



Kin (Tales of Beauty and Madness)

By Lili St. Crow

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Lili St. Crow is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Strange Angels series for young adults and the Dante Valentine series, among others, for adults. She is also the author of *Nameless* and *Wayfarer*, the first two books in the Tales of Beauty and Madness trilogy. She lives in Vancouver, Washington, with her family. Visit lilistcrow.com to find out more.

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PROLOGUE:

SHORTCUTS

TWO DARK-HAIRED YOUNG MEN, LEANING ON EACH other as if drunk. One of them reels, retching and coughing, the other makes soft soothing noises. There is a faint gleam—something silver, plucked from the drunkard's pocket. He grabs for it, almost topples, and his helper speaks softly.

This is a small town, and the train is waiting. The two have twenty minutes before the train is resealed and plunges through the Waste, flora and fauna both Twisted from stagnant and wild Potential. Sometimes a train derails, other times, things attack the metal intrusion. So far, though, this journey has been uneventful.

There is an alley close to the station. Its shadowed mouth swallows both young men. The darkness is complete, except for a few faint gleams—silver, again. A swaying, a sharp arc of brilliance. A meaty, thudding sound.

When a young man boards the train later, he looks faintly troubled. But he has plenty of time to reach his sleeper compartment, and is settled on a wide, comfortable seat folded down into a bed when the whistle blows, a high piercing demand. Layers of charm seal the train again, and anyone left behind for any reason has to stay in this small town. To leave anywhere, you must pay for a fresh ticket. And a new indemnity, in case the Waste eats the train.

Or worse.

Steam billows. Cinders fall, dirty snow, and the metal beast heaves forward.

Afterward, the station is deserted. The town slumbers, too small for its sleep to be troubled by the problems of cities—urban cores full of slopping-over Potential, a Waste of its own. There was always the small, remote chance that the Waste might move in, and swallow the town whole. The next train to come through could well encounter a wilderness, its walls shattered and its buildings jumbled, its inhabitants no longer draining off Potential to restore their surroundings to normality.

Around the station, unTwisted trees planted beside ruler-straight sidewalks rustle, their thin branches shaken by a hot wind from the Waste as a maggot-cheese moon rises higher in an uncaring sky.

The train's whistle, in the distance, is a lonely, mournful song.

PART I:

INTO THE WOODS

ONE

NEW HAVEN RECLINED UNDER THICK SUNSHINE AND fluffy cotton-wool clouds, isolated trees turning to autumn flames early this year. The rest were still that peculiar darkening green they wore right before dressing up for Dead Harvest.

Less than a week of freedom between the end of summer classes and the beginning of the last year at St. Juno's, which meant that if you wanted to have some fun you had to grab it with both hands. It was even better when you had friends to help with the grabbing and pulling.

Which sort of explained why Ruby de Varre was sitting cross-legged on her Semprena's still-warm bonnet, at the park on top of Haven Hill, completely alone. Summer was stuttering to a stop, so it was still warm in the sunshine, but here under a huge spreading oak tree that probably predated the Reeve there was an edge to the breeze. This tree hadn't started turning yet, still green and vital, the sound of its leaves rubbing against each other a snakescale whisper.

Cami and Ellie had both promised to meet her at Stellar's to get milkshakes before figuring out how best to waste this pretty nice day together. After fifteen with no sign of either she'd bailed, because who had time to wait around with so little summer left?

That just meant she was up here all alone, staring at New Haven spread out below the Hill like a fresh banquet in front of a glutton too stuffed to eat another bite. All that excitement, all that life pulsing under the ribbons of pavement, from the blighted core to the Moving Wall that separated city from Waste . . . and here she was, in jeans and a red tank top instead of school uniform but nobody to talk to. Nothing to *do*.

Maybe she could have stayed and waited.

