

# FERN'S SCHOOL for WAYWARD FAE



THE GRIM ADVENTURE  
FERN FORGETTABLE as told by PIPER CJ

2

CHAPTER SAMPLER

WALKER BOOKS



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# THE GRIM ADVENTURE

FERN FORGETTABLE

AS TOLD BY PIPER CJ



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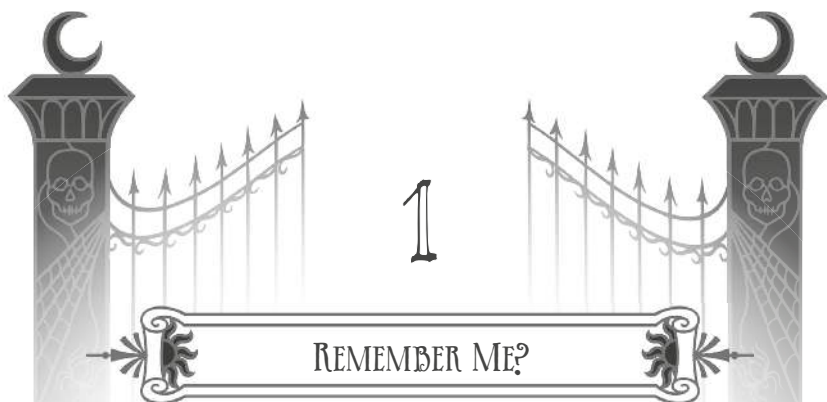
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TO BIGFOOT.

DON'T TELL PEOPLE I'M A BAD PHOTOGRAPHER.  
YOUR PICTURE WILL STOP TURNING OUT BLURRY  
WHEN YOU STAND STILL.





**T**he hardest part of going for a run is putting on your shoes.

The hardest part of running away from the Seelie Keeper, however, is probably his magical powers and enormous wings. In the human realm, *keeper* often refers to someone who prevents a ball from entering the net in sports. In the fae realm, the Keeper is a ruler, a judge, and a rather grumpy know-it-all with very strong opinions about the world and everyone in it. The fae Keeper also just happens to be my father.

You can call me Fern, and though I'm the one speaking, this is not my story.

If it were, I might tell you that I was born with red hair and beautiful, sparkling wings. I might tell you that I was

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happy for years and years, eating sweet pies and drinking grape juice and taking naps in the moss, until I discovered that I have three spectacular talents.

My first gift is the ability to travel. If I close my eyes and think of a destination, I open them, and I'm there! How marvelous, right? It was quite useful when my parents would hide the cookies on the topmost shelves. My mother and father had no idea why the jars of sweets would go missing no matter where they hid them.

My second power is the rather useful ability to find things. I can uncover a single sock if I've misplaced its partner, I can locate freshwater streams in the middle of the desert, and I can find demifae children—boys and girls and kids of all sorts with one parent who is human and one who is fae—caught in the cracks between worlds.

My third power is the ability to drink a gallon of milk in thirty seconds. That one might not be as useful.

One gift I don't have is the chance to see whether I will perish or be squished or vanish off the face of the earth, or if I will live to see another day. That particular gift is owned by the very bright, and deeply in trouble, Rosemary Thorpe. She hasn't done anything wrong, you see, but she's certainly ended up somewhere she does not belong.

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And that brings us to a burbling fountain, a mossy floor, an indoor patch of wildflowers, a twisted vine that takes orders from its master, a talking statue, a jeweled throne, and my very angry father as he towers over Rosemary, demanding to know how she found her way through the Lost Woods.

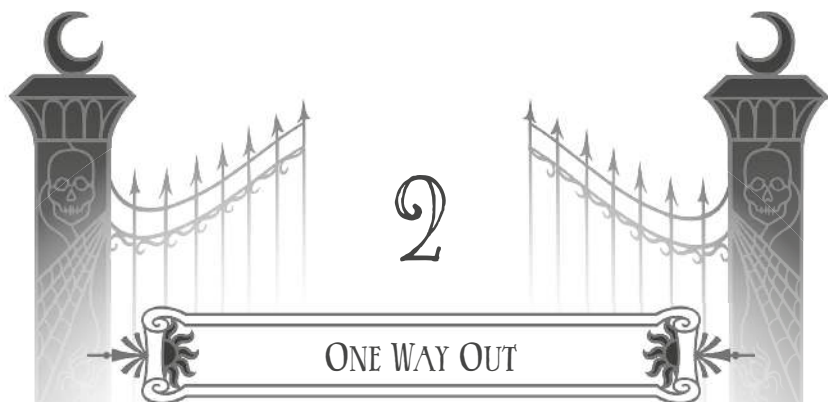
You see, my father—a greedy fairy with unpleasant ideas—wants to be able to go to any realm he wishes. It isn't enough to be the ruler of the Seelie court, not for him. He believes the worlds should belong to whoever has the most power, and he is quite powerful indeed. As such, the man has quite a few strong opinions about who should rule the human realm, and he would quite like to know how to get there. It's part of why my father and I can no longer be friends. I have the gift of travel, after all, and it's the one thing he cannot do. Not without help, anyway.

If Rosemary tells him how to get from one realm to the next, her fretful time in the court will come to an end. He will certainly release her from the horrible vine that's currently lashed her legs to the stool in the middle of his throne room. He will probably offer her sweets and have the fauns and pixies braid flowers into her hair.

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The fate of the realms, however, depends on her ability to keep this secret.

The hardest part of going for a run is putting on your shoes. And lucky for us all, Rosemary Thorpe was already wearing her favorite sneakers when the time came to run.



“**F**ern.” Rosemary choked on the name. Her heart thumped as she looked from one nightmare to the next. She was sandwiched between impossibly magical things, between a talking statue and children with hooves for legs, and every single one of them terrified her.

Rosemary hadn’t seen Fern since the day she’d been ushered into a car by Jeffrey the doctor and Susan the nurse. The odd, freckled fairy had offered her a chance to escape to a school for students like her, and she’d taken it.

Now she thought perhaps she’d made the worst mistake of her life.

Sweat prickled across her forehead as two fairies—father and daughter—boxed her into the throne room. On

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one side, a man with long blond hair and bright blue eyes scowled at her from his jewel-encrusted throne, demanding her secrets. He blocked the exit she truly needed: the knotted tree with a portal to the Lost Woods that twisted behind him.

On the other side, Fern Forgettable stood in the double-door opening with her arms crossed, glaring at the man she'd called Father. Rosemary struggled to move, but the thick, rope-like vine squeezed her more tightly every time she attempted to wiggle.

