

First Land Series

Book One: The Broken Doorway

PROLOGUE

“Cha d’dhuin doras nach d’fhosgail doras.”

No door ever closed, but another opened.

Gabriel, the oldest member and highest authority of the faerie race, looked out over Chead Talamh, the first land of the universe, and his heart ached with love and sadness. On one side of him, a brilliant blue sky met with miles of green grass and a sparkling ocean. On the other, ran a line of gray mountains with a maroon forest rimming the base like a thick beard. With brown hair rippling to his shoulders and black within black eyes, he stood watching his people busy about on the land. They were tall and thin, short and fat. Some with scales covering parts of their face or body, some partially covered in rock or bark with moss growing out of their hair. Some had red beards like the maroon trees rimming the mountains, some had large pointy ears sticking out like a fox. Others had smooth, light features with skin translucent, the way the moon shines on a pond at night. The sidhe race ranged in look and style from elegant and delicate like the unfolding of a new leaf, to rough and jagged like the rocky shore of an ocean, but they all shared a common purpose. To live in balance with themselves and their planet. His people knew the language of nature and animals. The language of the air and the rain. They knew how to talk to the vines and trees and ask them to grow and weave clothing. The sidhe could speak to the solas, magnificent birds as large as a bus with rich golden feathers and silvery eyes, that carried them from one point to another through the sky. They spoke to the aydars, lean cheetah-like creatures

that carried sidhe on their backs; their orange fur blurring over the grass they moved so quickly. His people lived wherever and however they felt most comfortable, in castles and homes, caves and the hollows of trees. And in the middle of it all, the Mor Halla. A great hall in the hollowed center of the gray mountain range that held the ten members of the council of Rye. The council was the judge and jury for the rules of balance in the land, and Gabriel was their leader.

The rules of balance in Chead Talamh rested on a principle that nothing could be taken or given for free and the sidhe had always followed these rules. But something was wrong. More and more sidhe had been coming to the Mor Halla seeking guidance from the council over issues of balance. They ranged from simple disagreements of daily life, to more complex issues such as the unfair trade of property or wealth. Sidhe were growing greedy and losing respect for the old ways.

Gabriel could see something was wrong and felt that the problem was that his people had been isolated for too long. They were cut off from the diversity of the universe and they needed new information and new influences. They needed new races to teach them things they didn't know. But when Gabriel tried to convince the council to let the sidhe search outside of themselves, and explore beyond the protection of their planet, they disagreed.

"Why would the oldest and wisest race of the universe seek to learn from those that came after them?" Argued Anseo, the 4th member on the council. He sat in his high-backed chair, bark creeping up one side of his face and his body wrapped in the tree roots that formed his hair and spilled down his back. "It is a waste of time. What could the younger races, born out of Chead Talamh, possibly teach us?"

“On the day of the opening, when the life of the universe was created from the matter of our planet and our people, we bore a responsibility to those creations.” answered Gabriel.

“Giving them life was enough. What more could they want?” replied Anseo.

“A sharing of life. A sharing of culture and information between us.”

“We know everything. All the universe has, everything it knows, came from the sidhe.”

“But things are not static.” Answered Gabriel. “Nothing stays the same forever, including Chead Talamh. Our planet and our people are changing. You must see it?”

“I see you are changing, Gabriel.” Anseo looked at him steadily.

“It is for the good of our people.” Gabriel pleaded, but they would not hear him.

Over time he watched as council members justified small acts of their own greed by taking more than their share of land and riches on the basis of title. He heard his people talking.

“If the council can upset the balance and take more than their share, then so can we.”

Gabriel could feel change in the air, and if he didn’t do something about it the sidhe would disrupt the balance between themselves and their planet, fighting each other until nothing was left.

Gabriel’s mind wandered to the dream he had the night before. He dreamt that he was a human girl sitting on a roof, looking out over a field toward the ocean where clouds stream in the wind. In the dream, he felt his heart beat wild and free. He felt full to bursting with life, magic and love. Love for everything and everyone around him.

He knew what he had to do. The dream had told him.

Gabriel took this day to travel to Chead Anam, a sacred place in their land which is said to hold the voice of the universe. He stared at the rocks jutting up and out of the earth like the teeth

of a yawning giant, and at their center was a green patch of grass upon which stood an ancient door covered with iron spirals.

It was the doorway between worlds, forbidden to be opened. The yawning rocks at Chead Anam spiraled and twisted before Gabriel, forming a crude face that told him he was there to break that law today. The face gave him the words of opening between worlds and the choice to use them or not.

He made his choice. He knew his people wouldn't understand. He knew he would risk his authority and respect, lose his place on the council and endanger his own life, but it had to be done. The doorway had to be opened, for himself, for the future of the sidhe, and for the human girl in his dreams. Gabriel stood before the door and spoke the words that only he had been given, his voice trembling with purpose and fear.

“Fen thar qui haijan, Nar Hadith Sabine. Qui Gia, qui Gia, qui Gia, mentate Ana. Oscail.”

CHAPTER ONE

CHARLIE'S BEGINNING

The sky was the heavy deep blue of late afternoon in Appleton, Maine, and twelve-year-old Charlie Arannia Chapel napped at the bottom of a hill behind her home. A light breeze teased the tender grass and the ends of her hair, as her chest rose and fell in peaceful rhythm with the world around. At the top of the hill, an old tractor sat perched and unused since the spring tilling. It's wheels were indented in the soft earth and cement blocks were wedged firmly against them for safety. Nothing stirred when spider leg- thin fingers wrapped around one of the edges of the cement blocks and with tremendous strength, started pushing it away from the wheel. Charlie's breath rose and fell without interruption, as the fingers dislodged one cement block and then the other, until all four had been removed. The fingers wrapped around the back of the tractor and rocked it back and forth, back and forth out of the the soft indentations that held it. Charlie continued to nap. She dreams.

Charlie plays in the grass behind her home. The sky sparkles above, spilling out over the cliffs until it blends with the ocean in the distance. The breeze and the grass tickle her bare legs as she crouches to peer at an orange ladybug crawling across a stick.

Her mother calls.

She sees her father sitting by the front door. He is reading. A lazy curl of pipe smoke drifts around his head.

Her mother calls again.

Charlie looks past the woodpile toward the flowerbeds that border the cliffs. Her mother's hand waves and she runs toward her. The earth squishes between her toes and the smell of flowers grows strong. She can see her mother sitting with a basket beside her. Her black hair is pulled back in a bun decorated with daisies and bluebells. Her mother's fingers pick through the stems, snipping off the most ripe and colorful blossoms to make into bouquets they sell by the side of the road.

Charlie can feel the salt spray on her lips as she nears the cliff edge, when a tiny giggle distracts her from getting to her mother. A creature peers out from beneath the undergrowth. It looks like a person, male or female Charlie couldn't tell. It has tiny hands and feet that cling to a grass blade and clothes that look like they've been made out of bark and moss. It is almost cute except for the eyes. They are solid and black like beetles. Charlie can't tear her gaze from those eyes.

Failte, it says in welcome.

She trips and the tiny person smiles, filling her with fear.

Her mother's voice rings out in anguish as Charlie falls over the cliff.

Water spray condenses on her skin like a thousand tongues tasting her before the last giant chomp into the mouth of the ocean below. The roar of the wind and water fill her ears. She screams.

There is a sudden tremble on the hillside where Charlie sleeps. The startled squeaks and chirps of disturbed animals are not enough to wake her. It isn't until her mother's voice calls to her from far away in her dreams that she stirs.

"Charlie, get up. GET UP NOW!" her mother's voice orders.

Charlie gasps waking and sits up in time to see a tractor wheel barreling down on her. She screams and scurries out of the way of the crushing machinery. The unmanned tractor bounces down the hill, veers to the left, and lands on its side in the mud. She's unharmed but the look on her father's face as he comes sprinting out of the house is one she hasn't seen in years.

Fear.

"Charlie! Are you alright?" John Chapel yells as he runs toward her. "Are you hurt?" he asks dropping down onto his knee's beside her and checking for any broken bones.

"Dad! It's alright. I'm fine. The tractor missed me completely."

He looked up at her with his normally neat brown hair fallen disheveled forward. A wave of relief washed over his face. "Thank Goodness!" He pulled her into a tight hug. "What were you thinking falling asleep alone out here like that?"

"I'm not a child. I'm almost thirteen." She pulled away from him and stood up, brushing the grass and dirt from her pants. "You can't keep an eye on me all the time."

"You're right." John sighed deeply, "It's just that after losing your mother, I can't lose you as well. You're all I have, Charlie." He looked up at her, his brown eyes brimming with tears.

"I'm sorry." She said, instantly feeling terrible for snapping at him.

"You don't have to apologize. You are growing into a fine young lady, and no amount of my worrying is going to stop that. What am I going to do when you grow up and want to leave here?"

"What are you talking about?" Charlie said sitting down next to him and throwing her arm over his shoulder. "This is my home. I'm not going anywhere."

They sat looking at their house tucked in a field full of flowers that surrounded it. It was the home where Charlie spent breezy summer days climbing trees, swimming and combing the beach for treasures. A home where she and her father would sit together in the evenings peacefully reading, telling stories or playing games. And despite today's near miss with the tractor, they were safe here. They had each other.

One last brilliant orange flash before the sun finished setting over the ocean past the cliffs, and Charlie and her father walked back to the house for dinner. Her father had thrown their leftovers from the week into a pot, added some spices and salt, and they sat down to a delicious bubbling stew.

"I was dreaming about mother before the tractor accident." Charlie spoke, squishing her bread into soft salty potatoes that dotted her stew. "She warned me that something bad was going to happen."

"That's impossible, Charlie."

"I know what you are going to say, but let me tell you about my dream."

"You've had dreams since your mother's accident."

"It was different this time. Will you just listen?"

John nodded patiently, and she started from the beginning. When she got to the part about the strange creature clinging to the grass blade, her father's face went white.

"What did you say it looked like again?"

"Tiny hands and feet, and clothes that looked like they had been made from things from the woods."

"The part about the eyes."

“Black like a beetles.”

Her father suddenly looked ill. He pushed his half finished bowl of stew away. “Can you clean up for me tonight? I’m tired. You can tell me the rest of your dream tomorrow.”

Charlie nodded as her father got up, kissed her on the head and headed straight for his bedroom. She cleaned up the dishes, then sat reading through a song book her mother gave her when she was a baby. She knew every song by heart and she leafed through it, humming the tunes while absentmindedly stroking the tattered corners of each page. Soon her eyelids grew heavy and Charlie turned off the lights, and headed to bed.

The next morning, her father was up waiting for her at the kitchen table.

“You’re up earlier than usual” Charlie mumbled, reaching for a cereal bowl.

“I need to speak with you about something.” His tone was tight and stern. Charlie slid into the chair opposite him noticing how tired and red his eyes looked.

“I’m sending you to a boarding school up the coast called the Porte Academy.”

“You’re sending me away?” Charlie’s spoon stopped midway toward her mouth.

“It’s a good school. They can take care of you there. The tractor was just one of many things that could happen. I was a fool to think I could keep my eyes on you all the time.”

“What about what you said yesterday? About worrying too much about me?”

“I changed my mind.”

“You can’t send me to boarding school.” Charlie replied defiantly. “You need me here. Who will help with the fall harvest if I’m gone?”

“Jamie can help me.”

“The next door neighbors’ son? But I’ve always helped you. You can’t just take me away from home and my friends.”

“I can’t keep you safe here anymore. My mind is made up. You leave on Monday.”

“Two days from now? You can’t do this!” she yelled, throwing her spoon onto the table. “It’s not fair. This is my home. This is where mother is!”

“Your mother is dead, Charlie. She was carried out to sea years ago and her body was never found. It’s time you accepted it.”

“Don’t say that! Don’t you ever say that! Mother would never send me away. Never!” She ran to her room. Her father called after her but she cut him off with the sharp slam of the door.

Charlie sat on the edge of her bed, shaking from anger and pain. How could her father do this to her? They had been through so much together since her mother’s accident. She was only five years old when it happened and a wave of horror washed over her as her father’s words brought fresh memories of that day into her mind.

She remembered her mother’s voice singing gently to wake her that morning eight years ago. Her singing was a clear bright sound mixing with the birds and the constant rush of the ocean at the base of the cliffs. Her mother’s black hair hung loose and soft around her face, framing her small and delicate features like a painting. Her eyes sparkled clear and bright, dancing blues and greens like waves cresting in the wind. Charlie remembered her smell. Fresh flowers and linen. Earth and salt, and something green, like when you split open the stem of a dandelion.

The next image she remembered from that day was her mother and father together in the kitchen. Charlie sat at the table eating, her feet swinging high above the floor boards and her small mouth hardly fitting around her spoon. She watched her mother chopping vegetables and

scooping them up into a pot, while her father pulled dried thyme and basil from a basket and crushed them together in his hands before sprinkling them in. Her mother took his hands and put them to her face to inhale the spice smell. She watched as her father swept her mother into his arms with a deep chuckle and buried his face into that wonderful black hair of hers and how her mother giggled and how, to Charlie, the whole room seemed to glow.