Why bother, though? Ellie was always on about *Avery* this and *Avery* that, and talking about the scholarships lined up with the help of the Fletcher charm-clan. Her Potential had settled and her stepmother'd been shipped off to a kolkhoz, and that was just fine by Ruby on both counts, but every other word coming out of Ellie's mouth was about the boyfriend nowadays.

At least Cami didn't talk about Nico much, but she'd been even quieter than usual lately, something about etiquette among the Seven. The Families ruled New Haven but continually jostled each other, and there was some slight or another that required some diplomacy and extra gatherings. Of course, Cami as *la Vultusina* had to organize a few of them as neutral ground. So she was always looking off in the distance, probably worrying about caterers or how to keep Family members from drawing any blood.

Literally.

Ruby sighed, leaning back on her hands. The smell of hot earth, the tang of the trees beginning to turn, exhaust from engines throbbing all through New Haven, pollen, cut grass somewhere. If her nose had begun to tingle, she could follow it and find some fun.

There was just no fun to be scented today.

She couldn't even bask, because she'd parked in the shade, as usual. Cami didn't complain about sunshine, but why take chances, right? Now that Cami was . . . whatever she was, with Nico Vultusino finally stepping up and sharing his family's, well, *peculiarities* with her, she liked to keep out of the sun's eye. *I'm not going to c-combust*, she'd said, trying to explain it to Ruby. *It's just . . . uncomfortable*.

So parking in the shade made her more comfortable, and Ruby was in the habit of caring about things like that.

She squinted, and could barely see, in the hazy distance, the gray bulk of St. Juno's. Just yesterday she'd squeaked through the High Charm Calculus final, mostly thanks to Ell's patient tutelage and a healthy dose of luck. That caught her up after all the skipping; Mother Heloise had called all three of them into her office and told them to stay out of trouble in the upcoming year.

Last year of high school. Which meant the last year before she had to Take Responsibility. Oh, there was Ebermerle Charmcollege to attend, but a Woodsdowne girl had Duties when she turned eighteen. To the clan, to the kin, to the world. As Gran was always reminding her.

You could grow into anything, given enough time. It wasn't Gran's fault Ruby was lagging.

She sighed again, shaking her head, and hopped off the Semprena's glossy blackness. Her key ring jangled as she spun it around one finger, and she caught herself grimacing. Most of her summer wasted, and her two best friends standing her up. Fifteen minutes wasn't forever, but still. It was the principle of the thing, that was all.

No, it's not. It's the collaring.

The thought stopped her in her tracks. She stared up at the oak's whispering leaves. Her skin itched a little, all over. A few deep breaths and that deep persistent scratching faded.

Gran couldn't have meant it, could she? Collaring was for kin who couldn't control themselves, not for girls who didn't do what their grandmothers wanted. Right?

I should collar you, to save you from yourself. Gran's mouth a thin line, the disapproval emanating from her in waves. All because Ruby had wanted to dance out the door without doing the dishes, and moaned theatrically when Gran called it to her attention.

Well, maybe that wasn't quite it. She'd moaned, and stamped into the kitchen, and accidentally bumped a coffee mug into the sink. Where it shattered, and Gran maybe thought Ruby had done it deliberately?

You cannot control yourself!

It wasn't fair. She had *plenty* of control. To prove it, Ruby put her hand out into the sunlight, past the dappled leafshade. Concentration made a knot behind her forehead, and the smells around her became sharper, more vivid, bursting in through her nose and painting pictures.

The rippling under her skin intensified. Like little mice, *mus*, the root word for *muscles*. A stippling, and a few scattered, fine golden-rust hairs sticking up.

Not quite painful, more like a stinging sunburn, the spots of fluid moving shade farther up her forearm a shielding coolness, twitching against her nerves.

Her nails lengthened, translucent tips hardening. Wicked-sharp, her wrist bulging oddly on one side as her

hand became something . . . different.

Ruby exhaled, sharply, and forced it down. There were prickles of sweat along her lower back and under her arms, despite the breeze. Easy-peasy. Nothing to it.