The redheaded fairy broke her angry stare and turned to Rosemary with a breezy smile. "Hi, peanut." She waved. "Sorry we had to meet like this." Then to her father, Fern said, "How did someone with such terrible manners create a daughter as lovely and friendly as I am? You could learn a thing or two."

"Of all my daughters, why are *you* the one who keeps turning up? You're my greatest disappointment, Fern, and you are not welcome in my court," the Keeper said with a snarl.

Rosemary was trapped. She was surrounded by the foods she'd been warned not to eat and the goblets she'd

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been warned not to drink from. Mushrooms of all types—not just the jolly red-and-white-dotted toadstools, but every kind imaginable—pressed in on her from the mossy floor. Rosemary’s mouth was so parched that she was ready to run directly into the gurgling fountain and gulp the well dry, though she wondered if she’d been cursed to feel thirsty simply so that she’d drink the enchanted water. She’d been betrayed. She was going to be a prisoner in the Seelie court forever and ever and ever. Unless . . .

While Fern spoke to her father, Rosemary caught the sight of something small, something sharp, and something very, very important. Just beside the too-beautiful piles of fruit was a tiny knife meant for cutting the food.

As sneakily as she could, Rosemary snatched the little weapon and prepared to cut.

Rosemary’s heart dropped into her stomach. She heard the gasps and murmurs of others in the court as she watched the exchange between Fern and her father. It was at this moment that Rosemary realized this might be her only distraction. She took the paring knife and plunged it into the vine. Though it tightened and recoiled as if it were a living thing, it made no noise, for it was a plant. With all eyes on

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Fern and the Keeper, no one was watching Rosemary frantically hack at the plant.

Fern spoke again. "You have no business keeping a student here. Let her go."

He sneered. "That's not your call to make."

"That's right," Fern agreed, taking a step forward. Rosemary caught her gaze and saw the way the skin tightened around the fairy's eyes. She'd seen what Rosemary was up to. She lifted her voice, drawing the court's attention. "It's not my call to make, nor is it any of yours. The students get to decide on their own where they wish to go. It is not for us to influence their choice. But from where I'm standing, it looks like Rosemary does not want to be one of your spies. Let her go."

"But why would they choose the humans?" the Keeper demanded. The thick perfume of flowers rolled off him as if swelling to cover his fury. Rosemary heard his argument, but it was background noise to her task. She successfully cut through one of the wooden cords and did her best to contain her glee as it snapped to the ground. She had begun hacking at the thicker branch when the Keeper said, "Especially once we've shown them what humans are capable of."

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She stopped what she was doing. She looked at the pair with glacial slowness. She barely had time to see Fern's careful shake of the head—a warning not to speak—before the words had already escaped her mouth.

“What do you mean *you've* shown us?” Rosemary said, voice scarcely loud enough to hear across the court.

The Keeper's back straightened. He dusted his emerald attire, though there was nothing to remove. Fern folded her arms across her chest behind him and said, “Yes, Father, what *do* you mean?”

A high-pitched ringing pierced Rosemary's ears as she asked, “Did you do this? To Essie?”

The man scoffed. “A human captured him. You saw it yourself. Humans did this.”

Rosemary's pulse tripled. “And how do you know what I'm talking about?”

He took a few purposeful steps toward Rosemary, but his daughter caught him by the arm. He jerked his attention toward her once more, which gave Rosemary the chance to return to hacking and stabbing and cutting at the vine while all eyes remained on the fight.

“You aren't allowed to interfere,” Fern snapped. “It's

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in the bylaws. The students must come to the decision on their own.”

“And they will!” he growled. “But some may need help coming to the *right* decision. We need their help. The students are the key to the coming war.”

He was about to turn back to Rosemary when Fern yanked his arm hard enough to garner a snarl. One more vine. She could do it as long as Fern held his attention. The fairy’s fire-red hair tilted back as she laughed an angry laugh and said, “There should be no war.”

“And there won’t be. It’ll be over before it begins,” he retorted.

Fern responded with a humorless smirk. “You don’t know what the students are capable of. You think wish granting is a marvelous power? You’re right. Another can walk through walls. Another calls to water. A little friend of hers can drop you where you stand with a single scream. Another can call an army of shadows. They aren’t weak. You won’t win.”

Rosemary could only see the back of the Keeper’s head, but she couldn’t miss the way he tensed as if ready to fight. “I will.”

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“And what if one of them could tell the future, Father? What if one of the students you hope to win to your cause could tell you exactly whether you will succeed, or if your fate ends in disaster?”

Rosemary nearly dropped her knife as Fern’s gaze flitted to hers, and her blood turned to ice. Was Fern talking about *her*?

“Impossible,” the Keeper said. “Once the students show us how to navigate the Lost Woods, we’ll have the access to the mortals we need to set all things right with the world. Never again will a fae suffer at the hands of a human.”

*Snap.*

Rosemary cut herself free, and she looked up at Fern with wide, startled eyes at the loud sound that echoed off the stones.

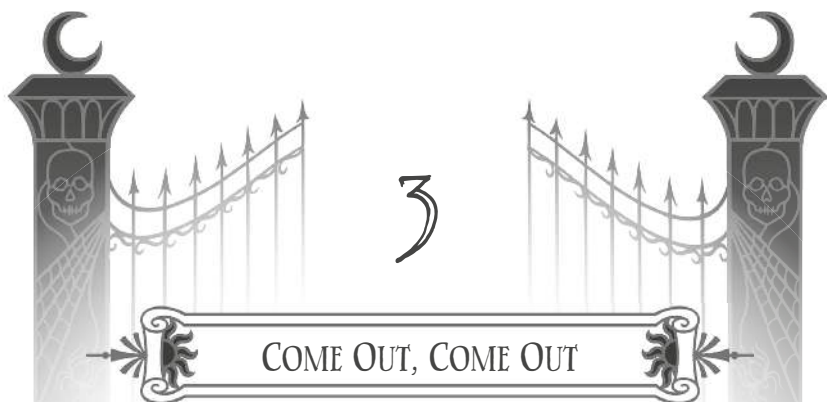
The Keeper turned as if to sprint toward Rosemary, but Fern dug her nails into his arm. Her command bounced off the walls as she called to Rosemary. “Go!”

Rosemary scrambled over the moss, kicking up stones as she slipped onto the silvery walkway and struggled to catch her footing. She nearly knocked the throne to the

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ground as she dashed for the tree. She stretched her arm out for the knob with one final burst of energy.

And just as she touched the knob in the tree, just as the world began to twist and swirl as she teleported away, she felt the cold marble hands of a statue wrap around her ankle.