The next and last memory in Charlie's head of that fateful day was of a thick afternoon fog that had settled over everything. She remembered how her yellow dress was bright against the gray and she could see every tiny red flower and curling green vine embroidered along the hem. She had been standing on the porch when a shadow in the fog caught her attention. It was small and fast like an animal and it circled the house until it stopped in front of her in the fog. It had the shape of a person, but it was small like one of her dolls. The thing giggled and her heart jumped before the shape scurried off. A moment later, her father emerged from the fog and Charlie ran toward him throwing herself into his arms excitedly and telling him about the tiny thing she saw. But he looked strange. Tears stained streaks on his cheeks and down his neck. Her first thought had been that maybe the scary thing in the fog had done something to him. She'd covered his face with kisses, and rubbed her yellow dress on his hands and arms, hoping the sunny color would make him feel better. She hugged his neck and looked back into the fog. It had thinned enough for her to see her mother with her back turned toward them standing by the fence that bordered the cliffs.

"Mommy!" She'd yelled.

But her mother didn't turn around. A shaft of light, like the sun breaking through the clouds shone on her mother. It was brilliant and beautiful and her mother's blue dress and black hair

glowed. Then she was gone. Like the blink of an eye - one minute she was there, and the next not. Her father tightened his arms around her and walked her into the house. Charlie never saw her mother again.

A soft knock came from the other side of her bedroom door, startling her out of her memories.

“Charlie? Can I come in? Please. I don’t want you to be angry with me.” Her father said from the other side of the door.

She didn’t want him to see how upset she was, and quickly brushed the tears from her cheeks before walking over and letting him in. He tried to hug her, but she turned coldly away and sat back down on the bed. He took a seat in the rocking chair next to her. It was the rocking chair her mother used to use to lull her to sleep as a baby.

“You won’t understand until you have to take care of children of your own, that their safety and well being comes before everything.”

“You can’t just send me away. You taught me everything since mother’s accident. How to dress myself, how to brush my teeth on my own, how to do my homework, how to climb trees, how to swim, how to work the farm, how to make meals, and now you’re going to abandon me?”

“I would never abandon you. I just need help to keep you safe.”

“We don’t need help. We have each other. It’s what we’ve always had.” Charlie leaned over grabbing her father’s hands in her own.

“It’s not enough this time.”

“There’s something you’re not telling me. What is it?” Her father’s gaze faltered, and she leaned in. “Tell me.”

“This is not up for discussion.” John rose abruptly out of the rocking chair. “You want to be treated more like an adult? Part of that is growing up and having to do things you don’t like.”

“Fine. If that’s what you want.” She bristled.

“It’s not what I want, it’s just what has to be done.” John answered sternly before leaving.

Charlie wouldn’t leave her room for the next two days. Her father left trays of food outside the door that she would only eat after he had gone to bed. Finally, the day arrived for her departure to the Porte Academy.

“It’s time.” Her father rapped on the bedroom door. She stepped out wearing a dress with a pale blue bow tied in her hair. “You look like your mother.”

Good, she thought. Let him regret sending me away. She picked up her bags without saying a word, and marched out to the cab that stood waiting to take her.

“Take special care of her Unis.” Her father laid his hand on the shoulder of the portly cab driver. “Slan go foill. Mathair dhuit.”

“Go mbeanni. Mathair dhuit.” the cab driver responded.

Her father spoke in a language she'd never heard before. He poked his head into the back window as she sat with her arms crossed and a determined pout on her face.

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him goodbye and the mother bless him. I don’t expect you to understand any of this Charlie but trust me, your mother would have done the same. I will see you at Christmas. Goodbye, my dear daughter. I love you.”

She refused to look at him as he pulled himself from the window and tapped the glass. The cab moved forward over the bumpy dirt road, away from the only house she’d ever known.

Charlie turned and peeked through the back of the cab. The blue sky mixed with the ocean beyond the cliffs and she saw the bright fields of flowers and her beloved home tucked within all of it. Her father stood in the middle of the road, head down and shoulders shaking.

Was he crying? She thought to herself, just as the car lurched around the corner, taking her and the last images of her home with it.

CHAPTER 2

THE PORTE ACADEMY

It was blueberry season in Maine, and Charlie gazed out of the window of the cab at miles of low bushes heavy with ripening fruit. The berries' bluish- gray color rippled out like waves across the landscape, punctuated only by patches of pine trees and the occasional farm house. The cab sped along narrow, twisting roads going deeper into the Maine wilderness. The fields were soon replaced by dense dark forest and Charlie lost track of the last time she saw a home or farm. Sunlight punched through the pine canopy like millions of streaks of golden hair, cascading among the scrawny trunks of the trees. The pungent smell of pine sap trickled in through her window. It made Charlie think of simpler days, popping sap bubbles on the trunks and letting the mess run between her fingers until they stuck together. Layers of brown pine needles carpeted the ground with patches of bright green fern and moss everywhere. The cab driver stayed silent and so did she. Charlie wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone about anything right now. Soon the lazy winding roads lulled her into sleep. A few hours later, the cab driver spoke.

“Best to wake up, young lady, the academy is just ahead.”

Charlie peeked out, surprised to see how high up they were. Bald patches of granite jutted up through the forest which had thinned considerably. The road wound its way higher and higher up a mountain, passing small waterfalls cascading down the rock. Charlie gazed in wonder at the landscape below. She could see for miles; in one direction, the forest covered land of Maine, in

the other, the Atlantic Ocean. The cab lurched around the last bend, and Charlie caught her breath at the sight before her.

The Porte Academy stood at the very top of the mountain. A magnificent five story library with a peaked glass roof stood at the front of the campus. Behind it was a large, octagonal inner lawn bordered by ivy- coated brick classroom buildings. To the left were four greenhouses positioned out from each other like a giant glass flower. To the right, were Cape Cod style dormitories painted white with cheerful green shutters and slate blue roofing.

“You’ll be staying in those buildings.” The cab driver pointed to the dormitories, as he drove up the driveway of crushed pink granite leading to the school.

“Where are all the other students?” Charlie noticed only a few people dotting the campus.

“Move in for most isn’t until tomorrow.” He drove the cab down a narrow path to the dorms and stopped at the front entrance. “Let me help you with your luggage.”

“I don’t need any help.”

“As you wish” he replied, turning his cheerful round face to her. “This is a good place. You have nothing to fear here.”

“I’m not afraid.”

“Of course you aren’t. Slan go foill, Ms. Chapel.” The cab driver smiled at her before driving away.

Charlie turned to the dormitories listening to the crunching sound of the tires receding in the distance, then picked up her suitcases and went in. The dormitory looked like a fancy inn. There was a large common room thick with Persian rugs and comfortable looking couches and chairs. Floral patterned wallpaper and oil paintings dotted the walls. The common room split off into

several other smaller rooms for gathering. Each of them equally as cozy with chairs gathered around fireplaces or dotted amidst bookshelves.

“May I help you?”

A tall, thin woman, no older than thirty, with her hair pulled back in a tight bun, stared from a desk in the corner.

“Are you lost?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I’m a day early and I don’t know my room number.”

“You didn’t get your information packet in the mail?” The woman squinted at Charlie in annoyance.

“No. I didn’t get anything. My father just sent me here.” Her voice broke a little at the mention of her father.

“Ms. Chapel?”

“Yes. That’s me.” Charlie replied, relieved that she didn’t need to give anymore information.

“We’ve been expecting you.” The woman’s face changed from pinched annoyance to cheerful greeting. “My name is Guinevere Chin, the dormitory head. You’ll be in room 210.” She grabbed a set of keys from beneath the desk. “Let me show you.” Charlie followed her up maroon carpeted stairs and down a long, brightly lit hallway.

“Here we are.”

She opened a door labeled 210 and Charlie gazed in on the room that would be her home for the next year. The first thing she noticed was another bed tucked against the wall to the left. She was going to have a roommate?

“Great” Charlie mumbled. “Another thing to get used to.”

“Bed linens and towels are changed once a week. The bathrooms are down the hall to your left. If you need another blanket, speak up now. They go quickly once the rest of the students arrive.”

“I’m fine.” Charlie replied.

“Here’s your set of keys. One opens the front entrance, and the other is for your room.” She dropped the keys into Charlie’s hand. “I’ll let you get settled in. Dinner is served at 6pm in the cafeteria.” Ms. Chin closed the door, and went back down the hallway to her post.

Charlie put her suitcase on the bed and looked out the window. It was calm and quiet with the late afternoon sun shining on the neatly trimmed inner lawn. Manicured hedges lined the walkways that led to different buildings and impeccably managed rose gardens bordered the greenhouses. Having lived on a farm surrounded by the woods and the open sea, Charlie was used to a wilder and less controlled environment. She gazed out at the campus feeling like she had just landed on the moon. A renewed burst of anger toward her father coursed through her. What did he mean when he said he needed help taking care of her? It didn’t make any sense. He’d taken care of her since her mother’s accident. Why did he need help after all this time? Charlie let out a long sigh. It was a useless effort to even think about it. She was at the academy now and she wasn’t going to find the answers to her questions here.

Charlie had just enough time to unpack her things and get changed before dinner. The cafeteria was a giant, open dining room surrounded on three sides with windows. Round tables were scattered about and meals were served from a buffet style kitchen at the back. She helped herself to roasted chicken and mashed potatoes, skipping her vegetables and doubling up on dessert.

The only people in the cafeteria were teachers and faculty sitting together at the far right of the room. Charlie sat in the opposite corner, trying to make herself as invisible as possible. There were a few kind smiles and nods of heads her way, but to her relief, no one bothered her. After dinner, Charlie went back to her room stuffed and satisfied. All the emotion from the past few days left her feeling tired and as soon as she slipped into her pajamas and pulled the blanket to her chin, she was fast asleep.

"I heard your mother died." Charlie opened her eyes, and bouncing at the end of her bed was a girl with pigtails and bright blue eyes. "I'm your roommate. Rebecca Salt. How did it happen?"

"I don't want to talk about it." Charlie replied groggily.

"Sure," Rebecca answered with some disappointment. "It's just that I've never met an orphan before."

"I'm not an orphan. My father's still alive."

"Why aren't you with him?"

"I don't know."

"Doesn't he want you?"

"Of course he wants me!" Charlie yelled, losing her temper.

"Fine. You don't have to be rude about it. If we're going to be roommates, you'd better work on your attitude. Half of this room is mine and I'm not going anywhere." Rebecca glared back at her.

Charlie sat on the edge of her bed, staring at the nosy girl that would be her roommate for the next year. The fresh memories of her mother's accident, being sent away by her father, and now

Rebecca were all too much for her to handle. A sob escaped her, and she fled the room. Charlie ran down the hallway, her bare feet padding on the carpet. She rounded the corner toward the stairs and ran straight into an elderly man in a bright purple waistcoat.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?" he asked her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bump into you." Charlie stuttered, trying to stem the tide of tears that Rebecca let loose.

"You must not be going very far in your pajamas and bare feet." The man smiled at her. "Let me walk you back. It just so happens that I was going this way to speak to a student." Charlie frowned. The last thing she wanted to do was go back and face Rebecca. The man looked at her, his sparkling blue eyes dancing like sunshine on a lake. "My name is Professor Afadare." He extended his hand.

"Charlie" she said, shaking it.

They walked down the hall together back to her room. Rebecca looked surprised when she saw Charlie accompanied by the professor.

"Professor? What are you doing here?"

"Welcome back, Ms. Salt. I came to tell you that Mrs. Robbins is expecting you to report to the cafeteria."

"The cafeteria?"

"It's part of the required work-study program for students."

"The schedule didn't say anything about a work-study program."

"It's a new program this year. I'm afraid there are no exemptions."

"I can't work in a cafeteria." Rebecca answered in a snotty tone.

“Perhaps you’d prefer trash duty?” The professor asked. She blanched at this suggestion. “It’s settled then. You are expected to be at the cafeteria by 4pm for dinner preparation.” Rebecca let out a whine and stomped past them toward the bathrooms. Professor Afadare turned to Charlie, putting his hand on her shoulder. “I have a much more interesting job for you. Would you like to see?” Charlie nodded. “Good. Get dressed and meet me in ten minutes outside the dormitory.” He turned to walk down the hallway. “And don’t forget your shoes.” He called back cheerfully.

Charlie got ready and met the professor outside. The campus was bustling with returning students as he led her down the path, and to the library. Inside, the enormous glass ceiling let in light and a thousand rainbows. Hundreds of alphabetically arranged titles spiraled up and out of sight into the building’s other levels, more books than Charlie had seen in her entire life.

“Your work-study will be here.” Said the professor.

“All I’ve ever done is farming.” Charlie said looking at him in surprise.

“There is plenty of time for you to learn how to navigate the library. Let me give you a tour.” He led her to the base of the staircase that stretched up through the levels. “Here is my desk.” He pointed to a cluttered mess tucked beneath the stairs. “When I’m not teaching mythology, you can find me here.” He walked her through the library, from anthropology to zoology, bottom to top. On the fifth floor, the professor led her over to a blank wooden wall.

“Oscail,” he spoke.

A door seam appeared in front of Charlie and the professor pushed on it. It made a small click and swung open. “This is a private room. The academy can be overwhelming at first, so I thought you could use your own quiet space to work.” The room overlooked all of the campus with a small desk and two chairs at the center.

"It's amazing." Charlie replied gratefully.

"It's yours for as long as you need it. Speak the word I used and it triggers the door to open."

Charlie stood, looking out onto the school, and wondered how the professor knew this was exactly what she needed. A quiet place to call her own where she could think.

