What? I didn't say I would give it away." Lean said, squinting her eyes.

"I wouldn't want you to risk it." Blake said, and returned to staring at the floor.

Lean sighed, and walked to the table, looking at unfinished food. She sat down next to Blake, and joined in staring at the floor.

"It really feels like the ground was pulled out under your feet, doesn't it?" Lean said.

Blake nodded, silent.

"I felt like that when I found out- you know. I didn't know who I was, I'm still not really there." Lean said.

"It.. it makes sense though." Blake said, still staring.

"Yeah, after a while it did for me too." Lean confirmed.

They sat in the silence for a while.

"I just don't understand.. why they did all this." Blake said, deep in thought.

"Some witches are just evil." Lean said. "And then they go and have children."

Blake shook her head in disgust.

"Yeah." Lean agreed.

"But we wouldn't be here if they didn't." Blake said, feeling conflicted.

"Eh." Lean said halfheartedly.

Blake laughed weakly, and then realized she didn't laugh for so long, it hurt her face to actually do it.

"Well I'm not complaining that you're.. around." Blake said, when she calmed back down.

"Not complaining, huh, well, that's an honour." Lean said.

Blake snorted, and Lean shook her head, smiling.

"You see? This entire thing is dumb." Lean said.

"It is." Blake agreed. "We should just get some good revenge."

"Well they're already banished, what else can we do?" Lean said.

"Lynx isn't banished yet, I bet Dana is keeping her locked somewhere here." Blake said.

"You think there's a dungeon here? I haven't seen one." Lean said.

"We should go and find her. And then make fun of her for losing to you." Blake said, dark glint in her eyes.

"Oh, she would hate that." Lean said, delighted. "But, she could be dangerous still, she's good at smelling weak spots." Lean added, apprehensively.



Blake thought about that, and realized it would be pretty awful to hear Lynx talk about her mothers, or about Lean again.

"Dareena knows a spell to keep someone quiet." Lean said, looking at Blake.

Blake turned to Lean with an evil grin.

"Get Dareena." Blake said.

Lean insisted Blake eat the rest of her food first, which Blake did, glaring only a little at being demanded to do something. Then they both entered the meeting room again, finding the witches looking a bit nervously at them.

"Dareena, you're up." Lean said.

Dareena stared at them incredulously, and then looked at Dana, apparently pissed off.

"You see what happens when you let the little cretins talk to you like that? Now they think they own the place." Dareena said to Dana, angrily.

Dana shrugged, apparently not caring much about the issue.

"We failed them, they don't have to respect us." Dana said.

"I'm not even talking about respect! They talk to us like we're beneath them, after all we've done-" Dareena started.

"Come on, two young witches counting on us isn't a problem." Dana said, halfheartedly.

"You're just saying that because you feel guilty." Dareena accused.

"We all used to be like them, didn't we?" Dana said, looking at Lean and Blake. "Thinking we know it all, and wanting everything to be done our way. Now it's their turn. Let them have a go. They're not a threat.

Lean, what do you need Dareena for?" Dana asked, looking at Lean.

"To silence Lynx so we can yell at her." Lean said.

"See? They got it all figured out." Dana said, smirking at Dareena.

"You want to do WHAT?" Dareena stood up, alarmed. "I would have thought, after all of this, you two would be properly scared of Lynx."

"Well that's why we're fetching you." Lean said.

Dareena glared at Dana again, who only shrugged and kept eating her meal.

Blake watched the entire thing in amusement, Lean ordering the council around was really something Blake could get used to, and doing it on Blake's behalf made it twice as fun.

Dareena muttered something about Dana being too soft and forgiving, which Dana ignored, and then walked towards Lean and Blake, sighing in defeat.

"Fine. But only for ten minutes." Dareena said begrudgingly.

Lean glanced at Blake, and Blake nodded in approval.

"Fine." Lean said, and they followed Dareena out in the corridor, and then downstairs.

Blake quickly realized they would not have easily found the dungeon, this place looked neat and warm, but the lower they went, the more it turned into a maze. At one point Dareena opened what looked like solid wall, and showed them into the dungeon.

It was a dark, moldy place. Blake could see a row of cells, and Lynx was nowhere in sight.

"She was yelling a lot of obscenities so we put her in the back." Dareena explained, and lead them forwards.

Blake started feeling uncomfortable, her latest dungeon experiences were not great, but it was Lynx who was now held here, Lynx who trapped and imprisoned Blake three whole times. That's way too many times, Blake thought. Lean glanced at her, worried.

"Wait here." Dareena said, and Blake looked at her suspiciously, and followed anyway.

"I have to silence her first!" Dareena said, annoyed.

"Fine." Blake said, grumpy, and leaned onto the nearest cell, watching Dareena leave.

Lean stood by her..

"I'm nervous." Lean said.

Blake was in fact, getting nervous as well.

"She can't hurt us now." Blake said, trying to convince herself.

"You're nervous too." Lean said, not falling for it.

"Shut up." Blake said.

"We could not do this." Lean suggested.

"No, I-" Blake started, then paused.

It didn't feel right for Blake, being afraid of someone like this. Blake wanted to face her, wanted to destroy any last imagined threat in Lynx. Without her powers, and without her words, Lynx was nothing. Blake needed to see that. Even if right now, it felt like coming in front of her was a very stupid, not well thought out idea.

"I need to do this." Blake decided.

Lean nodded.

Dareena came back to fetch them, and gave a look of warning to Blake.

"She's pissed." Dareena said.

"I'm pissed too." Blake said, glaring.

Dareena shrugged, and lead them to the final cell.

Lynx wasn't hiding in her cell. She was pressed against the bars, glaring, her eyes red at corners. She looked wild, disheveled and insane. Blake froze momentarily, her instincts telling her to pull back and

away. Lynx outreached an arm towards Lean, her eyes hungry, and Lean hid behind Blake. Blake glared at Lynx, and hissed at her loudly. Lynx then turned her eyes to Blake and grinned. She couldn't speak, but her eyes looked vicious, satisfied. Blake froze in shock, and this time Lean stepped forward and cut in front of Blake, blocking her from Lynx's line of vision.

"Don't go any closer." Dareena said, watching the exchange.

Blake tried to compose herself, she realized this was done too soon, she wouldn't be able to mock the insane, predatory monster behind the bars. Lynx was scary. And now Lean was looking right at her, and was probably scared too. But, if they retreat now, Lynx will know they're both still scared of her, still find her terrifying. Blake didn't want to give her that satisfaction.

"We're not afraid of you." Blake said, and took Lean's hand, pulling her so they stood side by side.

Lean nodded, glaring at Lynx, and squeezed Blake's hand gently.

"You can't do anything anymore, you're going to be banished forever." Blake said, and Lynx looked outraged, as if she wanted nothing more but to rip Blake apart.

"You will never be forgiven for what you did to us." Blake continued, feeling her anger come back. "I know you lied to us, you know nothing about me, or about Lean. And you deserved to be defeated by her, she's more powerful than you will ever be."

Lynx's eyes widened, and she glared at Lean with pure hatred. Lean stepped back slightly, but Blake held her hand tight, and she came back.

"You're not my mother." Lean said quietly, and Blake looked at her, surprised. It was the first time she talked since they faced Lynx. "I am disowning you. You are nothing to me."

Lean ignored Lynx's break of silent outrage at this, and looked at Blake instead, smiling.

"That did feel good to say." Lean said to Blake.

Blake smiled back and nodded. "Yeah."

Lean turned to Lynx again.

"If you didn't take Blake, I might not have been able to fight you. You brought this onto yourself when you hurt the one I love." Lean said.

Blake felt a sudden rush of heat in her cheeks and looked away. Lean didn't ever say that before.

Lynx stood back, not looking at Lean or Blake, but rubbing her fingers over her head rapidly.

"Looks like she got it." Lean said, and Blake found she had nothing left to say.

Blake nodded, and pulled Lean to come with her. Dareena stayed behind, apparently to remove the silent spell. But Blake didn't care about that anymore. She held Lean's hand as they got out of the dungeon, and they immediately got lost on their way up. They waited for Dareena to find them, and

show them their way up. Dareena showed them back into their room, and asked if they needed more food. They shook their heads, and Dareena left them with a sarcastic remark instead of good night.

Blake finally let go of Lean's hand, and sat down on the bed. Lean sat next to her.

"Did you mean that?" Blake asked.

"I did." Lean said. "I know it was a weird moment to say it, but I wanted to rub it in her face."

Blake leaned down on the bed, and stared at the bed curtain.

"I can't complain about that." Blake said.

Lean watched her. Blake was half-lying on the bed, deep in thoughts.

"How are you doing?" Lean asked.

Blake looked away, unwilling to reply.

"Was it too soon, seeing her?" Lean asked again, and Blake made a grumpy face.

Lean sighed and leaned down into the bed too. She was careful not to touch Blake, and Blake was grateful for it. Down there in the dungeon was different, in that moment she needed Lean's hand, but right now, when they were alone, getting too close to Lean felt unsafe again. Even as hearing Lean name Blake "the one she loves", didn't make it much better.

"Still don't want to be touched?" Lean said, as if she was reading Blake's mind, and Blake felt she was pointing out all the things that were wrong, and Blake did not want to think about them.

"Where did your change of attitude come from?" Blake asked instead.

Lean looked at Blake, and then stared up at the bed curtain as well.

"Well, being obedient did not pay off. And it caused me to do some things I regret. I think Leira might have been trying to raise me to be like that on purpose, so Lynx could control me easier. And I thought I'd look up to you instead. You don't listen to anyone." Lean said.

Blake's lips curled up in a smile, that was something Blake was proud of.

"Will you still listen to me?" Blake asked, teasing.

"Depends." Lean said.

"On what?" Blake asked.

"Whether I like what you're saying." Lean said.

Blake thought about it.

"That's fair." Blake concluded.

They laid there for a while more.

"Thanks for sticking up for me." Blake said suddenly.

"Anytime." Lean replied casually.

"I didn't realize I needed someone to do that for me." Blake said, honestly.

"We all do, sometimes. You did it for me too." Lean said, smiling.

Blake nodded, and sank back in thought.

"Did you know that Dana and Dareena call you the Night Witch?" Lean asked.

"The Night Witch?" Blake asked, grinning. "I like it."

"Yeah, it's cool! And I'm the Fairy Witch." Lean said, excited.

"The Fairy Witch. It sounds better than it is." Blake said, smiling.

"Yeah, like I'm some kind of hybrid." Lean added.

"You do have fairy powers, and witch powers, don't you?" Blake asked.

"Witch powers are way better." Lean claimed.

"Isn't it weird tho? Both of our powers are about controlling the light." Blake said, thinking.