Rosemary hit a stone-covered wall with a painful thud, and pieces of rock flew through the air. She winced as something hard and horrible hit her face. She wiped at her cheek only to pull back a hand smeared with blood.

An instant later, the horrid, shattering sound of cracking marble filled the small, rocky space as the statue crashed into the wall beside her. A broken marble arm bounced off the wall and landed on the far side of the hall.

“Ack! Look what you’ve done!” the statue screamed. Rosemary stumbled backward as it ran for its arm, giving Rosemary just enough time to spring down the corridor as she searched for a way out. She didn’t know where the jump had taken her, but this certainly wasn’t the Lost Woods. Was she still in the Seelie castle?

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She barely had time to gather a sense of her surroundings when the unmistakable noise of the statue thundered from somewhere behind her. Her sneakers thumped against the cobblestones as she ran and ran past doors and flickering lanterns and dripping ceilings. Rosemary took a tight corner and grabbed the last door handle on the right. She yanked the knob and leaped into the room, slamming the door behind her before the statue rounded the corner.

Rosemary turned the lock and doubled over, gripping her knees as she gasped and panted for air. She pressed her ear against the door to listen for the statue and was horrified at the smashing, splintering sounds of the marble woman breaking through each door in the hall. It would reach Rosemary any minute. She couldn't stay here.

Maybe there was another way out.

She turned to examine her hiding place, to find that she was in a bedroom. An enormous black bed stood at the center of the room, with four tall white posts hoisting a black velvet canopy overhead.

On closer inspection, she realized they were not pillars, but bright white bones.

Rosemary shuddered as she backed away. Beside the

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bed was a wardrobe full of black pants and black hooded sweatshirts—some with buttons, some with zippers, some cloaks, others that seemed plain and unremarkable. She hurried to the second door, but it only led to a bathroom. There were no windows for her to crawl out of, no vents for her to hide in, no means of escape.

The cracking sounds of smashed wood grew louder and louder as the statue broke down door after door.

*Think, Rose, think!* She searched the room. A giant antique mirror was big enough for her to hide behind, but she would be trapped in a corner if the statue found her. A large fireplace filled with ashes and burned logs was big enough for her to scurry into, but she'd never been much for climbing and had foreseen one too many deaths to ever play in a chimney. Large paintings decorated the room—landscapes of misty mountains, portraits of a man on a ghostly river, and a dark painting of a giant winged moth with glowing red eyes. Curtains hung on either side of the paintings, but the curtains did not go all the way to the floor, and if she hid behind them, her feet would remain exposed.

*Thump, crack, crash!*

The statue was so close now. It had to only be one or two rooms away. She was out of time.

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Rosemary dropped to her belly to crawl under the bed, only to discover she was not alone in the room.

A small, yappy dog dashed from beneath the bed, but the dog was made entirely of bones and fabric and buttons.

She covered her mouth to stifle a yelp. “Are you . . . you can’t be alive . . .”

It ran up to Rosemary, nuzzling her excitedly with a black button nose. Its fabric ears flopped as it tossed its head from side to side, barking.

“Shh!” she begged. “Be quiet, Bones!”

The happy canine would not listen. It continued to yip as she shot panicked looks to every other part of the room. The only thing that remained was the wardrobe.

Rosemary ran to it, slipping inside just as the first, thunderous attack arrived at her door. She latched the wardrobe door and backed up against the pants and sweatshirts.

“I know you’re in here!” the statue cried. It punched a hole in the door. “There’s nowhere to run, demifae! Come back to the Seelie court with me, and you won’t be harmed.”

If the statue opened the wardrobe, it’d spot Rosemary immediately . . . unless she could find a way to blend in.

Rosemary yanked a black sweatshirt from its hanger and slipped it over her head. She curled up in a ball, tucking

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her knees against her chest, and pulled the hood over her head before pressing herself into the corner of the wardrobe.

She stopped breathing as the final, splintering smash told her that the marble woman had entered the room. “Come out, come out, wherever you are,” taunted the statue.

*Don't breathe, Rose. Don't make a sound.*

A second later, Rosemary's heart stopped beating as the wardrobe door flew open. It banged against the wall as the statue loosed an angry growl. It leafed through the black clothes in frustration before barking caught its attention.

Rosemary dared to take a peek as the statue stumbled away from the wardrobe.

“Wha—”

“Ruff, ruff, ruff!” The bony dog nipped and bit at the statue's heels. The statue kicked at the dog, but the dog was quicker. It snatched the statue's broken arm between its teeth and took off out the door and down the hall at the speed of light. With a furious cry, the statue chased after the dog.

This was the distraction Rosemary needed.

*Thanks, Bones,* she mouthed at the creature.

Rosemary tumbled from the wardrobe and ran for the

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door, but not before something caught her eye. There was something wrong with the mirror.

Only a minute ago, a twelve-year-old girl in a gray T-shirt, with a jagged cut on one cheek and messy hair, had looked back at her. Now the room looked completely empty.

She approached the mirror and reached out to touch it. A trembling finger made contact with the glass, arms still covered by the black hooded sweatshirt, but no one looked back.

She shrugged out of the black hoodie and let it crumple to her feet. The moment it touched the floor, she reappeared, wide-eyed and still panting for air, in the mirror. The pile of fabric also appeared in the mirror, fully visible to both her eyes and the reflection once it was no longer on her body.

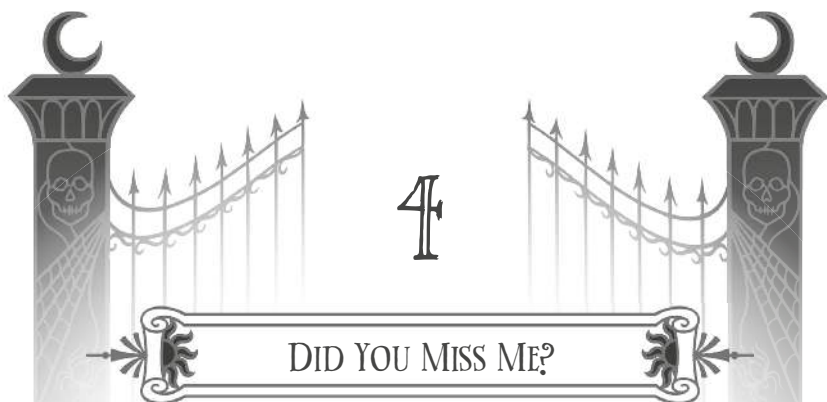
She bent to pick up the sweatshirt, noticing a small embroidered design for the first time. It was a stick with a curved piece of metal at the end.