CHAPTER 3

THE FIRST LIGHT CEREMONY

Charlie's first days at the academy were anything but quiet. On Monday morning, she was woken at dawn by the loud whine of bagpipes outside her window and she jumped out of bed in a confused panic. Rebecca was already dressed and heading out the door.

"What's going on?" Charlie called after her.

"The First Light Ceremony" Rebecca rolled her eyes. "It starts in five minutes. I wouldn't be late if I was you." She turned and rushed down the hall.

Charlie grabbed a pair of pants and a shirt and stuffed herself into them. Her hair a tangled mess, she slipped on her shoes and headed out the door. Shivering in the pre-dawn cold, she followed the throngs of chattering students toward the lawn. She noticed that everyone but her had worn a sweater or jacket.

"Where is everyone going?" She asked a boy walking next to her.

"The First Light Ceremony. It's an old tradition here at the academy." He said proudly. "This school is built on the highest point along the North Atlantic and it's the first place to view a sunrise in the United States. Every Monday, school bagpipers wake the campus at dawn alerting students and faculty to get up and gather around the school flag at the central lawn." He pointed to a flag pole ahead of them.

"What's printed on the flag?" Charlie asked squinting at it.

'Cha d'dhuin. Doras nach d'fhosgail doras', which means 'No door ever closed, but another opened,' He answered.

She was about to ask him what that meant, but he dashed forward to catch up with his friends. Charlie gathered with the rest of the students who were bumping clumsily into formation around the flag. The faculty formed a semicircle in front and they all faced the rising sun.

"Ar scath a cheile a mhaireann na daoine.

Ar scath a cheile a mhaireann na daoine.

Ar scath a cheile a mhaireann na daoine."

Everyone chanted around her as the light of the sun, unencumbered by the curve of the earth, spilled like hot lead from the mouth of the universe and straight onto the campus.

The school principal, Peter Blackshore, stepped up to a podium at the front of the gathering. He looked like an impeccably dressed scarecrow, with straw colored hair to his shoulders and a glinting silver school broach attached to the lapel of his pressed green jacket.

"Under the shelter of each other, people survive." He translated as the crowd erupted in a cheer. "Welcome! Welcome new and returning students to the Porte Academy. It is a most special year. A year that will mark the 1000th anniversary of our dear academy, making it the oldest functioning school in the history of the world." Another roar of cheering rang out around Charlie. "You are here from all over the world, hand picked by myself and our tremendous faculty. It is an honor and a privilege to be a student of this school, and I expect each and every one of you to live up to the expectations and standards that we require of you." Heads nodded and murmurs of yes rippled out through the crowd. "It has been this school's tradition to foster cooperation and hope amidst its students so that they may take that message out into the world. The school motto: No door ever closed, but another opened, is a message of hope and survival against all odds." More nods and murmurs of agreement. "But remember the most important

part of all. The most important part is that we do it together! That we are strong together!”

Another bout of loud cheering. “On that note, I send you out to your first day of classes, and indeed, out to your first day of this new life!” One last ripple of cheering and whistling passed through the crowd as the principal stepped down and students broke off for breakfast and classes.

Charlie ran back to her dorm room, pulled a brush through her hair, grabbed her books and headed to the cafeteria. She had enough time for a quick breakfast and then she went straight into the school day. The academy was enormous compared to the one -room school house in Appleton Charlie was used to. She was overwhelmed trying to navigate the campus and its hundreds of students of all ages and from all corners of the world. Her classes were English, math, biology, history and mythology, foreign languages and a choice of elective between art, theater or music. Charlie chose music, specifically choir. Singing reminded her of her mother and of home and it was welcome refuge in an otherwise chaotic and overwhelming first few weeks of school.

Her roommate Rebecca grew worse as the weeks passed. She’d decided that since Professor Afadare favored Charlie with a better job in the library, that Charlie was somehow responsible for Rebecca’s cafeteria duty. She worked hard to make Charlie’s days in the dorm room miserable, hardly speaking to her except to accuse her of touching her side of the room. Professor Afadare encouraged Charlie to join one of the groups on campus to make friends. She indulged him by trying out for the cheerleading team, and it was a mistake. Despite being strong and agile from farming and spending her days climbing and exploring, Charlie didn’t know anything about cheerleading. She failed the tryouts and the cheerleading squad mercilessly teased her, telling her to go back to the farm and tend to the pigs and chickens that she was used

to. She ignored them as best she could, but their taunts still hurt. Most days, she spent her time in the safety of the secret little room in the library, throwing herself into her schoolwork and coming out only for classes and meals in the cafeteria.

Charlie faced her situation with the same steely resolve as she had faced her father before he sent her away. She couldn't change the fact that she was stuck at the academy, and that she didn't have any friends. She would simply deal with it and try not to care. She held onto a small scrap of hope though, that someone would come along who understood her. Someone who might want to be her friend.

It was late October, and Charlie was in her usual corner in the cafeteria when a skinny, sandy haired boy sat next to her. She glanced up, and he smiled at her. His caramel colored eyes were sad and kind. He sat quietly, eating his lunch of cottage cheese and pineapple, two hard boiled eggs and dry toast and looking out the windows. For several days he sat there, as Charlie pretended to be occupied with her reading. Finally she couldn't stand it any longer, and spoke to him.

"You've been sitting next to me all week without saying a word. What do you want?"

"Nothing. I like it here. It has a nice view of the campus."

Charlie looked up and saw that he was right. She'd never taken the time to notice.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Max," he replied, holding out his hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"I'm Charlie," she answered, taking his hand with a tiny smile tugging the corners of her mouth.

CHAPTER 4

MAX

Max had arrived at the Porte Academy that fall, the same time as Charlie. He lost both of his parents in a car accident when he was six, and he had been bounced from one guardian to another until he was old enough to attend the academy. All of his guardians were friends of his parents, scholars or professionals in one capacity or another, and though he was given love and kindness from each of them, his parents had left instructions that he not remain in any home longer than a year at a time. Max didn't understand why they'd decided this. It seemed a cruel thing to do as it left him no chance to become attached to any of his guardians or settle into a stable home.

Six years ago, he tried to get an answer about his parents' instructions from his Aunt Lucinda. She'd let him call her that but they were not related. She was a professor who specialized in linguistics at a private college in New Hampshire. The two of them lived in a townhouse provided by the college on the outskirts of campus. It was a brick structure that had three levels up to a peaked roof. Max's room was at the very top. The room was hung with dozens of model airplanes he and aunt Lucinda had built together. He had been obsessed with flying that year. Flying in anything, to anywhere. It didn't matter just as long as he could get up and off the earth. It felt like the ground was going to pull him down and into the graves of his parents that had been dug two years earlier. He was regularly tormented by nightmares of his dead parents and being buried alive with them in their graves.

Aunt Lucinda told him it was only natural to have such nightmares. She would bring him a cup of warm milk mixed with sugar and vanilla and listen patiently as he described them. Some nights, aunt Lucinda talked for hours, going deeper and deeper into explanation of his dreams, incorporating her knowledge of other cultures, religions, and beliefs. She would talk about the ancient societies of Egypt and Greece that considered dreaming a means of supernatural communication. She would speak of dream symbols in all sorts of cultures. Native American, Aboriginal, Indian, African. She would talk of poets and philosophers who ruminated on dream interpretation, such as Descartes, Socrates, and Plato. Or the more modern thinkers such as Carl Jung or Sigmund Freud.

“A dream of death can mean a dream of new beginnings.” She told him. “It symbolizes inner change and transformation. Big changes are ahead for you. You are making a new start and leaving the past behind.”

Max listened wide-eyed while Aunt Lucinda told him about the world and its many types of people. He asked question after question and she indulged his curiosity until they were both so tired their lids drooped and the sun was peeked up over the edge of the earth.

Some nights Max felt overwhelmed by what she told him and pulled the covers up to his nose, too shy to ask her to stop. On these nights she would see his face disappear under the blankets and wind down their discussion by tucking him in tight on all sides to make the world seem a little smaller. She would kiss his cheek, smelling of vanilla and cloves from the tiny cigarettes she smoked out on the balcony. He could always smell the smoke drifting past his window and going out to dance with the night air.

Max's year with his Aunt Lucinda went by quickly and he was set to stay next with his uncle Patterson, a taxidermist in Aubergine, Texas. His nightmares were growing more and more intense and it was rare when he felt rested. On the last night with his aunt, he had his worst nightmare yet.

His parents visited him in his dreams as corpses. Smelling of death, they reached out to pull him to them. His mother cried muddied tears down her cheeks. They wanted him to join them. They missed him, but Max didn't want to go with them.

"I want to live!" he yelled at them. "I have my whole life ahead of me."

They didn't listen. They only wanted what was best for them—not what was best for him. He was mad at his parents for being so selfish. He was mad at them for leaving him alone.

"Let me go!" he screamed, ripping out of their grip and clawing his way out of the graves and toward the sky. A hand reached down to help him up. It was his Aunt Lucinda.

"Everything will be OK." She told him.

Max believed her, but at the last moment, her grip weakened and her hand slipped. Max gasped and fell back into his parents graves. Aunt Lucinda's face stared down at him.

"I'm sorry," she said before he was engulfed in blackness and the cold fingers of his dead parents.

Max woke and sat up in bed. He must have been crying out in his sleep because there was Aunt Lucinda with the cup of warm milk. She'd heard his cries and knew they'd been for her to help him. Her hand holding the cup faltered and spilled milk onto his covers. She placed the cup on the bedside table, sat down and lit one of the cigarettes from her pocket. It was the first time

she smoked in front of Max, taking a long pull and exhaling. The pungent clove mixture reached his nose and pulled him out of his nightmare stupor.

“Why do I have to leave here? Don’t you want me?”

“You’re smarter than that, Max McClanning,” she answered, catching the guilty trick he was trying to play by asking such a question.

“I don’t want to be smarter. I want to stop moving. I want a home and a family again. I want things to be normal.”

“Let’s examine what you just said in relation to your life up to this point,” she replied, crushing out her cigarette and reaching for a dictionary in the bookshelf by his bed. She opened the book and searched, stopping on the letter N. ‘Normal. Confirming with or constituting a norm or standard or level or type of social norm. In accordance with scientific laws. Being average within certain limits.’ She closed the dictionary and looked at Max. “Does that definition describe your life until this point? Does that definition describe anyone’s life that you know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I think ‘normal’ is one of the most useless words in language. It is stagnant and serves no purpose other than to describe something that simply does not exist.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Max grumbled from under his bedcovers.

“Who defines such a word? Who gets to decide what is normal or not and to decide that anything outside of the perimeters of that dictionary definition is unusual, abnormal, or wrong? If it were up to me, the word ‘normal’ would have an infinite definition. It would include everything that happens to everyone from one second to the next. It would be the definition of life itself. Do you understand me, Max? There is no normal. There is only life and the now.”

"I don't want to talk anymore, Aunt Lucinda. I just want to go to sleep and for these nightmares to go away. I'm so tired."

"Life can be tiring, but it comes in waves. It comes in ups, downs, and middles. There are places where you can catch your breath and there are new beginnings. You are overdue for one of those places, but they will come."

"How do you know?"

"I have lived many years and seen more things than you. You are young and strong, Max. Don't worry. You will be OK."

As much as he wanted to argue with her, especially after his dream, he was too tired to do so. Deep in his gut, he knew she was right and that he would feel better somehow. She leaned in to kiss his forehead.

"Sweet dreams, brave Max." He felt her kiss and cool hand before he fell fast asleep.

He never did get an answer about why he had to leave. That next morning he waved good - bye to his beloved Aunt Lucinda from the back of taxi cab headed for Texas. He never saw her again.

Max's stay with his aunt ended six years ago and he had grown accustomed to loneliness in that time, but when he arrived at the academy, he noticed Charlie right away. She had stumbled into him during the first light ceremony as he grabbed her by the arm to steady her amidst the sea of jostling students. In that moment, Max had a strong feeling that they'd met before. He felt a closeness to her he hadn't felt toward anyone except his parents and he didn't know why. He stared back at Charlie struck by her beauty, as she stood silhouetted in front of the rising sun with chestnut hair spilling across her shoulders, her green eyes dancing. She'd apologized for

bumping into him then dashed off toward her dorm room. Max's first thought was that perhaps she was part of the new beginning his Aunt Lucinda had mentioned so many years before.

Throughout the month of September, Max kept an eye on Charlie. He saw how professor Afadare took a liking to her and took her under his wing. He watched as Charlie disappeared for hours in the library and resolutely sat alone in the cafeteria pretending to be busy with her studies. By October, he'd made up his mind to try to be her friend and that was the day he sat next to her.