"Yeah, I'm a bit bummed out too. This is not great for combat." Lean said.

"Well, for you it is, you can just blind everyone and win by default." Blake said.

"That's not very adventurous. I want real fights." Lean said.

"You really have changed." Blake said, sounding impressed.

Lean lifted her head up, and leaned on her elbow, looking at Blake.

"Did you know Dana and Dareena were together?" Lean asked.

"How do you know?" Blake asked, turning on the bed to look at Lean.

"I saw them. When Lynx came to the castle, Dana got so upset she was lying on the floor and refused to talk to anyone. Dareena carried her away and kissed her bunch." Lean said.

"Huh." Blake said, awkward. "I didn't realize she got upset. How bad was it?" Blake asked, interested.

"Pretty bad. She said Lynx found her weakness and that she couldn't stand it." Lean said. "Ah, but don't tell them I told you. I said I wouldn't tell anyone."

"Well, it's good you told me, I now have everything I need." Blake said conspiratorially.

"Oh no, what will you do?" Lean asked.

"We'll see." Blake said, grinning.

"You're going to tease them like you did with Mjord, won't you?" Lean asked.

"Maybe." Blake said, still grinning.

Lean shook her head, smiling.

"You're awful." Lean said.

"And yet." Blake said, and extended her hand to fix Lean's hair. "You're here with me."

"Yeah." Lean said, closing her eyes at Blake's touch.

"You know, you should talk to Mathilda." Lean said.

Blake glared, and withdrew her hand.

"Mathilda is an evil little gremlin and I hate her." Blake said.

"Come on, what did she do to you?" Lean asked.

Blake went silent.

"I .. can't remember." Blake admitted.

Lean snorted, and they both launched into laughter. They kept lying there, and catching each other up on details the other has missed while they were apart. Blake was getting too tired, and she shuffled further into the bed, falling asleep while telling Lean about the plans for tomorrow.

## Chapter 32: Instincts

Blake woke up with Lean sleeping just far enough to not be touching her. Blake was grateful Lean didn't come any closer. She watched Lean's sleeping face, it was peaceful. Blake felt an odd sense of safety with Lean asleep like that. Lean looked harmless, curled up and breathing slowly. Blake smiled and touched her hair, then pulled her hand away, thinking. Why couldn't she trust Lean now? Lean already explained everything, and Blake believed it was sincere. Yet, she couldn't handle Lean touching her again. Every time Blake wanted to kiss Lean, something stopped her. Blake's chest would hurt and some weird instinct would keep her rooted to the spot. It wasn't fair. Blake missed kissing Lean. She already went so long without being hugged or held or touched, and now Lean was right there, and nothing could happen. And if that keeps up, maybe Lean would stop wanting to do it, and the thought of that was just too painful. Blake got up, careful not to wake Lean up. She scribbled a note for Lean to know where she went, and made a grim face. She would go and do something against her better judgment. She would talk to Mathilda.

Blake rummaged around the castle, keeping her ears opened for voices that could lead her to either Mjord or Mathilda. They weren't in the common room with the other witches, and in the end Blake got Dana to show her in what room they were both staying. Blake thanked her, glared after her as she left, and then knocked on the door.

It was Mjord who opened it.

"Blake." Mjord said, looking surprised.

"I need to talk to Mathilda." Blake said, refusing to look Mjord in the eyes.

"I see." Mjord said, sighed, and turned away from the door. "She wants you."

Blake could see Mathilda approaching the door, and instead of looking surprised, there was annoying "knowing" look on her face.

"Hey, Blake." Mathilda said, in seemingly good spirits.

"I want to talk to you, alone." Blake said, avoiding Mathilda's eyes as well.

"Alright." Mathilda said, and lead Blake to the room next door, which appeared to be empty.

Blake got in, and glared at Mathilda, who smiled good-naturedly, and sat down.

"What's up?" Mathilda asked.

Blake refused to sit down, and instead eyed Mathilda suspiciously.

"Lean said I should talk to you." Blake said.

"I see." Mathilda said.

Blake narrowed her eyes even more. Mathilda wasn't asking anything, or even trying to figure out why Blake was there. Blake was worried that Mathilda already knew, and it was irritating. Nobody should know things Blake wanted to keep private. Mathilda always talked as if she knew everything, and that's the way Lynx talked as well. It was possible Mathilda even knew that Blake hated it, and that's why she wasn't saying much. Blake ran her hands thru her hair, frustrated, and figured she wouldn't get anywhere if she kept trying to guess what Mathilda knew. She needed Mathilda to explain some things to her, and she had to ask about it.

"Ever since I got out, I couldn't let Lean touch me. I want to know why." Blake managed to say fast.

Mathilda looked at Blake in a way that made Blake feel transparent and uncomfortable, and then leaned back, apparently thinking about it.

"You weren't most touchy to begin with, were you?" Mathilda asked, and Blake shook her head.

"How come you let Lean touch you in the first place?" Mathilda asked.

Blake thought about it, remembered how innocent and fragile Lean looked as a fairy, and how it was Lean who got hurt first time Blake touched her.

"She seemed harmless." Blake said, honestly.

"That's all?" Mathilda asked.

"It felt good. And.. I wanted to." Blake said, and then stared at the floor.

"You still want to." Mathilda said, and Blake nodded, hesitantly.

"But she's not harmless now." Mathilda said.

Blake looked at Mathilda, frowning.

"What do you mean?" Blake asked.

"Her powers could hurt you." Mathilda said.

But that didn't quite sit right with Blake, Lean was blindingly bright before, and Blake would find a way around it.

"That's not it." Blake said. "She had powers of light before. I didn't mind it."

"How do you feel at the thought of her touching you?" Mathilda asked.

"Frozen." Blake admitted.

Mathilda thought about it again, and Blake felt a bit reassured, this was difficult after all, even Mathilda couldn't just tell what's wrong right away.

"From what I know." Mathilda started. "You were trapped by Lynx because you went there to save Lean, didn't you? And you got hurt there. I don't know anything about it, don't look at me that way. I don't know. But I could tell it was bad, you don't normally lash out like that. You got hurt more than you expected to. It shook your worldview. It forced you to re-think about how much you need to keep yourself safe."

Blake felt uncomfortably exposed again, but these words rang true. She nodded slightly.

"I expect you developed your instincts to keep safe on your own, since you never had much protection. So you don't expect someone else to keep you safe, or to stop you from doing something dangerous, you rely on yourself to figure out what's not safe. And it's possible that somewhere within all of this, your instincts decided that being close to Lean caused all this. So they're stopping you from doing it again, because you could be exposing yourself to danger again." Mathilda finished.

"But that's stupid." Blake said. "Lynx is finished. She can't do this again. This won't happen again."

Mathilda shook her head. "It doesn't matter. Anything that happened once is now a real possibility for your instincts, and no longer a non-existing threat."

"But.. how do I fight against that?" Blake asked, feeling hopeless.

"It's tough." Mathilda acknowledged. "But your instincts should calm down if it proves that you can heal from this. If the damage proves to not be permanent, then the risk is once again in the game."

"When will that happen?" Blake asked, frowning now.

"I don't know." Mathilda said. "You'll just have to wait this one out. It would help if you talked about what happened."

"I talked to Lean." Blake said, stubbornly.

"Did you feel better after that?" Mathilda asked.

"Yeah." Blake admitted, quietly.

"Then keep doing that." Mathilda said.

Blake nodded.

"You could probably talk to Mjord too. She's worried about you." Mathilda said.

Blake grunted angrily in disagreement.

"Oh lay off of her. She cares about you. She came here just for you. And it's not like she was keeping it secret from you for a long time, she only found out recently." Mathilda said.



Blake looked away, and thought about it. She wasn't as mad at Mjord anymore, but didn't want to talk to her yet either.

"I'll talk to her.. eventually." Blake said.

"Okay." Mathilda said.

"What happened to you?" Blake asked, remembering to be curious.

"What do you mean?" Mathilda asked, as if she really didn't know.

"At Lynx's castle, when I woke up, Mjord was holding you." Blake said.

"Oh. Had a run-in with Lynx. Mjord was really angry, we convinced her I wouldn't get hurt." Mathilda said.

"What did Lynx do to you?" Blake asked.

"Not worse than to anyone else, really. Some death threats, promises she'd make me watch when she tortured Mjord, and some of the descriptions got very graphic." Mathilda said, grimacing.

"Oh." Blake said.

"I didn't want Mjord to leave my side for a while after that. And we're staying until Lynx gets banished." Mathilda said, sighing. "Mjord really misses her plants."

Blake didn't know quite what to say. Suddenly it felt like she was taking rather a lot for granted. But Mjord never really complained for real about all the things she went through for Blake.

"That's awful." Blake said, quietly.

"I assume you went through worse. We all comforted each other right away, so we're recovering alright. You got away and I assume you spent some time alone instead." Mathilda said.

"I couldn't be around anyone." Blake said, blankly.

"That means it was pretty bad." Mathilda said.

"When is Lynx getting banished?" Blake asked.

"Tomorrow. We would do it right away, but Dana is still trying to get some information out of her. Some things are not very clear in her timeline." Mathilda said.

Blake felt some relief. After tomorrow, Lynx will no longer be around. Blake will never have to see her again.

"You and Lean will probably be invited to the banishment, since she affected your lives the most." Mathilda said.

"Okay." Blake said.

Mathilda stood up, and Blake realized she was leaving.

"Thanks." Blake said, awkwardly.

"Well, I am a horrible little gremlin, am I not?" Mathilda teased her.

Blake looked at her surprised, but then grinned.

"I stand by it." Blake said, unabashed.

Mathilda laughed, and went back to her and Mjord's room, leaving Blake alone with her thoughts. It didn't last long though, because Lean was waiting right outside the room. She must have had read the note and went looking for Blake as soon as she got up. Blake's lips curled into a smile, it felt sweet that Lean would think of nothing but finding Blake first thing upon waking up. Blake wanted to kiss her, but held back. Lean also looked like she was about to come closer and kiss Blake, but also stopped. Blake sighed.

"Hey, you." Blake said, affectionately.

"Good morning, Blake." Lean said, smiling.

"Did you sleep well?" Blake asked.

"I did." Lean answered. "How was the talk with Mathilda?"

"It was.. informative." Blake said, trying to decide on a word.

"What did you find out?" Lean asked, eagerly.

"My instincts are dumb and we should get rid of them." Blake said.

"Huh." Lean said. "That doesn't sound helpful."

"Well it made sense when she said it." Blake said.

"Did you find anything else out?" Lean asked.

"They're banishing your ex-mom tomorrow and we're invited to watch." Blake said.

"Uh." Lean said, uncomfortable. "I'm not sure I want to go."

Blake nodded.