Another boom informed her that she didn't have time to marvel at magical items or try to remember where she'd seen sticks with curved swords. She grabbed the hoodie

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from the floor and put it on once more, vanishing in the mirror the moment she did.

Rosemary knew what she had to do. She took several brave steps out of the room and followed the sounds of barking dogs and screaming statues. Summoning as much courage as she could, Rosemary walked directly toward the danger.



**H**ello, my friend. I'm sure you're quite worried about Rosemary right now, and I don't blame you. Statues have always given me goose bumps, and not the good kind. Rosemary is brave and skilled and smart, but no human or demifae can fistfight a creature made of stone.

The last time you saw me, I was still in a pretty heated conversation with my father. We don't get along, you see, but my gift for finding things told me that Rosemary needed to be found. I expected great things from the girl who can see death, but imagine my surprise when she used my chitchatting distraction to cut herself free from the vine and sprint for the tree. I was as surprised as she was (and you, perhaps) when the statue followed her.

Most young folk expect excitement in the month lead-

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ing up to their thirteenth birthday, but rarely do they expect it in the form of a high-stakes chase to the death. Halloween is always a bit spooky, but if Rosemary and her propensity for trouble have set the standard for October 31, then I can only imagine that bats and cauldrons will not be enough to satisfy our talented, very-in-trouble friend blessed with the graveyard gift.

Perhaps all would have been lost, if it were not for something very special that Rosemary Thorpe was not meant to find.

Invisibility is a neat gift. Some fae can become invisible on their own, though it's exceptionally rare. The one thing everyone wishes they had, but no one possesses, is a treasure that can make its user invisible at will. There is only one fae with such a gift, and it's not my place to speak the fae's name. That's the sort of secret you'll have to wait to uncover, I suppose.

What I *can* tell you, however, is that Rosemary Thorpe used her stolen sweatshirt and its powers of invisibility to sneak right past the statue. A little dog made of bones paused to wag its tail at her when she walked by, but otherwise kept the statue occupied. Dogs are lovely like that.

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I can tell you that Rosemary kept the hoodie on while she slipped out the front door of a large stone house—one that was not the Seelie castle at all.

I can tell you that she found a new knotted tree—one that took her to the Lost Woods—and that, from there, she used her classmate Iris's compass to go north toward Fern's.

I can tell you that Rosemary said *collywobbles* and the world twisted and spun until it spit her out in the forest beyond Fern's school.

I can tell you that she took off the sweatshirt, folding it so the curious stitching was hidden, and draped it over her arm as she approached the manor.

And I can tell you that Rosemary Thorpe was utterly certain that she knew not only who the Keeper's spy was, but precisely why they were trying to tear the school apart.



Rosemary's feet slowed as she approached the school, the sweatshirt bundled in her arms. She'd fought her way out of the Seelie court and finally made it back to the one place she felt safe: her home at Fern's.

At first, she thought things looked different because she'd arrived at sunset. She stared at the leafy green vine that smothered the manor, struggling to understand why the leaves looked so red and yellow. A speck of light caught her attention, and her gaze shot to a row of carved pumpkins with candles flickering inside. Enormous cobwebs stretched over the school's door.

She turned slowly to look at the forest behind her, the bushes by the animal sanctuary, the plants near the classrooms. Everything once green had shifted into shades of brown, gold, and orange. Pumpkins and spiders and

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dangling cauldrons decorated each building, as if everyone was in the throes of Halloween festivities.

Except . . . October shouldn't be for another month.

"Rose? Is that you?"

Rosemary whipped around to see her friend Henry stopping in his tracks after rounding the back of the building, slack-jawed and wide-eyed.

"Henry, what's happening? What day is it?"

He knocked the breath out of her when he rushed up to her with a hug. He pulled away, gripping her by the shoulders. "Thank the stars you're all right, Rose. When you didn't come back . . ."

"What do you mean?"

He dropped his hands. "I was so scared for you, Rose. We're both human-born, but you didn't grow up knowing about the courts or fae or how bad some of them can be. You were all alone, and . . . Now that you're back, we have to take this seriously. Come on."

He snatched her hand and dragged her toward the manor.

The door swung open before they had a chance to reach it. Their classmate Iris stopped midstep, her blond hair falling around her shoulders, jaw on its hinges, blue eyes wide

## TRICK OR TREAT

with shock. “Oh my heavens, look who it is,” she gasped. “Where have you been?”

Henry took a half step to position himself between Iris and Rosemary. “Back off. We’re on our way to see Una.”

Iris scoffed. “I’ve questioned your choices for a while, Rosemary, but you disappear without a trace for weeks and *he’s* the one who finds you?” Then to Henry she said, “The vine has seen you messing around doing heaven-knows-what at night. Willow told me so.”

Rosemary shot Henry a glance. The large vine within the school kept watch over the students, but . . . *Is Iris implying that the vine talks to Willow?* Before she had a chance to find out, Iris continued.

“Let me guess: Henry and his shadows took you to some Unseelie nightmare.”

Rosemary couldn’t believe it. Her roommate had been right to warn her about how unkind Iris could be. The girl hadn’t even given her ten minutes of peace before making her life miserable upon returning to school.

“There was nothing *Unseelie* about the nightmare I faced,” Rosemary said, narrowing her eyes at Iris’s rude division between the two fae courts.

Iris threw out a hand. “Are you kidding? Henry is

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practically the son of nightmares. Do you know who his dad is?”

“No, and I don’t care. Henry’s my friend. I can’t say the same for you right now.” Rosemary grabbed Henry’s hand and tugged him around Iris. They left her stunned on the landing as they marched toward the housemother, Una.

They were practically on top of Una’s desk before she looked up from her paperwork.

Her single enormous eye flew open. Papers went flying as they fell from her hands. The cyclops jumped up from her chair and scooped Rosemary up, squeezing her. “Oh, thank goodness!”

“Una,” Rosemary coughed into the housemother’s cloud of curly hair. “Will someone explain what’s going on?”

Una repeated Henry’s gesture from moments earlier and held Rosemary at arm’s length while she examined her. She muttered about the cut on her face and her dirty clothing, but after a hasty assessment, she said, “What on earth happened to you?”

“How long have I been gone?” Rosemary demanded, putting her foot down until someone answered her question.

Una blinked her single, bewildered eye. “Time moves

## TRICK OR TREAT

differently in different realms, dear. When you didn't come back with the other students, no one had any clue where you'd gone. We were so scared for you."

