Chapter 1

Saphira

Saphira sits at a statue on the grounds of an orphanage in the County of Cork, with an open book on her lap. The story involving her favourite mythical heroine, “Mirrin the Windblower” was displayed on the pages. Saphira watched the pages flutter in the breeze causing the text to blur. The smell of the paper wafted toward her making a smile grow, the pages no longer white but beige and the spine was no longer stiff. Regardless of its tatty appearance, Saphira always had her nose stuck in it as she absorbed every word that flowed across the page.

The sound of giggling reached her, taking her attention away from the book on her lap. The boys, who were a few feet away, standing at the bottom of the stairs leading into the orphanage didn’t even pretend to hide the insults as they looked in her direction. Saphira sighed and looked back at the book on her lap - turning the pages back, for the breeze had turned a few, and smoothed them down with her hand. Her nose was back in the book soon after.

*My life never changes. I’ll probably be surrounded by bullies until I need to leave this place.*

Saphira sighed again and continued to read.

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The boys sneered at Saphira’s defiance and watched her flip through the pages in another book that made her skull and crossbones satchel sag. Even from where they stood, they could see the pendant Saphira always fiddled with, as if it were some sort of talisman. It was a silver pentacle, and it glittered in the sun. It was no secret everyone thought that what she wore was just as weird as her, all gothic and girly. But her emerald-green eyes, and make-up just made her look like a vampire and her long black hair and pale skin emphasised the appearance.

However, it wasn’t just her clothing that caught attention. There was something else, something that radiated from her like heat. Whatever it was, it made everyone around her uncomfortable even though they had no real reason.

“Look at her. She’s always got her nose in a book, it’s weird,” Owen said in disgust. “Still, she knows we’re watching even if she’s hiding using that book.”

“How do you know?” Michael said.

“She looked at us, remember? Honestly, are you that stupid on purpose or is it natural?” Owen glared at Michael and watched his shoulders droop and eyes lower as Peter hid his discomfort by staring at Saphira but his shoulders remained poised.

“Owen, what are you thinking? You’ve got that look you had when you ambushed her the other day. She’s probably hiding those bruises you caused under that jumper and makeup,” Peter said.

Owen tutted in annoyance and turned his attention back to Saphira. He watched her put the book in her satchel - the pendant glittered as she fastened the straps shaped into mini skulls. He watched her walk toward the small patch of flowers she grew - they were vibrant and in full bloom.

He looked around and noticed none of the staff were present and decided to follow Saphira. Peter and Michael took a moment to follow as they didn’t expect Owen to risk drawing attention to himself.

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Saphira saw her flower patch in the near distance - every flower was blooming and glowing in the sun. A breeze blew her hair across her eyes obscuring her sight until she moved it aside. She could feel the weight of the book in her satchel for it slightly tapped her side with every footstep. She knelt at the flower patch and began to gingerly touch the stems, and breathed in the scent of roses, lavender, and tulips. Their scents calmed her allowing her to smile as she found a sense of solace. Nature was heavenly especially when the weather was hot and bright and Saphira felt at home (even if she had no true home).

“Hello, Saphira.” Saphira swiftly stood and turned.

“Owen…” Fear made her eyes shimmer and her hands were slightly trembling, but her face was blank. “What do you want?”

“Nothing much, really.” She watched a sly smirk appear on their faces.

“Then leave me alone.” Peter and Michael watched her hands shaking and chuckled - it made Saphira’s blood run cold and her skin crawl. But her attention was on Owen, for the way he was staring was full of malice.

She watched them take another step toward her - her body frozen with fear and her face finally betraying her. With every step they took, she tried to scream but her ability to make sound had vanished.

“Grab her arms.”

Pain made her nerves smart as Peter and Michael seized her arms, squeezing them tightly. She heard them laugh as they pushed her arms behind her - Owen was smiling slyly as he watched.

“Let me go.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Owen said.

Owen approached and struck her cheek causing a red mark to appear, emphasised by her pale skin. He laughed when she whimpered and struggled to free herself. Every squirm caused Peter and Michael to tighten their hold. She closed her eyes, knowing it would only enrage Owen further. She heard him snarl as she felt him grab and squeeze her face.

“Open your eyes.” She did not listen.

A cry of pain reached her ears when she felt him grabbing her neck, forcing her head up to look into his eyes. It took a moment for her to realise it came from her. The squeezing tightened causing the air in her lungs to start to burn. Each attempt at inhaling only resulted in spluttering.

Warmth began to flow through every vein and nerve, eventually reaching her hands. A whimper broke free from her restricted windpipe as her hands began to sting, but the pain worsened. The warmth was now hot and burning her skin. She didn’t have to look - she knew her palms were aglow with gold light. They always did when the control she had swiftly went into non-existence whenever she was ambushed.

*No, no, no!*

A sound, like shattering ice, reached her ears and she felt her arms being freed as Peter and Michael looked behind her. Blood rushed back into her arms causing cramp. She groaned as her eyes opened and noticed Owen and the others were frozen and staring behind her. She looked and the fear worsened - each branch and rose flower was encased in ice. Without waiting, Saphira ran, leaving the others behind in a state of shock. However, the glow remained making her clench her hands into tight fists. But it only made the pain worse as her nails dug in.

How on Mother Earth’s green earth was she going to explain this? Saphira hated herself - no-one should be able to cause such things to happen.