"We don't have to." Blake said.

"Wanna eat together?" Lean asked, looking relieved.

"Yeah." Blake nodded.

They walked outside, talking and discussing various aspects of the council castle. Lean seemed to be impressed with the constant night surrounding it, even though she could create complete darkness. Blake liked the warmth and the fires inside. They ate bunch of fruit they stole from the kitchens, and ate while talking. Blake still kept some distance between her and Lean, and Lean understood and didn't attempt to come any closer. They found a place to lay down on the grass, and relaxed, looking at the sky and listening to chirpy noises of birds and bees.

"I think I'm ready." Blake said, and Lean looked at her, wide eyed.

"Really?" Lean asked, pushing herself up and blushing.

"Not that!" Blake said quickly, watching Lean in alarm.

"Oh." Lean said, awkward. "Then what?"

"Let's go destroy Lynx's castle." Blake said with a grin.

Lean looked taken aback, Blake must have forgotten to mention that specific plan before. She didn't say anything right away, but seemed to actually consider it. Blake grinned even more.

"Do you think.. Dana would mind if we did that?" Lean asked, finally.

"Who cares, Dana owes me one." Blake said.

Lean sank back in her thoughts.

"Come on, I know you hate it too. You want it gone, don't you." Blake whispered temptingly.

"I do." Lean said, and pushed herself further up. "Let's do it."

Blake looked at her appreciatively, and wished she could kiss her right now. But, destroying a castle together will feel almost as good. Blake got up.

"All the animals and residents should be gone by now. And the castle is probably yours, Lean, you usually inherit that stuff." Blake said.

"Then I definitely want it destroyed." Lean said, determined.

"How are we going to do it, though?" Lean asked, a second later. "Our powers are no use for this."

"Oh, I've been thinking about that. I think your fairy powers will be useful here." Blake said.

"Fairy powers? Like making plants grow fast?" Lean asked, confused.

"Yeah. How fast can you make roots grow?" Blake asked.

"Just as fast as anything else." Lean said.

"We're going to plant some stuff down under the dungeon, and then have roots destroy the building. I've read about it happening, but it takes thousands of years naturally. We could do it faster." Blake said.

"I've never heard about fairies using their powers to destroy a place." Lean said, impressed.

"You're gonna be the first witch fairy to destroy a castle." Blake said, satisfied.

"Good." Lean said, and stood up too, looking excited.

Blake looked around and groaned.

"I forgot to bring the broom." Blake said, miserable.

Lean laughed. "I'll get it."

And she flew away before Blake could say anything about it, grabbed one from their room probably, and flew back, throwing it to Blake.

"Thanks." Blake said, appreciatively. She caught the broom and flew upwards, Lean right by her side.

They flew around the forest first, picking up seeds. Blake found black walnuts, acorns and other fast-growing trees, Lean harvested pieces of flowers and vines, sometimes digging underground to get a piece of root. They pocketed their findings and headed to the castle.

Blake felt nervous flying there, and she could tell Lean wasn't at ease either. None of them wanted to see the castle or be around it, but after today, it will not be an issue anymore. The entire thing is going down. This is the last time anyone is ever going to see that castle. Blake grinned to herself, satisfied with the thought.

"Don't worry." Blake said, not looking at Lean. "Nobody will be able to trap us there anymore."

Lean nodded, looking only a bit reassured.

"After that." Lean said, and Blake looked at her, waiting.

"We're going to the sea." Lean finished, giving Blake a stern look.

Blake laughed, remembering their original plans.

"We're going to the sea." Blake agreed.

Lean still wanted to go sailing with her, it gave Blake even more satisfaction. It was hard to believe the day they flew out of the library, making plans to repair a ship and sail off to the unexplored lands, was not so long ago. It felt like years had passed, in the amount of things that changed since.

But Blake didn't have much time to get lost in thoughts, because Lean landed, looking ahead at the castle. Blake landed next to her, and they gazed at it, wary. It didn't look like anyone was in there, all animals would have been removed by now. It was big, much bigger than one witch needed to have, and just thinking about all the things that happened in it made Blake's stomach turn.

"Can we really take down entire castle like this?" Lean asked, gazing at the top.

"One way to find out." Blake said.

They came closer, moving slowly, both intimidated by what they were about to do. But there was nobody in there, and they were able to walk thru the front door. Blake kicked them down for good measure. Lean laughed.

"You know, we should maybe destroy some rooms manually first." Blake said, feeling the rush of adrenaline.

Lean grabbed a chair in response and threw it at the window, shattering both the chair leg and the glass. They had to duck to avoid the shattering glass, then locked eyes with each other.

"You have a point." Lean said.

And they were off. Tearing up pillows, throwing furniture out the windows, laughing manically when something hit the ground and shattered in pieces. Lean tore down the curtains and they both tore them in pieces, Blake lighting a bit on fire, then throwing it out the window as well. Blake's eyes caught fire

and she rushed through the corridors and rooms, pulling out shelves and drawers and throwing them against the wall until they broke apart. She could hear Lean doing almost the same, and felt elevated, thrilled. This felt right. Until her eyes locked onto the room she had been held captive at, and something rock hard and heated exploded in her chest. She felt nothing but pure rage barging into that room, screaming and trying to destroy it without seeing what she was doing. The window had to be shattered into pieces, the bed and the sofa had to be torn and set on fire and the wall itself had to be taken down but Blake's hands couldn't do it, it was stone and magic and wouldn't ease up under Blake's desperate fists, wouldn't budge. Blake didn't realize what she had been doing until her wrists were pulled away from the wall by Lean, who looked at her, concerned. Blake realized she was shaking, and her knuckles were bleeding.

"Blake." Lean said, as if trying to pull her back to reality.

Blake said nothing, tried to catch her breath. She tugged her wrists, and Lean let them go, but stood between the wall and Blake, clearly not willing to let Blake have another go at it. Blake still felt heat spilling inside of her stomach, her fists clenched tight, her chest heaving.

"What-" Blake managed, and ended up sitting down on the floor, her eyes filling with tears.

"I hate this place." Blake mumbled, and rubbed her eyes, desperately trying not to cry.

"Tell me what happened. Why did you do that?" Lean asked, pointing at Blake's hands.

"I didn't realize I was doing it." Blake said, looking at them. The skin was chafed and bleeding in several places, those would take some time to recover. Mjord would probably know how to get them cleaned up properly.

"You didn't realize you were tearing your hands?" Lean asked.

"Seeing this place.. did something to me. It was like something exploded inside of me, I just, had to tear this wall down." Blake said, and rubbed her eyes again.

"I want to hug you." Lean stated, looking unsatisfied.

Blake shook her head.

"Well then let's get out of here, you shouldn't be here, and this room shouldn't exist." Lean decided, and motioned for Blake to get up.

Blake nodded, and pushed herself up. It was hard, her limbs weren't listening, as if some sort of shock was going through them, but once she was shakily on her feet, she felt lighter, like there was some weight she left behind. She and Lean got out of the castle, Lean watching Blake cautiously, as if Blake was about to throw another fit of rage.

"Stop that, I'm not going to do it again." Blake said.

"Fine." Lean said, and sat down. "How do you feel?"

"Better." Blake said. As soon as they got out of the castle, Blake felt safer, and still her body felt light and somewhat off, but it was a good feeling.

"Like I got something off of my chest. I'll feel even better when this castle is down." Blake said.

"Are you sure you want to go down to the dungeons?" Lean asked, sounding as if she didn't believe Blake was better at all.

"Yeah. It wasn't so bad in the dungeons. I just talked to Leira there." Blake said, remembering.

"Leira was in the cell with you?" Lean asked, surprised.

"No, we could just hear each others through the walls." Blake said.

"And she talked to you?" Lean asked, as if she seriously doubted this.

"Well, she didn't want to at first. But then she told me all about her little heartbreak and how her scheme to get Lynx back didn't go as planned. She sounded really bummed about it too. Can you imagine being bummed about Lynx?" Blake said, shaking her head in disgust.

"It's like I never even knew her." Lean said, frowning in disbelief.

"I figured she didn't mention all that at home. Let's go." Blake headed toward an opening in the grounds she knew lead to the dungeons, because it was where they broke out, and it seems Lynx just didn't find the time to fix it.

"Are you really okay? Your hands must hurt." Lean said, following her.

"It's not that bad. I think I had to do that." Blake said.

"Let me see them." Lean insisted.

Blake only showed her one hand, quickly, then pulled it away before Lean could say anything.

"We should take in some water, it would make it easier." Blake said, changing the subject.

"We're going to Mjord afterwards to clean those up." Lean said, not allowing it.

"Fine." Blake said, annoyed.

"Good. Do you think there's a vase somewhere that we didn't break yet?" Lean asked.

"I hope not." Blake said, glaring up at the castle.

"For the water, Blake." Lean said impatiently.

"Oh." Blake said. "Well I could make a barrier in a shape of a vase."

"Out of what?" Lean asked.

"I don't know, water." Blake said, without thinking.

"You're going to make a vase for water, out of water?" Lean looked at her incredulously.

"What, like that's a stupid idea." Blake muttered to herself, then stepped towards the closest pond of water, shaping her arms around it and trying to make it water-resistant.

It was not working.

Lean was looking more and more amused with every time Blake just dropped the water back into the pond, until Blake finally gave up, and glared at her.

"Well it was working okay in theory!" Blake said, looking offended.

"And-- what-- what was the theory for this?" Lean asked, suppressing laughter.

"I was going to make water.. water-resistant." Blake muttered to herself, and then snorted.

They both laughed together. Lean finally looked a bit more cheerful, and less worried. Doing stupid things is sometimes okay, Blake thought.

"Well, at least my hands are cleaned up." Blake said.

Lean shook her head smiling, and dipped all of her cuttings in the water to keep them wet.

"We really didn't think this one through." Lean said.

"You say that as if we usually make detailed plans." Blake accused her.

"We could use some.. minimal planning in the future." Lean suggested.

"No." Blake reasoned.

Lean laughed again.

"So, you like this huh? Sitting here with your hands bloody, not having any way to transport water to the place where we're meant to plant these?" Lean teased.

"Yes." Blake said proudly. "This is exactly where I want to be."

Lean sighed.

"Me too." Lean said.

They sat for a bit, thinking about their options.

"Ah, why can't we make it rain." Blake complained to the sky.

"Or move things with our minds." Lean supplied.

"No witch can do that." Blake said, amused.

"No?" Lean asked.

"No. That's just unnatural." Blake said.

"And I thought witches were cool." Lean complained.

Blake glared, offended.

"You are one of us!" Blake pointed out.

"Ah, right." Lean said.

Blake shook her head in disbelief.

"Unbelievable." Blake muttered to herself.