*Scared for me?* Rosemary's hand went to the silver compass still bulging in her pocket. Her thoughts darkened. *I bet one student knew exactly where I was, and why it was so scary.*

"I was only gone for a few hours," Rosemary said.

"Maybe that's true in the realm you were in. But here . . . no one has seen you at Fern's School in a month, Rosemary. We've been worried sick."

The world swam, Rosemary's vision bobbing as the information sent a shiver down her spine. *One month.*

The high, sharp sound of shattered glass caught her attention mere seconds before Rosemary's roommate, Trym, crashed into her. Rosemary struggled to breathe through the puff of lace and black, braided hair.

She tried to return the embrace, but her arms were pinned to her sides as she sputtered for air. The broken remains of a glass terrarium glittered over her roommate's shoulder, though considering Trym's love for animals, she was confident the box had been empty.

## THE GRAVEYARD GIFT

Trym released her and instantly jabbed a finger into Rosemary's chest. "Don't ever make me worry like that again!"

"Hey." Rosemary struggled between her confusion and the joy at feeling wanted. "I didn't disappear on purpose. This is my home. You are my family."

Rosemary held up all five fingers, then put her middle and ring finger down, making the sign for *I love you*. She wished she had learned more sign language by now to help communicate with her roommate so she could sign something like *I've missed you, I wish you had been there, or Holy crow, Trym, you're never going to believe what I went through.*

For now, this would have to do.

Trym returned the sign and said, "You're my family, too."

"So." Rosemary looked at Henry while still hugging Trym. She made a weak attempt at looking calm and collected as she asked, "October, huh?"

He ran a hand through his curly brown hair as he gestured to the leaves, the decorations, and the stunned faces. "Happy early Halloween."

"Happy early birthday," Una added with a smile.

## TRICK OR TREAT



Una told Rosemary to stay put while she fetched the other teachers. The command, like most of the house-mother's advice, was swiftly ignored.

"They can fetch her from her room!" Trym said, dragging Rosemary up the stairs before Una had a chance to argue. They huffed and puffed up two flights of stairs, until they entered their bedroom.

Trym gestured for Rosemary to take a seat while she shut the door. Rosemary tucked the sweatshirt behind her pillows while Trym lit the candles.

When she was ready, she shoved her crocheted stuffed phantom into Rosemary's arms. "Ghosty is for if the story gets scary."

Rosemary looked around the room not for a stuffed animal, but for the pinkish, magical squirrel-like creature that Trym kept as a best friend. "Where's Wiggles?"

The siboo popped his head up at the mention of his name. Rosemary dropped the ghost as the fluffy animal leaped into her lap, snuggling in for a story.

"Wiggles!" Rosemary hugged him and he responded with an excited squeak.

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“Back to the story,” Trym insisted. “You were gone forever!”

“From my perspective, I was gone for a few hours at most,” Rosemary said, stroking the siboo’s fur while she spoke.

“You keep saying that, but look around. Glance outside. The evidence says otherwise.”

For a sickening moment, Rosemary missed the normalcy of being homeschooled in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, before magic, before fairies, before talking animals and vanishing time.

Trym said, “You came back to Fern’s a little bit older, but not a lot wiser. I can whip you into shape before your birthday. Now, tell me what happened.”

Rosemary gave Wiggles a squeeze, then launched into her epic tale. She gave animated accounts of the children with deer feet, the statue, the sparkling, terrifying, beautiful Seelie court, and finally, the Seelie Keeper.

“Holy crow, Rose. You disappear for weeks and come back saying you met the Keeper?!”

Rosemary’s head wobbled once more at the lost time. She steadied herself and asked, “What do you know about him?”

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Trym scoffed. “He’s half of the reason the Seelie and Unseelie hate each other so much. Legend says that we used to live in peace, but everything changed when he came to power.”

“The Seelie Keeper,” Rosemary clarified. “He’s like the fae king?”

Trym drummed her fingers against her arm. “Listen, I don’t love humans and their silly systems of rulership, but at least they’ve sliced their little mortal countries up like a birthday cake. A ruler for this slice, a king for this slice, a president for this slice, so on, so forth.”

“But with the fae . . . ?” Rosemary pressed.

“He’ll be the Seelie Keeper until he’s gone. He’s the most powerful. And now that he’s finished conquering the Seelie fae, it looks like he had to turn his sights elsewhere.”

“Is there an Unseelie Keeper?”

Trym nodded. “Yes, but she’s like a billion years old and no one has seen her since dinosaurs walked the earth. There’s an Unseelie version of every Seelie thing. There was even a campus just for Unseelie students, once upon a time. I bet we would have liked it better there.”

The fae world was strange enough that Rosemary had no idea whether or not Trym was joking. Since she could

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only make sense of one impossible thing at a time, she focused on the Seelie court.

“He ran out of fae to rule, so now he needs to take over the humans?”

“No,” Trym corrected. “He wants to take over *everything*. But you got away! How?”

The answer caught in Rosemary’s throat. Maybe it came from years of losing friends when she’d shared something too terrible. Maybe it came from a caution that Iris might be listening on the other side of the door. But Rosemary simply shook her head and told a version of the story that wasn’t a lie but wasn’t the truth, either.

“I don’t fully understand how I got away.”

Trym made a sputtering noise, blowing up a tuft of hair as she did so. “Well, that’s the fae for you. There’s a good chance you’ll never understand anything again.” After a beat, Trym said, “Hang on. Do you know how you got there in the first place? We were all together, then *poof*.” One finger pointed upward between the other flattened fingers of the opposite hand, then dropped downward as she made the sign for *disappear*.

“I think . . .” Rosemary hesitated, then produced the

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silver compass from her pocket. “I think Iris’s compass took me there.”

The whites of Trym’s eyes were as large as tea saucers. “Her compass?! Why do you still have it!”

Rosemary started to give it to Trym, then pulled her hand away. She looked at her roommate seriously. “Whatever you do, do not press any of the buttons. Don’t open it, don’t close it, don’t do anything except look at it.”

“What are you, my mother?” Trym said, wriggling her fingers for the device. “Do you think her dad knows the Keeper? Or worse, could her dad be *working* for the Keeper?”

“What do you mean?” Rosemary asked, taking the compass back from Trym after the short examination.

“I mean”—Trym pointed to a candle on the far wall—“This is mine. If I light that candle, it zaps me straight through the Unseelie court and takes me to Banshee Town. My mother gave it to me.”

Rosemary gaped at the candle. “You have a transportation device, too?”