On entry to her room, she locked the door and let out a cry of pain - her hands were red, raw, and felt like they were burning but no blistering was occurring. Her eyes filled with tears but they did not fall - an ability she had mastered long ago.

She fell to the floor with her legs bent upward, and was taken out of her painful reverie as loud meowing and desperate clawing came from behind the door. Using the door to help her stand - she pulled down her sleeves to cover her inflamed hands and turned the handle. On opening the door, a copper-orange cat with ocean-blue eyes, and soft fluffy fur, charged in - it was Beryl.

Beryl stopped a foot away and stared toward her, but her eyes weren’t on Saphira’s face, but on her hands. Did Beryl know what was wrong? If she did, it was another thing Saphira couldn’t explain for even Beryl was weird, she did not act like a typical (once stray) cat. Beryl was the only friend Saphira had.

“Quit staring at me. I’m not exactly in a cheerful mood right now.” Saphira grimaced when the fabric moved away from her hands. “I better deal with this before anyone notices. I’ve already created another mess.”

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Beryl tipped her head to the side as her eyes narrowed in confusion. Saphira was trembling as she tried to hide the amount of pain she was truly feeling, which was a habit she had honed over the years. But why had her hands suffered again? They only suffered whenever Saphira’s gift presented itself. And why was she in such an unsettled mood? The answers, she knew, Saphira wouldn’t say aloud, and why would she? She was a cat, but she could guess - Owen had hurt Saphira in some way.

Beryl watched Saphira open the door and check every direction that led to her room. The hallways were silent and Saphira left - she followed suit a few moments later.

Saphira’s life was full of questions. And no answers were ever provided. She was determined to find them because, in her heart, she knew she didn’t belong in the world she lived in. If the books beheld any truth at all, there was a world where she did belong. This was a world Saphira desperately wanted to find. She could then leave this life behind.

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Owen and his cronies still stood staring at the rose bush that was glistening like crystal in the sun. Owen approached and touched a rose - it was frozen solid. Each flower looked as if someone had coated them in glass. He grimaced and Peter and Michael noticed blood running down Owen’s hand - a thorn had pricked him.

“What the hell is that freak?” Owen said.

No-one answered for they felt the anger emitting from Owen which worsened with each drop of blood.

“Owen, I doubt even she knows,” Peter said.

Owen snarled and his hands curled into tight fists as the rose bush began to instantly thaw, leaving no evidence of what had happened. Saphira had always been weird but this? This is only heard of in the books she always read.

“Owen, we better go, we’re being watched,” Peter said.

“So what? That freak did something when we hurt her.”

“Owen, we know, but no-one would believe us if we told anyone regardless of how weird she is,” Michael said.

“Who said anything about telling anyone? You absolute imbecile.”

“Don’t call me an imbecile, Owen. What I said is true.”

Owen grasped Michael’s neck and squeezed making him splutter. Owen’s hand tightened, causing Michael’s windpipe to narrow, and his face redden. Owen’s eyes were full of rage, and he was grinding his teeth.

“Owen.”

“What?” Owen said, through gritted teeth.

“Let the idiot go before anyone sees.”

Owen growled as he let go of Michael’s neck causing him to fall to the ground, coughing and shaking like a leaf. Owen looked at him, disgusted as Michael’s face slowly returned to its natural tan.

Michael cried out when he felt Owen’s foot slam into his stomach - he curled up as pain struck every nerve. Michael should have kept his mouth shut.

“Don’t you ever speak to me like that again!”

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Peter put his hands into his pockets while he was watching Michael suffer. He knew how dangerous Owen was, and after what Saphira did, Peter knew Owen was silently conjuring up plans to ambush Saphira once again. Unlike Michael, Peter kept his thoughts to himself. Everyone knew Michael wasn’t exactly known to think before he spoke.

“Come on, I’ve got better things to do than watch you whimpering like a dog,” Owen said.

Owen spat on the ground near Michael before turning to march toward the gym, where he would take the rest of his anger out on a tatty punching bag.

Peter followed, knowing better than to leave Michael where he lay - he would eventually join them in the gym, regardless of what Owen did.

# Chapter 2

Night Wander

Saphira slowly pushed open the door leading into the bathroom - she peeked through the gap to check if it was empty. The room was silent, apart from the extraction fan that sounded like heavy breathing - she always found it creepy. Beryl followed and continued to stare at Saphira’s hands.

Saphira turned the tap on, and filled the sink, allowing it to half fill. The sound of running water was calming, for it reminded her of flowing streams as the water travelled through and over rocks and boulders, creating eddies. She took a few breaths to prepare herself. The moment she submerged her hands in the cold water she grimaced and pressed her lips tightly together as an ocean of profanity went through her mind. Doing this caused pain to shoot through every nerve. But it was the only way she knew to return the skin to its natural colour.

Saphira watched her skin return to normal as the (once cold) water sent steam into the air. Whatever caused her gift to cause such pain was another thing that went unexplained. She pulled the plug and heard a loud popping sound as she watched the water create a mini whirlpool as it drained. She peered at her palms, and no-one would know they were inflamed moments ago.

Saphira looked into the mirror above the sink - her cheeks and neck had red marks in the shape of Owen’s hands. But soon, she watched the marks gradually fade - miraculous healing was another obscurity. As she looked down at her feet, she noticed Beryl’s eyes were shimmering as her worry worsened.

