Aislinn

By : TheNinjaShroom

Aislinn is a Caster, and she has extraordinary potential. But she can't unlock her full powers until she Declares herself for Light or Dark. A huge, irreversible decision which will change the course of her life forever. And while she's struggling to make a choice, she falls for the only guy she can't have at her new Mortal school and has to protect him from her unseen world. Some things are unseen for a reason...

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Aislinn : Chapter 1

Aislinn

I woke up and looked around blearily, still not accustomed to my surroundings in Uncle M's stately home. My room was about the size of our old cottage and had more furniture, including the huge four poster bed I was currently laying in. The gilt ceiling was exquisite and I had spent many an evening staring up at it, trying to make sense of the intricate patterns, and the walls were covered in ornate tapestries which I was almost entirely sure were worth more than the entire stock in most museums. The sun was streaming in through the beautiful stained glass windows and dappling the floor with a whole spectrum of colours and I couldn't help thinking how much Adina would love it. I pulled open the hangings and stepped onto the lush green carpet, burying my toes in the luxurious fabric. I danced my way across the room to the huge oak wardrobe and opened it with a flourish, still awed by the sight of the rainbow of clothes available for me to wear.

"Wear the pretty green dress!" said a voice behind me. I turned around to see my six-year-old sister Adina smiling sleepily at me, still in her white pyjamas. I picked her up and spun her around, laughing as she squealed delightedly.

"I wore the green one yesterday," I told her, setting her down on the floor again. "Things aren't like they used to be any more. We could have a different dress for every day of the year if we wanted to."

"That's a lot of dresses," said Adina doubtfully.

"I know, but we don't need that many, and we don't want to be greedy, now do we?" I said, tapping her on the nose. She shook her head, giggling. As always, my eyes were drawn to her deep blue eyes, and I sighed.

"What's wrong? Don't you like having dresses?" asked Adina, looking up at me anxiously.

"No, sweetie, it's nothing like that," I promised her.

"Can I wear the green one?"

"It's much too big for you," I told her. "Why don't you wear that lovely blue one, it really brings out your-" I paused. "Your eyes."

"Okay," she said, smiling.

As I helped her into the beautiful little blue dress I tried to keep up a smile, but whenever Adina's back was turned I couldn't help letting my real emotions play out on my face. I knew that it was wrong for me to resent her, but she had it so easy, not needing to worry about Declaring herself. That decision had already been made for her.

"Aislinn?"

"Yes, sweetie?"

"When will we see Mummy again?"

"Soon," I lied.

"Where did she go?"

"To see her family." Another lie.

"Aislinn? Adina?" called a voice from down the corridor.

"Just a minute!" I replied, picking a random top and some jeans from my wardrobe and quickly getting changed, not even bothering to brush my hair before stepping into the corridor with Adina by my side. As always she looked perfectly groomed, her blonde ringlets framing her angelic little face and her eyes big and blue and innocent.

Our older brother Malachi was stood waiting for us, his blonde hair cropped close to his head and his blue eyes sparkling.

"Adina, looking lovely as usual," he said, taking her hand and bowing low. Then he turned to me and nodded. "Aislinn."

"Malachi."

"Do you want me to do a Freshening Cast on you, Ash?" asked Adina. I shook my head, but she closed her eyes for a second and I felt my hair untangle and could taste mint on my breath. I sighed.

"Uncle M wants us all to have breakfast together in the dining room," said Malachi. Adina smiled, took his hand and skipped alongside him as we made our way through the huge house and into the grand dining hall. The doors opened themselves as we approached and we stepped tentatively inside, nervous about our first proper encounter with Uncle M since we had arrived: even though we'd been living in the house for over a week now we'd barely seen Uncle M at all, as he preferred to spend his time tucked away in his office and have his manservant Jones keep an eye on us. We glanced at each other nervously.

I couldn't help staring at my opulent surroundings and wondering exactly how much all of the ancient vases, marble busts and bronze statuettes dotted around the room were worth. It was my old 'try to stay alive' side trying to pop in and make an appearance. We don't need to worry about money any more, I thought. But I still carefully catalogued every object in the room by value, use and potential as a weapon. Call me crazy.

"Come here, children, I can barely see you all the way over there," called Uncle M. We shuffled slightly further into the room. "I don't bite." We all took a deep breath and walked over to where Uncle M was sat at the head of the table, all the way on the other side of the room. He wasn't actually our uncle, he was our grandfather, Magnus Greenfeld II, but when we arrived he told us to call him Uncle M and then pretty much disappeared.

"Would you like me to fetch the breakfast, sir?" asked Jones, who was stood unobtrusively by the door.

"Yes, Jones, thank you," said Uncle M. Then he turned to face us and smiled. I was startled to see that his irises were such a dark grey that they were almost black, but I covered my shock with a cough and averted my eyes. "Please take a seat. How are you all today?" asked Uncle M.

"We're fine," replied Malachi stiffly.

"You two recognise what I am," surmised Uncle M, gesturing to me and Malachi. We nodded cautiously, both glancing at Adina, who was obliviously staring at one of the tapestries on one of the walls.

"I didn't know we came from an incubus bloodline," said Malachi.

"You don't know much about your history. Don't worry, I'm not surprised your mother didn't tell you anything. Lillian was ashamed of her parentage."

"Why isn't she a succubus?" I asked bluntly.

"Because her mother was a Caster," replied Uncle M. "And a particularly strong Caster at that, so Lillian turned out like her. Your uncle Dale, on the other hand, is an incubus like myself, and his daughter is a succubus."

"We have an uncle? And a cousin?"

"Yes. Your cousin is almost twenty now, her name is Rayann."

"Can we go visit her?" asked Adina excitedly. "What does she look like? Does she look more like Mummy and Ash or like me and Mal? What does Uncle Dale look like? Who's our auntie?"

"Dale looks a lot like Lillian did, the same flaming hair, but Rayann looks like her mother," replied Uncle M carefully. "She has short brown hair and very dark eyes, but they are more brown than grey."

"Who was her mother?" I asked.

"I never met her," replied Uncle M, avoiding the question. "Anyway, as much as I would love to spend the whole day talking about your extended family, there are more pressing matters for me to address."

"Like what?"

"Your education. I understand that you were educated at home by your mother, but I want you to go to school."

"School?" I choked.

"Yes, Aislinn, school."

"Oh yay!" said Adina.

"You can't be serious?" asked Malachi. "Sending them to a Mortal school?"

"I am deadly serious, Malachi. They need to be able to blend in with Mortals, and so do you, which is why I have secured a position for you at a law firm." Malachi's response was to inhale the coffee he was drinking and spend the next two minutes spluttering whilst still trying to look dignified.

"What could we possibly need to learn at a Mortal school?" I asked, trying to be reasonable and hide the fear that was gnawing at my insides.

"Everything that will equip you for life outside of these walls," replied Uncle M, gesturing to the opulent dining hall. "Without qualifications how do you expect to get a job?" I shrugged. "Exactly. You need to be there by half eight, so hurry up and eat."

"Huh?" But Uncle M had already swept out of the room, leaving the three of us slightly shell shocked and Malachi still coughing.

"I would suggest that you eat your breakfast and then get ready for your first day of education," said Jones, making me jump. He placed a rack of toast and three glasses of orange juice on the table. "I will be driving you to school today. Meet me outside in ten minutes."

"Come on, Adi, lets go get ready," I muttered, grabbing a slice of toast and hurrying upstairs, Adina close behind me.

"What do I need for school?" she asked, looking around our room.

"Um..."

"Most things will be provided for you. Just take a bag to put your pencil case in."

"Christ, Jones, you scared the hell out of me!" I exclaimed, turning to see him stood in our doorway. "Stop creeping up on us like that!"

"I apologise. I just thought you might be confused about what to bring. Aislinn, you will need these." He handed me a pile of textbooks, notebooks and stationary, which I unceremoniously dumped on the floor.

"I need to find a bag," I explained, opening my wardrobe and rifling through the contents until I found a plain white backpack, into which I shoved the pile of school supplies.

"Are you both ready?" We nodded. "Follow me please."

Jones led us through the house and out of one of the side entrances to where a small red car was waiting. I raised my eyebrows.