Trym nodded. “They’re pretty rare, so usually parents give them to their kids. You can also get one from a best

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friend who wants to see you, a sworn enemy looking for a fight, or a boss who wants you to be at your job in an instant. But Iris hasn't turned sixteen yet, so I'd bet it came from her dad. We knew he was Seelie, but I don't like that he'd send her straight to the Seelie court. Maybe her parents are encouraging her to give him information."

"It wouldn't surprise me at all if Iris's family knew the Keeper."

Trym chuckled. "He's that bad, huh? Awful enough to compare him to Iris?"

"Worse."



The sun had already set by the time Una and the tutors collected Rosemary and ushered her away to find out what had happened.

The auditorium was eerie at night.

She hadn't been allowed to watch crime movies growing up, but she'd seen glimpses of police interrogations on TV, and couldn't help but feel that four tutors asking questions of one student was very much like detectives inter-

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viewing a criminal. Rosemary had been in this room many times for afternoon classes, always surrounded by her classmates while daylight beamed through the windows.

She knew her tutor, Dante, of course, and was comforted by the flannel he wore, almost like a uniform. Miss Amanda, a Seelie fae with some gift for guardianship, tutored Iris and Grey. She had a friendly smile, deeply tanned skin, and long, braided hair. Rosemary knew her better than the remaining two tutors, only because she was most often put in charge of afternoon lessons on the human realm in the auditorium.

The other two, Aster and Magnolia, she only knew in passing. Aster taught the Unseelie boys, and though he was Seelie, he looked like he belonged in a Halloween store. Magnolia, on the other hand, looked like a summertime Santa Claus dressed in leaves.

“Here.” Una pushed a cup of hot chocolate into her hands. “Sweetie made a pot just for you. I hope you understand *why* we’re so worried. We can’t very well have students go missing one right after the other. And coupled with Essie’s horrible encounter with those human troublemakers whisking him away with a wish . . . ?”

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“Our school isn’t a safe space if our pupils can vanish or run away at the drop of a hat,” came Miss Amanda’s soft voice. She and the rest of the tutors sat on one side of a long desk, while Rosemary and Una sat on the other. “We’ve gotten a record of events from Essie and everyone who went with you on your rescue mission. You were very brave, and very foolish to go alone.”

Aster, the tutor with a love for dramatic black robes, spoke sharply. “Where were you?”

It felt like an entire apple caught in Rosemary’s throat as she swallowed. “The Seelie court,” she said honestly.

“For a month?” Aster pressed.

Rosemary examined each teacher. “Did anyone come looking for me?”

The teachers exchanged looks.

A small, angry flame flickered within her. “Last time a student went missing, *I* went and found him. Did anyone do the same for me?”

Aster clicked his tongue. “You, young lady, were breaking the rules. Without you around to be a bad influence, things followed protocol.”

“And that protocol . . . was to allow me to disappear for a month?”

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“Well,” Miss Amanda replied, “if you were at the Seelie court, you were perfectly safe. You didn’t need rescuing.”

“Pray tell,” asked Magnolia, the pink-cheeked, gentle tutor of the elves and elemental fae, “why did you go there?”

“I didn’t,” Rosemary said. The frustrated flame continued to burn deep in her belly, but she had questions to answer. “Not on purpose, anyway. One moment I was in the Lost Woods with the others, and the next, I was being dragged before the Seelie Keeper.”

Una squeezed her hand in support. The teachers exchanged glances, many lifting their hands to cover their mouths as they murmured to one another. But Dante kept his eyes forward, studying Rosemary’s face as he sipped his hot chocolate.

“Dragged because you were trespassing?” Miss Amanda asked at last.

“No.” Rosemary’s hands clenched into fists. “The Keeper is behind all of it. He’s the reason everything is going wrong at Fern’s. He wants to learn to navigate the Lost Woods so he can get to every realm. He—”

Boisterous laughter cut her thoughts short.

Her angry flame evaporated into something closer to

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horror. Not only had they not looked for her, but the teachers were *laughing* at her.

Their faces were not cruel, but Miss Amanda, Magnolia, and even Una beside her giggled and wiped at jolly tears. Una was the first to apologize. “Please forgive us, dear, but my, what a misunderstanding. The Keeper is one of the most powerful beings in the fae realm. The idea that he would concern himself with our tiny school of demifae . . .”

“It’s a splendid joke.” Magnolia’s nose was red from his honest, happy laughter. “Positively rollicking. None intended at your expense, of course.”

Miss Amanda made an apologetic face. “I was born in the human realm like you were,” she said. “So maybe it would help to have an example, like . . . if you had said the president of the United States was the reason the sprinklers at your elementary school didn’t work. Do you see why it’s silly?”

Rosemary’s fists became so tight that her fingernails bit into the palm of her hand, threatening to draw blood. She freed herself from Una’s attempts at comfort.

“I’m telling you,” Rosemary insisted, “he’s behind it.”

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“If he’s the villain you claim,” Aster said, voice low and snake-like, “how, pray tell, did you manage to escape such an ancient, powerful being?”

Rosemary’s mouth went dry. She looked at Dante—the only person who had not laughed when she’d shared her news. His reaction now was so subtle, she could scarcely see it, but the prophet shook his head once.

*Don’t tell them.* That was Dante’s silent warning.

She blinked rapidly as her gaze darted between the tutors. So, as she’d done with Trym, she said something that wasn’t quite a truth, nor was it a lie. She said, “There’s a tree behind his throne. I ran for it and grabbed the knob.”

Miss Amanda looked at Magnolia. “You’ve visited the Seelie court a time or two, haven’t you? Did time pass differently when you returned?”

“It did not,” Magnolia said. Something about his tone sounded like he was saying he was sorry.

None of them believed her.

Rosemary wrapped her arms around her stomach.

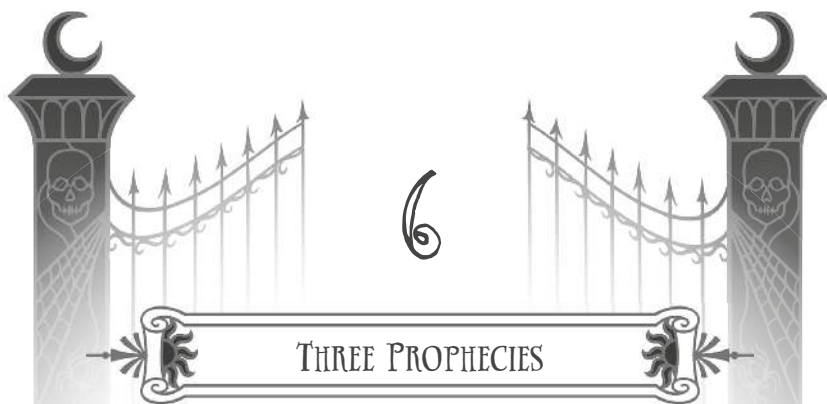
It seemed from the teachers’ quiet chatter that they found this answer acceptable. They’d never have to know that she’d mistakenly hopped to a strange stone house after

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the Seelie court, that she'd met a dog made of bones, or that she'd taken a sweatshirt that made her invisible—a sweatshirt currently stashed behind her pillows.