“Beryl, what on earth am I? No-one should be able to do what I just did. What am I doing? You’re not going to give me the answers I need! You’re just a cat.”

Saphira watched Beryl lower her head - she almost looked guilty. Saphira frowned and huffed as she turned and left. Withdrawal was how Saphira coped with the abuse and physical torment she endured whilst in the orphanage.

Saphira’s life had never been, that many would deem, “normal”. It had always had some form of obscurity, and “magic” was the root of it. From the age of five, there was always something odd occurring, especially when she was threatened or hurt.

But things got worse when Owen and his companions arrived at the orphanage. However, no-one witnessed their arrival - they just seemed to appear. But Isabella wasn’t at liberty to reveal that knowledge to the other children, anyway.

But since that day, Saphira and her gift became a bigger target than it previously was. Each ambush caused her to lose control, and over time, the pain it caused also worsened. But it never left physical scars - the bruises just seemed to vanish within a few minutes. Still, she pretended to hide them to keep others asking questions.

The silence of her room was jarring as she sat at her desk - staring into space with a black biro pen in hand as a diary lay open with a blank page staring back, Saphira found herself unable to write. Her mind drew a blank regardless if it were still racing after being ambushed…again. A long and stressed sigh escaped her - slowly, she began to write.

*Date: 15/05/2016*

*Well, Diary, what can I write that I haven’t written before? Owen and his companions - if anyone could them that, he bullies them as well as everyone in this place, ambushed me again. They hurt me, of course, but this time I saw something in Owen’s eyes. It was more than malice, it was a darkness I’ve never seen before. It was also cold.*

*Maybe I cause the bullying somehow. Maybe they sense something caused by my gift, which, frankly, is more of a curse. But hey, my life is full of questions that will, most likely, never be answered, regardless of how much I want them to be. Sometimes, I just want to leave and find whatever answers there are, even if they land me in trouble.*

*Well, Diary, I may as well conclude this entry and return to my dire life where I have to isolate myself. People in this place simply seem unable to accept me as I am, weirdness and all.*

Night had fallen, the moon was full, the stars were glittering, and the breeze was still warm. The silence was calming as she walked. The soft grass where the wildflowers grew created a carpet that was full of life as the moonlight shone. After the day Saphira had had, she needed to find some sense of calm.

Saphira heard a clock chime in the distance. It was eleven o’clock, and no-one was around. She walked toward the statue. The strange thing was no-one knew when or by whom it was commissioned.

Mirrin was far stronger and able to control the gifts she had, unlike Saphira. Mirrin’s story was full of struggle, ridicule, and love. The first two were what Saphira truly understood, for they were her life in a nutshell. As for love? That was non-existent. No-one had ever shown her an ounce of whatever constituted love. She was a toy her peers liked playing with, only to purposely cause damage. And Saphira was damaged. In her opinion, nothing could ever fix her.

The statue was opaque in the moonlight. The breeze seemed to emphasise the way Mirrin’s long hair and dress fluttered in the wind, even though they were stationary. She touched the cold marble, trying to imagine what Mirrin would have done to protect herself if ambushed, the difference was, Mirrin, was brave. Saphira had been a coward, and in her state of fear, she lost what little control she’d had.

Saphira sighed in defeat as she wrapped her arms around herself. Slowly she sat down on a patch of grass full of clover, daisies, and buttercups and peered toward the sky. The idea of falling asleep where she sat was hard to resist. Her bed may be soft, but it creaked every time she moved, and she was known to toss and turn. And her nightmares were to blame.

Saphira snapped out of her thoughts when she heard something move nearby. She stood and peered toward the nearby bushes - the leaves swayed as though something had brushed against them. Against all instinct to head back inside, she walked toward the bush.

“Hello?”

No-one answered. Saphira tried to focus on the bush but only the moon provided a minimal amount of light. Suddenly, she heard a swooshing sound coming from behind the bush. She watched the leaves rapidly sway as though a gust of wind had blown.

“Is someone there?” Still no answer.

Saphira was beginning to feel foolish - no-one was there. It had to be a bird or some type of rodent.

“Now I’m seeing things. Great.”

Saphira tutted at her stupidity as she walked back to the statue where she would sit and absorb the warm breeze and silence. Nights like this gave her a chance to truly relax without anyone staring, cursing, or bullying her. She didn’t favour the loneliness, but the peace was blissful.

Saphira closed her eyes and allowed herself to breathe steadily and her limbs to relax. However, against all common sense, she fell asleep.

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The bush swayed again, and the branches parted as though hands had separated them. Soon the grass formed indents that travelled to where a girl named Saphira, slept.

The sound of steady breathing could be heard through the silence of the night. She looked angelic, as the moonlight touched her pale skin. The breeze caused her hair and clothes to flutter. She looked completely calm as she slept - which was rare, as nightmares usually plagued her.

Two large indentations formed beside her, as though someone was kneeling. Her beauty was breathtaking, yet she suffered abuse from others around her. Still, her voice was gentle and virtuous, yet unsure and rarely heard by others. She lived a life full of sadness and loneliness and didn’t deserve to be treated with animosity.

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Saphira suddenly snapped awake - something had touched her cheek. It may have just been for a moment, but it felt affectionate and caring. Saphira touched her cheek in confusion - what (or even who) had touched her? Saphira jumped as she heard the swooshing sound again. Something was telling her that she hadn’t been alone in the garden. But whatever or whoever it was, couldn’t be seen. Once again questions formed only to be added to the mountain of unanswered questions within her mind.