"Mr Greenfeld thought it best not to attract attention by using one of the more noticeable cars," said Jones, noticing my face.

"Where's Mal?" asked Adina.

"Mr Greenfeld has arranged alternative transportation for him, in a way which is more fitting for his new occupation."

Chapter 2: The New Girl

Gabriel

"Gabe!" called Jennie, threading her way through the groups of people to sit beside me.

"Hey, Jen," I replied, grinning at her and sliding my arm around her waist. "How come you're so late?"

"My dad was being a dick," she said. "Saying he needed to get ready for work and that I was a 'spoilt little brat'."

Secretly I couldn't help but agree with her dad but I just said, "Poor you," and tried not to listen to her rambling on about her hair or something. I'd tried breaking up with her before but she just didn't seem to listen, and whenever I complained about her to my friends most of them didn't understand. All they cared about was looks, and Jen certainly had them, but I was sick to death of her personality. All I wanted was a girl I could have a decent conversation with, and instead I was stuck with a spoilt blonde bimbo who only cared about two things; money and sex. We'd been dating six months and so far I'd only provided her with the first, wanting to make sure I was losing my V with the right girl.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Huh?"

"What the hell? You're supposed to be listening!"

"I'm sorry babe, I just sort of blanked out-"

"What, so I'm boring? Is that what you're saying?" she shrieked. "You know what, screw you! If you're gonna be like that then fine, I don't need you! I'll just go to Chase, he's already been satisfying my other needs for months." I stared at her, shell shocked. Then I whipped round to glare at Chase, probably the person I hated the most in the whole school. He sneered back at me.

"Well that escalated quickly," muttered Kevin, my best friend, from behind me. "Good job bro, sorted out an annoying girlfriend and an arch enemy at the same time, and it's not even nine in the morning." Then he grinned and I couldn't help but smile back. Kev's one of those people who can make you smile no matter what mood you're in, which was one of the reasons he was my best friend. Also he made great sandwiches.

"Sit the hell down!" yelled Mr Spiro, striding in and dumping a pile of papers onto his already overflowing desk. People meandered to their seats whilst Mr Spiro cleared a space on his desk for his laptop and opened up the register.

"Oi! Chase, I said sit the hell down!"

"Sorry sir," muttered Chase, sitting down at a desk at the back with Jen. Mr Spiro's one of those brilliant teachers who knows how to have a good laugh, but still gets respect out of his students and isn't afraid to discipline people if they do something wrong.

"What's up with him?" said Kevin from next to me, making me jump.

"Christ, Kev, you scared the shit out of me," I muttered. "And I dunno, maybe it's just because it's-"

"Excuse me?" said a quiet voice from the door. I looked up to see one of the most beautiful girls I'd ever seen standing nervously in the doorway.

"You must be, um, Ice-lynn?" said Mr Spiro.

"It's pronounced Ash-lynn," replied the girl, smiling slightly. "Don't worry, happens all the time."

"Well, Aislinn, welcome to 11C."

"Thank you, Mr Spiro. Um, where should I sit?"

"There's a space at the back next to Jen, or you could sit next to Gabriel, or there's a spare seat next to Evangeline," said Mr Spiro. I felt my heart speed up when Mr Spiro mentioned my name and found myself desperately hoping that this mystery girl would choose to sit next to me. As she walked past the delicious scent of raspberries drifted into my nostrils and I took a deep breath in, feeling weirdly empty as she went and sat next to Eva.

Throughout the whole lesson I couldn't get the new girl out of my head, and had to resist the urge to turn around and just stare at her as she worked. Although I'd only had a brief glimpse of her as she walked in and went to sit down, I felt as though everything about her was burned into my brain: her bright, intelligent green eyes; her thick, dark red hair tumbling down her back in effortless waves; her perfect porcelain skin; that beautiful, intoxicating smell of raspberries. Her voice was high and clear and her speech was elegant and understated, classy without being showy about it, unlike some of the other girls I knew, including Jen, who always bragged about how wealthy their families were and how Daddy had agreed to buy them a new Mercedes for their birthday.

"So what do you think of the new girl?" I asked Kev casually at the end of the lesson as we packed up.

"She's hot," replied Kevin. "I mean, I don't normally go for redheads but for her I'd make an exception. And she looks like she's a nice person as well. I reckon everyone'll like her, as long as she stays away from Jen and her lot."

"Yeah, but Eva'll look after her."

Chapter 3: First Encounter

Aislinn

As I walked into the classroom for my first lesson in a Mortal school I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, and I tried to steady my breathing. If I had to go to school, I wanted it to be as quick and painless as possible. *Keep your head down and don't attract attention to yourself. Just sit down, get the work done and then you can go home*. But it wasn't really home. It was Uncle M's ridiculously huge house. Not our comfy little cottage in the middle of nowhere with the raspberries in the back garden.

"Excuse me?" I said quietly. The teacher, a man in his late twenties with dark hair and brown eyes, hidden behind geeky square glasses, looked up and smiled kindly at me. I instantly warmed to him.

"You must be, um, Ice-lynn?"

I sighed inside, but I just said "It's pronounced Ash-lynn. Don't worry, happens all the time." The teacher, Mr Spiro, smiled at me again, and I managed a small smile back.

When he told me where I could sit I instantly quailed at the thought of sitting next to the stunning, athletic-looking blonde. I looked at the other girl he'd gestured to, Evangeline, and started making my way towards her, not even considering sitting next to a guy. But as I walked past him I couldn't help noticing his deep brown eyes, so much like my father's but so, so different, and his thick light brown hair, shaggy and effortless. He was so beautiful. And in that second, I would have done anything those gorgeous eyes told me to.

"Hey, I'm Eva Holden," said the girl I was told to sit next to, breaking me out of my trance. I shook my head slightly and smiled at her. She had short, layered golden brown hair and big hazel eyes and her face was pretty without being particularly remarkable, but she looked friendly, the kind of person you wanted to show you around on your first day. I sat down next to her.

"Aislinn Orviatti," I replied quietly.

"Where are you from?" asked Eva. "And how come you moved to this dump? I mean, the houses are small and ridiculously expensive, it's always raining, and there's a creepy old man who lives in the big mansion on the hill."

"Magnus Greenfeld?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"He's my grandfather."

"Oh, my god, I am so sorry, I didn't mean any disrespect, please don't hate me," babbled Eva, her eyes wide. "What's it like, anyway? The house?"

"It's not very interesting really," I replied quickly.

"Where did you say you were from?"

"I didn't. But I'm from London, we moved here after my mother-" *How much do I really want her to know about us?* "To see my grandfather more."

"Okay..." said Eva, raising her eyebrows. I could tell she knew I'd stopped myself from saying something, but she didn't ask. Instead she said, "So, what do you think of the place so far?"

"It's alright," I replied, relieved for the change of subject. "Doesn't seem like that much of a dump."

"That's because you've come at the best part of the year," said Eva, laughing. "You wait until winter when you're freezing your socks off and every item of clothing you own is soaked. Then you'll know what I mean."

"Eva, new girl, shut up," said Mr Spiro.

"Oops," muttered Eva.

At the end of the lesson I was panicking about where to go and who I would be with, but when I checked my timetable I had Drama and Eva was in my class, so we walked to the studio together. During the lesson I met a couple of her friends, Dexter and Nate, and they seemed pretty cool, and they didn't ask any awkward questions, which I was thankful for. Even though he wasn't even in the class I still couldn't get that guy Gabriel out of my head, and I found myself getting really easily distracted. Nate and Dexter started calling me Dreamgirl because I kept completely zoning out and staring at nothing, but I found that I actually didn't mind that much. Maybe Mortal school wasn't that bad.

At lunch I went to line up with Eva and saw that the food wasn't actually that bad. I got a bowl of pasta, some orange juice and a cookie, and as I was lining up I realised Gabriel was standing right in front of me. He had his back to me, talking to one of his friends, and I couldn't help staring at him. The line started moving and someone shoved into me from behind, and I stumbled forwards and almost fell over. Gabriel grabbed my arm to steady me, and when I looked up I saw that he was smiling. *Oh my dear Christ my heart is melting*.

"Sorry," I mumbled, looking down at my food.