She was merely an unlucky student who had stumbled into a fortunate outcome.

Nothing more.



The sky was still pink with early-morning sun as Rosemary marched toward the school building. She ignored the neighing unicorn and sleepy chirps of waking birds as she let herself in and began climbing the stairs.

Dante looked up from an array of papers the moment Rosemary opened the door. “Good,” he said as a greeting. “I was tired of getting up early.”

Rosemary rubbed the sleep from her eyes as if it might help her better understand his sentence.

“I wasn’t sure what day you’d seek me at sunrise, so I’ve been setting my clock for the break of dawn since you got back to the school. I’m glad it didn’t take you long.”

“You knew I’d come?”

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“I did. I just didn’t know whether or not you’d miss autumn exam before you returned.”

“What are we being tested on?” Rosemary asked.

“Right now? Nothing. But in a few weeks, every student will submit a subject they believe is most important for testing. Fae-born students often want to be quizzed on human culture so they don’t appear suspicious in the human realm. Human-born kids often want to learn about magic or powers. But, on the topic of powers, I have something to show you.”

Dante gestured toward the table. The floorboards creaked beneath Rosemary as she approached her tutor and bent over the assortment of papers.

“Look at this.” Dante pointed. He’d kept the drawings that Rosemary had done over the weeks of their lessons and had scattered them about the table. His finger rested on one Rosemary had made in the first week after her arrival. He tapped against the picture of a young man with dark tan skin wearing an olive-green tunic. The lights and velvet tents and cotton candy had seemed unimportant when she’d painted them so long ago. She hadn’t been painting a vision—at least, she hadn’t thought so. She’d just been doo-

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dling for the sake of art. But there was no denying it. The scene depicted Essie at the carnival.

Dante looked up at her. “Do you recognize it?”

Rosemary’s mouth dropped open. “How did you . . .”

“I didn’t,” Dante said. “I think there are parts of your gift you understand, and other parts you don’t.” He flipped the papers to something new. “What about this one? Why did you paint this?”

Rosemary looked down at the image and tried to remember the assignment. Dante had asked both her and Trym to think of something terrifying. Rosemary remembered how disappointed she’d felt about her drawing, as if she’d done it wrong. For some reason, she’d used her watercolors to paint a tray of fruit in front of a sparkling fountain, with a single, pointed knife.

“What happened?” Dante asked.

Rosemary swallowed. “You’re a prophet,” she said. “Don’t you know?”

Dante shook his head. “I’ve had three visions about you, Rosemary Thorpe. None of them made sense at the time, but being a prophet has taught me patience. In the first”—he pulled out the picture with the lights and rides

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and a circus tent—“was this. You painted Essie long before he went missing. You were meant to be there.”

Rosemary shook her head. “But I only see—”

Dante’s expression softened. He echoed something Rosemary had heard once before as he said, “Seeing bad things is not the same thing as making bad things happen.” He gave Rosemary’s shoulder a reassuring pat before he said, “On your third day here, I had a vision of you and me talking at sunrise. You had this scab on your cheek, just here.” He pointed to the tiny cut Rosemary had acquired in her escape from the statue. “I knew the vision wouldn’t be relevant until I saw you with this wound. But I didn’t know how important any of it would be until I saw you with *her*.”

Dante leafed through the pages and pulled up an image of a winged fairy with hair as red as flame. “When you drew this, I assumed you were just painting the person who recruited you. Fern brings all the waywards to the school. She has a knack for these things, as annoying as she is.”

Rosemary took the page from Dante’s hand and frowned down at the freckled fairy. Fern stood in the painting near a wall of ivy next to a yellow blob clad in green. Rosemary looked back at her tutor and asked, “Why don’t you like her?”

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Dante grumbled. “Because as annoying as she is, she’s always right. Even if I haven’t seen the future yet, Fern always comes out on the correct side of history. I’ve learned to trust her judgment, even when it’s obnoxious. Besides, she’s courtless, and it’s not easy to be courtless. I should know.”

“Courtless . . .” Rosemary tested the word. The world had been split down the middle twice over. Humans versus fairies. Seelie versus Unseelie. This was her first time hearing that maybe, just maybe, there was another option.

Dante settled into his chair across the table. “There aren’t a lot of Seelie fae who defect into courtlessness. People call them anarchists. Do you know that word?”

Rosemary shook her head.

“An anarchist is someone who wants to destroy the order of things. But that’s not why I became courtless. I just don’t believe in the divide between the Seelie and Unseelie fae, and I have no desire to be a part of their politics.”

Rosemary gripped the table. “But I thought you were . . . Didn’t the others say you were . . .”

“People make assumptions. But no. I was born Unseelie, and I chose to leave my court. Most of the famous courtless fae were once Unseelie.”

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She chewed on her lip, lost in thought. “If I choose to live in the fae realm when I turn sixteen, will I automatically be a member of the Unseelie court?”

He rubbed his chin. “It’s typical for students to join whatever court their parent belongs to. I suppose that makes your situation a little unclear. If you choose to remain in the fae realm, that is.”

Heaviness squeezed her chest as she thought of her parents. Eleanor Thorpe, who hadn’t wanted to be her mother, and a fae who hadn’t bothered to step up and reveal himself as her father. Perhaps she was courtless by default, simply by being unwanted. Jealousy stabbed her as she thought of Iris and how she bragged about having a Seelie angel for a father. The girl loved her court and her parents alike. Iris would probably giggle herself to death at the thought of Rosemary’s situation.

Rosemary suppressed the angry twitch of her lip when Dante broke her dark, spiraling thoughts.

“I’d like to talk about why you’re here,” he said. “Long ago, I had a vision of you visiting me at sunrise. In that vision, we were discussing the Grim Reaper. Long before Fern’s—many, many years ago—Grim and I were classmates at the old Unseelie school. Before things . . . changed.”

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“A school before Fern’s?” she asked.

“Not before.” He cleared his throat. “Students used to be separated. It was a different time. A worse time. But I saw the future, and I knew what changes to make to ensure that I became the person I needed to be. I don’t know if the same can be said of my former classmates.”