Saphira stood, and looked around but saw absolutely nothing. She swiftly began to walk back to the orphanage, where she would lay in bed restless as her mind tried to formulate any sort of answer - even if the answer was ridiculous.

Saphira entered the building and had one last look around before a confused frown appeared on her face. The moment the door closed, the two indents that were present near the statue vanished.

# Chapter 3

The McGeowns

Isabella left her office and entered the waiting room, where two couples were sitting looking nervous, and one woman looked rather depressed. The woman’s face was ashen, and her eyes glistened with unshed tears. Her partner was holding her trembling hands. She clearly didn’t want him to let go. Her hands held his so firmly, they had turned pale pink from the pressure. After all the years of dealing with couples, Isabella knew the woman was unable to have children of her own. She noticed the other couple seemed excited, and that was always good to see.

“Mr and Mrs McGeown, you can come in now.”

They followed Isabella into her office where they sat down on chairs better suited in a posh household, not an orphanage which carried the stigma of being depressing and institutional.

She peered toward the couple and noticed the woman was fidgeting with her wedding ring, twisting it around her finger as she tried to hide her worry and apprehension. The man, however, was difficult to read, for it was clear he was struggling to decide on which emotion to allow to show.

Misgivings soon formed - the children in her care feared rejection, and couples who showed such behaviour tended to send back the child after a few weeks. Stress was part of adoption, especially with the older children entering or in puberty.

Misgivings or not, she desired adoption for every child, for it enabled her to bring more into her care. But she knew she could not be over-protective and reluctant due to first impressions. But she could not stop the suspicions growing within her mind.

“My name is Isabella Crowe. Now, I see from the file your names are Alice and William McGeown.”

Alice noticed a swift glance in her direction - the expression on Isabella’s face was questioning. Was she giving Isabella reasons for not accepting their application by allowing her anxiety and overwhelming sense of feeling out-of-place to show?

“Ms Crowe, I know I seem a little out of sorts, but I am trying to relax,” Alice said.

Her voice slightly trembled nervously - even to her she sounded like a broken record. Alice frowned inwardly, now feeling stupid - it caused a swift tightening of her lips.

“Mrs McGeown, this room may look foreboding, but I assure you, you can be yourself.”

“Of course.”

Isabella noticed that the fidgeting with her ring stopped, but her discomfort only reduced slightly. Her suspicions about their ability to cope with the challenges adoption can have, were being strengthened.

“Mrs McGeown, may I ask if your discomfort is due to having reservations about adoption?”

“Oh no, it’s just... I still don’t know what to expect.”

“Alice, we spoke about this. Relax,” William said.

Isabella watched him rub Alice’s hands with his thumbs - the tension in Alice’s shoulders slowly diffused. Maybe William was naturally reserved and Isabella saw nothing wrong with it, but in this situation, it didn’t help with clarity. Maybe it was time to be blunt.

“Mrs McGeown, it’s my understanding that you wish to adopt, but whoever you adopt will pose challenges, especially with older children. Have you considered such challenges?”

“Of course, and the age of the child isn’t an issue.”

“Then what is?”

“I always thought I would bear my own, but I have accepted the fact I won’t. We both know adopting a child will massively change our lives. William and I aren’t naive, we know it’ll be hard work.”

“Mrs McGeown, your lives won’t just change, they’ll be impacted in ways you didn’t expect.”

“Ms Crowe...” William began.

“Call me Isabella.”

“Okay, Isabella. We are very willing to adopt, even if it means we must be extremely patient and overcome whatever challenge presents itself. But we have thought about and discussed those facts in depth for over a year.”

Isabella began to see desperation and had reservations, so she went straight to the point.

“Mr McGeown, many couples adopt a child and after a while, the child is returned due to stress and, quite frankly, misunderstanding. If you really wish to adopt a child you must not do this.” Her brow crinkled, her lips tightened, and her eyes slightly narrowed.

They watched a stern expression appear on Isabella’s face, and it was unnerving. Alice nervously shifted in her seat, whereas William sat up straighter.

“We would never do that! It would be cruel, and we would never forgive ourselves. We want to give a child a happy home and cherish them,” William said.

Isabella watched his face contort into an annoyed glance. Maybe she needed to rein in her blunt statements, for clearly, the couple was offended.

“If you are absolutely sure, I think I ought to collect the forms.”

She stood and walked toward the large brown filing cabinet that looked out of place in such a posh-looking room. Alice watched as Isabella flicked through multiple drawers and folders – feeling nervous but excited. William noticed his wife’s shaking hands and gave them an affectionate squeeze, which she returned with a nervous smile.

Isabella went back to her desk holding what looked like a book's worth of forms, which made them slightly squirm with apprehension. It would, undoubtedly, take over an hour to complete them all.

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Alice noticed a thick, tatty book on Isabella’s desk. It was black with a grey spine and the punch holes, once metallic, were now scratched. The label on the front read “Files and Records” - along with a smaller label stating the orphanage’s address, registry number, and the position Isabella held.

 It was almost bursting with pages and dividers of varying colours - all had faded handwritten notes on the labels. The pages appeared bent at the edges, and the paper had lost its fresh white appearance. It also had a musty smell.