"Hey, don't worry about it," he replied. "It's not your fault, it's that jackass." He pointed to the guy behind me, a footballery type with a perpetual sneer and really thick eyebrows.

"What you staring at, Gabby?" he demanded. "Trying to figure out how to do your hair to get your girlfriend back?"

"Oh fuck off Chase," replied Gabriel, turning his back and rolling his eyes. Chase slapped me on the ass as he pushed past us and paid for his food and I squeaked slightly. "You touch her again, and you're dead."

"Ooooh, what you gonna do Gabby? Hit me with your man purse? Or maybe you'll smoulder me to death with your 'beautiful eyes'?" Chase sniggered and gave Gabriel the finger before swaggering off to sit on a table with a bunch of similar looking sporty types.

"Don't worry about him, he's just a dick," said Gabriel quietly.

"You didn't need to do that," I told him as we got to the till.

"Yes I did. He needs to know he can't be a dick to everyone."

I reached into my pocket for my purse. "Oh crap, my purse is in my bag. Can I leave my tray here for a second to go get it?" I asked the dinner lady at the till. She nodded.

"Oh hey don't worry about it, I'll pay for it," said Gabriel, handing the dinner lady a ten pound note. She gave him the change and he grabbed his tray and mine. "Where are you sitting?"

"Over there," I replied, pointing to where Nate and Dexter were waiting with a couple of their other friends. Gabriel took my tray over and put it down on the table for me, then grinned at me again.

"I'm Gabriel, by the way," he said.

"Aislinn," I replied, smiling at him as he turned and went to sit with his friends.

"Ooooh, Gabe has his eye on the new girl," said Nate, raising one eyebrow.

"No he doesn't!" I exclaimed, slapping him lightly on the arm. I could feel my face heating up and quickly looked down at my food.

"Ash is going red! She likes him too!"

"No I don't," I lied. "I've only just met the guy. And anyway, that guy Chase says he has a girlfriend."

"*Had* a girlfriend, honey, past tense," said Nate. "That ended this morning when he found out Jen had been sleeping with Chase."

"He was dating Jen?"

"Oh yeah, they were quite the couple," said Dexter. "He was always spending money on her, she was always blathering on about her hair. He was always doing cute, romantic things for her, she was always blathering on about her clothes. It was a match made in heaven." He rolled his eyes. "Personally though, I don't care about all the romantic stuff, Jen is *hot*."

"Oh shut up Dex, we all know you're sweet on Liv," said Nate. "Honestly, this boy is impossible."

Chapter 4: Party Planner

Gabriel

"Gabe? Dude, are you even listening to me?" I blinked and shook my head.

"What?"

"Plans for the party," sighed Kev. "You know, I thought you'd pay more interest. This is technically your party."

"Yeah, sorry," I muttered, glancing round at the new girl once more before focusing my full attention on Kev. "So, what do we have sorted so far?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Ah. Well, what needs sorting?"

"Food, drinks, music, a place..." said Kev. "So not much really." I rolled my eyes and pulled my notebook out of my bag, flicking through the pages until I found a small blank patch.

"I can sort out the food," offered Derren through a mouthful of cheeseburger. "We just want nibbles and such, right?"

"Yeah, anything for people with the munchies," I replied, grinning.

"And we can get drink off everyone, but we'll each get a couple of bottles to start," suggested Kev. I got a pen out of my pocket and in tiny cramped writing wrote 'Derren - munch, everyone - drink'.

"What about the music?" I asked.

"Jas can do it," replied Rory. "But she'll need someone to help her unload her kit, wherever we're throwing this thing."

"Why don't you ask your new girlfriend?" said Derren, wiggling his eyebrows at me.

"Who?" I asked. I couldn't help glancing at Aislinn again as I said it.

"Her," replied Derren, nodding in her direction. "She lives up on the hill at Greenfeld's place."

"Seriously? Why?"

"She's his granddaughter."

"Huh. Fancy that."

"So, you gonna ask her?"

"What? Oh, no," I replied. "Don't want anyone getting weirded out by the big creepy house on the hill." What I didn't say was that I didn't want to scare her off by assuming things too soon.

"Gabe!"

"Ugh," I muttered, gritting my teeth and turning to face Jen. "What do you want?"

"Just to know when you're picking me up tonight," she replied, running a finger down my arm.

"Uh, what?"

"You know, last week we arranged to go out for dinner tonight," she said, her tone hardening slightly. "You do remember that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I remember, but that was before I found out you were fucking Chase behind my back."

"Oh baby, I was only joking," she said. Then she leaned forwards and whispered in my ear: "I'll make tonight worth your while." Over her shoulder I saw Aislinn look over at me, then quickly grab her stuff and rush out of the room, Nate and Dexter following behind her. I pushed Jen away from me and stood up, crossing my arms.

"Stay the hell away from me, alright?" Before I could shove my notebook into my bag Jen grabbed it off the table and started leafing casually through it. My hands clenched into fists.

"Jen, just back off alright?" said Kev. He knew that my notebooks were my most private and intimate possessions, and not even he had read them. For Jen to just look through it so casually was one of the most disrespectful things she could have possibly done to me.

"I don't see what the fuss is about with these notebooks, Gabe. There's nothing private in there, just a bunch of doodles and random words and phrases. They're not even that interesting. There's nothing about me in there." And with that she dropped the notebook into the bin and walked away to join Kayla and Hannah, her two little sidekicks, who were waiting by the door.

I carefully fished my notebook out of the bin and shook it to remove any crumbs, then put it back into my bag and swung it onto my shoulder.

"Where are you going?" asked Kev, starting to stand up.

"Just to the library to catch up on something, I'll find you later," I said, already halfway towards the door.

When I got to the library I found it relatively empty, but even so I threaded my way through the shelves and study areas until I got to the little chair and desk in a quiet corner of the library where I was spending more and more of my time recently. To my surprise the chair already had an occupant.

"Aislinn?" I asked cautiously. She was slumped forwards with her head on her arms on the desk, but I recognised her by her fiery hair and the backpack that had been dumped on the floor. She lifted her head slightly, then sat bolt upright, her eyes instantly suspicious.

"What?" she asked, equally cautiously.

"Are you okay? What are you doing here on your own?"

"Studying."

"With your head on the table?" I raised my eyebrows.

"Why do you care anyway?" Fuck, she had me stumped. I mean, what was I supposed to say? *I really like you even though we've only had one conversation, Aislinn*? Or maybe *I think I'm starting to have feelings for you even though we only met today, Aislinn*?

"So what are you studying?" I asked.

"Why are you here?"

"I normally come and sit here when I don't want to talk to people," I replied.

"Think maybe I was trying to do the same thing?"

"Oh, right, sorry." *Idiot, idiot, idiot. Of course she doesn't want you here*. "Do you want me to leave?" *Of course she wants you to leave! Just go!*

"No, no, if this is your spot I'll leave," she said, grabbing her bag and disappearing into the maze of shelves.

"Hey, wait!" I said, jogging after her. I caught her arm and spun her around to face me. She glared at me with her beautiful eyes and I quickly dropped her wrist. There was power in those eyes.

"What?"

"Look, I didn't mean to piss you off, I just wanted to know what was up," I told her.

"It's nothing, alright. Just leave it."

"Are you gonna talk to anyone about it?"

"Probably not."

"Why don't you tell me about it?" She raised her eyebrows. "No, honestly, I'm a good listener, and I won't judge you, and I promise I won't tell anyone." *Please, just let me help you. I'd try and fix anything for you.*

"You wouldn't understand," she said, and then she turned and walked away. She muttered something else that I couldn't quite catch, but I swear it sounded something like, "You're only Mortal."

Chapter 5: Jack's Garden

I just need to get as far away from him as possible, I thought. I can't get attached. Not in that way.

"Hey, wait!" He grabbed my arm and it took all of my self control not to run away screaming. This was the first time I had ever touched a Mortal and I felt a tiny zing of electricity where his bare skin touched mine. I glared at him. He dropped my arm.

"What?" I demanded.

"Look, I didn't mean to piss you off, I just wanted to know what was up," he said.

"It's nothing, alright. Just leave it."

"Are you gonna talk to anyone about it?"