She wasn't even *angry*. Well, maybe a little, but that—

The cramps hit, right below her ribs. Ruby doubled over, denying the dry-heaving, shoving the sensation away. It was dangerous to shift partway, because everything in you would cry out for release.

Stray curls fell in front of her face, their red-gold burnished by more sunshine, because she'd stepped out in the full flood of it. The stinging all over her drove her into a crouch, and her palms met warm pavement with a jolt. It was work to tip her face up, her closed eyes filling with rufescent glow, lips skinned back from teeth. Finally, breath coming fast and hard, she levered herself back up and examined her hands.

Tanned, and human. She was Woodsdowne rootfamily, she was kin, and she was in control. Gran couldn't mean what she'd said about collaring Ruby to calm her down.

Except Gran rarely said things she didn't mean. *Rarely* was something of an understatement. It was more like, well, *never*.

Ruby swore, softly, and picked up her keys. There was nothing to do and nowhere sounded interesting.

Might as well go home.

• • •

"I'm *heeeere*!" The door to the garage banged shut, and Ruby prance-galloped through the utility room as if she was six again. She danced into the living room, the tapestry with a charmer's sun-and-moon whispering as its threads shifted, the sun's broad smile turned knowing and friendly. Every chair and couch was overstuffed, and the place would have looked cluttered if not for Gran's ruthless organization. Everything had a place, and there were boxes and baskets and dishes to hold *everything*. Gran did her active charming in a workroom off her downtown office, but she charmed at home, too. So there were the sealed bottles of charmahol and sylph-ether in the utility room, and jars containing small things—feathers, bones, brass discs, other tiny items that could hold a charge of Potential or finished charm.

Everything was jewel toned, but the shades were dark and restful. Royal blue, deep hunter green, accents of gold and thin threads of crimson, everything placed just-so.

Gran was in front of the fireplace, just straightening and brushing her hands as if to rid them of noxious dust. Crackling Potential limned her—the kin didn't often throw high-powered charmers, but she was one of them. Oh, sure, every kin *could* charm a little, especially since the Reeve, but not like Gran. She could probably even set Ellie back on her heels, and Ell was a prodigy.

For a moment Gran's gray eyes glowed with their own internal light, and her parchment hair, braided and pinned with ruthless precision, caught the radiance of the tall bronze lamps with their rice-paper shades. Afternoon sun pouring through the wide front windows almost seemed to go *through* her, despite the cheerful colors of her dragon-patterned housedress.

Edalie de Varre, who controlled import and export through the Waste outside New Haven, wrinkled her aristocratic nose slightly as Ruby came to a skidding halt before her and dropped a tolerable curtsy.

“Good afternoon, Granmere.” Cheerfulness dripped from every syllable, the camouflage old and comfortable as a pair of worn trainers. “Charming as always, I see.” The air around them both rippled with Potential, waves Ruby could almost-see, the smells of hay and fur and food comforting and familiar. There was beef under a defrost-charm in the kitchen, one corner of the High Charm Calc equation unknotted so the temperature would equalize swiftly, shaking off ice and keeping the meat safe. Maybe Gran planned stew or stir-fry tonight.

Gran’s mouth twitched. On another person, it would have been a fleeting expression, too small to be seen, but on her it was loud as a shout. Ruby, relieved at this sign of forgiveness, threw her arms around the older woman and hugged—gently. Gran wasn’t fragile, by *any* stretch of the imagination . . . but still.

Edalie patted Ruby’s tangled hair. “Good afternoon, child. I was experimenting with live flame and a Beaudrell’s charm.”

“Ellie would know if that’s a good thing or not.” Ruby shut her eyes for a moment, breathing in safety and comfort. There was a black ribbon of burning, the thread stitching together every other scent that made up *home*. That was funny; a Beaudrell’s charm was supposed to be odorless.