 Alice pointed toward the book. “Isabella, is that a book involving the children?”

“Yes, it has their name, a present photograph, a short list of what issues they may have, if any, and there are notes on their nature and hobbies.”

“May I see it?”

“Of course, but please look at each one carefully.”

She gently grasped the book. “I will.”

On touching her hands, the book was firmer than expected and its appearance was clearer, even the musty smell was stronger. How old was the book, Alice wondered.

Alice opened the book and began to read. Time seemed to stop for she was constantly bombarded by children. Their faces, natures, and hobbies were all she saw. The room disappeared, and she was alone with nothing but a large chair and a thick book on her lap.

Alice was about to turn the page when she noticed a young girl’s face staring up at her. She unknowingly smiled - the girl was goth like she had been when she was young.

The girl’s name was Saphira and most of her hobbies included mythology, art, and music. She had become so engrossed that she had failed to hear William or Isabella speaking to her.

“Alice?” William said as he touched her hand.

“What?” Alice jumped when she felt his touch.

“Isabella wants to know if the sex of the child is an issue.”

“William, I want to meet this girl, her name is Saphira.” Alice showed William the photograph - Isabella hid a smile by looking at the forms in front of her.

“Are you sure?” William said confused as he read the paragraph beneath the photograph.

“I know there are odd things listed, but we were both odd when we were young.”

“I know we were, darling, but how could anyone be found surrounded by a large gathering of cats in the middle of the night?”

“Saphira is indeed an odd child and things do happen around her but please don’t be alarmed. Saphira’s gentle, shy, and she doesn’t have one nasty bone in her. She’s far too forgiving for she harbours no grudges, not even when people pick on her.”

“They laugh at her clothing, don’t they?”

“Yes, they do. She dresses in what she likes.”

“Sounds like how we were.” A cheeky smirk appeared on his face, almost hinting at his childhood fashion that was acquired taste for many.

“Isabella, does Saphira harbour any secrets?” Alice said.

Isabella began to notice that Alice was not easily fooled - she knew there was something odd about Saphira.

“Saphira does harbour secrets just like any child, but trust me, what secrets Saphira has are ones nobody would believe, not even the ones who claim to be open-minded.”

“What aren’t you telling us?” Alice said with a suspicious expression spreading across her face.

“If I told you, you would laugh and call the mental asylum,” Isabella said with a small chuckle for it were true for no-one, in their right mind, would believe her.

“Why would I do that?” Alice said curious.

“Saphira has a past that many wouldn’t believe. I didn’t until I bore witness to her mother, Rose, displaying it.”

“Displaying what?” Alice said.

Isabella stared trying to decide whether to reveal what she knew or not. She knew her expression must be betraying her thoughts.

“Isabella, what did her mother display?” Alice said, none to gently.

“…magic…”

“Excuse me?” William said confused.

“I told you that you wouldn’t believe me,” Isabella said with a small (and nervous) chuckle.

“William…I believe her…”

“But it’s stuff of myth.”

“William, you’re forgetting our beliefs. We’re Wiccan and worship Goddess Solas and Mactire. We both know what they are capable of.”

“But actual magic?”

“Yes, William, magic. Now, I know you, and regardless of that shocked expression on your face, you know we would accept Saphira regardless.”

Isabella stared at her, and the expression on Alice’s face was one of complete seriousness and firm belief. Even she found it rather shocking, for William clearly felt the same and he was married to her.

“I urge you to keep it to yourselves. The poor girl fears rejection far more than the other children.”

“May I ask if you know why her mother left Saphira here?” Alice said.

“That’s another unbelievable story, but I saw how terrified Rose was. Her entire body was quivering as she held Saphira, and she looked so tired and weak, so I took them in.”

“Why did Rose leave her in your care?” Alice said.

“Do you know of a person named Petra?”

“Of course. It’s a well-known story amongst wiccans.”

“Well, according to Rose, that woman wants Saphira, but Rose never revealed the entire story. But from what she did reveal, I don’t blame her. If you know about Petra, that means you know of her son, too.”

“We know the story involving them. But why would they want an innocent baby?” Alice said.

“That part Rose never revealed, but she did say Saphira was intertwined with those two for reasons she also didn’t reveal. So you see, Saphira’s past is shrouded in myth.”

“Well, regardless, I would still accept Saphira for who she is, not what she is.”

“If you still wish to adopt her you have to adopt her cat, Beryl, that cat has been with her for years. The pair is inseparable. I gave up trying to shoo her off the bed years ago, the animal is strange, too.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Alice chuckled.

“I know, it’s a bit cliché, I suppose.”

“Can we meet her?” Alice said.

“Of course, she is probably sitting at the statue of ‘Mirrin’ ...”

“The Windblower? I know the story. I assume it fascinates her?” Alice said.

“It always has. Saphira loves all mythical stories, regardless of how terrifying some are. But the story of ‘Mirrin the Windblower’ is her favourite. The statue of ‘Mirrin’, where she sits, was already here, although I don’t know who commissioned it. She sits there every day with Beryl, watching the others play in the garden.”

“She doesn’t have any friends, does she?” Alice said.

“No, it’s just Beryl. Now, should I call in Maia to collect Saphira?”

“Yes, we would like to meet her. Her cat too, undoubtedly, she’ll be with her,” William said.