"Probably not," I replied honestly. Who was there to talk to?

"Why don't you tell me about it?" I gave him my best 'are you fucking kidding me?' look. "No, honestly, I'm a good listener, and I won't judge you, and I promise I won't tell anyone." Looking into his eyes, I wanted so badly to trust him. To tell him everything. To put myself entirely in his power.

"You wouldn't understand," I told him, turning my back to him and walking off. "You're only Mortal."

I navigated my way back through the shelves until I came to the front desk, where the librarian was busily tapping away at her computer. I flashed her a quick smile as I pushed open the heavy oak door and walked out into the corridor. Compared to the library it was crowded, plasticky and boring. The library was actually the original building, and over the years had been built around to make the rest of the school. It was a two story room, with the main area on the ground floor and a balcony creating a first floor, which contained the more modern aspects of the library such as the computers and various virtual learning rooms.

What I loved was the main floor of the library, which was full of mismatched wooden bookshelves, all placed perpendicular to each other to create a maze of books that I could happily get lost in for days. The floor was a dark hardwood, and the entire room smelt of a musky mix of old wood and old books, transporting me back hundreds of years to a simpler time, when Casters could be themselves in their own world rather than having to live in the Mortal world with the constant fear of detection. It also reminded me of Uncle M's house, because it was full of old things, and had the same feeling of care but at the same time dusty abandonment that I loved.

When I found that little table and chair, it reminded me so much of the desk in our cottage that I almost Declared myself right there, choosing Light like my mother. But I knew it wasn't that simple, so I just sat at the desk and traced the engravings on it with my finger, trying to imagine that we were still in our cottage, and that I was sat at the desk writing yet another letter to another Caster organisation, asking them to help us. That Malachi was outside playing with Adi so that she didn't realise just how bad things were. That Mum was lying on her bed staring blankly at the ceiling, not paying attention to anything, not even noticing when her youngest daughter was crying with hunger. But at least she was there.

"Ash, there you are!" I turned around to see Dexter and Nate coming down the corridor towards me. "We've been looking for you for ages, where did you go?"

"Library," I replied, gesturing to the door behind me.

"We have tutor, but I'll see you after in English," said Nate. "Do you know where your tutor base is?"

"Um..."

"What tutor group are you in?"

"11C."

"You're in Mr Spiro's tutor," said Dex. "We can't really walk you there, our tutor's on the other side of the school. Oh, Gabe, you're in 11C right?" I whipped around to see Gabriel emerging from the library. He nodded. "Great, you can walk Aislinn there, she doesn't know her way round yet."

"Uh, yeah sure," muttered Gabriel. Nate and Dexter waved and walked off in one direction, whilst me and Gabe turned the other way. We walked through the school in awkward silence, neither of us wanting to bring up what had happened in the library.

When we got to our tutor base Gabe held the door for me and I felt my cheeks heat up as I walked in and went quickly to sit next to Eva.

"What the hell?" I turned around to see Jen sat behind Gabe, whispering angrily at him. "What were you doing with her?"

"She didn't know the way back from the library."

"Oh yeah, sure. I'm not a complete idiot, you know. What, are you cheating on me with her? Do you think she's better than me?"

"Jen, what the hell? We're not even together any more! You were cheating on me with Chase."

"Stop making excuses," hissed Jen. "You're mine." Her blue eyes glittered with fury, and I could have sworn I saw them flash silver for a second.

"I'm sorry babe," murmured Gabe softly, his expression vacant. "Of course she's not better than you. You're my world."

"That's better," said Jen with satisfaction. She looked up at me and I turned away quickly, looking down at my desk.

"You okay, Ash?" asked Eva.

"What? Oh yeah, sure, I'm fine."

"Right, piss off all of you," said Mr Spiro from the front of the class, and the students all around me began to grab their stuff and leave.

As I went through the door I felt someone grab my arm, digging their fingernails deep into my skin. I expected to feel the same twinge of electricity I had felt when Gabe touched me, but all I felt was the sharp pain of the fingernails trying to puncture my skin. I whipped around and saw Jen, her eyes glinting with malice and her nails beginning to draw blood. Her minions Kayla and Hannah were standing on either side of

me, blocking any exit I could make.

"I don't know what you're trying to play, new girl, but trust me when I say I can play better than you. I invented the game. And I don't appreciate you trying to steal Gabe away from me. He's mine. End of. And if you don't respect that, I'll have to teach you some respect myself. Understand?"

"Look, I didn't do anything, can I just get to my lesson?"

"I said, do you understand?"

"Yeah, whatever," I muttered. Jen smiled smugly and let go of my arm. I saw four deep crescent-moon shaped cuts but said nothing, just turned and quickly walked away, not even knowing where I was going but not caring as long as I got away from Jen. Something wasn't quite right about her.

"Uh, Aislinn?" I turned and saw a girl from my tutor group standing behind me. "English is that way." She pointed back down the corridor where I had come from. I made a snap decision.

"I'm not going to English," I replied, and carried on walking. The girl jogged to keep up with me, looking worried.

"But it's your first day, and that's an unauthorised absence," she said. "You'll be in trouble before you've even been here a full day."

"At this point I honestly don't care." I pushed open a door that led outside and began walking across the hard courts towards the main gate. The girl was still following me and I was seriously considering Declaring myself right there so that I could put a Cast on her to make her leave me the hell alone, but instead I just turned to face her and yelled: "Why the hell are you still following me?"

"I'm trying to stop you getting in trouble!" she yelled back. "Sorry for trying to help." And then she turned and stormed back inside the building, leaving me speechless on the hard courts. I stood staring after her for a second, then turned back towards the school gates and walked off of the school grounds. Outside of the school gates I sat leaning against a wall and sighed.

"You alright?" I looked up and saw a guy, about my age, standing next to me. He was wearing the same uniform as me, only he had taken off his school shirt and was just wearing the navy trousers and a t-shirt with a funny slogan. He had glasses and dark, curly hair, and he was cute in a geeky kind of way. I smiled slightly at him.

"I'm fine," I replied.

"I've never seen you here before, are you new?" he asked.

"Today's my first day," I told him.

"Already sick of it, huh?" I nodded. "Fair enough. It's a shit tip. And don't worry about getting in trouble, they'll let you off because it's your first day and 'it must all be so overwhelming for her, the poor troubled soul'. And if you keep doing it, after a while they'll diagnose you with something like they did with me and then they can't do anything anyway. I'm Jack, by the way. Jack Kingsmill." He held out his hand.

"Aislinn Orviatti," I replied, grinning and taking his hand. He brought my hand up to his lips and kissed it, and I couldn't help thinking how adorable he was.

"So, Aislinn Orviatti, why did you leave?" he asked, gesturing in the direction of the school.

"Just..." I sighed. "People."

"They are a plague on us all," he replied, grinning. "So... You got a plan for the rest of the day?"

"Um..." I hadn't really thought about what I would do once I left, I just knew I had to leave.

"Come with me," said Jack, grabbing my hand and pulling me to my feet. He slung his bag over his shoulder and smiled at me again before leading me along the road, his hand still in mine.

"Where are we going?" I asked, laughing, as he skipped along the road with me in tow. Even though I'd known him a grand total of five minutes I already felt completely comfortable with him, and I could tell he was one of those guys you just had to be friends with.

"It's a secret," he replied, winking.

"Aren't you two supposed to be in school?" demanded a voice behind us. I whirled around and saw an old woman glaring at us. Jack dropped my hand.

"No ma'am," replied Jack, smiling serenely at her. "We're not school students, we go to college."

"You're wearing school uniform."

"Shit," muttered Jack. "Um..." Then he grabbed my hand again and we sprinted down the road and down an alley, only stopping to catch our breath when we had emerged on the other side and were sure that the woman hadn't seen where we'd gone.

"Well handled."

"Why thank you," he replied, grinning. "Anyway, come on, let's get where we're going!"

"Where are we going?" I asked as he took my hand again. He tapped his nose and we skipped off down the road again.

When we finally arrived I was panting for breath and leaning against Jack for support, feeling my heart slow down to its normal rate again. We were stood at the end of a little road well away from the town centre, practically buried in the woods, in front of an intricate wrought iron gate set into a high stone wall.