They became great friends. Max knew that her mother had died. Rebecca blabbed that detail to anyone who would listen on campus. And Charlie knew that his parents had died, (also thanks to Rebecca), but they never talked about it. There was nothing to say. Nothing could change the helpless truth of those deaths, so they filled their time with things of life. They explored every inch of the campus together. Charlie showed Max her secret room in the library, and the two of them spent hours looking through books and talking in there. They stole food from the cafeteria to have picnics in the woods. They snuck into the attics of the dormitories, sometimes finding a forgotten trunk with treasures inside. They discovered odd things at the academy, like tiny shifting panels in the walls and extra doors to rooms and staircases that led nowhere. Sometimes those trunks in the attics had strange contents like letters written in a language neither of them could understand. They found carved statues of people and animals they had never seen before. Once, they found a tapestry shoved into the furthest corner of a basement. It was stained and faded, but it had once been an intricate and amazing scene:

Figures that looked almost human rode on the backs of giant creatures. The creatures were not of Earth—golden-winged flying birds, and gigantic, spotted animals. Other figures that walked

as tall as the mountains and had flowing white hair were stitched into the tapestry. Every inch of the land, sky, and the ocean was filled with such images. Max and Charlie studied the tapestry, trying to find mythological stories in the library to match the pictures, but there was nothing. Every time they stretched the tapestry out and drew their fingers over the lines of the scene, Charlie felt as if she had seen it before. She felt like she knew the story it wanted to tell.

"I've seen these figures with the black eyes," Charlie remarked, pointing to the almost -human things. "They were in a dream I had before my father sent me to the academy."

"Are you sure they aren't from stories your father told you?" Max answered skeptically.

"He never told me stories like this." Charlie answered.

Since her mother's death, so much of her life felt like she was walking in a fog, but every time she gazed at that tapestry, life felt clearer and more solid. The strange thought that she'd seen the dark eyed figures before echoed over and over in her mind. How could something she'd dreamed about be stitched on the tapestry before her? It didn't make any sense and day by day she was growing increasingly agitated at the lack of answers to her questions.

Dreams, like the one she had at home about falling over the cliffs, plagued her every night. She visited strange lands and saw images and creatures she didn't recognize. Sometimes her mother was in the dreams, and those were the worst. Her mother looked tired and distraught, stuck in a cold and empty place that Charlie didn't recognize. Her mother would try to speak, pleading something, but Charlie couldn't hear her, as if her mother was trapped behind glass. She didn't understand why her mother was in the dreams, but the strange lands and creatures were probably remnants of the tapestry and the mythology lessons from professor Afadare's class. Charlie noticed that the professor brought his own books to class and she'd never seen anything

quite like them. The covers of the books were designed in delicate spiraling gold patterns and the stories that filled them were like the tapestry, with characters on adventures in strange lands. Sometimes, the professor let her read ahead at the end of the day while he corrected papers. She would plead with him to let her take the books to her room, but he was firm.

“The books stay with me. It is my duty to protect them.”

“Protect them? From me? Don’t you trust me?” Charlie asked.

He looked hurt when she said this. “Of course I trust you. This is one rule, however, that cannot be broken. It is a promise I made and I never break my promises.”

“Who wrote these books?”

“I do not know. They were given to me by a friend who asked me to keep them safe and preserve them for the next generation.”

She didn’t like it when he talked this way, of the future and a time when he would not be there. Her father made trips to visit her these past months, but they were short and awkward for both of them. He refused to explain why it was important for her to stay at the academy and she gave up asking him if she could go home. She felt distant and disconnected from him. Professor Afadare felt more like a father to her these days. She didn’t know how old he was. Sometimes he seemed young and spry, other times he looked tired and burdened, as if he carried hundreds of years behind those twinkling blue eyes. All she knew for sure was that she cared for this funny old man like family and that was something she didn’t have much of.

On Sundays, Max and Charlie made it a tradition to picnic in the woods surrounding the campus. They would load up on food from the cafeteria. Croissants and cranberry scones with pats of butter and tiny jars of Devonshire cream. They wrapped strips of crispy bacon in napkins

and gathered peaches and bananas in their pockets. Charlie would fill a thermos of hot chocolate and the two of them would set off toward their meeting place, an enormous pine tree about a quarter mile from the academy. They would sit, staring up through the branches, eating their feast and talking about whatever came to mind.

Charlie talked of her home by the cliffs. She described the fresh, salt air of the sea and the beauty of the flower beds. She could hardly bear talking about her mother. She longed to, especially since she'd been having the nightmares. Her mother's tired and distraught face from those dreams were fresh in her mind and they haunted her, but each time she began to speak the words caught in her throat. It wasn't just sadness she felt, it was a deeply- penetrating denial of her mother's death. Charlie was not ready to let her go. Not yet.

Max talked about the people that raised and cared for him before he arrived at the academy. There was his Aunt Lucinda, his Uncle Albert, a taxidermist from Aubergine, Texas, his Aunt Ginny, a botanist from Montana, and his Uncle Rufus, an oceanographer from the Florida Keys. Charlie loved to hear Max's stories about the places he'd lived and the wonderful guardians that cared for him. He'd stayed in a tree house one hundred feet in the air for a month with his Aunt Ginny to protest deforestation in Montana. He'd swum with a pod of dolphins while snorkeling with his Uncle Rufus in Florida. He'd tracked a herd of Bison across the Texas range with his Uncle Albert. And he'd learned so much from the books and lectures of his Aunt Lucinda.

"I had a room filled with model airplanes at her house." Max described.

"I didn't know you liked putting together models."

"I always liked the way things can come together to form something. Besides, it helped me keep my mind off of my parents. I was having terrible nightmares almost every night back then."

Charlie's face dropped when he said this, and she looked away as her eyes filled with tears.

Max noticed reaching out to comfort her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"I've had nightmares about my mother every day since I came here. She's always trapped in them and calls to me, but I can never get to her. I can never find her, as hard as I try." Charlie confessed as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I can't promise the nightmares will go away completely, but I know I started having mine less and less as time went on. My Aunt Lucinda once said that life comes in waves. There are ups, downs and middles, and places you find where you can catch your breath. I think this school and our friendship is one of those places."

"What happens when we have to leave here?"

"I've moved around so many times in my life that I had to stop asking that question. I can only hope that those I care for, and who care for me, will be there no matter where I am."

"What if they leave you by dying?"

Max took a deep breath, remembering his dreams and the terrible lonely fear that they'd caused him. "What has happened, has happened and it has changed us forever. You have to try not to fear and to find a way to accept it."

Charlie knew he was right, but deep down in her gut she just wasn't ready to accept her mother's death.

"At least we have our friendship." She said, looking warmly at Max.

"Yes, at least we have that." he replied staring through the pine boughs and into the sky.

Max's brows furrowed as dark clouds gathered for a winter storm.

CHAPTER 5

VIOLET

It was late in the spring semester when Violet came into Charlie's life. Violet sat next to Charlie in math class and often asked her for help. Charlie guided her through algebra until they were passing notes and becoming fast friends. Violet was silly and playful, and made Charlie feel normal for the first time since she arrived at the academy.

Violet was from New York and Charlie was spellbound by her descriptions and stories of her life in the city. She would act out whole Broadway shows for Charlie. Dancing and singing scenes from A Chorus Line, 42nd Street, and Fiddler on the Roof, grabbing Charlie and twirling her around into the show. Violet would strip the pillow cases from their beds for peasants clothing and tape yarn beneath her nose for a mustache to play Tevye from Fiddler on the Roof or she would slick back her hair and put on greaser clothing to belt out songs from Grease. They would collapse in fits of laughter from their performances. They skipped classes, spending time together in Violet's dorm room listening to music. They played pranks on the cheerleading squad, spiking their water bottles with salt and re-locating pieces of the cheerleading outfits to various places all over campus.

Charlie began spending less and less time with Max. Violet helped her forget her sadness about her mother, whereas Max was a constant reminder. She could joke around and share secrets with Violet that only another girl would understand. She didn't tell her about the nightmares, which unfortunately were growing more intense as time passed. Sometimes during the day Charlie felt as if someone was watching her. She would get a strange, creeping feeling up

her back and whip around expecting someone to be there, but there never was. She worked hard to push these fears away, enjoying her friendship with Violet and not wanting anything to jeopardize it.

The remainder of the year passed quickly. She and Max grew further apart until they no longer spent time together at all. Summer vacation started, and to Charlie's delight, Violet was enrolled in the camp program at the academy. The two of them spent their days swimming, hiking, and camping together on the grounds surrounding the school. Max was there too, but he kept to himself. Charlie noticed that he had taken to solitary games of handball against the school's brick walls. She could hear him playing, the ball thudding against the brick for hours. And despite the break in their friendship, a small part of her felt comforted to know he was always there.

September came, and with it the start of a new school year and Charlie's fourteenth birthday. It began happily enough, but at the end of the month the captain of the rugby team, Gus Panier asked Violet to the final rugby match of the season. After that, Violet spent less time with Charlie. She moved across the classroom in math to sit next to Gus. Charlie could hardly stand watching the two of them pass notes together, just as Charlie and Violet used to do. It made her feel completely and utterly alone.

"Charlie, can you hear me? Are you alright?"

She was in biology class and had been gazing out the greenhouse window lost in her thoughts. Her teacher, Professor Oriel, a thin man with his elbows and knees jutting out like a praying mantis, stood before her. The entire class was staring at her as he asked the question again.

"Could you give the Latin name for the plant species before us?"

“I don’t know which one you mean,” she stammered with the blood rushing to her cheeks.

“Are you feeling well?” Professor Oriel’s bright hazel eyes stared at her intently.

She wasn’t feeling well. She felt embarrassed and was dreading seeing Violet and Gus in math class the next period. Plus there was the lack of sleep due to her nightmares.

“Can I go to my room and lay down?”

“School policy requires that you see the nurse first. I’m sure that if you explain things, she’d let you go to your room.” Professor Oriel scanned the students. “Max McClanning, would you accompany Ms. Chapel to the infirmary?”

“I can get there myself,” Charlie spoke.

“Again school policy. A sick student requires a chaperon,” answered the professor.

Charlie got up and started toward the infirmary across campus.

“What are you waiting for, young man?” The professor said to Max who jumped up and headed after her. She was halfway across campus before he caught up.

“How are you?” He asked.

“Okay,” Charlie replied.

“I’ve seen Violet with Gus a lot these days.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“At least you know what it feels like to lose a friend.”

“I never stopped being your friend, Max. I just made another one.”

“You left me alone with no explanation.”

“I wanted to be with Violet for awhile. She was fun and did things we didn’t do.”

“You should have known better, after all that I told you about me and how many times I’ve been left alone by those I care about.” Max spoke, trembling with anger in front of her.

“Maybe it was better this way,” Charlie thought, “for both of them to stay apart and in their separate corners where they couldn’t hurt each other.” She felt herself shut down as she did when her father decided to send her to the academy.

“I’m sorry Max. It’s probably better for both of us if we’re not friends.”

She didn't know what else to say. She opened the door to the infirmary and stepped through, closing it on the boy who used to be her best friend.

After what she said to Max, Charlie felt worse than ever. She explained to the nurse that she hadn't been getting much sleep and was sent to her dorm room to rest. Charlie drew the shades and lay down. Within minutes, her eyelids fluttered and she was fast asleep.

She was in a strange land, surrounded by strange creatures. She could hear her mother calling from somewhere, but the words were muffled and Charlie couldn’t understand what she was trying to tell her. She felt a familiar pull toward a distant point on the horizon and toward her mother's muffled cries. She started running with an intense feeling of panic in her throat. She had to get her mother. She had to try to find her. She ran and ran but never grew closer to the point on the horizon.

Something shifted. She had that creeping feeling along the back of her neck that someone was following her, like she’d been having during days at school. Charlie turned around and found that she was face to face with herself. At least, it looked like her but it wasn't her. It was something much different. The eyes were not green like hers, but pitch black. It looked like the creatures she’d seen on the tapestry in the basement. It stared back at her with its black gaze

reaching into her soul and tearing it apart. Charlie was frozen with fear. She could hear her mother's cries growing more desperate but she could do nothing. She was falling into the blackness of those eyes. She was falling and falling and falling.

"Charlie," spoke a familiar voice. She tore her eyes away from the dark and saw Max.

"You should know better" he said to her, reaching out and taking her hand to lead her away from the terrible thing with black eyes. It shrieked in anger but did not follow them.

For the rest of the afternoon and into the night, Charlie's nightmares changed. She dreamed of her friendship with Max and of happy days with her family when her mother was still alive. It was the first restful sleep she'd had in months and when she woke the next morning, she felt clear-headed for the first time in awhile. Cutting Max out of her life was wrong. She needed him and he needed her and she would have to find a way to apologize and make up for the way she'd treated him.

CHAPTER 6

A BIGGER PLAN

Charlie's first class that morning was choir. It was her favorite class, and after a good night's sleep her voice sounded clean and clear like a bell ringing out of the fog. It rang out above the other students and she rocked back and forth on her heels, letting the music lead her. Charlie could shift in and out of notes with ease from the highest soprano to a low contralto. There wasn't anything Charlie couldn't sing. She even took to imitating sounds around her. Birds, wind chimes or the occasional ping of a buoy out at sea. Her choir teacher, Professor Greenborough, said that her voice was the most unique she had ever heard, and that it was extremely unusual for a girl her age to have such skill and control without years of training.

Charlie had learned to sing with her mother when she was a child, but for a time after her mother's accident she'd stopped. She was afraid that singing would bring forward emotions she couldn't bear. That changed one afternoon when Charlie was about eight years old.

All the flowers in the fields of her home in Appleton were wilting in the midday heat. She remembered kneeling down and lifting their sad, delicate heads onto the palm of her hand thinking that they were so small, and the sun was so big, and the tiny flowers were at the mercy of things much larger than them and out of their control. She wanted to help them and not knowing what else to do, Charlie parted her lips and sang the first song her mother ever taught her called "Beltane" or "The May Day Song."