Lean ignored her and looked around for a leaf big enough to carry water in it.

They were interrupted by noises around the castle, someone was yelling their names. Blake stood up in time to notice a figure flying towards them, looking upset. It was Dana. She landed right next to them.

"What happened here? Lean? Blake? Who else is in the castle? What happened to your hands?" Dana asked, breathing heavily.

"Hey Dana." Blake said, coolly.

"Don't give me that! There's furniture lying around, windows are broken, were you fighting someone? Let me see." Dana said and tried to take Blake's hand, to which Blake hissed and moved away.

"It's okay, Dana." Lean said, walking closer with her hands full of leaves. "We did that."

"You what?" Dana looked at Lean, then at Blake again. She noticed bunch of plants being dipped into the water, and narrowed her eyes.

"What is going on here?" Dana demanded.

"Nothing." Blake said innocently.

Dana looked at Lean instead.

"We're destroying the castle." Lean said confidently.

Dana sat down.

She laughed.

"There's just no winning with you two, huh?" Dana asked, and then sighed, shaking her head.

"Destroying the castle, of course you would."

Dana muttered something to herself, and then looked at Blake.

"How did you get hurt then?" Dana asked.

Blake looked completely unwilling to answer that.

"An accident." Lean filled in, looking at Blake in a reprimanding sort of way.

"I don't believe that." Dana said. "But if you want to keep it secret, fine."

"So, are you going to tell us we can't be destroying the castle?" Blake asked, bored.

"It's Lean's castle now." Dana shrugged. "There are a few things you're forgetting though."

Lean sat down, interested. Blake tried to think of anything she might have forgotten, but came up with nothing.

"Like what?" Blake asked, finally.

"Did Lynx ever mention her 'adventures' to you?" Dana asked.

"She did." Blake said coldly, remembering how she thought, far back in the past, that Lynx was cool, for a second.

"Well, I don't know how she described it, but it was mostly thieving. She stole a lot of valuable and powerful items, and not from witches." Dana said.



"So? Doesn't Lean inherit that too?" Blake asked, annoyed.

"You can't inherit what was stolen, Blake." Dana said, patiently. "It's the property of the original owner, or their descendants. All of it has to be returned. And it's all hidden somewhere in that castle." Dana pointed at it.

"Oh." Lean said, understanding.

"So before you do whatever you want to do, we need to retrieve these." Dana said.

Lean looked at Blake animatedly, like she was into the idea, and Blake sighed. Instant destruction sounded much better than delayed one, but she still would get to destroy it.

"We could go look for them." Lean said, then looked at Blake. "Maybe there's a bucket for water somewhere." She added.

Blake snorted, and then gave up.

"Fine." Blake said to both of them.

Lean looked happy, and Dana nodded.

"I was going to do that today, but if you're willing, I can leave and let you to it. You could leave a few chairs too." Dana suggested.

"No." Blake decided.

Dana shook her head in disapproval.

"Just bring back anything that looks ancient or powerful, and not made by witches." Dana said.

"We will." Lean promised.

"Yeah leave us alone now." Blake said, glaring.

Dana shrugged and grabbed her broom again, looking mostly relieved.

"Fine Blake, have fun with your girlfriend." Dana said mockingly and flew away.

Blake blushed and jumped to pick a fight with Dana, but gave up, and looked at Lean instead, who was also blushing.

"Shut up." Blake said, and pulled Lean's hand. which Lean didn't seem to mind. She was reminded by a dull pain that her hand was injured, but she ignored it and pulled Lean towards the castle, still blushing.

## Chapter 33: The Fall

"So, are we girlfriends?" Lean asked, giggling as Blake pulled her forward.

"I told you to keep quiet." Blake said, not looking back.

"But I wanna know." Lean persisted.

Blake let out a frustrated sigh and slowed down.

"Well, if you- I mean- do you want to be?" Blake asked, embarrassed.

Blake looked at Lean only to find her suppressing laughter, again.

"Hey!" Blake complained.

"You thought you had to ask?" Lean said, laughing.

Blake flushed and turned around, finally letting go of Lean's hand.

"We were girlfriends for a while already." Lean stated.

"Well I wasn't told." Blake said, stubbornly.

"You're so clever all the time, but then you get so clueless at things like this, why is that?" Lean asked.

"Don't ask me that." Blake said, still looking away. "What decides if we're girlfriends? Is it not that we settle it?"

"Well, yeah, but, since you stole me from the tribe, and I saved you from Lynx, I thought we were bonded. It felt like more than girlfriends." Lean said.

"It is." Blake said softly, and finally looked at Lean.

"Why won't you let me touch you then?" Lean asked, longing in her voice.

Blake felt both alarm and warm pulse of desire stream thru her body, and she bit her lip, thinking.

"It's not that I don't want to, it's just.. not as easy." Blake said nervously.

"What are you worried is going to happen?" Lean asked.

"If-if you're too close to me now, I might get hurt." Blake said, and immediately felt much worse for the honesty.

"How?" Lean asked, frowning.

"I can't say." Blake said.

Lean just looked at her for a bit.

"Alright." Lean said, finally. "It will feel easier later?"

"Later." Blake nodded.

They entered the castle once again. None of them regretted the mess they've made, in fact Blake made sure to kick down any standing object they missed the first time. Lean kept watching her cautiously, apparently still not over that one time Blake tried to punch down a wall. The castle was designed with secrecy in mind, and Blake and Lean had already found a lot of its secret passageways and doors, but it was not where Lynx hid the stolen goods.

They searched up to the top of the castle, and found only some peculiar-looking candles that might have been made by another species. Blake had fun throwing things from the highest tower, and watching

them hit every roof on their way down. Lean joined in, and soon there was a whole new pile of trash around the castle, and both of them were exhausted.

They were on their way to the dungeons, the last thing they hadn't checked yet, when Lean called Blake's name, showing her a weird hole in the wall. They tried to push their fingers inside, and poked it with long objects, but nothing happened until Lean directed a stream of light inside of it. Then the wall opened, showing them a dark corridor. Lean grinned and made her body shine only as much as they needed to see their way through.

The treasure room was small, but overflowing with objects. There was a treasure chest filled with coins and jewelry, a box of medallions, glowing stones and golden rings. Blake immediately started trying things on, and Lean laughed at her, but Lean's face looked worried. However, even Lean couldn't resist taking on a big metal sword and wielding it, Blake immediately caught on and grabbed another, starting a mock fight. Lean accepted it, and soon they were both making a lot of noise, clinking their swords against each other and shouting victory cries. They stopped when they ripped the painting off the wall. Blake insisted they keep the swords, but Lean shook her head. Blake glared at her, then got over it, and occupied herself with opening the rest of the wooden boxes decorated with embroidery.

"Lean, don't you have one of these?" Blake asked, holding up a ring with a black stone.

Lean looked paler when she took the ring in her hand, and compared it with the one on her finger.

"They're the same. That must mean.. mine is stolen too." Lean said, and her fingers trembled.

"Lean, hey." Blake tried to sound soothing, because Lean suddenly looked devastated.

"I was wearing this ring all my life, and it's stolen." Lean said, sounding miserable.

Blake took Lean's hand and held it.

"That sucks." Blake said.

"I have to know where it came from." Lean said.

Blake looked at the box, there was a bracelet with a similar stone, and a tiara. She gave the box to Lean for examination.

"These look special." Lean said. "I wonder who they belonged to."

"We can ask Dana about it." Blake suggested, and Lean nodded.

"It feels like we have so much to do." Lean sighed, and sprawled her body down on the carpet.

"Well, there's delivery of treasure, avoiding blood relatives, destruction of the castle, our trip to the sea.." Blake numbered, and joined Lean down on the floor. The carpet was soft and comfortable.

"It's easier now that you're back with me." Lean looked at Blake and smiled.

Blake nodded. "For me too."

"But I won't be at ease until I can kiss and comfort you." Lean said.

"I don't need to be comforted." Blake said, her voice sounding weird.

"You agree that you need to be kissed, then?" Lean asked, turning to lie on her stomach, still looking at Blake.

"Maybe." Blake said, smiling slightly.

"Do your hands still hurt?" Lean asked, glancing at them.

"No, I forgot about them." Blake said, not looking at them.

"Will you go visit Mjord?" Lean asked.

Blake took a while to answer that, and in the end she only nodded in agreement.

"Good." Lean said.

Blake watched Lean roll around on the carpet. Lean looked around the room and sighed.

"I can't believe she stole so much stuff. I feel like a criminal myself." Lean said.

"You had nothing to do with this." Blake said.

"It still feels like.. part of legacy I inherited. Do you feel that?" Lean looked at Blake.

"I don't know." Blake said, alarmed.

"You don't wanna think about it." Lean said.

"I don't." Blake confirmed.

They lied there in silence for a bit.

"We're not taking all of this to the council, are we?" Blake said, eyeing the room.

"No, we'll just take the smaller things, Dana can pick up the rest." Lean said.

"I wanted to destroy the castle today." Blake complained.

"We still can, if we put all the stuff outside." Lean said.

"I don't wanna carry all of this." Blake moped and buried her face into the carpet. "I'm tired."

"You're like a small baby huh?" Lean laughed.

"How dare you." Blake mumbled half-heartedly into the carpet.

"Come on, I think I saw a bucket on the level above, let's finish this." Lean said.

"You do it." Blake said stubbornly.

Lean narrowed her eyes at Blake, suspicious.

"What's going on, Blake?" Lean asked.

"I don't want to talk." Blake said. "I just want to lie here forever."

"Don't you hate this place?" Lean asked.

"I hate it..." Blake mumbled.

"Don't want to destroy it anymore?" Lean asked.

"What if you want to live here, later? It's your castle." Blake said.

"I'm pretty sure I don't want to live here." Lean said, gently. "Besides, all of the windows and furniture are ruined."

"Well they had it coming." Blake said grumpily.

"Are you worried we'll regret this?" Lean asked.

"I don't know." Blake said. "I decided it on my own, then talked you into it, and where will you live then?"

"I haven't decided yet. But I was hoping.. you know. We could live together." Lean suggested, blushing.

Blake lifted her head up from the carpet.

"That.. doesn't sound bad." Blake said, cautiously.

"But, I'm not going to live in a tree." Lean said.

Blake lifted herself up, and sat down, looking at Lean.

"Why not?" Blake asked, offended.

"Well, for once, there's bugs." Lean said. "And there's no walls, and I can't regulate my temperature at will like you can."

"I'll show you how." Blake said.

"Blake, we're not living in a tree." Lean said firmly.

"What about a tree house?" Blake bargained.

"No. On the ground." Lean insisted.

"You're no fun." Blake said.