"Here we are," said Jack, gesturing to the gate with a flourish.

"It's just an old gate," I said sceptically.

"Ye of little faith," replied Jack. He pulled an big black key out of his pocket and opened the large padlock on the gate. I raised my eyebrows. He pulled at the gate, and after a second of resistance the knotted grass at its base relinquished its hold and the gate swung easily on its hinges, obviously well oiled. "Ladies first." He bowed as he held open the gate for me.

"Wow," I breathed, walking down a little stone path into the high-walled garden.

"What do you think?" asked Jack, making me jump. He was closer than I thought, and I felt a whisper of his breath on the back of my neck.

"Oh Jack, it's beautiful," I told him, hardly daring to talk in case I shattered the peaceful tranquillity of the garden.

I stared around in amazement, barely comprehending that this little garden was in the Mortal world. It looked so much like the Gardens of the Nymphs in my own world that I was half expecting one of the beautiful maidens to emerge from the little pond or behind a tree. I noticed that the trees around the outside of the garden were all rowan, which brought a tiny smile to my face. Rowan is the most powerful sacred protection a person could possibly have, and its presence made me feel instantly safe. The path wound its way through the trees and shrubs in the garden, around the stunning jewel-coloured pool, under an arch of hanging willow branches and disappeared into the undergrowth, hidden by the mass of life surrounding it. As I walked slowly along the path, marvelling at the huge array of colours and shapes in the plants, two tiny butterflies appeared and darted around in front of me. I smiled at them as the blue and purple danced together, then stopped abruptly as I realised what was happening. They weren't just flitting around each other: the purple butterfly was attacking the blue. I remembered Adina's stunning sapphire eyes this morning, and the coldness of Malachi's ice blue, and then looked again at the two butterflies, but they had disappeared. I looked down and saw the blue butterfly fluttering weakly at my feet, unable to lift itself off of the ground, whilst the purple hovered above it in a very unbutterfly-like way.

I stared, stricken, at the beautiful blue butterfly dying slowly on the ground. Could this be a prophecy? When I finally Declared myself, would it be for the purple eyes of Dark, leaving the blue eyes I could have had to die with the Light they represented?

Chapter 6: Roses

Gabriel

I expected to see Aislinn when I walked into English, but all I saw were groups of people stood around talking, and Jen sat waiting for me. She gestured for me to sit next to her but I ignored her and walked over to Nate.

"Where's Ash?" I asked.

"I was about to ask you the same thing," he replied. "I thought she would have walked with you from tutor."

"No, she was one of the last people out," I told him.

"Are you talking about the new girl?" asked someone behind us. I turned to see Gemma, a girl I had never even talked to before, watching us. I nodded. "Jen cornered her outside tutor and then she stormed off. I followed her to try and get her to come to lesson but she yelled at me and walked out the gates."

"Shit," I muttered. I turned back to Nate. "Do you have any idea where she might have gone?"

"Not a clue," he replied.

"I think Jack Kingsmill was outside the gate. She might be with him," said Gemma.

"Uh, okay, thanks." I knew what Jack was like - anyone who met him was instantly his friend. I mean yeah, he was a great guy and everything, but I didn't want him anywhere near Aislinn. Not until I knew what was going on with her.

"Tell sir I'm ill or something," I muttered to Nate, turning around and walking back out of the room. I kept my head down, not wanting to meet Jen's eyes. I still couldn't believe what had happened earlier: Of course she's not better than you. You're my world. Where in the name of hell had that come from? I couldn't even remember saying it, just the words coming out of my mouth.

"Gabe? Where are you going?" I ignored her, walking quickly down the corridor and out of the door onto the hard courts. When I got out of the gate Ash and Jack were nowhere to be found.

"Shit," I muttered. They could have gone anywhere.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?" I looked up and saw an old woman glaring at me.

"I'm looking for a friend," I replied.

"The redhead girl with the weird green eyes?"

"Um, yeah. Have you seen her?"

"She was with a boy," the woman told me, shaking her head. "They went down the alley by the new offices."

"Okay thanks," I said, smiling at her. She regarded me suspiciously for a second more before walking off muttering to herself.

As I headed towards the new office block, I tried to figure out where Jack had taken Ash. I knew that on the other side of the alley was mainly a residential area but it was a whole network of roads and cul-de-sacs. The only chance I had of finding them was if they came back the same way and I bumped into them.

I looked up, suddenly aware that I was at the alley, and almost jumped out of my skin.

"Gabriel? What are you doing here?"

Aislinn

"Ash? Are you okay?" asked Jack. I could tell he was right behind me, but I didn't turn around. I nodded. "If you're bored we can leave, I mean, I know it's not that interesting-"

"No, it's not that," I told him quickly. "I just... I can't believe this much beauty can really be in such a small space." I turned to face him. "It's amazing."

"Come with me," he said, smiling, taking my hand and leading me further down the path and into the shelter of the willow trees. When we emerged on the other side of the tunnel of branches I stopped, stunned. We were stood in a tiny little square of the garden, underneath the branches of an old ash tree. Unlike the rest of Jack's garden this corner was neat and organised, with beds of roses surrounding the huge ash.

Although it was utterly stunning, it seemed artificial compared to the wild, untamed beauty of the rest of the garden. There were roses of every colour, but I was drawn to one small rose bush right in the corner. These flowers were small but exquisite, such a pale pink that they were almost white, but much more naturally beautiful than the larger red and white roses surrounding them.

"These are my favourites too," Jack told me. I reached out and stroked one of the blooms lightly, feeling the velvety texture and breathing in the delicate scent that my touch had released.

"They're..." I struggled to find a word good enough to describe these radiant flowers.

"It's a shame I can't grow more of them, but they don't sell. I only keep them here because I couldn't stand to get rid of them. People prefer the more traditional colours, like red and white."

"You sell them?"

"At a little market. Not here, obviously, but in a market in a little town a few miles away. That's what I keep them for. I prefer the rest of the garden though. It's much more natural."

"So how come you have this place anyway?" I asked, turning towards him again.

"It used to be my mother's," replied Jack. "We used to come here every weekend and help her with it. My father wanted her to make the whole thing into a rose garden because he didn't understand why she found it so beautiful. When she left I knew that unless I took charge of it then he would probably either flatten it all and hire people to grow the roses or he'd just sell the land. This is the only place where I still feel close to her. It helps me remember, and forget."

"When did she leave?" I asked quietly.

"Seven years ago, when I was nine and my little brothers were three. I didn't really understand what was going on, but I had to pretend that it was all okay for them."

"That must have been so hard for you." He shrugged.

"I had to do it for them."

"I know how that feels," I murmured. He smiled at me, then sat down in the shade of the ash tree and patted the ground next to him. I rolled my eyes and sat next to him.

"So, do you have any brothers or sisters?" asked Jack.

"Both," I replied. "Older brother and younger sister. Malachi and Adina."

"How old are they?"

"Mal's twenty one and Adi's six," I replied, smiling slightly.

"Do they look like you?" asked Jack. "Because my brothers look like little mini versions of me, it's quite sweet."

"No, they don't look like me at all. They both have very blonde hair."

"What colour eyes do they have?" he asked. A perfectly innocent question, but it brought back all of the confusion and pressure that I had, at least temporarily, forgotten about. I suddenly became immensely interested in a ladybird on a piece of grass when I replied.

"Blue." I think Jack heard the change in my voice because he abandoned that line of questioning.

"Do you wanna go to the cinema with me this weekend?" My head jerked up.

"What?"

"Um, do you wanna go to the cinema with me this weekend? There are some really cool films showing at the moment, and they do really good popcorn, and I thought it'd be nice for you to have something to do. I mean, it's okay if you don't want to, I totally understand, or if you have plans with someone else or something that's totally fine-"

"I'd love to go to the cinema with you," I interrupted him.

"Really?"

"Yeah, it sounds like fun. It'll be good to be able to get out of the house and be with a friend."

"Right, yeah," muttered Jack, looking away. His brown eyes met mine again for a second before moving back to his shoelaces. As I struggled to figure out what I'd said to upset him he abruptly stood up. "We should probably be getting back, last lesson is almost over. How are you supposed to be getting home from school?"