"May, clad in cloth of gold,
Cometh this way:

The fluting of blackbirds
Heralds the day.

"The dust-colored cuckoo
Cries 'Welcome, O Queen!'
For winter has vanished,
The thickets are green.

"Soon the trampling of cattle
Where the river runs low!
The long hair of the heather,
The canna like snow!

"Wild waters are sleeping,
Foam of blossom is here:
Peace, save the panic
In the heart of the deer."

"The wild bee is busy,
The ant honey spills,
the wandering kine
Are abroad on the hills."

"The harp of the forest
Sounds low, sounds sweet;
Soft bloom on the heights;
On the loch, haze of heat.

"The waterfall dreams;
Snipe, corncrakes, drum
By the pool where the talk
Of the rushes is come."

"The swallow is swooping;
Song swing from each brae;
Rich harvest of mast falls;
The swamp shimmers gay."

“Happy the heart of man,
Eager each maid;
Lovely the forest,
The wild plane, the green glade.”
“Truly winter is gone,
Come the time of delight,
The summer true joyous,
May, blossom -white.”

In the heart of the meadows
The lapwings are quiet;
A winding stream
Makes drowsy riot.”

“Race horses, sail, run,
Rejoice and be bold!
See, the shaft of the sun
Makes the water-flag gold.”

“Loud, clear, the blackcap;
The lark trills his voice
Hail May of delicate colors
tis May-Day-rejoice!”

Every note she'd been taught danced from her lips and across the wilted flowers. It spread out over the ocean and called back a cool breeze and mist that settled over everything. The flowers sucked the moisture from the air and started rising and reviving all around her, washing the heat of the day off with her song and the mist.

Charlie bathed in the memory of that afternoon in choir practice, feeling the nightmares, sleepless nights, and broken friendships with Max and Violet slip away.

She skipped out of the choir room in a good mood and down the hallway for breakfast. Pans of fresh scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, and French toast were laid out. Fruit juices, coffee, and hot chocolate were set up in the drink station and an array of hot and cold cereals could be found on a separate table. Charlie sat with her hands wrapped around a cup of coffee and watched the morning light spill through the trees. When she and Max were together, he would meet her and they would sit, hardly saying a word, and watch the world wake up. Violet was never up in time. She always slept through breakfast and Charlie would have to save her something to eat. Gus had that job now and Charlie watched whenever he stuffed a dry bagel or package of cereal into his backpack for Violet. Violet always took it gratefully in the hall before math class, planting an kiss on his cheek and plopping down next to him like a puppy.

Today, Charlie let her eyes wander over toward Gus in math and saw that Violet's chair was empty beside him. It was strange not to see her with him. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen Violet. She headed off to her locker after class with an uneasy feeling in her stomach about the absence. Charlie took a corner in the hallway and was so distracted that she bumped smack into the back of Gus.

"Watch it!" he yelled, whirling around. "Oh, it's you." He took several steps forward until he was pinning her against the lockers. "I see you watching Violet and me. Why don't you mind your own business?"

"You don't tell me what to do."

"You should listen to me if you know what's good for you," he said, pinning her even tighter. "My family has been part of this academy for generations. We don't need you here." He looked her up and down with a scowl of disgust on his face. "You're just a little fish in a big pond."

“I belong here just as much as you.”

Gus laughed. “What use are you? I play my part. I’m important to this school, but you” Gus grabbed her face and looked angrily at her. “You just cause problems.”

“GUSTAVE PANIER!”

Everyone froze as principal Blackshore's voice rang down the hallway.

“Leave her alone! Into my office.” He pointed at Gus, who seemed glued to his spot.

“NOW!”

That unglued him. He released Charlie and shuffled past the principal toward his office at the end of the hallway. Charlie stood, watching them recede and ruminating on her encounter with Gus. What he said didn’t make any sense. What part exactly did Gus play at the school? Why did he think that she caused problems? There was something deeper going on with Gus, and she had a terrible feeling that maybe Violet was involved. She headed down the hallway toward principal Blackshore’s office. He would know why Violet wasn’t at school and maybe he could answer some of her questions about Gus.

“Did you think for one second the kind of trouble you could have caused?” Principal Blackshore sat at his desk, glaring at Gus.

“I can’t stand it anymore. Why is Charlie so important?” Gus whined. “Why do I have to waste my time pretending to be Violet’s boyfriend, just to draw her away from Charlie? It’s stupid.”

“I don’t care how you feel. You are part of a bigger plan and I expect you to play your part.”

“Why can’t you do something? You’re the principal. Can’t you handle one student on your own?”

Blackshore slid out of his seat like hot oil and was nose to nose with Gus before he knew what was happening.

“You listen to me,” he hissed, holding the front of Gus’s uniform with an iron clutch. “If you can’t fill the duties asked of you, then you are dispensable.”

“You can’t...”

Principal Blackshore’s grip tightened, squeezing the collar so it was hard for Gus to talk.

“You think that because your rich daddy went to this school that he will protect you? It was his idea to pair you up with Violet. It’s been the best way to draw her away from Charlie without attracting Professor Afadare’s attention. Your father understands more than you will ever know about this place. He understands the importance of duty and loyalty. If you disappeared, your father could do nothing.”

Gus’s eyes grew wide. “Please,” he gasped.

“Don’t question my authority again.” The principal released Gus who took a large inhale of air. A knock came at the door.

“Principal Blackshore? It’s Charlie. I’m sorry to disturb you, but I have to speak with you about something.”

“What did you tell her?” The principal hissed at Gus.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“One moment.” Principal Blackshore adjusted himself and opened the door.

“I think something has happened to Violet.” Charlie burst in. “I can’t find her. I checked her room and I haven’t seen her anywhere on campus or with Gus.” The principal shot Gus an angry glance.

“Calm down. Calm down. I’ll answer everything. Please sit.”

He motioned to the chair Gus was occupying. The boy jumped up and out of the office, scurrying past Charlie like a scolded dog.

Principal Blackshore strode behind his desk and sat down. “Ms. Chapel, as principal of this school, it is my duty to know where every student is. There has been a family emergency and Violet’s father came to pick her up.”

“An emergency?”

“It is not your business, but she is expected back in a few weeks.”

“A few weeks?.”

“Everything will be handled for her smooth return.”

“I’m sorry for wasting your time.” Charlie got up to leave. “I was just so sure Violet needed help.”

“I can see that you are worried about her and I have broken the confidentiality of her family by telling you why she is not at school.”

“Thank you for that, but might I ask about Gus? I bumped into him and the next thing I know, he’s pinning me against the lockers telling me I don’t belong here. What did he mean by that?”

“My advice to you is to stay out of Gus’s way. It is not unusual for him to be protective of his place at this school. His family has a deep and long history here. Stick to worrying about yourself. Now, I have work to do. Would you please close the door on your way out?”

Charlie left. The explanation of Violet’s absence sat strangely in her gut. Things didn’t quite add up. In fact, the whole meeting seemed strange. Something was wrong, and she would find out what it was on her own.

Classes let out early on Friday, so Charlie headed out onto campus to ask about Violet. She went to their old stomping grounds to ask other students when they'd last seen her. A group of girls who hung out at the bleachers overlooking the rugby field said they'd seen her a few days ago.

"She was acting sort of strange," said Gina, the pretty, red-headed captain of the cheerleading squad. "She was nervous and distracted. She couldn't concentrate on any of the routines."

"Violet was on the cheerleading squad?" Charlie asked shocked. Violet hated the cheerleading squad.

"She joined last month and still has a lot to learn," Gina said in a snotty tone. "Gus is going to have to keep his promise."

"Promise?"

"You don't think she got on the squad by trying out, do you? Gus said he would buy us new uniforms if we let her on."

"Why would he do that?" Asked Charlie.

"Trying to impress Violet, I guess."

"Thank you for your time." Charlie realized she had all the information she was going to get and turned to leave.

"If you see Violet, tell her I don't care how much money Gus throws at us, if she keeps missing practices, she can't be on the squad."

Charlie headed in the direction of the dormitories.

"What do you want?" Violet's roommate Sarah spat at Charlie when she opened the door.

"I want to ask you about Violet."

"Now you show an interest in her? You've been ignoring her for weeks."

"I've been ignoring her? She the one who's been glued to Gus. She is the one who is ignoring me." Sarah rolled her eyes at this. "I just want to know if her father picked her up."

"A few days ago."

"Did Violet say why she had to leave?"

"Some sort of family emergency. She wouldn't say what."

"Was she acting strangely to you?"

"I don't know. I guess. She was kind of out of it. I swear, she would have forgotten her shoes if I hadn't reminded her to put them on. It's bad enough that she left her room key, now I'll have to let her in when she gets back." Sarah pointed to a key sitting on a table by the door.

"Did she say anything else?"

"She was mumbling about it all being a lie."

"What being a lie?"

"She didn't say. Her dad came and calmed her down. It was weird. He spoke in a different language. Like the language on the school flag. Cha d'dhuin doras....whatever he said, it quieted her down. Is there anything else? My mom is picking me up any minute."

"Thank you. You've been a lot of help." Charlie turned to go.

"You should talk to Violet once and awhile. She needs a friend."

"She has Gus."

"A real friend."

Charlie nodded and as she passed the side table, she slipped Violet's room key into her palm. She would be back after Sarah left to try to find out more.

The next day was Saturday, and Charlie stood in the doorway of the cafeteria watching Max. What was she going to say to him? He sat with his back to her in their old spot. She remembered when she first met Max, and he was the skinny sandy-haired boy that sat next to her at that same table, waiting patiently for her to talk to him. He was taller now, and his hair had darkened and hung thick and wavy to his shoulders. He'd grown handsome and girls at the school began to notice, walking by him in giggling groups and smiling his way. Charlie felt differently about him. She cared deeply for Max, a brother she never had. She took a deep breath and made her way over to their table. There was no easy way to bridge the gap between them, she would simply have to apologize and leave it in his hands as to whether he would accept it or not.

"You were right," she said, sitting down next to him, "I should have known better. Violet did the same thing to me I did to you. She left me to be with Gus. I didn't know what to do, so I cut her out of my life. I went back to being hurt and alone, like I had been when you first sat next to me at this table." Max listened without saying a word. "I don't know how much has changed for us and our friendship, but I know I don't want to cut you out of my life." Charlie got up to leave. "I'm sorry I hurt you, Max. I just wanted you to know that you're my friend and you always will be."

"You were always my friend, Charlie." Max looked up at her. "And we all make mistakes. Apology accepted."

Charlie leaned over and gave him a long hug. "Thank you. I missed you."

"I missed you, too." Max broke the hug and patted the chair next to him for her to sit down. "So, tell me what's going on. I've been watching you grill people about Violet all over the campus."

Charlie filled Max in on what she'd discovered since her meeting with principal Blackshore. She showed him the key to Violet's room and explained that she wanted to go through Violet's things.

"I need to find out why her father came to pick her up."

"The principal said she had a family emergency."

"It doesn't add up. Why was Gus acting so strangely around me, and why would he bribe the cheerleading captain into letting Violet on the squad? Why did her roommate say she was acting strangely, and what was the lie Violet was talking about? I'm worried about her Max. I need your help to keep a lookout while I'm in the room. After that, I think we need to keep a close watch on Gus."

"Gus?"

"He's hiding something. I need you to follow him. Find out where he goes and why."

"Ok, but I'm not going to enjoy slinking around the rugby field." Max gave her a goofy frown, and a quick laugh escaped from her. It felt nice. It had been awhile since she laughed.

Later that afternoon, Max positioned himself outside Violet's dorm room as Charlie went in. Violet's desk was a mess of papers and tardy slips. Her bed was half-made and clothes spilled from her closet. It looked as if Violet hadn't packed anything before leaving. Charlie checked under the bed, on the shelves, and even went through her trashcan before sitting down, frustrated and empty handed. Her gaze wandered to the table by the bed where a small piece of red ribbon

stuck out from a drawer. She pulled it open and found that it was a marker to Violet's diary. She never went anywhere without her diary. Charlie took it and started reading.

The first half of the diary was filled with stories of things she and Charlie had done together. Silly memories of swimming and activities during summer camp, pranking Charlie's roommate with shaving cream in her toothpaste, or the two of them wearing matching pajamas to class, but soon the entries shifted to Gus. Violet doodled hearts and kisses over page after page with Gus' name on them. There were entries about how Gus took her to the fall dance, let her wear his rugby jacket, and took her on walks along the school paths. She mentioned she got onto the cheerleading squad but that her squad-mates weren't nice to her. She wrote that she missed Charlie and wished she could talk to her. Charlie felt pangs of guilt as she read on. The next entry was about how Violet found out that Gus bribed the cheerleading squad to get her on. They had a fight about it and she told him he didn't need him to "buy" her into anything. He screamed at her that she didn't understand, she was just a little piece in a bigger plan and she should just play her part. He threatened her, saying that if she stopped going out with him, she and her whole family would regret it. Then Gus slapped her.

Charlie was so angry when she read this, she could hardly hold the diary. Violet wrote that she went straight to principal Blackshore and reported Gus, but he did nothing. She called her father next. She wrote that her father promised to call Gus's family and then come and take her for the weekend, not for several weeks as principal Blackshore had said. And there was no mention of a family emergency. That was the end of her entries and Charlie placed the diary back into the drawer, put the key on the table, and left the dorm room.