“Undoubtedly,” Isabella agreed smirking - she picked up the phone and asked Maia to collect Saphira (and Beryl) from the garden.

# Chapter 4

Another Meeting

As Saphira entered the room, she noticed Isabella was not alone. There was a couple sitting on the posh chairs looking out-of-place in their casual clothing.

*Great, another rejection.*

“Saphira, this is William and Alice McGeown. They wish to meet you.”

“Hello,” Saphira said automatically - the word had become ingrained within her memory after constant use.

“Hello, Saphira and Beryl,” Alice said.

Beryl narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Isabella began to see the fear in Saphira’s eyes. “We have much to discuss today.”

Saphira sat on the soft sofa where she always sat awaiting the hour of judgement and ridiculous nitpicking. The hour always dragged as though determined to see her squirm. What had she done to deserve all this rejection? It must be the strange aura she carried wherever she went.

The sofa was a reminder, and she despised it, for it had become a can of worms containing years of her pain, fear, anger, and loneliness just binding time to violently burst.

Beryl was her only source of friendship and someone to talk to, even if Saphira knew she was basically talking to herself.

“Now I know what you are thinking, but you will listen to everything I, and the McGeowns, have to say before your mind wanders.”

“Yes, Ms Crowe.” Secretly her mind had already wandered.

“I see you like gothic clothing. William and I were the same at your age,” Alice said - her voice was gentle and warm. “We live in Killarney, near Lough Leane, it’s a beautiful area. Very peaceful.”

“We got hand-fasted there,” William said - a slight look of confusion showed on Saphira’s face.

“Oh, I thought most people got married in a church.”

“Most do but we are Wiccan. We grew up together in the same town. In fact, we met at a moot with our parents, we were both ten,” William said.

“That sounds wonderful. Have you heard the story about ‘Mirrin the Windblower’? It’s one of my favourite stories from the books I have.”

“That story tends to be told at moots, especially during celebrations. Where the moots occur is usually in forestry or on beaches with bonfires and enough food to feed a small army,” Alice said.

“I feel comfortable whenever I am in nature, especially in forests, it has never judged me but here, I’m an oddity. Isabella, you know it’s true.”

“I know and I’m sorry, but we both know you prefer to be on your own with Beryl.”

“Don’t worry, if we are to become your family, she will, too,” William said. “I saw the look she gave me. I think she believes I’m odd, and she’s right. My wife and I understand how you feel. We were both considered odd, and everyone who attended the moots was, and some still are.”

“Saphira, you have suffered greatly. You have carried the burden of rejection on your shoulders for years. But believe me, being odd is something to welcome and cherish,” Alice said.

Against Saphira’s wishes, a tear fell down her face causing Beryl to meow in a comforting manner. She placed her paw on Saphira’s face wiping the tear away. It felt cold as it fell but, strangely, it stung for it was another rotten reminder of how weird she was. Saphira recoiled at the weakness she was showing for it was something she tried to hide. But here she was, in a room with two complete strangers, basically bubbling like the baby her peers called her when they witnessed tears she failed to hide.

“She truly is protective of you.” The scene saddened William. “Don’t cry another tear, we know, sweetheart.”

Saphira looked up sharply - how had they guessed? Did they read that stupid book Isabella kept? Were they simply told? However, they found out, it made her hands prickle as anger caused her to slightly lose control - luckily, her hands were hidden by Beryl’s fur.

A scowl appeared on Saphira’s face for a split moment, and it was something Isabella rarely saw. “Know what?”

“Saphira, Alice knew there was something different about you, so I had to tell them,” Isabella said. “And regardless, they wanted to meet you.”

“Why? I’m not normal.”

“Saphira, we have been in this room for an hour and Alice and William are still here. Stop it, Beryl, your glaring is unwarranted.”

“Isabella, Beryl is right to glare at us, we are complete strangers,” Alice said gently.

“Beryl doesn’t trust anyone. I can’t say I blame her, but in this case, it is not needed.”

“Beryl, you can stop glaring,” Saphira said, stroking Beryl’s head. “I think we should talk to them.”

“Saphira, what do you truly want?” Alice said.

“I just want to be myself without fear of ridicule, judgement, and rejection. I can’t do that when I am stuck in this place.”

“Saphira, do you want to leave?” Isabella asked - she knew it was pointless asking.

“I just want out of here, and if that means I’ll have to be adopted by William and Alice, then yes, I want to leave.” Beryl once again stroked Saphira’s cheek with her paw.

“Well, let’s begin the adoption process, then we can arrange checks, interviews, and home visits. Saphira, you may return to the garden, if you wish.”

# Chapter 5

Unexplained

Saphira stood at the front doors trying to take steady breaths to calm her nerves. Meeting another couple after seventeen years of being rejected was making her head hurt. Add the fact that the couple knew she was able to cast magic - a brass band swiftly began to play inside her head.

Her mind was replaying the meeting on fast forward, so the images of that memory were blurred. Was she finally going to be adopted, or was it one of her dreams that made no sense? Her life was hard enough without suffering dreams involving magic.

Saphira looked at Beryl and saw the same expression - guilt. Saphira frowned, adjusted her satchel and walked toward the statue. The grounds were busy, so she expected a few stares and whispered taunts, but she didn’t expect multiple glares. Something was telling her a few had walked by Isabella’s office.