"Don't you wanna cook, sometimes?" Lean asked. "Or just, sit on a chair, and drink tea? Or have a real bed?"

Blake thought about it, and frowned. "You can do most of these things on a tree."

"There's no privacy." Lean said.

Blake bit her lip and understood what Lean was saying.

"Fine... we'll live in a house." Blake said, defeated.

"Good." Lean said, relieved. "I'm glad that's settled."

Blake was half-excited, and half annoyed at not getting her way. Still, she stood up, grabbed some of the treasure, and started to wrap the carpet around it. Lean helped, and soon they had a big makeshift bag of treasure, which Blake fastened to her broom, then flied it outside slowly, still bumping into walls and almost falling down. Lean laughed and caught the bits that fell. They left it on the grass, outside of the castle grounds. Lean had a bucket in her hands. They stood and looked at the castle once again.

"We're doing this." Lean said, excited.

Blake nodded.

"We have to warn the animals first. There could still be some on the castle grounds. I don't want them getting hurt." Blake said.

Lean looked for a second as if she was going to hug Blake, then backed out of it at the last second. Blake felt she wouldn't have minded it, just then.

"How do we warn them? Do we yell?" Lean asked.

"No, the birds will do it for us. Watch this." Blake said, and then she made a deep calling noise, which caused a small flock of owls flying right at them. Blake spread her arms, grinning as the owls took hold on them, and then wincing when one of them landed on a wound.

"Tell everyone to back off from the castle. It's about to fall." Blake said to the owls, and some of them started tugging at Blake's shirt and rubbing their beaks at Blake's cheek, but Blake shooed them away. They flew and made loud, screeching noises all around the castle. There was a flock of small animals, mice, rats, birds, frogs and snakes moving away, they were impossible to see just seconds ago, but the united movement made them visible.

"We're ready." Blake said, and they walked to the pond, all their seeds and cuttings waiting for them there. Lean filled the bucket with water, and took the cuttings. Blake took the seeds, and put the bucket on her broom. They flew to the dungeons, thru the hole in the ground. Blake shivered from the memories down there.

"Were you trapped here?" Lean asked, looking at Blake.

Blake nodded. "Yeah. While you were trapped in the castle."

"Leira was here, too." Blake added.

Lean looked around and frowned. "It's hard to imagine her here."

Blake searched for Lean's hand and found it, Lean looked surprised but pleased.

"Are you alright?" Lean asked, squeezing Blake's hand gently.

"Just.. let's destroy it." Blake said.

Lean nodded.

"So how will this work, exactly?" Lean asked. "I can make plants grow fast, but not this many. And they.. they don't live very long then." Lean said.

"That's where I come in. And that is why witches get to claim their territory first. Remember when you asked me about that?" Blake said.

Lean nodded.

"Well, witches don't usually make plants grow faster, but we can make them stronger. We can give plants energy to make sure they don't get sick or leggy, and it can even slow their growth, but if we like a plant, we'll make sure it lives for centuries." Blake said.

"So what does that have to do with the fairies?" Lean asked.

"Fairies make things grow fast, that's why they're so good with flowers and edible plants, but you force those plants to use up all of their energy at once, and they don't live long afterwards, even if they've grown big. Unless, they're doing it to a tree a witch took care of. That's why witches claim territory first, we make sure all big trees are stable and powerful. Afterwards fairies can move in, create their homes, and fill it all with flowers. Witches actually like seeing it sometimes, knowing the trees cannot be destroyed anymore, filled with flowers and fruit."

Lean thought about it.

"So, I can make them grow, and you will make sure they cannot die?" Lean asked.

"Yeah." Blake nodded.

"How come I can't do it like you can? If I'm a witch, I should be able to strengthen them too." Lean said.

"Well, witches can usually learn all sorts of skills, if you were learning how to grow them fast with the fairies, you'll be able to do it forever. I can teach you about making them powerful later."

"Okay." Lean said. "I'll start then."

Dungeons were already filled with dirt from the destruction, and it was easy for them to place the seeds. Lean placed the cuttings on the sides of the walls, roots in the deepest ground. Then she placed her finger along the stems, and over the edge of the roots, and Blake watched, fascinated, how quickly they developed roots and growth.

"Give them water." Lean instructed, and Blake poured bits of water over every plant. It was absorbed immediately. Tiny plants were popping up from the seeds, and within minutes they were visible as small walnut or acorn or acacia trees.

"They'll need more power now." Lean said, and Blake pressed her fingers to every plant, making the stems thicker, leaves wider.

"I'll give them light, close your eyes." Lean said.

Blake grinned and created a small night barrier over her face, she could still tell that Lean was making the place as bright as the sky, but it didn't bother Blake.

They kept repeating it, the circle of growth, water, power and light, and plants were filling out the room, trees bumping into the ceiling, the vines and roots Lean brought were finding their way between and under the stones, destabilizing the place.

"We'll need to get out of here quickly once we're done." Lean said, alarmed at how little space there was left for them to fly away. Stones were starting to collapse from the ceiling, the roots and the branches pushing them up mercilessly. Dozens of trees, vines and weeds were devouring the room. The walls were invisible under the greenery, rough bark and big roots only poking out of it.

"Blake!" Lean yelled, and Blake finally stopped strengthening the trees and grabbed Lean's hand, laughing manically as she flew them both out. Lean laughed in relief. They got out through the same hole, out of breath and exhausted. They collapsed onto the ground, their eyes glued on the castle. Branches of trees were poking out of the lower windows. Vines and roots were already engulfing the ground floor, pushing the stone blocks out. Lean and Blake pointed their fingers and laughed, yelling in delight of their creation.

"We'll.. have to... push it once more!" Blake heaved.

It was true, the growth was slowing down once Lean and Blake stopped touching them.

"Let's just-- give it some time." Lean said, gasping for breath.

Blake accepted this, and they sat on a fair distance, watching their trees grow outside the doors and the walls, creating holes and crumbling once stable castle walls. They could see the biggest walnut tree pushing so hard, it almost destabilized the ground floor entirely.

"We'll just need to push that one." Lean said.

Blake looked at her hands, feeling dizzy with exhaustion, and nodded.

They flew and landed on the branch pushing out the ground window, the castle was no longer safe to land in. It was enough for both of them to press their hands onto the tree for a minute, and it was going wild, leaves opening every second, branches reaching up to the sky. They yelled and flew away as the tree grew so fast it looked as if it was moving, as if it was ready to pull its roots up and walk the earth. They flew onto higher land and sat down, trembling in excitement, wondering if it was enough. It was enough.

The foundations started breaking.

First tower crashed downwards, Lean and Blake watched, mesmerized, as it was shattered in slow motion, only branches of walnut trees breaking its fall. It was incredible. Crash was loud, louder than lightning, and Blake felt Lean's shaky hand holding hers, and realized she didn't mind. Another tower followed, loud crashes of rocks and stone filling the forest. Trees kept on pushing up, and castle was dismantling like it was made out of sand, some towers just fell vertically and crashed into small pieces, some leaned and fell downwards, breaking apart into pieces. Lean and Blake were both screaming in disbelief at what they'd done. When the last tower crashed, and the view of the forest and mountains was no longer blocked by the towering structure, Blake pulled Lean into her arms and kissed her.



## Chapter 34: The Arguments

It was a celebratory kiss, and Lean kissed her back with full power, her hands hungry for the feel of Blake's body under them, Blake felt incredible, and the castle, the castle was down, there would be nobody imprisoned, nobody held against their will again in there. Lean tried not to wonder if Blake would push her away a second later, tried to enjoy the kiss for as long as it could last. Blake held her tight, arms wrapped around Lean's back, unwilling to let go. Lean felt the same, she held onto Blake and kissed her until they were both out of air, gasping and looking at the castle that was now in ruins.

"We did it." Blake said, breathless.

"We-" But Lean didn't get to finish, because Blake was kissing her again, radiating happiness and joy. Lean hoped the moment would last forever, seeing Blake in such high spirits was thrilling, and Lean wanted to kiss her so much more, for any reason. It felt like victory, kissing Blake over the ruins of their once prison. It felt right.

"We should do this every day." Blake exclaimed, once she had to gasp for breath, and Lean laughed and nodded, mumbled something about how they would die of exhaustion but it would be worth it, and kissed Blake again.

Lean didn't know for how long they were kissing, she felt her lips almost hurt from it but wouldn't stop, she needed more, Lean kissed Blake's neck and found no resistance, so she slid her hand under Blake's shirt, draping fingers over her back.

"Wait." Blake tensed, and squirmed, trying to take a hold of Lean's hand.

Lean withdrew it, knew she crossed the line.

Blake rubbed her back with her hand, almost as if trying to erase the feel of Lean's fingers and Lean felt offended, but it was only for a second and then Blake kissed her again, smiling.

"Let's just do this for now." Blake decided, and Lean nodded, it was, way, way better than nothing.

The sunset found them sitting on a cliff, hands around each other, leaning their heads on each other's shoulder. Lean was silently singing, and Blake listened, eyes glued to the castle ruins, from which the trees were still rising up, looking strong and healthy even though they were only growing for few hours. Most of the rocks were already covered with so much greenery, it looked like a green foresty place rather than a destroyed castle. The canopy from the walnut trees threw deep shadow on the ground, and Lean wondered if they could use it to make a swing, or someone could claim this territory again, something new could be made here. No trace of Lynx would remain.

"Lynx is getting banished tomorrow." Blake said.

"Yeah. Mjord told me." Lean said.

"Do you want to come watch?" Blake asked.

"No." Lean said.

"Me neither." Blake said.

"I do wanna see her face when she finds out what we did to her castle, though." Blake added.

Lean smiled, imagining it. "She won't be pleased."

Blake pressed a kiss to Lean's cheek, then leaned onto her again.

"Thank you." Blake said. "For going on with me, for, giving up the castle."

"Mm." Lean said. "You're welcome."

"I'm lucky to have you with me." Blake said sweetly, and kissed Lean's cheek again.

Lean looked Blake down analytically and crossed her arms.

"You're in a good mood now." Lean said, almost as a question.

"Huh?" Blake said.

"I think it's time we talked about some things you said. Before." Lean said, staring Blake down.

Blake looked away quickly. "What things?"

"How everything between us was a setup. Or how you thought I should go and find some better witches for myself." Lean said.

"Well- well I didn't mean that." Blake said, looking embarrassed. "I only said it because of what Lynx-"

"What about not feeling special enough, because I didn't choose you?" Lean asked.

"I.. I was being stupid." Blake said.

"Were you?" Lean asked.

Blake sighed, and buried her head between her legs to hide her face. "I felt special enough when you went and yelled down the entire council because of me."

Lean waited.

"I'm sorry I said those things. I wasn't sure who to trust." Blake said, peeking at Lean, ashamed.