She and Max went back to the cafeteria for dinner where Charlie told him everything she'd read in the diary.

"He slapped her!" Max said shocked.

"Can you believe that?"

"And Principal Blackshore didn't do anything?"

"Nothing."

"You're sure the diary said that she was leaving for the weekend? Not several weeks like the principal reported?"

"I'm sure."

"There is something strange going on." Max said. Just then, Gus walked into the cafeteria with his rugby team for dinner. "He should be expelled," he growled, glaring in Gus's direction.

Charlie stood up and started to make her way over.

"Stop," Max said, grabbing her arm.

"He hit Violet, and I wasn't there to help her."

"I understand, but it's not the time or the place. We won't get any answers about anything if you go over there now." Charlie sat back down, and Max looked at her intently. "I'll keep an eye on him and won't let him out of my sight. I promise."

Charlie nodded. She knew she could count on Max.

CHAPTER 7

GUS

It was late the next morning on Sunday, and Gus sat in his dorm room, slumped against the wall with a trashcan propped between his knees. He tore pages from a notebook and set each one on fire with a box of matches. The pages were notes from Violet. His roommate Patrick sat at his desk, trying to get his homework done.

"You'll get expelled for doing that."

"Shut up," Gus snapped, lighting another page.

"He's right, you could get expelled," a voice spoke from the doorway.

"Father!" Gus jumped up, dropping one of the flaming pages onto the floor. His father walked over and calmly stomped it out. His eyes did not leave his son.

"Patrick. Could you give me a moment with my son?"

"Of course, Mr. Panier." Patrick gathered up his books and left the room.

Mr. Panier had a commanding manner. He was dressed in a finely tailored but simple suit. His balding head gave away his age but every other aspect of his stature indicated a fit and very agile individual. He fixed his hazel eyes on Gus.

"Sit down."

"I didn't know you were in town," Gus stammered, sitting on his bed.

"I was passing through. It's a good thing after what principal Blackshore has told me."

"He called you a coward, father!"

"Did he?" Mr. Panier's eyebrows arched with interest.

“Not in those words exactly but he did threaten me. He said if anything happened to me you couldn’t do anything about it.”

“Oh.” His father seemed disappointed. “He would be right then.”

“I don’t understand,” Gus said, surprised. It was the first time he’d heard his father concede to anyone.

“You’re not supposed to understand, Gustave. You are supposed to follow orders as you were taught to do.”

“I am Father, but this isn’t what I signed up for. Pretending to be Violet’s boyfriend? It’s stupid. I don’t even like her. The sight of her every day makes me sick.”

“STOP YOUR WHINING!” his father bellowed.

Gus looked like he wanted to sink beneath the bedcovers.

“Whether you like it or not, you will do as you are told without question. The honor of the Panier name depends on it.” His father’s voice softened. “The safety of my only son depends on it.”

Gus looked up concerned. “Is everything alright? Are we in trouble?”

“Nar laga Mathair do lamh. All we can do is obey. Damn you, Morrigan.”

“What are you saying? And who is Morrigan?”

“May mother not weaken our hand, my son, and you do not need to know about Morrigan. Not yet.”

“I will do my best, Father.” Gus said trying to sound brave.

Mr. Panier placed his hand on Gus’s shoulder. “That is good, son. That is very good.”

Father and son stood with the afternoon light spilling down on them, casting strange, ominous shadows around the dorm room.

Max was keeping a close eye on Gus as promised, and stood outside his dormitory. He saw Gus's father arrive and leave and thought it unusual for Mr. Panier to come to the school. In the time Max had been at the Porte Academy, he'd only seen Gus's father drop him off at the beginning of the school year and he'd never seen Gus's mother.

Gus left the dormitory just as the sun was setting, jogging toward the trails that led through the woods surrounding campus. He was twice Max's size and he had to run fast not to lose him. As Gus rounded a bend ahead, Max followed but stopped short. Gus had disappeared.

The trail dead ended at an ancient looking tree. Max stood listening for footsteps but there were none. He walked to the tree, circling it several times, and was about to give up when his toe hit something hard sticking out of the ground. Max bent down and discovered the corner of a flat stone, like a manhole cover peeking from the grass. The earth looked disturbed around it as if it had been hastily hidden. He got a good grip on the edge and it lifted, making a soft popping sound to reveal a sloping tunnel leading beneath the tree. A faint light shone within.

Max slid downward, following the slope about fifteen feet underground. The glow from the light ahead made it possible for him to see and pick his way forward. Tree roots veined the walls and ground. The light grew stronger as he rounded first a bend to the left, then another to his right where he froze in his tracks. Gus was right in front of him. He was sitting on the tunnel floor trying to light a cigarette. The matches were damp and Gus was so intent on getting one to light that he didn't notice Max, who slipped back around the bend. A string of swearing and a

pile of damp matches finally produced one success and Gus lit his cigarette. Max waited, eyes watering, trying not to cough on the smoke, until finally Gus crushed out the cigarette and moved on.

The turns and twists multiplied. Gus seemed comfortable, as if he'd made this trip before. As Max followed, he couldn't help but notice the walls around him. Every inch was covered with spirals. From floor to ceiling, in the dirt, in the rock, on the roots. Someone had painstakingly carved spiral after spiral over everything. It was beautiful and strange and Max had never seen anything like it.

Gus stopped suddenly and pressed on the wall to his left. It opened and he disappeared through it. Max jumped forward, catching his foot in the doorway just before it closed. He slipped through and followed another slope to the surface. His head poked through to fresh air in the private gardens behind Principal Blackshore's residence. Max watched Gus disappear through the back door of the principal's house. He climbed out, placing the manhole shaped rock back over his exit, camouflaging the tunnels completely.

It was late, and Max shivered in his thin school shirt as he dashed across campus back to his dormitory. Charlie would be thrilled to know she had been right. Something was going on, but he couldn't shake the feeling that it was bigger than him. It was something much bigger than both of them. Max made a promise to himself, that he would protect Charlie. He would protect her no matter what the cost.

On Monday, Charlie didn't have time to meet up with Max before classes. She sat in professor Afadare's advanced mythology class, mesmerized by a story he read from one of his books called An Mor Eagothroime or The Great Imbalance.

Deep in the bowels of the Obsidian mountains ran twisted, ancient hallways tunneling for miles. They were formed thousands of years ago, during a civil war that split a great race into dark and light.

This was not the same dark and light associated with good and evil. Right and wrong were drawn differently in this place because its people followed the rules of Mother Nature. These were the rules of balance. Nothing given for free and nothing taken for free. Maintaining this equality of things meant keeping the flow of life and death as Mother Nature intended it to be. This was the way of their world, the way of the universe, and the way of all that existed.

Controversy began when Gabriel, a greatly respected and powerful ruler of these people, opened a doorway between his world and other worlds. It was forbidden, but he felt that his world had grown out of balance from being isolated for too long. His people needed new information and new influences. They needed new races to teach them things they didn't know.

There was disagreement over this doorway. Many of his people wanted to keep things the same and were offended by the suggestion that their old and powerful race had much to learn. One named Bedale exploited the opening of doorways. He preyed on the insecurities of his people by proselytizing the power of their race. He encouraged them to take what they wanted, whenever they wanted it and to ignore the laws of balance. His race grew greedy before his eyes, but Bedale did this because he was after the thrill of the unbalance. He craved the confusion

and weakness he caused in his own people by what he did. He was in control and he was manipulating fates. It was his addiction.

Bedale did not live long. His own daughter, Morrigan, killed him, thirsting for his wealth and power. More and more of Gabriel's people were corrupted and fought with each other. A great battle between the people of the old ways of balance and Bedale's ways of greed, was at hand. The Mor Eagothroime.

Both sides suffered miserably. The scales tipped from one side in the morning to the other side by the afternoon. They tipped for three days and many lost their chances at immortality until, on the third day, each side had an equal number of bruised, battered and dead. Not wanting any more bloodshed, Mother Nature decided to separate them. The ground shook and split open and a great jutting of mountains sprang from the crack and reached toward the sky. This was the Obsidian mountain range. Both sides fled in terror, leaving their dead and wounded at the foot of the mountains. It has been divided ever since. The twisted hallways that tunnel through those mountains were made by generations passing from one side to the next.

"What happened to Gabriel?" Charlie interrupted.

"I knew you would ask about him," replied the professor, "but we don't have time for that today." Books closed with thudding relief around the classroom. "I want papers on my desk by Friday dissecting this myth and how it applies to us and modern society."

Groans echoed from students filing out. Charlie stayed behind and told the professor about her meeting with principal Blackshore.

"He told me to stay out of Gus's way."

"A sound piece of advice, but why would you assume something has happened to Violet?"

"It's just a feeling."

"What do you mean?"

"A quivering feeling like an arrow being shot in the wrong direction."

"That's an interesting description. Do you get these sorts of 'feelings' often?"

"Ever since the dreams began."

"Dreams?"

She knew the professor would be interested. He talked often in class about how important dreams could be and about how many cultures believe that they are channels to other worlds or dimensions. He said that dreams could inspire us, warn us, or offer explanation of things we might not see or understand in our everyday lives. Charlie described the fantastical lands, images, and creatures to the professor, leaving out the parts about her mother. The images of her mother plagued her and were deeply painful to describe. She would be ready to talk about them at some point, just not now.

The professor listened intently and agreed that the dreams were probably fueled by his mythology lessons. He suggested that she write in a journal before bed to dismiss the images and fears of the day. After their talk, Charlie left to find Max and Afadare headed straight for the greenhouses to talk to Professor Oriel. He found him trimming a pack of tiny violets in one of the steamy glass structures, and told Oriel about Charlie's dreams.

"She is definitely nasctha," Professor Afadare said.

"Of course Charlie is linked. What did you expect, Micah?" Professor Oriel called his friend by his first name when they were alone.

"I expected her to be safe and protected while she is here. The poor child has been through enough."

"She is both safe and protected right now. Don't worry. Let her think that the dreams she is having are from your books. I warned you that reading those stories might open a channel for her."

"She has a right to her history. Her OTHER history, not just the human side."

"All races have their udar. Even ours, the sidhe, had its beginning long, long ago. Let this one grow."

"You sound like Gabriel."

"If only our old friend were here to speak to us himself. I miss him."

"As do I. I'll keep a close eye on Charlie and follow up on Violet's absence. There may be more to it. Should we osail an doras on the winter solstice?"

"We have sidhe who wish to come and go. The doorway will be opened as planned" replied Oriel.

Professor Afadare nodded and left the greenhouse. Oriel thought of his friend Gabriel and how much he missed him, as he continued his task of weeding out the dead leaves and buds on his violet plants to make room for new growth. He couldn't help but think that the weeding felt much like the way the human race was growing and learning. Though he had failed in helping his own race, the sidhe, he hoped that he could help this one grow in the right direction.

Meanwhile, Charlie had found Max in the corner of the school library. He told her about following Gus the night before and the mysterious tunnels underneath the school grounds. She told him about letting Professor Afadare in on her dreams.

"You know how the professor feels about dreams. Are they the same ones you had last year?"

Charlie nodded. "What did he say about your mother being in them?"

"I didn't tell him about her."

"Why not?"

"It hurts too much to talk about." Max nodded, understanding, as Charlie knew he would.

"So what next?" He asked.

"We figure out what Gus is up to and how the principal is involved."

"And Violet?"

"We wait until she comes back, then ask her about Gus. After what he did to her, there's no way she'd be caught dead near him."

CHAPTER 8

THE ROURKE

A few weeks later, as the principal had promised, Violet returned to school. Charlie spotted her in the cafeteria sitting next to Gus and ran over.

“Violet! You’re back! Are you alright? I’m sorry I pushed you away. I was hurt when you started seeing Gus and I was only thinking of myself. I never thought you might need me.”

Charlie scowled at Gus. "Come on. Why are you sitting next to this jerk?" She leaned down and took Violet's arm.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Violet pulled her arm from Charlie.

"You don't have to do this. He doesn't own you."

"I want to be with Gus."

"After he slapped you?"

"Slapped me? Gus never touched me."

"Who told you that?" Gus spoke angrily at Charlie.

“Violet, don't you remember anything I am telling you?"

“I think you’re just jealous of what Gus and I have."

Charlie stood with her mouth opening and closing. She didn't know what to say. It was as if Violet's memory had been erased in the time she was away from the academy. Gus leaned over and whispered something into Violet’s ear that sent her into a fit of giggles.

“Gus says you look like a fish out of water.”

“Didn’t I tell you to stay out of our business?” Gus glared at Charlie.

She looked at Violet for some response, but there was nothing. Her expression was blank.

"You wrote it all down in your diary."

"I don't have a diary." Replied Violet.

"You've always had a diary. Don't you remember?" said Charlie.

"What diary?" asked Gus alarmed.

"It doesn't matter. She doesn't know what she's talking about." Violet turned and looked at Charlie. "You better go."

"Yeah. Run away little wabbit," Gus jeered.

Violet giggled again, burying her head into his shoulder.

Charlie left the cafeteria as fast as she could to find Max. He was sitting at the edge of campus beneath an oak tree whose leaves had turned bright crimson.

"You should have seen the look on her face," Charlie told him. "She had no idea what I was talking about. It was like her memory was erased."

"How do you erase a person's memory?"