*Just perfect, eavesdroppers anyone? My head hurts enough, thank you very much.*

Saphira reached the statue and took out her tatty copy of the myths she favoured, and began to read. Her mind only saw the world the stories created - much better than the one she lived in. Reading was Saphira’s method of coping with being different. In a way, it gave her some level of understanding of what she was able to do.

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Owen stood on the top stair of the orphanage steps watching, while Saphira buried her nose in a book. She was always doing that. Owen found it pathetic, but she was pathetic anyway. The cat was at her side, as always. He found that animal incredibly annoying, due to the fact it somehow managed to reduce Saphira’s weird aura. Did that cat absorb it, or did it simply disguise it?

Peter and Michael appeared at his side, and their eyes immediately followed his - annoyed sneers appeared on their faces. Owen felt (and shared) their disgust. Saphira was oblivious to their attention, which was strange because her cat usually alerted her. She was just a cat, but the way she was with Saphira, her behaviour was akin to a guard dog.

Owen tutted and chewed his tongue as he noticed Maia was making her rounds along with the janitor. Along with Isabella, Maia was another person who seemed to be “pro-Saphira”, and it just riled him. Saphira was a freak, and she made everyone feel uncomfortable and angry - most couldn’t explain it, either.

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Peter watched Owen becoming irate and saw his hands curl into tight fists, causing his skin to pale. Peter glanced at Michael, and he swiftly noticed Owen beginning to shake as adrenalin started flowing through his veins. Their eyes dashed between Owen and Saphira like a perverse version of tennis, the ball on neither side of their court but stuck somewhere in the net.

They watched Owen begin to approach Saphira, so they followed suit, not knowing what Owen was planning to do. He seemed enraged by Saphira’s oblivious behaviour. Peter had a swift glance toward Owen’s face - his eyes were glazed over, his hands were still curled into fists, and his face was contorted into a glare.

Saphira was three meters away when Maia appeared, and she saw them approaching. Peter grasped Owen’s wrist, forcing him to stop. The glare on Owen’s face was now a snarl. Peter didn’t let go of Owen as he shook his head in Maia’s direction. Like a child, Owen huffed, turned, and walked away - his swagger defiant and angry. Peter and Michael knew where he was headed - the gym.

Maia was staring but soon turned as she watched Owen leave. Peter saw her peer toward Saphira, then to him and Michael with a frown on her face. Peter whispered to Michael as they left, heading to the common room. Owen would join them, and soon enough, they would have to listen to his plans to take Saphira by surprise. Hopefully, the cat wouldn’t be there to stop him.

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Saphira finished reading as the breeze made her hair flutter across her face, obscuring her eyesight. The sun was still high, the sky was still cloudless, and Beryl awoke when Saphira closed the book. Beryl looked drowsy, but the breeze soon made her remember where she was.

Saphira moved her hair away from her face as she stood - more couples were entering the orphanage as she headed toward the annex where the art studio was. The story she read had inspired her to paint for the first time in weeks.

The annex was near, and from where Saphira stood, it appeared empty, but a hallway connected it to the main building so anyone could walk in. Saphira pushed the door open - it creaked regardless of the janitor’s constant attention.

The door leading into the room was locked - confusion appeared on Saphira’s face because it was never locked. Beryl looked up and saw her expression as Saphira tried the handle again.

“Why is it locked?”

After another attempt, Saphira gave up and returned to the garden. On her way back, she heard the annex door open making her swiftly turn. Worry and fear filled her veins when she saw the person who liked to bully her.

“Owen…”

“What’s wrong? Aren’t you pleased to see me?”

“What do you want?”

“You know what I want, Saphira.” A sly smirk appeared on his face making his light-blue eyes shimmer with malice.

Beryl began to growl as her ears went back, and her fur stood up - Owen watched her go and stand in front of Saphira.

“Seriously? Does your cat think she can protect you? I think not.”

Owen began to approach as Saphira took a few steps back - Beryl was now hissing, but no-one could hear it from this far away. Fear made Saphira tremble, her skin crawl, her eyes widen, and her pupils dilate. Owen laughed - it was deep and sinister.

“Leave me alone.”

“I think not.” Owen laughed harder.

Saphira’s breathing was swift and deep as she tried to step back - every breath almost hurt. But Owen just kept walking, slyly smirking all the while. Once again, the darkness filled his eyes. It was something completely new and caused her blood to run cold.

Beryl charged and began to bite any part of his body within her reach. Owen easily pulled her off and threw her into the tree. Beryl screeched and went limp as she hit the ground. Saphira could see that she was still breathing.

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Owen chuckled at his success in getting rid of Saphira’s pathetic “guard dog”. He grabbed Saphira by her arms and pushed her roughly against the wall, making pain shoot up her spine. Owen laughed when he heard her gasp in pain.

He could feel Saphira shaking, her eyes filling with tears, but she did not let them fall. He knew she refused to show him any weakness, which made him smirk slyly.

“Finally, I’ve got you to myself.”

Owen moved her head to the side, making her face where the statue stood a few feet away. He knew she would know it was to rub her face in it, for he knew she aspired to be like her heroine - brave and strong. Owen watched her close her eyes firmly as her arms shook. Owen slapped her, causing her cheek to redden and her to gasp and cry.

“Open your eyes, freak.”

She did not listen, which made him snarl as he struck her other cheek. Owen roughly turned her head back to the statue. Rage filled him as he squeezed her cheeks causing his nails to slightly dig into her soft skin.