"Someone's picking me up," I replied. I wasn't any more specific than that, as I didn't want to mention the fact that that someone was my grandfather's lycan manservant.

"I'd better get you back then." He pulled me to my feet and we walked quickly back through his garden and out of the old gate. As soon as we were outside of the protection of the rowan trees I felt as though my troubles were about to engulf me again, but Jack didn't seem to notice my discomfort as he locked the padlock

and led me back through the streets.

"Jack? Are you okay?" I asked him when the silence started to get to me.

"What? Yeah I'm fine," he said quietly. I grabbed his hand and spun him round to face me.

"No you're not. What's up?" I demanded.

"Justâ ¦ Just thinking about my mum," he replied. "I've always felt like it was my fault, and talking about it just brought back all the memories, you know?"

"I'm so sorry. You could have just said you didn't want to talk about it, I'm really sorry if I upset you," I told him. "I know what it feels like for a parent to leave, but trust me it's not your fault." I smiled and hugged him, wanting to squeeze out all of his sadness. I felt his tears making my shoulder damp and I hugged him tighter, trying to stop the shaking sobs and make him feel better. "It's okay, don't worry, it's okay," I murmured. "Don't worry, I'm here for you, it's okay."

"Thanks," he said thickly, pulling back and wiping his eyes on his sleeve. I took his hand as we carried on walking and he smiled at me with red eyes. "Sorry. I shouldn't burden you with my problems."

"I don't mind," I replied honestly. "I'm always here for you to talk to." He smiled again and squeezed my hand.

We were about to walk down the alley when Gabe practically walked into us.

"Gabriel? What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Oh, uh, well I was looking for you," he replied. He glanced down at our joined hands and I felt Jack's grip tighten.

"Um, why?"

"Well, you know, you walked out of school on your first day, and it was sort of my fault," he muttered.

"It wasn't your fault," I told him.

"Yeah, it was. I should have told Jen to back off."

"Don't worry, I get it. She was getting protective over her boyfriend. It's not a problem."

"Ex-boyfriend," he corrected me. "And either way, I'm sorry."

"It's fine," I said. "Anyways, it helped me make a new friend." I smiled at him.

"Ash, don't we need to get going?" interjected Jack. "You said you're getting picked up and last lesson ends in five minutes.

"Oh right yeah, of course. Gabe, are you going back that way? You can walk with us if you want." I heard Jack mutter something but I ignored him.

"You skipped a lesson on your first lesson? Aislinn, I expected better of you," said Uncle M.

"Something wasn't right about her," I insisted. "The way she just controlled him like that. It's not normal! And I swear her eyes went silver, I'm sure they did."

"I know you're trying to come up with an explanation for his behaviour but there might not be one. Mortals are notoriously unpredictable. Anyway, that is not what we are talking about here; we are talking about you skipping a lesson. There is no excuse for it, and it will draw attention to us, which is exactly what we are trying to avoid."

"Sorry."

"And so you should be," replied Uncle M. He nodded to me, then turned and left the room.

"Are you in trouble?" asked Adina.

"Were you in here the whole time?" She nodded. "You're not supposed to listen to other people's conversations Adi, it's not polite. But yes, I am in trouble."

"Why did you skip a lesson?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I was in a bad mood, and I shouldn't have done it."

"Why were you in a bad mood?"

"Because a Mortal girl said some nasty things, but that shouldn't have made me walk out of school."

"Why didn't you just put a Cast on her?" asked Adi, frowning.

"I haven't Declared myself yet, Adi," I reminded her. "And even if I had, we're not supposed to do Casts in front of Mortals, let alone on them. It would draw unwanted attention. Anyway it's not nice to put Casts on people because you're angry."

"But it would make you feel better."

"Not for very long. Afterwards it would make you feel bad."

"Why? Mortals don't matter," said Adi. I stared at her, too shocked to say anything.

Chapter 7: A Letter Home

Aislinn

When I woke up the next day I still couldn't quite believe what Adina had said. She'd just spent a whole day surrounded by Mortals, and then she'd come out with something like that. I turned over and looked at my clock, trying to figure out if I was allowed to go back to sleep - what a surprise, I wasn't. I sat up and looked across at Adi's bed. She was still asleep, her little body rising and falling as she breathed, and she looked so adorably innocent that I thought maybe I'd dreamed what had happened yesterday. She couldn't have said that. Could she?

"Ash, you up yet?" called a soft voice from the other side of the door. I opened it and went out into the corridor with Malachi, making sure I didn't disturb Adi as I closed it behind me.

"What's up?"

"We got a letter from Mum," replied Malachi. I gaped at him. He handed it to me wordlessly, then turned and disappeared back down the corridor. I unfolded it and stared at the achingly familiar handwriting, not quite believing this could be true. The last time I had seen my mother, she had been completely oblivious to everything, trapped in her own private hell, and not even noticing her children starving to death or the Caster Healers taking her away. Even the fact that she was able to write a letter was proof that she was getting better, but that didn't make me feel happy or even relieved, just more anxious. What would happen when the Healers let her go? Would we go back and live with her again? What if she gave up again?

Even though the letter was there in my hand, I still couldn't quite believe it, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to read it. I knew that what was written there was probably important, but would it be better not knowing? I realised I had scrunched it up in my fist, so I carefully flattened it with shaking hands and began to read.

My dearest children,

Let me first say that I am so sorry for what I did to you. I shouldn't have left you like that - it was selfish. I am so proud of you for how you helped each other, and me, and I will always be grateful for that. For now I am staying with the Healers, and probably will be for a long time, but you will be safe with Jones and my father. Please do not inconvenience him too much, as he is doing me a great favour by taking you in and we are all in his debt.

Malachi, do not argue with my father, whatever he has decided is for the best. You should get to know Mortals.

Aislinn, I know how hard this is for you and trust me, it will get better. For now, enjoy your time in the Mortal world and don't let yourself be pressured into your Declaration. You can make that decision when you are ready. If you ever feel overwhelmed, talk to your grandfather. He can be more useful in matters like this than you'd think.

And lastly, Adina, I love you pumpkin, and I am so sorry you have to deal with all of this so early in your life. Listen to your grandfather and your brother and sister, and be good and helpful.

I love you all, and I will be with you again as soon as possible. I have heard nothing from your father, but I know he will be in contact with us soon.

Mum xxx

I fought the urge to cry. This letter had not been written by my mother. It was her handwriting, but not her words. The Healers had revived her from her comatose depression, but they had not healed her mind. That was still lost. Still trying to find my father. They had drugged her and put her into therapy, and that had made a small part of her come back, enough to make them think she was okay. But I knew that as soon as she was released, she would revert straight back to how she had been. Broken.

"Ash? What's that?" I spun around and hid the letter behind my back.

"What's what?" I asked, tucking the letter into the waistband of my pyjama bottoms. She frowned at me.

"Nothing. What's for breakfast?"

"I don't know. We'll get dressed and then go downstairs, okay?"

When we got downstairs Malachi and Uncle M were already waiting for us, a huge breakfast spread out on the table in front of them.

"Please help yourselves. I know that the breakfast you were given yesterday wasn't exactly the best because you were in a hurry, but I hope to rectify that today. Dig in." I glanced at Malachi before pouring myself a small bowl of cereal, ignoring the impressive array of foods in front of me. "So, how did you sleep?"

"Fine, thank you," replied Adi, smiling sweetly. "What about you?"

"I don't sleep, little one," said Uncle M. "I am an incubus."

"Mummy used to talk about them sometimes," said Adi. "What are they?"

"Incubi are the males of our species and succubi are the females. We are creatures of the night, mainly, and most are allied with Dark. We need the energy of Mortals to survive, like you need food and water, and most, especially those who have chosen to work with Dark, choose to take life energy in the form of blood. Others, however, live on other forms of energy, such as spiritual energy or chance energy." I noticed that he didn't mention the fact that as well as blood many incubi and succubi also fed on sexual energy. Surprise surprise.

"Do you eat Mortals lives?" asked Adi.

"No, I refuse to take a Mortal's life. I live on a much more benevolent kind of energy - imagination, mainly in the form of dreams."

"Why?"