"It wasn't Gus. He was completely surprised when I mentioned a diary. I'm sure whoever is responsible covered their tracks and got rid of her diary. What should we do now?"

"We keep watching," replied Max. "Sooner or later, something is bound to happen."

For the following few weeks, it was business as usual with Gus, Violet, and Principal Blackshore. Charlie and Max busied themselves exploring the tunnels and researching information on the spirals. No one book gave information about them being part of a culture or religion and yet they found the pattern scattered in different stories and locations around the

globe. They stole twine from the greenhouses and used it to map the pathways beneath the ground and by Thanksgiving, they had discovered that the tunnels led to the principal's house, the greenhouses, the library, and the great lawn where the first light ceremony was held.

December came and winter settled in fast. Maine winters were long and cold, especially at the top of the mountain where the academy perched. Wind whipped through the campus, sneaking down hallways and into classrooms, sending sudden gusts of goose bumps in its path. Charlie and Max had to stop going into the tunnels. Every surface was coated with a thin layer of frost, making the spiraling designs sparkle like a million tiny diamonds, but the frigid air hung in cold sheets down there. Students packed the library and cafeteria looking for a common area to meet and study, so Max and Charlie moved into her workroom in the library to meet in private.

Christmas was coming and Charlie's father was to arrive on December 20th to spend the holiday with her on campus. That morning she sat in the library, reading from one of Professor Afadare's books as he graded midterms. She couldn't tear her eyes from the strange and terrible story she read titled "The Rourke."

And so he rode on the back of the giant, invisible creature. He could feel its desire to swing its fist down and squash him like the grains of sand on the beach it walked on. The creature's deep, rushing breaths came in and out, hot and labored. He had pushed the rourke for days across his land from one end to the other. He ate and slept on its steadily moving shoulders while not permitting one moment of rest for the creature.

The rourke didn't dare disobey him for fear of breaking the old order of things. It would push itself to death and never question why. It didn't understand that its world was changing. Its world was twisting and corrupting thanks to him. The rourke only obeyed the laws of balance. It was

too set in its ways over tens of thousands of years to understand when things were out of balance. It would never understand why he pushed it to near death. In its mind, it believed that the creature on its back would return the favor. That it would repay him equally for his efforts and sacrifice. That it would maintain balance.

He never intended to do any of that. As ancient as his race was, every creature in his world was new to the ways of deceit. The rourke was loyal to Mother Nature and it believed through the marrow of its bones that its Mor Mathair, its Great Mother, would protect it.

He laughed out loud over the ragged breaths of the rourke beneath him. He laughed at himself for being so stupid for so long. Why hadn't he seen it sooner? He laughed at the potential of his future and how much power he could have. For how long? Who knew? Maybe his people would learn quicker than he thought, but probably not. The old laws of balance scared them too much. They would let themselves go extinct before questioning the plan of the Mor Mathair and their role in it. He might not take it to that point, but he would come close. They deserved it for being so stupid.

He was so lost in thought, he didn't notice the breaths of the rourke growing shallower until the shoulders of the creature lurched and he was thrown forward into the invisible, tangly mess that was its hair. He hadn't paid attention and pushed it too far. It was going to die.

No matter. He would find another to ride and be gentler—or not. He grabbed his sack and slid down the back of the giant. His people had been riding this species for as long as he could remember so he knew exactly how to dismount it without getting crushed. His feet hit the ground and he stretched, looking out over the blue expanse of the ocean, teeming with creatures.

An anguished cry echoed behind him. The rourke was dying. He turned, not wanting to miss this. The creatures were invisible. He had heard stories about what they looked like, but their identity remained a mystery until death. Since they were immortal, it was rare that the Great Mother unbalanced things enough for one of them to die. But HE had unbalanced things this time and now he was going to relish it.

He felt the ground shake as the creature fell to its knees, digging craters ten feet into the sand. Its body followed and he watched as the ground sunk a half a mile long under its weight. The air shimmered like a mirage as the rourke's death rattle shook off any last magic that kept it invisible. Then he saw it and was shocked to see how beautiful the creature was before. It was white like clouds. Shimmery and ethereal. Its hair was soft and long and spilled white down over its shoulders. He was surprised to see that it was a female.

"Were they all female?" he wondered.

The story abruptly ended here. Charlie couldn't help but think that the description of the rourke was much like the figures she'd seen in the tapestry.

"It's like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and he's the serpent who's come to corrupt innocence."

"No," Professor Afadare corrected her. "Adam and Eve had no responsibility. They lived in Eden, blissfully oblivious to all that was taken care of for them. When the serpent tempted Eve in that story, it was like giving candy to a baby that didn't know any better. Adam and Eve were told not to disobey, when they didn't understand what it was to disobey. They did not gain knowledge until after they were thrown out of Eden. The race and creatures of the land you read about had a great understanding of rules and responsibility. They were wise and just. Who you

read about was not the tempter, but more like a spoiled child who just wanted to break the rules to see what would happen. He didn't care or understand what the consequences would be."

"Who is he anyhow? Does he have a name?"

"His name is Bedale. You've heard of him in one of our stories in class about An Mor Eagothroime or The Great Imbalance."

"Are there other stories about him?"

"For another time." The professor took the book and put it into his bag.

Charlie sat for a moment, pondering what he told her. The story disturbed her though she knew it wasn't real. She couldn't get the death of that beautiful, giant creature out of her mind. It seemed senseless and unfair. The dark-haired librarian, Ms. Umbrale, came down the staircase toward Charlie. She carried a slip of paper.

"Ms. Chapel. This note was delivered for you."

It was a note from her father. He'd been delayed by weather and would be a day late. She stared at the paper suddenly feeling upset. Why was she feeling this way? She folded the paper and tucked it into her notebook.

"Are you alright?" The professor sat behind his desk with the librarian standing next to him. They looked like a pair of concerned parents.

"It's nothing. My dad is going to be a day late."

Ms. Umbrale, who had always been kind to Charlie, reached over and patted her hand.

"I'm sure your father misses you very much and will be here as soon as he can." Charlie managed a weak smile.

"I must be off, Ms. Umbrale, would you accompany me?" Spoke the professor.

Charlie's smile grew as the pair walked away. They made a cute couple. Rumors flew around the school about the librarian and professor being involved, but they'd never been proven. Seeing the two of them together, Charlie was certain there was something going on.

CHAPTER 9

THE DOORWAY

Charlie wandered down the school hallways later that afternoon. She watched as dust swirled in lazy, spiraling circles in the beams of the afternoon light and she was reminded of the tunnel patterns. She shifted her gaze to the potted plants lining the window in the teachers' lounge. The plants didn't seem to care that there was one pane of glass between them and the certain cold death outside. Their rich, green leaves budded out and soaked up the wintery sun. Charlie leaned in closely and could see the same spiraling pattern repeating itself in the plants' leaves. She held her hand up, letting the light shine through the thin membranes of her fingers. They glowed red from her blood and there, too, she thought she saw the spiraling pattern being pulled and pushed by the beating of her heart.

She suddenly felt like she was on the verge of a great discovery or a great re-discovery, as if she'd known it all before and long ago. It was not the first time she'd had this feeling and it always overwhelmed her. Charlie felt that strange pull in her gut like in her dreams. She turned her gaze from the plants in the teachers' lounge and back into the hall. The beams of light were disappearing as night closed in. Everything was drowning in shadows. Her heart beat quickly and she felt like something was watching her.

"Mea. Me Inion. Balance. My daughter," a wind blew down the hallway whispering to her. Her breath froze. She walked quickly toward the exit, terrified to look behind her. What if she saw that horrible face with the black eyes from her dream? Pulling on the exit doors, she was hit with a blast of winter wind.

“Mea. Balance,” the voice in the wind said again. She gasped from the cold and wasn’t sure if the goosebumps on her arms had been there before or after the wind hit her. She ran across campus and away from the whispers toward her dormitory, leaving powdery, spiraling tracks in the snow.

Charlie couldn’t wait to bury herself deep in the covers of her bed. She burst into her dorm room, kicking off her boots and dropping her jacket on the floor.

“Are you going to pick that up?” Rebecca complained, looking up from painting her toenails. Rebecca’s parents decided to spend the holiday traveling that year, and they did not take her with them, which meant Charlie was stuck with her. Charlie ignored her and headed for her bed, pulling the covers over her head.

“I’m going to dinner. Are you coming?”

“I’m not hungry,” Charlie grumbled.

The door clicked shut and she was alone. She curled up, humming a lullaby her mother used to sing to her, before drifting off into welcome sleep where she began to dream.

“Failte Inion. Ta Me Mathair. Welcome, my daughter. I am your mother.”

The words rang in the air as Charlie flew over the horizon like a bird skimming the surface of a lake. The horizon stretched, rippling and dark before curving like the outside of a great Christmas ornament. She followed it as it bent into a circle that hummed as its end snapped together with its beginning. Once this happened, she was released from its hold and could fly out and away. Looking down, more lines protruded from the great circle, shooting like rays out of a dark sun. She could see a faint outer shell far off where the line ended and she sped toward it. It joined a second circle and she flew along it. More spikes met the outer circle and she saw that it

was a great, cosmic wheel connected and originating from the same source. She felt like this was the source of the pull in her stomach. She felt that she had been here before. She felt like she knew every inch, every bit of this wheel as if she had a hand in its creation. She looked up from the line and out into the darkness where she saw something that took her breath away. A hundred, a thousand, a million other wheels were dotting the blackness of the universe like sparks from the ancient fire of life and matter. She veered away and flew out to visit them, knowing that they were her family. Infinite, everlasting, and beckoning her to join them.

Charlie woke and sat up in bed with her stomach growling. She had slept through dinner. Rebecca was fast asleep, snoring on the other side of the room. Everything was gray and quiet when suddenly a flash like lighting came through the window, projecting the bony shadows of tree branches onto the walls. With the flash, came a calling. Her mother! Another set of flashes and another set of strong feelings that her mother was close. She got up and peered out the window over the campus, scanning the darkened library and classroom buildings for the source of the light. It flashed again from the greenhouses. Charlie pulled on her shoes and a jacket and headed out to investigate.

The cold air on her brow made her instantly alert as she walked across the lawn toward the greenhouses. Thick blinds were drawn over all of the side windows to help keep in the warmth and the only way to see in was through the glass roof. Charlie circled the building, looking for a way up. She saw a ladder and climbed, perching herself at the edge of the roof and peering in.

Vines hung on the walls and the thick broad leaves of plants spread throughout the greenhouse. She caught movement beneath the leaves and leaned over further, cupping her hands to get a better look. At that moment, there was a sudden flash so bright that it lit up the

greenhouse like a giant x-ray and blinded her. She snapped up, blinking to get her eyesight back, when something that felt like a large lizard scurried out of an open roof panel and across her hand. She wouldn't have been so startled if she weren't blinded and if the lizard-like creature hadn't spoken to her as it went by.

"We've seen you," it said in a voice that smelled and sounded like rotten wood.

Charlie screamed and lost her balance. She whipped about on the top of the ladder for a moment, her arms cartwheeling backwards before she regained her balance enough to fall forward. Her hands and upper body hit the glass panels, and she slid through the opening like a seal into water. She fell with light all around her as the leaves and vines slapped her arms and face. Charlie squeezed her eyes shut and braced for the impact of the greenhouse floor below.

On the other side of campus, Max couldn't sleep. He'd gone to dinner earlier looking for Charlie, but when he didn't see her he came back to the dorm, not wanting to sit alone. His nightmares were back but now they weren't just about his parents. Max dreamed of Charlie's world filled with the things she'd described to him. He dreamed of traveling through her lands, then out, flying like some great cosmic bird across the universe to other places Charlie never mentioned. In these parts of his dreams, he felt free and with purpose. He could follow the pathways of molecules through the universe, to where they were and what they had become. He felt like he had control over them because he knew their true names. It was an immense power but it didn't scare him. What scared him was the feeling that he could lose himself. The more he flew, the more he was scattered, and worst of all, the more he couldn't protect Charlie.

Max stared out of his dormitory window, wondering about these new feelings that had awakened in his dreams. He watched the wind kick snow into swirling circles across campus and it reminded him of the tunnels. He felt the sudden urge to visit them. Maybe he could sort through his thoughts better down there. He pulled on warm clothes, packed a flashlight, and sneaked down the back stairs and outside. Wind and bits of snow stung his face. He dashed to the center of the great lawn, kneeling down to search the earth for the shallow indentation that marked the covers leading to the tunnels. He found it and pulled, thinking it would be frozen tight. To his surprise, the cover popped open. Max slipped into the dark hole and it snapped shut behind him. He drew his flashlight and started walking. The tunnels were cold and his breath came out in thick white puffs, but it felt good to wander. He ran his hands along the spiraled walls until they grew numb from the cold, rough surface. He walked past the door that led to the headmaster's house, then past the library entrance, continuing through the turns and the twists, not caring where he ended up.

A bright flash suddenly lit up the tunnel, blinding him. It flashed again, making every root and rock lining the tunnel walls show up like an x-ray. Max noticed that the door leading to the greenhouses seemed to be the source of the light. He pushed through and his head popped up into Professor Oriel's office which was attached to the greenhouse.

The warm humid air of the greenhouse felt cloying after the cold, quiet air in the ground. He squinted through the darkness and into the dense foliage, letting his gaze wander up until it rested on to the roof. He caught his breath in surprise. Somebody was up there. He was about to yell out when the flash hit again. The face on the roof screamed. It sounded like Charlie.