“You should know too.” Gran didn’t sound precisely disappointed, but it was close.

I do know. It’s not a good idea, but if you’re an active and experienced charmer, you can escape having it blow up and singe your eyebrows. “How am I going to be a disappointment to the entire clan if I know things like that?” The instant it was out of her mouth she regretted it, but said was said.

Gran’s hand merely paused before continuing. “Is that your goal?”

Don’t be ridiculous. “Of course not.” *I just don’t see how it’s not going to happen.* “Beaudrell’s Charms can be used to control open flame, but the secret of precisely how died with Beaudrell himself.” She made it into a singsong, letting the history lesson jump out hopscotch-quick. “Anton Beaudrell, died in ’56, famous for his control of fire and the advances he made in preservation charms. Married into the Creighton charmclan of Manahat Province, it was also whispered he had a touch of the fey in his veins—”

“Untrue. I met the man once, and was not impressed. He was no Child of Danu.” Gran’s arms loosened, and though Ruby wanted to hold on, she knew better.

So she loosened up, and made sure she was smiling. “You’ve met *everyone*.”

Gran stepped carefully away. “Living does tend to bring the world to one’s door.”

“I thought it was ‘travel makes you meet interesting people.’”

“I dislike travel.”

“You don’t like driving long distances, and you hate trains.”

A pained expression flitted across Gran’s familiar face. Were the wrinkles getting deeper, or was Ruby just looking more closely now? “We’re meeting a train tomorrow.”

“Really? A business contact, or what?”

“Kin, my child. It’s time.”

Huh. “For what?”

“For you to see him again.”

Kin. *Not anyone interesting.* She’d planned tonight to maybe see one of her regular boytoys before the moonrunning anyway. *Toy* was the only word that applied, since a Woodsdowne girl couldn’t afford to go Too Far. Besides, they were all so weak-smelling. Easily roped in, and just as easily discarded.

Still, she feigned some interest. “Who?”

Maybe she’d see Brett; things hadn’t heated up to their inevitable conclusion with *him* yet. Which meant him wanting to go further than making out, or thinking he could pressure her into it.

There was only once she’d been tempted to go Too Far, and it hadn’t been with a mere-human. That one hot fullmoon night, strawberries and the musk of a kinboy, Thorne’s fingertips, dyed with strawberry juice, feathering around the outside of her lips. Maybe she would have let him do what he wanted if they hadn’t been interrupted by Hunter’s approaching footsteps.

It was probably for the best. The two of them were always at each other in that way only boys who had grown up together could manage, with the added spice of kinstrength and claws.

Her grandmother made a small, dismissive sound. “A rootfamily boy from Grimtree clan. He’s arriving tomorrow on the seven o’clock from up-province.”

For a few moments it didn’t make sense. The meaning of the words arrived, thunder after lightning, and Ruby almost rocked back on her heels. “I’m not even out of high school yet!”

“You wouldn’t marry him right away.” Gran apparently considered that to be the final word, and turned toward the kitchen. “Besides, you may not find him pleasing.”

“I don’t find *any* of this pleasing. It’s medieval, to parade me in front of—”

“Oh, no. In those days, the males would have fought to submission or death to mate a kingirl, even if she evinced no interest. Times have changed.”

Great. *You sound like Uncle Efraim.* “Is that supposed to be comforting? Jeez, Gran.”

“His name is Conrad. Surely you remember?”

Conrad, from the Grimtree. It rang a bell. She’d been told the story a million times, how she’d whacked him on the head with a stuffed rabbit when he’d announced she was pretty. “I was *three*.”

“I knew you would recall it.” Mithrus Christ, Gran sounded *pleased*. Before she vanished into the kitchen, she tossed one more little tidbit over her shoulder. “Also, your friend Cami called. She sounded quite worried, and hoped you were all right. I thought you were meeting her?”

“She didn’t show up,” Ruby managed, through numb lips. Of course Gran would think Ruby had lied about where she was going.