"Mortals are what keep the balance," replied Uncle M. "If they did not exist, neither could anything else. We should never forget that and, even if they do not realise it, they should always be treated with respect."

"So you and Uncle Dale and Rayann all live on Mortal energy?"

"Yes."

"If I may interject, sir, I think it's time we were leaving," said Jones from the corner.

"Ah, yes, Malachi and Adina, go and get ready," said Uncle M. "Aislinn, you are staying here today."

"What about school?" I asked. Even though it was stupid, I was completely panicking that I had imagined yesterday and that Jack and Gabe and all my friends didn't exist, and I needed to go back to show myself that it was all real.

"You have the day off today."

"Why?"

"There are things we need to discuss," he replied, gesturing for Jones to take Adi and Malachi out of the room.

"Like what?"

"Your Declaration."

"That's my decision, and I'm not ready to make it yet," I said coldly.

"I know, and I'm not trying to force you," he replied. "I just want to talk to you about the implications of your decision."

"I'm perfectly aware of the implications of my decision," I told him frostily. "Funnily enough that's why I'm thinking about it so much."

"There is more to your Declaration than you might think. It affects more than just you."

"What do you mean? The whole point of a Declaration is that it's a personal choice, and no one can judge you for it."

"Not in your case. You're very special, Aislinn," said Uncle M softly. I narrowed my eyes at him. "Did your mother never tell you? Your Declaration will change our world forever."

"How? Why am I so special?"

"Let me start right at the beginning," said Uncle M.

Gabriel

"You alright dude?" asked Kev. "You keep looking round like you're expecting an axe murderer."

"No, I'm, uh-"

"Looking for the new girl?" he guessed. "Don't worry about it; I'm sure she'll turn up. Maybe she's ill."

"Maybeâ ¦ Is Jack in school today?"

"Kingsmill? Yeah, why?"

"He bunked with Ash yesterday, I thought they might be doing the same today," I told him. "It's only her second day, why isn't she here?"

"Why don't you go up to her house after school and ask?" suggested Kev. I frowned at him, then I realised he was serious. *Actually, it's not such a bad idea,* I thought. *And it can't do any harm.*

"Come with me?"

"Hell no, are you serious? I'm not going up to the big scary house on the hill just for you to stalk the new girl. No way."

"Come on, Kev, I need to make sure she's alright," I pleaded. I knew it would probably be really creepy to turn up on her doorstep asking why she wasn't in school but I couldn't help it - I needed to see her. I was addicted, and I needed my fix.

"No. Why don't you ask Eva or one of them lot, they're her friends right?"

"Yeah, but I don't really talk to them."

"I don't really talk to the new girl and you're still trying to drag me up there," Kev pointed out. "Just go and ask Nate, you talk to him, and you managed it yesterday."

"Fine," I muttered. Rather conveniently Nate and Dexter chose that moment to walk into the room, so I beckoned them over. "Hey, have you guys seen Ash?"

"She's not in today," replied Dexter. "No idea why."

"I think I'm gonna go to her house after school," I told them. "You know, just to make sure she's okay. Do you guys wanna come with?"

"Uh, yeah sure," said Nate. "She lives up at Greenfeld's place right?"

"Oh great," muttered Dexter. "That sounds like a good idea, let's all go up to the creepy house on top of the hill to ask the creepy guy who lives there why his granddaughter isn't in school today."

"Shut up, Dex," said Nate, slapping him on the arm. "We'll meet you at pupil reception after last lesson," he told me.

Aislinn

"I don't understand; why am I so different?"

"Because of your unique heritage," replied Uncle M, smiling slightly. "I am an incubus and your grandmother Lilith was a powerful Dark Caster. Her father was a Light Caster and her mother is a nymph. Your mother is a powerful Light Caster, and your father is a lycan. His parents were both lycans, but they had Caster and incubus blood in them. Most members of our world have only one type of blood in them, in some cases two. Lycans mate almost exclusively within their own species, so for your father to have chosen your mother is almost unheard of. In your blood you have the power of lycans, incubi, Casters and nymphs. A very potent and rare combination; you have more of each of their powers than you know."

"But I can't turn into a wolf, or live on Mortals' blood, or stay young forever because I'm half tree, I can't even Cast yet! I don't see how my bloodline affects my Declaration at all."

"It shows how different your parents were in their choices, and all of that has been channelled into you. The Light is from your father's side, and from your mother herself, and the Dark from Lilith and I. You and your siblings have an equal mix of Light and Dark in your blood, rather than having an excess of one, and so your decision is that much more difficult."

"Why weren't Mal and Adi different to any other Casters? Why is it me?" I asked. "What's so special about me?"

"I don't know," replied Uncle M, annoyingly calmly. He gestured to my cereal, and I took a grudging spoonful.

"So what big effects will my Declaration have?" I finally asked. Well, there wasn't much point in avoiding such a big question, and I might as well know what I was up against.

"At the time of your birth the Fae made a prophecy about you," said Uncle M slowly. "They said that you would be forced to Declare yourself to save a Mortal you loved from a Dark being, and that when you did, one of two things would happen: either the barrier between the Mortal and Caster worlds will disintegrate and the Mortals will declare war on all of our kind, or the barrier will strengthen to the point that no one will ever be able to pass through it again." He glanced anxiously at me, trying to gauge my reaction. I gaped at him, unable to process what he'd just told me.

"So either I'll start a war or cut us off forever? Which is which?" I demanded.

"We don't know," replied Uncle M. "That is all the prophecy says."

"So I have to make this huge decision and I don't even know what it'll do? I could choose one side thinking it'll be the lesser of two evils and accidentally start a war! How the hell am I supposed to do this? What kind of choice is that?" I exploded. "I'm sixteen, for God's sake! I don't need to Declare myself for another four years, why are you telling me now?"

"Because if you don't make your decision soon, both of our worlds might disappear."

Chapter 8: My World

Author's note: I am so sorry I haven't updated, I've just done my English Language exam and also I've been quite ill, but I'm better and I'm writing again so here it is: Chapter Eight *dramatic music*

-TheNinjaShroom

Gabriel

I met Nate at pupil reception at the end of the day and we set off towards Greenfeld's house.

"Where's Dexter?" I asked.

"Oh, he 'has homework to do'," replied Nate, rolling his eyes. "He's just being stupid. There's nothing scary about Greenfeld; it's just superstition."

"Yeah, I mean if there was anything weird about him then Ash wouldn't be living with him."

"Exactly. Dex is really superstitious though, black cats and all that," said Nate. "One time he made me wait twenty minutes to walk into the cinema because there was a ladder over the entrance." I glanced over him and noticed that even though he was saying it as though it was a bad thing, he was still smiling.

"Do you, um, do you like Dexter?" I asked him awkwardly. *Oh God, if I'm wrong he's gonna punch me. You can't just ask someone if they're gay!*

"Yeah, of course," replied Nate. "He's my friend. Why wouldn't I like him?" He gave me an odd look.

"No reason," I muttered.

"Rightâ ¦ So are we just gonna walk up and ring the doorbell, or what?"

"I guess so," I replied. "What else could we do?" *Well, we could always sneak round the back and see if we can see her through a window or something. No, wait, no, what? That's the most stalkerish thing we could possibly do.*

"Dex'd probably say something stupid like try to sneak in and find her without having to see Greenfeld," said Nate, smirking. "It's probably a good thing we didn't bring him."

"Yeah," I said, looking away. "Have you ever been up here before?"

"Once, on a dare when I was nine," said Nate. "They dared me to go up and ring the doorbell, but I only got to the drive then I chickened out. No one had a go though - it was the closest anyone had ever gone."

"Well, looks like we're about to break your record," I said as we walked onto the drive. It was eerily quiet, as though all of the birds and animals had the same idea as the people in the town - *stay away.*

The house and grounds had an air ofâ ¦ Not exactly neglect, more like they had decided they didn't want to be looked after. There was evidence that a gardener had attempted to tame the wild mess of the garden, but had eventually given up, leaving the plants to re-establish control. The rowan trees lining the drive were contorted and bare, their branches reaching out to pluck at our clothes and hair and their roots snaking up from the path

to trip us. The grass was overgrown and filled with bramble bushes and nettles, as well as bright red, poisonous-looking berries growing on dark, stunted little trees.