Lean looked at her, and finally uncrossed her arms.

"So, do you trust me now then?" Lean asked.

"Yeah." Blake said.

"You won't try to do that again? No matter what anyone tells you?" Lean demanded.

"I won't." Blake said.

Lean huffed out a breath of relief and then tugged at Blake's shirt angrily.

"You really scared me!" Lean said.

"Sorry." Blake said, apologetically.

"I know it was awful for you, and I wanted to wait until you felt better before we talk about this, but I'm done waiting! You should never lose your trust in me like that!" Lean said, breathing fast.

"Yeah, I- I didn't know you well enough." Blake said.

"And I know I should have ran to save you no matter what they told me, but I wouldn't do that again either! Next time something happens I'm going to be right there!" Lean yelled.

Blake nodded. "Yeah."

"We have to stick together!" Lean finished, tearing up.

"We do." Blake confirmed, and pulled Lean in a hug.

"So it doesn't matter, that I'm a witch?" Lean asked, her head buried in Blake's neck.

"It doesn't." Blake said, her hands in Lean's hair.

"And you won't try to tell me I'm wrong for wanting you?" Lean asked.

"I won't." Blake said.

Lean pulled away to look at Blake again.

"Do you ever think.. it's more trouble being with me than it's worth?" Lean asked, anxious.

"No!" Blake said, startled.

"I never thought that." Blake added, shaking her head.

"Okay." Lean said and hugged Blake again, refusing to let go.

"How did you even come up with that?" Blake asked, stroking her head.

"I gave you a lot of trouble." Lean said, quietly.

"Well that wasn't you." Blake said gently. "You were going through trouble, what kind of person would I be if I didn't help you out?" Blake asked.

"Well I'm lucky you helped. You saved me." Lean said.

"You saved me as well." Blake said.

Lean didn't reply, only found Blake's lips and kissed her gently, and Blake accepted it, and kissed back just as tenderly.

It took a bit of kissing and hugging until Lean felt better. Blake held her tight against her chest and that was most important.

"So, we should.. get the treasure and go?" Lean said, recovering.

"Ehhh." Blake said, uninterested. "I'll just carry the sword."

"Don't steal it." Lean reprimanded her.

"I would never.. I mean, fine." Blake said.

Lean flew down to where they put the treasure, still wrapped in the carpet, and took the jewelry box with the ring and tiara. She made the moss grow over the rest of it, making sure it was invisible to the would-be thieves. Blake grabbed the sword and hopped on her broom, posing like a warrior.

"You look ridiculous." Lean laughed at her.

"I look cool." Blake corrected her, and took one last glance on the castle ruins. Blake stuck her tongue at it, and took off.

They flew side by side, Blake clumsily trying to not bump the trees with the sword, as she kept one hand on the broom, and Lean easily flying with both hands free. Her wings turned up to be an advantage in carrying things.

They barged into the council castle, and found most of the company socializing after dinner.

"Blake, Lean! There they are." Dareena said.

"Dareena." Blake said, and then glared at Dana.

"Hey Dana, Blake is upset you got to tease her before she got to tease you." Lean explained to Dana.

"I'm sure you'll get a chance, Blake." Dana said, grinning.

"Shut up." Blake addressed them all.

"What do I hear about you two destroying a castle?" Dareena asked.

"We'll destroy this one too if you're not nice to us." Blake threatened.

"Blake, no." Lean said firmly.

"No, I mean, you didn't actually destroy it? Dana said the furniture was down." Dareena said.

"The castle is destroyed." Blake said, glowing with pride.

"We did destroy it." Lean confirmed.

"How?" Dareena asked, perplexed.

"Oh, we planted some trees." Blake bragged.

"We grew them so fast they destabilized the foundations, so the castle collapsed." Lean filled in.

Dareena looked at Dana. "Can they do that?"

Dana frowned, and looked from Blake to Lean, suspicious.

"I don't know. We never tried that." Dana said, and turned to Lean and Blake. "Aren't your powers all light and darkness?"

"I'm good with plants. And Lean is too." Blake said.

"Maybe they did do it. We'll go check tomorrow. Did you bring the treasure?" Dana eyed the sword in Blake's hands.

"Yep, can I keep this?" Blake asked, swinging the sword.

"No." Dana and Lean said at the same time.

"The rest of the treasure was too heavy, we left it under the castle. It's covered with moss but you'll be able to find it." Lean said to Dana.

"Good. Join us for dinner?" Dana invited them.

"Fine." Blake said, and sat herself down to the chair closest to food.

"I still have a few questions." Lean said, and Dana nodded, and motioned Lean to eat first.

It was different, eating there with other witches, without any threat or urgency looming over them. Lean kept glancing over to see what others were doing, but Blake seemed preoccupied with stuffing her mouth with food, and everyone else chattered and discussed their lives, and events Lean hadn't heard about before. She asked questions and witches accepted her into their circle and answered them, explaining about witch traditions and festivities. Lean got so engulfed in their conversation she forgot Blake was completely ignoring them all, until the topic of Lynx's banishment came up.

"We're not coming." Blake said, interrupting everyone. "But I want you to tell Lynx we destroyed her castle, then remember her exact face expression, and repeat it for me, deal?" Blake said to Dana.

Dana laughed. "Maybe."

Dareena gave them both dirty looks and Blake was about to tell her something, but Lean interrupted.

"Does Lynx still have her ring on?" Lean asked Dana.

"I think she does, yes. We suspect she stole it." Dana said.

"We found another one, and a tiara." Lean said, and showed the treasure box to Dana.

"Do you know who it belonged to?" Lean asked.

Dana looked at the objects and studied them carefully, then engaged in a discussion with everyone present, before they concluded it must be from the mystery women.

"They're from overseas. Nobody has met them, that's why we call them mystery women. Sometimes we find some evidence they exist, some lost pieces of clothing or footwear shows up at the coast." Dana explained.

"And they made this?" Lean asked, showing her own ring to Dana.

"We can't think of anyone else. Witches don't use this particular metal, or crystals, we're not even sure what's it made of. It's not something seen on these lands." Dana said.

"Lynx must have met them, if she got something this valuable." Lean said.

"It's possible. She travelled in secret, always." Dana said, and then buried her head in her arms, sulking.

"We're leaving a really poor impression on them if first thing they know about us is thievery. And I'll have to find someone willing to travel over there to return it, and then hope they won't decide to forgive us."

Dana complained.

"We're traveling overseas." Lean said, meaningfully.

Blake looked at her fast.

"Lean!" Blake hissed under her voice.

"What?" Lean asked.

"Well don't tell them our plans! They might want to ruin them!" Blake said.

"You're travelling?" Dana looked at them both, surprised. "How?"

"Don't tell her!" Blake insisted.

"Blake said we could repair a sunken ship, and since we're going anyway, we could just bring these back."

Lean decided.

"No!" Blake opposed.

"You two were going to take a broken ship, and head out to the sea?" Dana said, affronted.

"You just try to stop us." Blake huffed.

"That is way too dangerous, not even fully trained witches would-" Dana started.

"What's that I hear about you two on a ship?" Mjord said, entering the room.

"Damn it." Blake said.

Mjord and Mathilda joined them, Mjord immediately rounding up on Blake.

"What are you thinking! You can't even sail!" Mjord accused Blake.

"Well that is none of your business." Blake said, and turned her back on Mjord.

"She's still angry." Mathilda said to Mjord.

"Well she can be angry but she's not going away to sea!" Mjord said, angrily.

"Why can't we?" Lean asked, perplexed.

"Because, witches often go missing at sea, they fly away from the ship then can't find it anymore, or get caught in storms, and then try to fly back to land but they fall asleep and drown. None of your powers can counter that." Mjord said.

"She's right." Dana said.

"We won't fly away from the ship." Lean said quickly. "And Blake can make barriers and make sure the ship is safe, we'll manage."

"Don't explain to them what we'll do, they can't forbid us to go." Blake said, offended.

"Blake! What happened to your hands?" Mjord said suddenly, noticing the marks and the wounds.

Blake rolled her eyes. "Nothing. Had a little accident. Let it go."

"Show me." Mjord insisted.

"Blake, it's going to be easier if you listen, Mjord can get scary when injured person doesn't comply."

Mathilda said.

Blake glared at Mathilda, and then extended her hands to Mjord, who immediately set a blue barrier over them, and told Blake to keep them like that until she brought the medicinal herbs and bandage. Blake pulled her hands away as soon as Mjord left the room, sighing.

"See, I told you they wouldn't let us if you tell them." Blake turned on Lean.

"How did you even think to pull Lean into something so dangerous?" Dana asked.

"It's not dangerous if she's with me!" Blake hissed at Dana.

"I'd have thought you'd learn that you're not invincible, Blake." Mathilda said.

"Shut up!" Blake yelled.

"Okay, let's, let's not talk about this right now." Lean said, trying to calm the situation.

"Fine, but we're still going." Blake concluded.

Dana and Dareena exchanged frustrated glances, and then Mjord came back with tinctures and creams and cloths, hissing at Blake to put her hands back, and then washing them out, and bandaging them with healing herbs pressed on the wounds. Blake wouldn't look at Mjord, but she sighed with relief when it was done.

"Better?" Lean asked her, thinking how strange it is seeing Blake bandaged up.

"Yeah." Blake said with a sigh.

"Can I touch them?" Lean asked.

Blake looked around the room in alarm and shook her head. "Not with everyone around."

"Oh." Lean said, realizing Blake was too embarrassed. "Later."

Blake nodded.

"Maybe we should go with them." Mathilda suggested to Mjord, smiling serenely.

Mjord looked at Lean and Blake, and seemed to consider it.

"Maybe." Mjord said.

"No!" Blake yelled, realizing what they were talking about.

"Why not?" Mathilda asked.

Blake turned red for a second, then glared at them both mouthed. "I don't want them having sex on my ship."

Everyone laughed and Blake was furious, but ended up joining in. Lean felt relieved at how easy they both fit in there, how normal Blake looked. It was hard to imagine just a while ago Blake wouldn't even look at anyone, and now she was arguing and laughing and almost back to her old self. She still wouldn't let Lean touch her as much as she wanted to, but it felt like it would get better. It was getting better.

## Chapter 35: Too warm

Dana and Dareena shooed off Blake and Lean to bed, no doubt to discuss without them just how to stop them from their plans. Blake told everyone off and waltzed off to bed, Lean following her in good spirits.

"Blake." Lean said the moment they entered the room.

"Hm?" Blake turned around to look at Lean.

"Your hands." Lean said.

Blake considered it for a moment, then hesitantly sat down. "I was hoping you'd forget."

Lean grinned and sat down next to Blake, then gently took one bandaged hand between hers.