Wild kingirls sometimes did.

A guest from out of town meant that she’d have to give up almost her entire week to showing him around,

acting like she was interested but not *too* interested, and pretending to be a little downcast when he left. With Gran watching every moment, making decisions. *It's for your own good, child.*

It always was. Tonight was moonrunning, too, and everyone would be asking her questions unless she avoided them. That avoidance would be judged and weighed, too, because *kin* meant *together*. Even solitaries craved the company of their own when the Moon rose full.

So much for the last week of summer. Ruby sighed, groaned theatrically one more time, and stamped for the stairs.

TWO

AN HOUR LATER, A CHARMBELL TINKLED SWEETLY, and Ruby, furiously working at a wad of choco beechgum, whipped the front door open to find her best friends on the step, the green tangle of the garden under thick gold sunlight behind them.

“*There* you are!” Cami looked a little pale, but maybe it was just the deep voracious blue of her eyes. She even smelled worried, a tang of bright lemon over a deeper well of ancient spice and healthy young girl. “We w-waited for an hour!”

Which was worse, to admit she’d only hung around fifteen minutes, or to let them think she’d blown them off? It was one of those unanswerable questions, like where the Reeve started or whether lightcharms worked more like particles or waves. “I thought you’d forgotten, so I left.”

“Got caught in traffic.” Ellie, her wavy platinum hair pulled back, tipped her sunglasses down. It was kind of a shock to see her in jeans without holes and a decent pair of boots, a luckcharm bracelet tinkling sweetly on one wrist. She wasn’t as pale as Cami, and she’d put on a little weight, thank Mithrus. She’d been scary-thin when summer classes started, and scary-starey-eyed as well. “You okay?”

They depended on her to be the perfectly unreliable one, *quelle ironique*. “Come on in. Sorry, I thought you’d bailed to spend time with the boys. Or, you know, study or something.”

“Why would . . .” Cami halted midway, stepping nervously over the threshold. Normally Ruby would have assumed the stutter was giving her some trouble, because she never used to be able to get a whole word out without trying a couple times. Ever since she’d disappeared last winter, kidnapped by a nightmare below New Haven, and been rescued, speaking had been easier. She was the closest thing to a sanity-anchor Nico Vultusino had, which was great—that boy *needed* something to put his brakes on, and Cami had quietly but definitely been moderating him even more lately.

Then there was Ellie, who glided into the front hall like she was on rails. Enough Potential to light up the city, a mad talent for charming, her *real* parents dead and her stepmother half-Twisted and shipped out into the Waste to a kolkhoz, good riddance and goodnight. Except Ell had disappeared for a while too, hanging out with some fey thing living near St. Juno’s, and *that* hadn’t ended well.

At least they were both still alive. A bit wide-eyed and twitchy, but alive.

It was a change to be considered the most drama-free of the three of them, and one Ruby wasn’t quite sure she liked. Still, if she was going to start being responsible, better get used to it, right?

“I’m sorry.” The words felt a little weird. There never used to be anything to apologize for, really.

Or had there, and she just hadn't noticed? Lately, she'd been asking herself that a lot.

"No problem." Ellie swept the door closed. "What do you want to do? If Avery drives we could even make a club tonight. You know, a grown-up place."

For what value of grown-up, if they'll let us in through the door? Still, the idea was powerfully attracting. "He can go out after curfew now?"

A shrug, but Ellie's eyes were dancing. "He's got the permit."

Which means we'd have to take him. "That would have done us some good a few weeks ago."

Ellie, ever the overachiever, looked a little horrified. "We were in *school* then."

Because Cami lost a ton of class time during the winter, and then you disappeared and we skipped everything to go around looking for you too. "Oh yeah. That means no fun, ever. Forgot about that."

Well, it had sounded funny in her head, but neither of them laughed.