Trym’s comments about an Unseelie campus sprang into sharp focus. Rosemary’s curiosity was squashed by a sickly, sinking feeling. She’d spent her life seeing death, but she’d never caused it. Visions of skeletons and robes and ghosts filled her with dread.

Her hand flew to the shoulder where a stick and curved piece of metal had been embroidered onto a sweatshirt. Now she recognized the symbol. It was the Grim Reaper’s scythe.

“The Grim Reaper is dangerous,” she said. “That’s why you didn’t want me to talk about him. He’s a murderer.”

Dante asked, “Did you meet him?”

She shook her head. “I . . . I think I . . . took something from him. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t know it was him. I had to escape, and his clothes—”

“Made you invisible,” Dante said, finishing the thought for her. “As one of the courtless fae, he’s the ultimate threat

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to both realms, human and fae. He's responsible for the deaths of mortals and fairies alike. He can move among humans and fae without being seen. I haven't seen him in years, but it can't be a coincidence that we're hearing about him now that there's a power struggle."

Her blood chilled at the thought. It was terrible enough to see unwanted visions of death. She couldn't imagine being evil enough to cause it.

"Do you think they're working together? The Keeper and the . . . um . . . Grim?"

Bright morning light filled the room. Dante's face was awash with gold as he said, "If the Keeper really does want access to the realms, then no. I suspect that the Keeper would have a much easier time navigating the realms if he abandoned his court, or had someone courtless on his side. I think he'd be fighting against Grim, not with him."

"Does that make the Keeper . . . our ally?"

Dante gave one low, humorless chuckle. Rosemary shifted uncomfortably at the thought. Of course the Keeper was no ally. Things were rarely so simple.

Rosemary looked out the window. The information pressed down on her like weights on her chest and shoulders. The sun was high enough now to cut through the

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window and hurt her eyes with its piercing morning light. She lifted her hand to shield her eyes, catching her teacher's worried gaze as she did so. "None of the tutors believed me when I told them what happened. Why are they on the Keeper's side? Is it because they're Seelie?"

Her tutor rubbed the scruff on his chin as he took a moment to think. "Whether they're Seelie may influence their views, but that's only part of it. No one wants to believe you because they need you to be wrong. If you're mistaken about the enemy, if you're wrong about who's turning the school upside down, their lives can continue as normal. If you're right, everything has to change."

"The school is no match for the Keeper," Rosemary said. "Especially if the teachers aren't on our side."

Dante considered the statement for a moment. "Teachers aren't perfect. Many of them have fallen into the trap of court politics. They've been told that Seelie fae are good fae, and since they themselves are good, they're inclined to believe the narrative."

Rosemary was about to ask what he meant by *narrative* when he explained.

"Narratives are stories we tell ourselves about the world. For example, the narrative about certain tough

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dogs is that they're dangerous, when in fact, they just have owners who have mistreated them. Or the narrative that some students who graduate from fancy human colleges are smarter people who get better jobs, even if they haven't earned a dollar in their life. The story in the fae realm is that Seelie fae are good, and—"

"Unseelie fae are bad." Rosemary *hmped*.

"I didn't say it was a good belief." He clucked his tongue. "But if you're right about the Seelie Keeper, it means not only that a lot of teachers have to examine their thoughts on the Seelie, but that they'll have to reflect on what other lies they might have told themselves. Like I said, it's easier to believe you're wrong."

Rosemary looked at Dante. "But *you* know I'm right. You know about the Grim Reaper."

Dante sighed and revealed an old painting of Rosemary's. Blotches of red and orange and yellow dotted the page as twisted trees filled the space. There were people—though who, she couldn't be sure—and a few interesting creatures that she didn't remember painting. In the corner stood a tall, dark figure, cloaked in shadow and gripping a tall wooden stick with a curved piece of metal.

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The once-innocent painting stared back at her with two glowing red eyes in the center.

The Grim Reaper.

Rosemary looked at her painting, then at the stack of evidence of her gift—her curse—which forced her to think of death every single day. She looked at her teacher, and for a moment, all of the walls within her heart fell to the ground.

His smile was kind, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Something is coming, Rosemary. You've already foreseen it—though what it is exactly, we don't yet know. And it's up to us to be ready for it by the time it finally arrives."



Dante, as it turned out, had been patiently waiting to show them how challenging class could really be. His gift for prophecy had informed him from day one that Rosemary was already on the right path, and that her thirteenth birthday was to be a turning point.

"Then shouldn't I get time off until I turn thirteen?" Rosemary asked unhelpfully.

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“And get out of class for three weeks? Nice try,” Dante grunted. “The clock is ticking, and for all I know, it’s my responsibility to ensure that you’re ready by Halloween.”

“Is that what you saw in your prophecy?” Rosemary asked.

He folded his arms across his chest. “I think everyone in this room knows that visions of the future aren’t that clear. Now, back to it.”

Trym leaned back in her chair. “This isn’t fair,” she said definitively. “I should not be forced to change my lessons just because *this one* had a few successful visions. Shouldn’t we be preparing for the autumn exam?”

“That’s not something you can prepare for,” Dante said. Then to Rosemary he explained, “You’ve been gone long enough to miss a few important announcements. Your autumn exam will take place on Halloween Eve.”

Rosemary groaned. “What are we being tested on?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you.”

And she didn’t know why, but she found his answer unsettling. Then again, her life had been tilted on its side since she’d returned. When she left, she was a new student in the late-summer heat, and she’d come back a mystery, surrounded by dying leaves and Halloween decorations.

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The classroom, at least, was a welcome monotony. Everyone else had been acting so strange since she'd returned, students and teachers alike. The tutors tried to reassure her that everything was normal, but the nervous glances between them confirmed what she knew: they were lying. They were every bit as upset and bewildered by her strange loss of time as she was.

Instead, she focused on the wooden table, the rickety attic where lessons were held, the square window, the creaky floorboards, and the piles upon piles of art materials. She had even missed Dante and his endless supply of plaid shirts, the sleeves always rolled up to the elbows. She so desperately wanted to be a normal student in a rather abnormal school.

Unfortunately, Rosemary had the sinking, horrible feeling that she would never get to be blissfully bored again.

Trym held up a picture of a salami sandwich and whispered, "I'll give you my bauble if you make this vision come true for dinner."

Rosemary stifled a chuckle. "Hungry?"

Trym slammed down the paper and began to add harsh splashes of brown and yellow. She lifted the paper once more. "I'll give you *two* of my baubles if there are french fries."