"Do they hurt?" Lean asked.

"Not anymore. Herbs are helping." Blake said.

Lean lifted Blake's hand ever so gently, then pressed her lips to the fingertips. Blake shuddered, and tried to hide her face, looking away.

"What is it?" Lean asked.

Blake said nothing.

"You can't be embarrassed now, it's just you and me, and it's dark." Lean said.

"I'm not." Blake said. "It feels.. weird. Too warm." Blake said.

"Has nobody ever kissed your wounds better?" Lean asked.

"That's- No. I wouldn't let anyone touch me if I'm injured." Blake said.

Lean looked at Blake in surprised, then at Blake's hand.

"This is special." Lean realized.

Blake nodded, and closed her eyes. Lean took it as a permission to go on, and she turned Blake's hand in hers carefully, then pressed her lips over the bandages, over and over again. Blake shivered and sometimes made a small noise, but didn't pull her hand away. Lean stopped when she felt Blake's hands tense, and found Blake with her eyes clenched shut.

"Is it hurting you?" Lean asked, concerned.

Blake let out a breath of relief when Lean stopped, and pulled her hand back.

"It's not that. It- it hurts somewhere else." Blake said.

"Where?" Lean asked, checking Blake all over with her eyes.

Blake put a hand over her heart. Lean frowned.



"But I'm supposed to be comforting you." Lean complained.

"Well, you are, but, I.. I'm having that instinct problem again." Blake said.

"What, to not get too close to me?" Lean asked.

"Yeah." Blake said.

"Because you'll get hurt?" Lean asked.

Blake nodded.

"But how? You know I wouldn't do anything to hurt you." Lean said, upset.

"I know." Blake said.

"You let me touch you before. Did it hurt you then?" Lean asked.

Blake didn't say anything for a while, and she stood up and walked away from Lean, facing the desk instead.

"It didn't, at first. But when I thought you- you stopped caring about me, then. A lot." Blake said, her voice strained.

"Oh." Lean said. "But I didn't. It was all just a lie to get you away from me. You know that now." Lean said.

"I do, but.. " Blake ran a hand over her forehead. "I didn't know it could hurt so much."

"No." Lean said, standing up too. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't want that."

Lean approached Blake, and carefully put a hand over her shoulder, to see if Blake would reject it, but when Blake didn't, Lean hugged her from behind.

"I never stopped caring about you. I couldn't. Nothing could make me. Even when you tried to make me go away, all I could think of is how you were alone and hurt and needed me with you. I'm not going to stop caring." Lean whispered at Blake's ear, and Blake shivered again.

"We should- they're probably talking about us, we should go and-" Blake started, clumsily, and then got free of Lean's hold. Lean let her go reluctantly.

"We should what?" Lean sighed.

"We should listen in, so we can evade their plans." Blake said.

"Your plan was just to make them think we're going to bed." Lean realized belatedly.

"Well yeah, so they'd talk about preventing us in secret. Okay, just be quiet now." Blake said, and carefully opened the door and peered into the hallway. Lean followed her out. They sneaked around the hallways until they could hear voices.

Lean would have preferred to be in private room with Blake at the moment, but Blake didn't seem to want to continue the conversation, and it was useless to try to push her. So Lean would just follow along and wait for her next chance.

"... I'm not having this, Dana, you've been acting weird about them both from the start, now you can't tell me you really think we should let two untrained-" Dareena's voice was coming faintly thru the hallway. Blake stood still and listened, alert.

"Blake is trained." Dana said.

"Barely!" Dareena argued. "You let her talk you down, and she's just a squeaky brat who thinks she can run the world!"

There was a silence, then voices too muffled to hear. Blake risked getting a bit closer, and Lean followed, now interested in the voices.

"... believe you forgot, weren't you the same?" Dana's voice said. "We all started as squeaky brats trying to run the world."

"Yeah but we weren't idiots!" Dareena insisted.

"Weren't we? Do you remember what we did when we were their age? Remember the Stars Well?"

There was laughter, and then Dareena spoke again. "Yeah, well, that was fun! And we got out just fine, didn't we?"

"That's exactly what they're thinking. What would we have done back then, if someone tried to stop us?" Dana asked.

"But this is different! There's no one but us responsible for them, they don't have a clan!" Dareena said.

"We can't play it as if we're their clan, and then place limitations on what they can do." Dana said, calmly.

"You can't be serious, and what if those women out there imprison them? Maybe Lynx was able to get away from them, but-" Dareena started.

"Lean has the same powers as Lynx. And it seems they actually destroyed a castle, in one day." Dana said.

"So they're out of control, stupidly powerful children! It doesn't mean we set them lose! They could be dangerous, they'll create damage." Dareena said.

"No, they.. well, Blake might. But if Lean is with her, I think she'll set her right." Dana said.

Lean could see Blake clenching her fists, and wondered just how badly Blake was holding back from yelling at them all.

"Nothing short of imprisoning will stop Blake once she sets her mind on something. And it seems she and Lean have been planning this." Mjord said. Blake backed away from the voices, surprised.

"I thought, you out of all witches, would know how to talk her out of it." Dareena said.

Mjord laughed.

"Only if there was something she wanted more." Mjord said.

"They're running, both of them." Mathilda said.

"From what?" Dareena asked.

"Blake has just found out her mothers are criminals. She doesn't want to face that, she wants to go where nobody knows anything about her. And Lean too, isn't ready to deal with the fact she's a witch, save Lynx's descendant, she's focusing on Blake to avoid dealing with any of that. If they go overseas, they leave all this behind." Mathilda said.

Blake looked at Lean in alarm, and they stared at each other, and then resolutely shook their heads. Mathilda didn't know what she was talking about, Lean and Blake only wanted to go and have adventures together, and Lean felt she wouldn't be at peace until all three rings and tiara were returned. That was all there is to it.

"So shouldn't we advise them to stay and figure it out? Lean should be going through her training, it would help her fit in." Dareena suggested.

"That's a good idea." Mjord said. "If she wants to stay, I don't think Blake would go without her."

Blake looked at Lean then, and Lean shook her head, frowning. She wouldn't be the reason they're unable to go to the sea.

"Lean will stick with Blake." Mathilda said. "She's been following Blake around from the moment she left her tribe, she doesn't feel comfortable around anyone else yet."

There was movement heard in the room, and Blake hurriedly moved away, and tried to hide, for the chance they were discovered.

"We should just give them supervision." Dana said, finally.

"Like what? Are you thinking of going with them?" Dareena asked.

"No. I know a witch with birds that can fly long distance, they could fly over the ship, let us know if something happens. And.. we could create a communication device that doesn't use tree root connections." Dana said.

"Maybe give that to Lean, Blake doesn't get in contact unless she wants something." Mjord said, laughing.

"You wont be able to protect them with a bird and a voice." Dareena said.

"I wont be able to protect them anyway." Dana said. "I don't think we're supposed to stop them now. We're supposed to stop whoever is after them. And if they have trust in us, they're going to tell us who it is." Dana said, cheerfully.

"Why don't you just join them into the council, so you can pretend you're sending them on a mission?" Dareena said sarcastically.

"That's a good idea." Dana said enthusiastically, and Dareena groaned in frustration.

"Something is off with you." Dareena said.

"I'm not telling." Mathilda said, Dareena was probably staring her down.

"Dana, if we have to let them go, I want them to go on a good ship. That's best protection we could give them." Mjord said.

"I was thinking the same." Dana said.

"Fine, you two go ahead and *organize* the trip for them, I won't be a part of this." Dareena said, and then footsteps, approaching Blake and Lean, made them rush thru the hallway, and back into their room. By the time they closed the door shut, they were panting, barely avoiding getting caught.

"They're going to give us a ship!" Lean said excitedly.

"Yeah!" Blake said. "I guess Dana isn't that horrible, I mean, she's still pretty bad, but I didn't expect-"

"And Dana would have us join the council, can you believe that?" Lean asked, laughing.

"She can't, we're not even considered adults." Blake shook her head. "Not that I would join, anyway."

"You wouldn't?" Lean asked, surprised.

"Of course not, Lean, they have rules here!" Blake waved her arms to the ground, emphasizing.

"Oh." Lean said, and shook her head, laughing.

"They think they have figured us out so well, did you hear Mathilda? *They're running, blah blah*, like that's any of her business!" Blake argued.

"Yeah! They know nothing about us." Lean agreed.

"That's right." Blake confirmed.

"I'm so relieved we don't have to fight them to go." Lean said, and laid herself down on the bed, stretching.

"Do we want to go on their ship?" Blake considered.

"Why not?" Lean asked.

"Well, then it's not ours, we have to give it back." Blake said.

"Yeah, but how long would it take to repair a sunken one?" Lean asked.

"Uh." Blake considered this. "Long."

"We can pretend it's ours. I'll write our names on the mast." Lean said.

"Good thinking." Blake accepted.

Lean stretched again, imagining all the things she'd have to look forward to now.

"Blake, do we have a map? How will we know where to go?" Lean asked.

"Birds will help us." Blake said.

"Oh, good." Lean said.

"We'll need to think of food." Blake said, and frowned. "How long does it take to grow fruit trees and vegetables?"

"We just grew enough trees to collapse a castle, I think we will grow food." Lean reminded her.

"Oh, right!" Blake laughed. "We really did collapse that castle..." Blake sighed happily and lied beside Lean.

Lean trailed her hand over the cover, found Blake's hand, and touched it tentatively. Blake responded by taking Lean's hand in her own. Lean grinned.

"You seem to be much better since we did that." Lean commented.

"Of course. Now everyone who even thinks to imprison me knows they'll get their home destroyed. Let's see who has the guts to try it now." Blake said, challenge in her voice.

"You did it to prove a point." Lean stated.

"And we did prove it. Nobody will mess with us now." Blake said affectionately.

"And we're going to the sea, and we'll see the underground forest..." Lean said dreamily.

"Maybe meet the dragons, finally." Blake filled in, satisfied.

They kept chatting about everything waiting for them, until they fell asleep, still holding hands.

## Chapter 36: Departure

They were woken up by a knock on the door. Both jumped, and then Blake got up swearing under her voice to open it. It was Dana.

"What the hell, we were sleeping!" Blake complained, glaring.

Dana came in and critically examined both of them.

"Of course you'd oversleep it. It's done. Lynx is banished." Dana said.

Blake and Lean looked at each other, and yelled in joy.

"Finally!" Blake exclaimed, and Lean jumped all over the bed, laughing. Blake joined her, and Dana watched them frowning.

"What did her face look like? When you told her about the castle?" Blake asked.

"She was upset." Dana stated.

"No! Show me her exact expression!" Blake demanded.