Uncomfortable silence filled the hall to bursting, sloshing against the walls. Gran's cottage was in the heart of Woodsdowne, prime property, but it was small. You could tell she'd never expected to have company in here, much less the baby of a kingirl who wasn't ever spoken about.

Sometimes Ruby wondered about her mother. It would have been nice to know something more than the handful of whispers she'd managed to gather around the edges.

Whispers like *she was so beautiful, and Wild too.*

Really Wild, not just halfway there like Ruby. Maybe that was the trouble; she was watered-down instead of the real deal. If she was *really* Wild, she probably wouldn't have cared what Gran thought. Or maybe Gran would respect that, the way she respected Cami's quiet strength or Ellie's smarts.

Gran never spoke about Ruby's parents, except to once remark that Ruby looked like her mother, and confirm that her mother's mate was outclan. So she didn't have to worry about mingling with the closer branchkin.

Marrying too close wasn't good for the kin.

"You're angry." Cami folded her arms. Even on the hottest days she generally wore long sleeves, even though her scars had vanished.

A habit that old was hard to break.

"I am *not*." To prove it, she folded her arms too, and took a deep breath. Gran could probably hear every word, no matter where in the house she was.

"W-we didn't *mean* to be late." A small vertical line had developed between Cami's perfect coal-arc eyebrows, and Ruby was abruptly conscious of her own wildly curling, uncombed hair, bare feet, chipped nail polish. Cami always looked so damn put-together. "What's wrong?"

She would be the one to notice any little thing, too. Since she didn't talk much, it was easy to be surprised when she made an observation.

Oh, nothing. I'm just probably going to be married off or collared because Gran thinks I'm too Wild. After expecting me to be Wild enough to qualify as rootfamily for years. When really I'm not Wild enough, and not sub enough to be calm and collected. Stuck in between. No big deal. She dredged up a smile, searching for her old familiar *I-couldn't-give-a-damn* voice. It came, like it always did, an old reliable friend. "Not a thing, sweets. I just can't go out tonight. Clan stuff."

Cami's face fell perceptibly, and Ellie's eyes darkened a shade or two. But Ell, as usual, immediately shifted to solve-the-problem mode. "Well, let's go have some fun now. I'll drive. And we can figure out what we're doing each day this week before school starts and write it down."

It's just so like you to plan out everything. "Houseguest."

"What?" Sudden changes in direction always threw Ell off, especially when she was arranging things.

Ruby felt a little guilty, but only a little. Disrupting the planning mode had a charm all its own. "We're getting a visitor, tomorrow. Some guy Gran might marry me off to once I'm out of charmcollege."

The announcement had its intended effect. Both of them looked thunderstruck. The line between Cami's eyebrows went away, and her cherry-glossed lips parted a little, as if she was working on a knotty High Charm Calc problem. Ellie actually rocked back on her heels—the boots were PaxGrecas, and well worn, so they still said *money* but they did it in a couth whisper.

"It's about time," Ruby continued, hoping Gran was listening. "Gotta be more responsible, right? Last year of high school and all. So anyway. Where are we going?"

• • •

In the end, they couldn't decide where to go, so they flopped down on the living-room couches, the conversation turning in lazy circles as the tapestry's threads made that maddening little sound. There was a sort of perverse pleasure to be had in shrugging and saying, "I don't know, it'll depend on the visitor" when Ellie tried to time out the next week in precise increments. Cami watched both of them, her expression a mix of concentration and worry, just as it had always been.

It was almost a relief when Ellie sighed and glanced at the clock. "I'm due home for dinner soon. Ruby, is there any time at *all* that we can hang out before school starts?"

Well, wasn't that guilt-inducing. "I'll try. I just . . . you know, Gran wants me to do things."

"I know." Ellie rose in one fluid motion, her Potential a brief, sparkling arc for a moment as the atmosphere of another charmer's cottage changed around her.