Squinting through the intense light, Max saw the figure land on the glass panels and slip through the opening to the greenhouse below. It was Charlie and she was going to fall. He leaped into action, reaching out to grab the doorknob, but it vanished in front of him and he pitched forward onto the floor. Had he done that? Max looked up and saw Charlie fall into the light. He realized he wasn't going to make it. He wasn't going to be able to protect her.

The light diminished and Max was able to break the door open.

"Charlie! It's me. Max. Are you hurt? Can you hear me?" He tore through the foliage with vines and leaves slapping his face. "Where are you?" he called but there was no answer. Max scoured every inch of the greenhouse before sliding to the ground exhausted. The only sound was his ragged breaths and beating heart. Charlie had disappeared.

Max sat there, trying to get his head around what he'd seen and what he was going to do next. He thought about the doorknob and how he'd watched it dissipate into thin air. It was like the dreams he was having, as if the matter that made the doorknob was broken apart and scattered. Maybe it had something to do with Charlie's disappearance? Maybe it had to do with his dreams? For now, it wasn't important. He had to find Charlie.

Max scoured the campus in search of her but she was nowhere to be found. His mind raced trying to think of who he could turn to. He could see a glow coming from the school library and knew he would have to trust Professor Afadare. He didn't know what he was going to tell him, but he knew that Charlie would want the professor to be the first to know if anything happened. He headed across campus toward the library.

That evening, Professor Afadare sat, as he often had over the years, beneath the staircase with his nose poked deep into an ancient journal. If you were to open that journal, you would find nothing, for each word he wrote would sink into the paper and disappear. There he sat peacefully reading and recording, when he received a piece of news he never thought he'd get in his lifetime. An elaborate red script appeared on the page within the journal.

"THAINIG D' SL."

"She has come," he murmured before letting out a howl of despair and falling backward from his chair in a faint. Hearing his cry, Ms. Umbrale came racing down the staircase to find him out cold on the floor.

"Micah!" Hearing his first name instantly woke him.

"Eiridh tunn air uisge balbh," he said, wiping his brow with the handkerchief from his breast pocket.

"What do you mean a wave will rise on quiet water?" asked Ms. Umbrale.

"Get me the book of Rye. I need to read the Tuar. The prophecy will tell us." He pulled at a chain hanging around his neck to reveal the tiniest of gold keys and handed it to Umbrale.

"It's too soon. It can't be happening already, can it?" she asked him.

"Mo run, my love," he replied, placing a gentle hand on her cheek, "For the sake of all of us, I hope not. Now hurry and let no one see what you are doing."

Tears sprang up in her eyes before she turned and left the library.

A short time later, Max pulled on the heavy front door to the library and ran into the book rooms and toward the staircase where he knew the professor would be working.

“I’m sorry to bother you Professor, but something’s happened. Something’s happened to Charlie.”

Professor Afadare looked up from his desk and the ancient journal. He peered at Max with his blue eyes the color of a sea in a storm, and knew that Max had seen the opening of the doorway.

“Please.” The professor gestured to a chair next to him. “Have a seat.”

“We can’t just sit here. We have to find her. We have to help her.”

Professor Afadare fixed him with a steady gaze and walked over. His blue eyes looked a thousand years old.

“Do you remember the lessons of mythology I taught you?” Max nodded. “It was more history than mythology. It was the history of my people.” Before Max had a chance to react, Professor Afadare laid a hand on his shoulder. “I can’t explain, but I can show you.”

Max was no longer in the library. He was standing in a place where the bluest of blue skies met with the greenest of green grass on a horizon that stretched for miles. Gray mountains with glassy, black peaks jutted up in the distance and a wondrous maroon forest hugged the base of them. He hardly had time to take in what he was seeing before images started playing out against the landscape. It looked like the tapestry he and Charlie found in the basement, but everything was teeming and alive around him. People lived in this world, but of a race he didn't recognize. They were human-looking but with those black eyes Charlie described. The images started to speed up. An entire civilization was built before him. He watched the strange race construct whole realms, govern their people, and tame the creatures that roamed their planet. He watched

as deception and greed seeped into their great culture and rotted it. War broke out and divided them. Max watched in horror as the war played out with more and more suffering and death flashing in front of him until he could stand it no longer.

"STOP!" he cried out.

Max was back in the library with Professor Afadare and Umbrale. They stood together staring at him. They blinked, and for one moment their eyes turned black before changing back to their normal colors.

"We are called the sidhe or faerie in your language. What you have just seen is our world, the First Land or Cead Talamh. Charlie has fallen into the middle of it and is in great danger. We must work together to help her."

Max walked numbly over to the professor's desk and sat down. It seemed impossible and yet he knew it was the truth. Everything began to make sense. The hidden places around the school, the tapestry, the strange language and carved figures. It was all real. What made sense most of all to Max was that he had a purpose in it. It was clear that Charlie was his purpose. She always had been. He loved her and his purpose was to be there for her and protect her.

"What must I do?" Max asked the professor.

"Be strong and brave and everything will be OK."

They were the same words Max's Aunt Lucinda had told him so many years ago. Ms. Umbrale put a hand on his shoulder and the three of them bent over the book of Rye. They read of the history between the human and faerie races with an intricate overlay of prophecies that had happened and were yet to happen. They read through the night, heads pressed together, until the sun spilled through the windows and scattered rainbows across the library.

CHAPTER 10

CEAD TALAMH

Charlie fell, waiting to hit the greenhouse floor, but it never happened. Her eyes snapped open to find the greenhouse had disappeared and a gelatinous material was cushioning her. She had no trouble breathing as it quivered around her, holding fast. She wasn't sure how much time had passed before she was pressed through a membrane, like surfacing out of water, and found herself lying on grass in a completely foreign land.

With her first breath, Charlie coughed and closed her watering eyes as her head spun. The air was perfectly clear and clean, pungent with the smells of grass and earth. She stood up and looked around. Colors jumped out, so bright and rich that she had to squint. A brilliant blue sky met with green grass that stretched for miles. Mountains with glassy, black peaks jutted in the distance and a maroon forest rimmed the base of them. She should have felt overwhelmed and afraid but she wasn't. She knew this place. She didn't know why, but she felt it in her bones. It was the same familiar feeling the tapestry gave her. Her senses adjusted as she noticed that there was plenty of light and the temperature was comfortable, but there was no sun, and no wind. The only movement was her hands, swinging lightly back and forth across her thighs. She looked out toward the mountains and felt that unmistakable pull from her dreams.

She started off toward them, feeling unusually confident and changed, as if she'd finally been planted in the right soil and given the chance to grow when suddenly, the ground shivered beneath her feet. She jumped back as a boy about her age was being birthed through the grass and out of the gelatinous tunnel that had carried her earlier. He had olive skin and dark eyes and

looked like a prince dressed in delicately patterned and stitched silks. He wore an orange wrap on his head and gold bracelets lined his arms. He jumped up from the ground, coughing and gasping on the crisp air, as she had.

"Where am I? What is this place?" he stuttered.

"I was hoping you would know."

"Who are you?" He backed away from Charlie.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"Do you know who I am?"

"I'm sorry, I don't. I fell into this place like you did."

The boy reared up and clicked his heels. "I am Alhummud Abdeslam Mustaf the Third. Son of King Mustaf and only heir to the throne of Al Jalid." He bowed deeply.

"My name is Charlie. Charlie Arannia Chapel." She bowed back.

"Can you bring me back to my home?"

"I'm not sure where your home is. I've never heard of it but I feel like I have been here before and I know my way around." Charlie pointed toward the mountains in the distance. "I was going in that direction before you arrived. If we get to higher ground, we may be able to see where we are."

"It is a good idea."

The prince brushed himself off and they started walking across the landscape.

"I could get back to The Porte Academy." Spoke Charlie.

"I've never heard of this place" said Alhummud.

"I'm not surprised. It's a small school on the coast of Maine."

"I've never heard of this place either."

"Maine? It's a state." Alhumud shrugged. "In the United States?" Alhumud shrugged again. "Of America?" He looked at her blankly. "Where did you say you were from?"

"Al Jalid, the capital kingdom of the eastern hemisphere."

"What country?"

"I don't know this word."

"English is not your first language?"

"I speak Arrigeon."

"I've never heard of Arrigeon."

"You are speaking to me in Arrigeon right now."

"I'm speaking English. I have no idea how to speak your language."

"Are we on Madune?" Alhumud asked, blanching.

"Madune? What is that?"

"My planet."

"Your planet? This is Earth. We are on planet Earth."

"Are you sure about that?"

Charlie looked around, noticing the odd colors and smells. She stared at the sky, trying to find the sun and turned her head to find the wind, but neither was there. Charlie dropped to the grass in shock.

"A different planet? That's impossible. How can I feel like I've been here before?"

"How can we understand one another?"

"It doesn't make any sense," Charlie replied, gazing in awe around her.

"What should we do?" Alhumud paced, growing more panicked.

"Stick to the plan to get to higher ground. We should be safe there."

"Safe? Safe from what?"

"I don't know. But if we get higher, we can see more of what we might be facing."

"Agreed." Alhumud nodded nervously and they resumed walking.

After several hours, they discovered that the mountain range was farther than it looked. They were both tired, hungry, and thirsty. Alhumud flopped onto the grass while Charlie scanned the horizon for any signs of life. Her eyes caught movement.

"I saw something." She pointed to a knoll in the distance. There was a black flicker. They walked to the spot, which looked like a regular hill, and searched the grass with their hands until Charlie's hit something. She dug her fingers into a groove and pulled. A tiny door, much like the ones leading to the tunnels at the academy, swung open with a pop and revealed a warm, black interior. Charlie poked her head in and was hit by the earthy rot she'd smelled on the creature that startled her at the greenhouse. She took a deep breath and lowered herself into the hole. Her feet found the bottom and her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

"It's safe."

Alhumud lowered in and dropped to the ground. The moment he did this, the tiny door snapped shut and they were in complete darkness.

"Can you see anything?" Charlie whispered.

"No, can you?"

"I'm going to try to find a way to open the door again. You stay here."

Charlie stepped through the dark with her arms outstretched in front of her. She found the walls and searched for a latch or button that would reopen the door. Feeling a root, she followed it with her fingers up over a knotty section when suddenly something slapped her hand. She cried out.

The sound of a match being struck came from the opposite side of the hole. A flame licked in a hearth dug into the hillside. As the flame grew, it cast shadowy light on the surroundings and its inhabitants. Charlie's eyes widened as Alhumud backed up slowly to stand next to her.

"What are they?" he whispered.

A hundred or more creatures were staring straight at them. They were of various shapes and sizes-some Charlie's height, some the size of a cat and others no larger than a lizard. Their faces were human-like but with different features. Some had large pointy ears covered in hair like a fox. Some had fangs. Some had snake scales covering a part of their face or body. There were creatures that looked like they were partially composed of rock or bark. Moss and lichen could be seen growing with their hair. They were as different among each other as a crowd of humans would be. But they all shared one trait. The eyes. They were shiny and black, like beetles. The creatures sat on stools and around tables fashioned out of the roots, rocks, and earth of the hillside. Like cats, they perched perfectly still, staring with their black eyes at Charlie and Alhumud. Alhumud stepped forward and made a low bow. His bracelets clinked together along his arms and, like crows to a shiny object, the creatures turned their eyes and cocked their heads to the sound.

“My name is Alhumud and this is my companion, Charlie. We have walked a long way across your land and are hungry and thirsty. Could you help us? We would be grateful to your kindness.”

“We are sidhe," they hissed in unison. “You are in our sidhein.”

“Do you have something to tradail?” a voice piped out from the group. "What will you trade us for food and water?"

"I don't have anything" spoke Alhummad.

"Those bells will do nicely." A separate voice that sounded like two rocks being scraped together spoke from the corner.

“Bells?” Alhummad asked.

One of the sidhe about the size of a cat, with long pointed ears, and lichen- like green hair to its shoulders, pointed to the bracelets on Alhummad’s arms.

“These are the birth right of a prince” He said, holding out his arm. You may not have them.”

Hisses of disappointment echoed throughout room. Charlie leaned over.

“It looks like it’s not going to matter. If you don’t agree, they may just be taken from you.”

She gestured to the group that looked as if they were going to pounce.

“It’s settled then. One of my bells for food and water.” Alhummad announced.

A ripple of discussion made its way around the room before falling silent.

“Very well. One bell for a bag of food and a water stick.” The rocky voice replied.

Alhumud removed his bracelet and held it out. A single sidhe, the size of a lizard, emerged, carrying a lumpy bag and a wooden staff. The items were much larger than the creature, but it carried them with ease, prompting Charlie to think that either it was very strong or the items

themselves were very light. It dropped the bag at their feet and snatched the gold bracelet before scurrying back with the treasure.

The door popped open and a shaft of light showed them the way out. She picked up the bag and groaned under its weight. Apparently, the small sidhe was much stronger than it looked, which made her glad that they had not upset it. She heaved the pack onto her back and the two of them crawled out. As Charlie pulled herself from the hole, she looked back. The sidhe, in one big massive rush, were jumping and crawling toward the one that held the bracelet. In a maddened frenzy, they pounced on the poor thing, which let out a blood-curdling yell before the door closed and the world above was completely quiet.