Blood droplets appeared at each tip as he felt him losing control. The whimper of pain he heard coming from her both delighted and scared him. He couldn’t lose control, but Saphira’s aura was filtering through her cheeks and into his hand - he gritted his teeth. However, it only caused him to release, only to shove her back against the wall. The blood droplets fell like tears down her pale skin - it looked sinister.

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Saphira whimpered as she felt Owen’s nails dig in. It wasn’t long until she felt wetness on her cheeks, and she wasn’t crying. She could smell iron and knew she was bleeding - did Owen hate her that much?

Saphira felt her arms being freed and heard Owen gasp in pain. She opened her eyes. Owen was on the ground groaning. Saphira watched something drag him away as though an invisible hand had grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. Had she done that? Saphira looked at her hands and noticed they weren’t irritated - it wasn’t her. She looked toward Beryl, and she was still unconscious. What had dragged Owen away? Something had been watching, but who? Was that person anything like her? Considering what she saw, and whomever the person was, they were gifted. Was it the same person that had touched her cheek?

Saphira forced herself to come out of her thoughts and go to Beryl, who awoke the moment Saphira lifted her. She looked in the direction Owen had been dragged - he was nowhere to be seen. Beryl watched a confused frown appear on Saphira’s face - what had happened after Owen knocked her unconscious?

Saphira was silent as they walked toward the main building. No-one even looked at the red marks and blood droplets on Saphira’s face, which were emphasised by her pale skin. No-one cared, no-one deemed her worthy of friendship, and absolutely no-one accepted her for who she was.

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The ground was dry and firm, but the smell of flowers and leaves was in the air. Owen groaned and touched the back of his head - his hand came away covered in blood. He sat up but regretted it soon after, for everything was spinning. He started coughing - each one hurt, and he realised his ribs must be (at least) bruised.

Owen tried hard to focus. His vision blurred and bent as if he were in a hall of mirrors. The sound of crunching reached him. He looked and noticed areas of grass were forming indents. They resembled footprints in the shape of a boot.

“Who is there? I can hear you walking.”

Owen got no answer, and the boot prints were where he sat. Owen groaned as he found himself in midair - he felt his neck being grasped. The pain increased as the hold got tighter.

“What do you want?” Owen spluttered.

“Leave that girl alone.”

“What girl?”

“The girl you just assaulted. She has done nothing to deserve the cruelty she suffers. Now, leave her alone.”

“Who are you to demand anything from me?”

Owen began to choke as the unknown person tightened their hold. Owen soon began to scream in pain - he heard sparks and felt his neck burning. Whoever the person was, they were clearly a freak like Saphira.

“I will not warn you again.”

Owen heard a swooshing sound as he fell to the ground. His neck was burning. He could feel blisters forming like bubbles in boiling water. Owen fell on all fours as he whimpered - he only now realised his face was sodden. He angrily growled at the person - and himself, for crying like a child.

Slowly, his sight cleared as Owen blinked repeatedly, and his head was still spinning. Owen forced himself to his feet, stumbling, as he did so. As he looked around, Owen noticed that he was in a clearing surrounded by oak, birch, and rowan trees. Owen had no clue where he was. He saw a path nearby and stumbled towards it. If anyone saw him, they would assume he was drunk.

Owen reached the path and noticed a sign nearby. He groaned with every step he took - he was in Glengariff Woods. Confusion swiftly mixed with the pain in his head and neck - he was over fifty miles from the orphanage. How on earth did he get here, and who had grabbed him? Considering Saphira was able to do freakish things - was there someone else like her at the orphanage? If there were, he had no idea why they hadn’t acted before this - it wasn’t the first time he had hurt Saphira. Plus, it was a man. Owen had a feeling the man knew Saphira - but before he was dragged away, she looked confused - Saphira had no idea who the man was.

Owen grimaced as his head began to smart again – thinking was making it worse. He touched his head and noticed it was bleeding. An ocean of profanity escaped his mouth. Whoever had done this to him was going to pay. However, before Owen could take another step, his head spun, his sight gradually went blurry, and he collapsed. On impact with the ground, his head hit a moss-covered rock, and he began to seize. Even in this state, he could hear rapid footsteps and someone shouting. The last thing he heard before his mind finally went black was, “Jenny, call an ambulance”.

Behind an oak tree, he watched Owen being hoisted onto a red stretcher as the doors of a vehicle with flashing blue lights opened. Owen was placed on a bed on wheels and secured. The couple who found Owen looked like hikers with bulging backpacks strapped to their bodies. The woman looked confused, as the man watched the doors close.

He knew Owen was injured, blood was soaking the back of his shirt, but it didn’t rouse any misgivings, pity, or guilt within him. Owen had gone too far this time, and he could no longer bear to watch the cruelty Owen inflicted on Saphira. But he could not forget the look on Saphira’s face as she watched Owen being dragged away by something she couldn’t see.

However, he couldn’t forget the expression that spread across her face when he touched her face. It was a moment of weakness on his part, but he needed to touch her, at least once, before he vanished again. Still, he could not allow her to know that her instincts were right - someone was in the garden with her. He was brought out of his thoughts when he heard the doors slam, and a horrendous alarm went off.

At the moment he vanished, the woman looked toward the oak tree in confusion - she had heard the swooshing sound but saw nothing.