Cami followed suit, more slowly. "I'll have a c-car tomorrow." She spaced the words out carefully, brushing back a few glossy strands of raven hair. "Nico ordered it special from overWaste. A Spyder. So whenever you call, I can come."

"Well hot *damn*. That's great news." There was a funny little tickle in Ruby's chest. She and Ellie wouldn't need rides home from Juno anymore, being Year 12s and able to drive on their own. That had been Rube's job for *forever*. "What color?"

"Sort of cream, I guess. He tells me Spyders are p-pretty safe."

"Safe?" Ellie's eyebrows nested in her hairline. "I guess, if you overlook that made-of-charmfiber-and-goes-

like-the-wind thing. Hey, when you get it, can Ave look at the engine?"

The urge to roll her eyes was *immense*. It was Boy Mentionitis in a big way—every other sentence was about Avery. Ell hadn't even noticed boys *existed* before, so it was probably a natural stage in her dating evolution. Even an idiot could tell Ave was serious about her, which was nice to see. It meant one more person keeping her out of trouble.

"I guess." Cami crossed her arms as if she was cold, rubbing at them through her sleeves. "Maybe I can even find out how an engine works. Fun."

"You press the accelerator and it *goes*." Ruby bounced up from the couch. "What more do you need to know?"

"How to keep it going, how to brake, how to—"

"I'm not *stupid*, Ell. It was a joke."

More uncomfortable silence. Finally Cami cleared her throat, a small soft sound. "Today's not a good day. I'll call you both d-day after t-tomorrow. And we are *going* to hang out." Polite but very definite, with her blue eyes level and serious, she suddenly looked less like a little girl playing dress-up and more, well, adult.

It happened to everyone sooner or later.

"Yes ma'am." Ruby sketched her a cheerful salute, but her heart had fallen right into her guts with a gurgling splash. "I'll even wear heels."

"We could go shopping." From Ellie, that was a peace offering—her stepmother had worked in couture, and going into boutiques and ateliers turned Ell an interesting shade of pale sometimes. "Anywhere you want."

It shouldn't have stung, but it sounded like offering a bratty five-year-old a treat. Ruby pushed her temper down with an almost-physical effort. "I'll make a list."

It wasn't until they were safely out of the driveway—the sun blazing down despite fat-bellied shadows drifting over the city from fleecy clouds, gilding the primer-splotched Del Toro Ell borrowed from Avery Fletcher whenever she felt like it—that Ruby's shoulders unknotted. She'd played the holy terror for them again, and also gave Gran a few indications of responsibility.

If she could just keep this balancing act up, everything would be easy.

THREE

WOODSDOWNE PARK, A GREEN BEATING CHAMBER IN New Haven's slow ponderous heart, always filled slowly with summer dusk. Here the trees hadn't started to turn yet, not even a few, and she wouldn't have put it past them to petition Gran for permission before they started to paint themselves. Summer lingered longest here in the hollows and dells, and once or twice in the middle of icy Nonus or even Decius, close to Mithrusmas, Ruby could swear she'd seen flashes of green, gone as soon as she turned her head.

Some things you just couldn't look at straight-on. Especially if you had any Potential at all. Ruby's was respectable, but it hadn't settled yet. She wasn't as high-powered as Gran, or Ellie, but she wasn't low on the

gauge, like some branchkin.

Stuck in the middle once more.

“You’re quiet. What’s up?” Hunter crouched easily, his seal-dark head cocked to catch every sound. As usual, he was a little too close, crowding her personal space.

Ruby finished tying her trainers and didn’t answer.

It was Thorne, as usual, who caught on. “He’s coming, isn’t he.” A lock of wheat-honey hair fell across his forehead; he shook it away with an impatient toss. A flash of white teeth as he grimaced, and Ruby straightened, stretching.

Hunter did too, in a rush. “Who?” He followed as she hopped down from the fallen log, verdant moss blurring its outline. “What?”