Dana sighed, and then made an angry, if-i-had-my-powers-you'd-all-be-dead face.

Blake was pleased. She laughed victoriously and high-fived Lean.

"It's not all over yet." Dana warned them.

"What is it now? Do you have to ruin our fun?" Blake glared at her again.

"It's Leira, we're worried she might try to track Lynx down, even though it's against our laws. She seems to be attached to Lynx beyond what we could control. We need your input, Lean. She has been helping Lynx all this time, so she's complicit in what was done to you." Dana said, looking at Lean.

Lean stopped jumping, and looked a little put out.

"I-I know she's been lying to me, and I just don't want to see her. I don't want to decide what happens to her." Lean said, unsure.

"Can't you just banish her too?" Blake suggested.

"We could." Dana said, and sighed, leaning to the closet. "But, we believe she was influenced by Lynx, and possibly incapable of great evil when on her own. We would only be able to test this if she stayed away from Lynx. So for now, we will keep her here, to make sure they don't join forces."

"That's fine by me." Lean shrugged.

"If you change your mind about her, let me know." Dana said.

Lean nodded.

"Here's Lynx's ring." Dana offered it to Lean.

Lean took it carefully, and studied it. It was the exact same ring as she'd been wearing, it showed no sign of wear, and there was nothing written on it.

"Thank you." Lean said, and put it in the box with the rest of them. "I'll make sure I return it."

"If you and Blake still insist on sailing, there's a few conditions we-" Dana started.

"What conditions?" Blake asked indignantly, finally jumping off of the bed and rounding on Dana.

"There's a list." Dana said, smirking.

"And why should we care?" Blake asked.

"Do you want to have entire court, and Mjord and Mathilda in your way?" Dana asked, eyebrows raised.

Blake paused, considered threatening Dana, but then backed off, and sat down on the chair instead.

"Give me the list." Blake demanded.

Dana gave Blake a dirty look and gave list to Lean instead, who thanked her politely. Blake watched them, irritated.

"And now I have to go see that some maps are redrawn. Certain castle that is now destroyed was a landmark." Dana said, looking at Blake.

"Well hurry up then, I'm sure the maps are urgent." Blake mocked her.

Dana laughed to herself, gave a wave of goodbye to them both, and left in good spirits.

"Do you have to always be this mean to Dana? You said yesterday she wasn't so bad." Lean asked.

"She's not bad. I just don't want her to think she can tell me what to do." Blake said, her nose up in the air.

"Does that mean you've forgiven her for the entire bait thing?" Lean asked, curious.

"Of course not!" Blake said, and then frowned. "If she gives us a ship I might."

Lean smiled, and sat on the chair close to Blake, looking at the list.

"There's quite a few things on here." Lean said, and extended the list to Blake.

The list said the following:

If Blake Firethorn and Lean Greenwood were to dispatch on a journey on the sea surface, they would have to oblige with the following rules:

1. Use the council provided ship, which will be given to them when they accept the following conditions:

- take and finish sailing lessons provided by the court's sea witch
- learn the history of witch's failed sailing attempts, as well as the consequences of such endeavors
- give a heartfelt promise to not leave the ship unattended for any period of time
- never fly or swim the distance that would keep the ship out of your field of vision

2. Return within 30 days or sooner, if this is not met a search party will be sent after them

3. Communicate their state and whereabouts every day via device that will be found on the ship

4. Ask for help in case of an emergency or danger

5. Complete the task of returning three rings and tiara to the inhabitants of the New Island, currently known as "mystery women", and attempt to establish agreeable relations

6. Collect and bring back any information about unexplored land and women, which will be saved within the library.

Dana Winter

"We'll be hundred years old by the time we're done with all this." Blake said, disinterested.

"We could have our own book in the library!" Lean said, excited.

Blake looked at her, and couldn't help but to smile. Lean liked adventures, but collecting new information seemed to be her favourite. Making Lean happy was worth some compromising, Blake thought.

"How long could sailing lessons last?" Blake wondered.

"So we're going with this?" Lean asked, surprised.

"Well, we could try to take on Dana, but I think Mathilda would destroy us." Blake said, smiling.

Lean grinned, understanding, and stood up, extending her hands to Blake for a hug. Blake accepted, and stood up only to have Lean's gentle hands wrapped up around her. Blake felt herself relax, it was soothing and thrilling to be hugged like that, and Lean felt so soft and fragile yet strong and warm. Blake placed her hands around Lean's waist and leaned into her, thinking how strange it was she would do things for Lean, that she wouldn't for anyone else. And feeling how happy Lean was, Blake knew it was the right thing to do.

They went down to the breakfast, where they were introduced to the sea witch, and both given a book titled "Swallowed by the Deep Ocean", which Lean started reading immediately. Blake still argued with Dana about the terms of their departure, but Dana wasn't budging.

In the afternoon, they were brought to the shore, and introduced to the ship. Blake had never seen one looking so new and undamaged, only ones she played with were falling apart. There was a small garden already growing on the roof of the cabins, beans were climbing up the to the crow's nest, decorating it

with leaves and fruit. Blake flew all around it and she could find nothing to complain about, nothing to criticize. Lean just kept staring at it with her mouth open, so Blake shook her a little before addressing Dana.

"Well, it's satisfactory." Blake said.

Dana laughed, and urged her to learn to move it around the sea.

It was soon apparent that Blake did not in fact, know how to sail a ship. She was very stubborn in doing everything but what she was told, so her progress was slow, and ship was not getting anywhere. Lean had already learned all the names and the parts and what each one does, while Blake was trying to tie a rope around her broom to pull the ship forward. Instructor and Lean watched her for a while, too amused to interrupt. It didn't work.

In the end the instructor demonstrated her skills to Blake, which got her impressed enough to sit down and listen. Instructor was able to sail the ship singlehandedly, which would usually be impossible. She was using magic and barriers and plants as an extra set of hands, they would listen to her voice and move as instructed. Lean could do some of that too, but they needed to work together to sail the ship correctly.

It took two weeks for the instructor to be satisfied with them both, even though Blake was insisting she got it all after two days. After two weeks they'd been thru heavy rain and wind, and Blake's barriers for protecting the ship were working well. It was unscratched even after Blake took it thru rocks and shallow water she wasn't supposed to sail in at all.

"Alright, I'll talk to Dana. It looks like you two are going to the sea." The Instructor said at last, and Blake and Lean celebrated by jumping on the big net repeatedly, and flying thru the open doors of the cabins in laughter. It was their favourite game to try to fly thru the narrow frame unscathed, not that either of them was without bruises. They didn't seem to mind though. Blake's hand was completely healed, and it didn't seem like anything would stand in their way anymore.

Lean and Blake started packing the ship with books, clothes, fruit, snacks and various gifts the witches in the council entrusted them to bring to the "mystery women". They came to the dinner, both nervous and excited, eager to see Dana.

Dana made Blake swear she wouldn't fly off, and Blake, annoyed, made a promise she would keep on the ship, or in very close distance. Everyone seemed to think Blake would be the one to make a mistake, and looked at Lean as if she would do perfect. Lean herself looked nervous, and made a promise as well, shuddering a little. Blake hugged her close and dragged her away from the council, mumbling how it was about time to leave.

Dana made them wait until the dawn, insisting they should get a good sleep before tending a ship.



It was no use. Neither could sleep.

They spent the whole night talking and kissing, and excitedly jumping on their bed, discussing about all of the things they would do once alone at the sea, and how likely were the mystery women to be dangerous, and if they could bring home a dragon, or at least a new animal.

Their blood was still running fast in the dawn, when the entire council had came to see them off, brought them more food, more blankets and anything they felt the two witches might find useful. Dana gave them a compass, and Dareena, who had gotten used to the idea that they were indeed, sailing away, shook her head and gave them a book about moths.

"And don't try to grow anything out of the ship's wood, if you make it develop roots they will suck in the sea water, and then the entire deck is going to go bad." Dana was still lecturing them, even as they were standing on the deck, preparing to lift the anchor.

"Shut up!" Blake yelled at Dana, as Lean helped her pull on the rope.

And then, everyone was waving and cheering at them, Lean waved at them, and Blake just stood there feeling awkward. Why did they have to have a send-off ceremony? Blake would have been happy to leave in the middle of the night, telling no one. Still, Lean looked happy. She got friendly with quite a few witches in the council. It was a good thing. Blake waved at the crowd, started to steer the ship in the right direction, and then flew to the crow's nest, checking the horizon. Lean held onto the mast as the ship turned, and grinned up at Blake, as the sun was rising.

And they were off.

*Author's note: I'm already on my way to write the second book, but there is a lot of plot I created for this one that didn't make the cut. After what happened to Blake and Lean I decided they've been thru enough, and to spare them all additional trouble that could have happened.*

*That witch's lair they encountered way back, in Thornwood? That was one of Blake's mothers, who was going against her banishment and living in Thornwood illegally. Witches can't live there because demons are after their powers, but one without powers could easily align with the demons and live there peacefully, without anyone finding out. Lynx knew about it tho, she knew about both Blake's mothers, because she was hungry for their powers. Lynx was actually secretly making experiments on how to take powers from a witch and transfer it to another one, which was also highly illegal. She found out it was impossible unless the witch already had that same power in the past, so only ones who could make use of this were banished witches. Blake's mother had sworn her loyalty to Lynx, if Lynx would restore her powers in return. Lynx wanted that, more power on her side would make it hard for anyone to stop or detain her. So when Lynx was keeping Blake captive in her castle, she would have eventually tried to take Blake's powers and give it to Blake's mother. This was prevented by council acting fast and taking Lynx's*

*powers away, also by Blake and Lean destroying her castle, and with it the experiment lab, they never even realized it was there. So that was a whole lot of crisis averted. I decided even if Blake goes to Thornwood again (and she might), she won't run into her mother there, and find out just what she was planning.*

*Also Lynx wasn't sure until the last second if she was actually going to save Lean and play a hero, or just let her die, and her powers with her. Lean was too much of a threat and Lynx didn't know if she could control Lean, so it felt safer to just get rid of her. That is why Lean got so bad, and why Lynx was so pissed to find out that Lean escaped instead, and was brought to a healer. Pretty much all she told Blake were lies.*

*Dana got most of this information out of Lynx before the banishment, but ultimately decided to keep it to herself, and to keep a close eye on Lynx to make sure she doesn't get in any position of power again. Blake would be pretty pissed if she found out she wasn't told any of this, but I don't think she'll find out.*

*I know Lynx seems like a kind of stereotypical, much too evil villain, but she's based on two people I actually knew, in real life. Scary, huh?*

*I will give my best to give the second book a bit slower pace, I did not realize how fast the entire thing was for readers because I was writing it very slowly! I hope to write the first chapter within a week.*