“Grimtree clan, one of their brothers. Clanmother’s been looking for an alliance for a while now.” Thorne wasn’t looking *directly*, but he was keeping very careful track of her in his peripheral. Again, just as usual. He’d always been the watchful one.

Like Cami, he watched. Of all the clan, he was probably the one who suspected the most about her—so she kept her distance.

It wasn’t easy, when you’d grown up with a pair of boys, to keep them at the right orbit—not too close, not too jealous, not too far. A balancing act, just like the rest of them, speeding up in increments year by year until she looked around and realized the blur was making it harder to keep up.

It didn’t help that Thorne was . . . well, difficult.

“Bunch of posers. I hear their Clanmother lets her enemies live.” Hunter’s laugh was a sharp spear in the gathering dark.

“She’s modern. Not like *you*.” Thorne got the idea Ruby wasn’t going to take the bait, so he tossed out another piece. “Do you remember him, Rube?”

She let it go, touching the closest tree trunk—an old black elm, like the ones near St. Juno’s. Leaves rustled, sounding like the tapestry in the living room.

Hunter, of course, couldn’t leave it alone. “What was his name? Started with a *K*, right?”

“Conrad. The older twin, by a couple minutes, at least. He’s a Tiercey, I think, that’s their rootfamily.” Thorne’s dark eyes gleamed, and he jostled Ruby. It wasn’t accidental. She elbowed him back, catching him off balance and slipping away from between them and the tree, their unwitting helper in trying to surround her.

Kinboys liked to fence a girl in. You needed to be quick as a minnow to slide through. Sharp as a shark when they pushed it, too, like they *all* did.

It wasn’t their fault girls were so few. Before the Reeve, they’d been born more often than boys. But when the Great War knocked whatever metaphysical cork loose and Potential spilled out to drown the Age of Iron, something happened, and now girls were increasingly rare among the kin.

In the old days, the problem had been mere-humans fearing what they didn't understand and killing what they could. A frightened mere-human was a deadly one, just like the Elders said. Now it was looking like evolution, or Potential itself, was going to do what the Age of Iron couldn't—erase the moon's children.

Behind her, Hunter shoved Thorne, who rabbit-punched him—light taps, one-two, on the arm. They were excited, full of healthy high spirits, just like before every full moon.

“Maybe he'll fight for her.” Hunt sounded a little breathless.

“Who cares?” Thorne, bitterly, but Ruby didn't want to deal with his temper tonight. Well, she never did, she hated the constant back and forth, as if she was a bone.

Just one more thing about kin and clan. She lengthened her stride, leaping a bracken-fall, and they hurried to catch up.

The last fingernail-paring of the sun slipped below the horizon, and Ruby took a deep breath. The Park inhaled too, little creaks and crackles in its depths as more cousins arrived. There were a few catcalls from other parts of the Park, the deeper growl of males and six or seven lighter, higher girl-voices. One sounded like Cherry Highgier, who dyed her hair with feyberry red, as if that would make her root instead of just a branch. She went to Hollow Hills instead of Juno.

All the other kinggirls did. She'd never had the courage to ask Gran where *she'd* graduated from, or why Ruby wasn't sent to Hills. It wasn't a bad school, but Juno was *the* school for New Haven aristocracy, at least the charm and mere-human ones. If Cami had been born into Family instead of adopted, she would have gone to Martinfield like all the other Family girls. Ruby had once or twice wanted to ask her if she'd ever longed to belong with the kind that raised her.

That wasn't a kind question, though, and she was glad she'd reconsidered, for once. Considering how things had turned out.

Ruby hopped, lightly, testing her trainers. Just right, bouncy in the heels and light in the forefoot. You wanted a broken-in pair, comfortable but with some life left, for this sort of thing. Heels for hunting, boots for tracking, and trainers for fullmoon.

A silver thread ran through the night sky, and like she did every time, she ducked her head and picked up the pace, searching for the right beat.

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