The house itself was huge, made of dark bricks, and with ivy crawling up its sides, trying to edge its fingers under the cracks in the windowpanes and further encroach upon the old man's territory. There were even more nettles all around the house, almost up to the windows, standing guard over the residents, making sure no intruders could appear without their knowing. The front door was made of dark wood which was just on the edge of ineffectual, as I was pretty sure even I could knock it down with a single kick. As far as I could see there was no lock, only a cast iron wolf knocker, but I was reluctant to touch it. The wolf itself was not what bothered me, but the fact that around its neck was a collar of what looked like human teeth.

"Go on then," said Nate, nudging me up the step towards the front door. I glanced back at him. "I'll stay here." I rolled my eyes and lifted the heavy knocker. It made a surprisingly loud sound, disturbing the creepy silence of the place.

The door opened to reveal a tall, blond-haired man with startlingly blue eyes. He appraised me coldly, seeming to look right through me with those piercing eyes. I saw that he was wearing black formal trousers and a shirt and guessed that he had just got back from work, but I had no idea who he was. I stared at him for a moment longer, then realised he was waiting for me to speak.

"Uh, hi, I'm Gabriel; I go to school with Ash. Can I see her?"

"That depends," replied the blond man. "Why?"

"She wasn't in school today, and we were worried about her," said Nate. "I mean, it's only her second day. Is she ill or something?"

"I'll get her." He disappeared inside the house and I glanced at Nate. We hadn't been invited inside, so we stood awkwardly on the doorstep awaiting his return. It didn't take long. When he reappeared Ash was with him, looking unhappy but perfectly healthy. I frowned.

"Nate?" she asked. "Gabe? What are you guys doing here?"

"We just wanted to make sure you were okay," I told her. "You skipped class yesterday and then didn't turn up todayâ¦"

"What? Oh, yeah, sorry, I've just been kinda busy today, that's all," she replied distractedly.

"Busy doing what?" asked Nate. "What's so important that you're allowed to take time off school?"

"Oh, just family stuff," she said vaguely. She turned to the man standing next to her. "Um, Mal, do you mind?"

"Mind what?"

"I don't really appreciate you standing there listening to my conversations with my friends," she said. He gave her a weirdly intense look. She nodded slightly. "They're just friends from school." He gave her another long look before nodding to us and walking back into the house. Ash came out onto the doorstep with us and pulled the door shut behind her.

"So what have you been doing today?" I asked her.

"Nothing important," she replied. "Did I miss anything?"

"We got Drama homework, but no," said Nate, laughing. "Oh, and we've started work on Romeo and Juliet and we're in partners for some role play next lesson, you're with Jack."

"Which Jack?" I asked sharply.

"Kingsmill," replied Nate, frowning at me. "He's the only Jack in our class."

"Oh, he's the one who was missing yesterday?" said Ash, understanding dawning in her eyes. "I've been wondering who you guys were talking about, it never clicked that you were talking about my Jack." I stiffened. *Her Jack? What the hell does that mean?*

"Oh so he's your Jack now?" said Nate, wiggling his eyebrows. "What happened yesterday anyway? Some people said they saw you guys holding hands. Damn girl, you move fast." He grinned at her.

"No, I just meantâ ¦ Shut up!" said Ash, swatting at him. He dodged easily. "Do you guys, uh, do you wanna come in or something?"

"Sorry Ash, I can't. My parents want me home for dinner," said Nate, grimacing. "I'll see you tomorrow though?"

"Yeah of course," said Ash. He gave her a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek and then jogged off down the driveway, around the corner and out of sight. Ash turned to me.

"Uh, yeah sure, I can come in for a while," I said. She beamed at me and led the way inside. I was expecting the inside of the house to look like its exterior, but I was surprised to see that it was actually very welcoming, despite its size. Everywhere I looked there were antique artefacts on little wooden tables, or old oil paintings on the walls, or marble sculptures in corners. The walls were panelled with oak and the floor carpeted with a deep forest green. I looked up and saw that the high ceilings were covered with ornate frescos of mythical creatures.

"Ash? Who's that?" asked a voice behind us. I spun around to see a little girl, probably about six or seven, with blonde ringlets and angelic blue eyes.

"This is Gabriel, from school," said Ash. "Gabe, this is my little sister Adina." The girl walked up to me and held out her hand formally. I glanced at Ash and hesitantly shook her hand.

"It's nice to meet you," said Adina.

"Uh, you too."

"Adi, don't you have homework to do?" asked Ash pointedly, giving her sister a 'go away' sort of look. Adina pouted but turned and obediently disappeared up the huge staircase, practically dancing up the stairs without needing to use the thick, sweeping banister.

"She's, uh, she's lovely," I said.

"She can be a bit disconcerting at first," replied Ash. "But you'll get used to her. She's actually a darling, the best little sister I could ask for." I couldn't help grinning at the astoundingly happy look on her face, lighting it up with an inner radiance that made her eyes shine.

"You guys must be really close."

"Yeah, well, we spent a lot of time together when we lived with my mother," replied Ash wistfully. I opened my mouth to ask about it, but she quickly changed the subject. "Do you want a coffee, a glass of water or something?"

"Uh, a coffee would be great," I said, following her into a huge, homey kitchen. The sideboards were all oak, and there was a huge chest freezer in a corner. The fridge was covered in photos of an old man, who I guessed was Greenfeld, all over the world, and of Ash, Adina and the blond man with a beautiful woman with Ash's flaming hair. Ash went over to a door I hadn't noticed in the corner and walked into a massive cupboard, lined with shelves filled with pasta, flour and God knows what else. She grabbed a jar of coffee and brought it out, flicking on the kettle and grabbing a mug from another cupboard.

"So, how was school?" asked Ash conversationally.

"Uh, it was alright I guess," I replied, trying not to stare at the way the sun coming through the window was making bronze and copper coloured strands in her hair glow. "Nothing much really happened. Same as usual."

"I want to know all about the usual," said Ash, her eyes lighting up. "I haven't really experienced *normal* before." She laughed and looked at me expectantly.

"Uh, well, Mr Spiro was his normal self, funny but still getting stuff done. Can't really remember what the lesson was about though. Something to do with slavery, I think. Probably important." She nodded, her face completely alive, and I realised that she really hadn't done normal before. This was utterly new to her. "Chemistry was alright, we played around with acid. Kev burned a hole through his lab coat. Then I had Music, which is when you had Drama I guess. Nate said about Romeo and Juliet. Um, and then in English we started a new creative writing topic. Nothing really happened during lunch or tutor. And then in Maths we did simultaneous equations *again* because some people still aren't getting it. And that's about it."

"So how are things with-" Aislinn was interrupted by the kettle boiling, so she busied herself with putting the coffee and water into a mug, then half-turned towards me to ask: "Milk or sugar?"

"Milk, please," I replied. I wanted to know what she had been about to say, but I knew that if I asked she'd just brush it off as nothing. Hmm. She handed me the mug of coffee, and I took a tentative sip, focusing on not burning myself.

"Do you wanna come upstairs?" asked Ash abruptly.

"Uh, yeah sure," I replied, not really knowing what to expect as I followed her to her room. Whatever I had been expecting, it wasn't what I saw. The floor was dappled with colours from the beautiful stained-glass windows, creating patterns on the thick green carpet, and a huge four-poster bed dominated the room. In the corner was a wardrobe on a similar scale to the bed, and I noticed a door in the wall on the other side of the bed, and guessed it led to an en-suite bathroom.

"It's a bit big," said Ash apologetically.

"I think your bed is as big as my whole room," I told her, resisting the urge to launch myself onto the bed and starfish there. It looked so comfy.

"This room is bigger than the cottage I used to live in," admitted Ash, perching herself on the edge of the bed. "I'm pretty sure it also has more furniture."

"How come you moved her? What could you possibly want in our wet little town?"

"Things got complicated with my family," she replied, looking down at the carpet. "My mum had to go away for a while, so we're living here with Uncle M until she comes back, or our dad does."

"Uncle M? I thought he was your granddad?"

"He is. It's complicated. Can we talk about something else?"

"Okay. Who was that guy who answered the door?"

"My brother, Malachi."

"How come you don't look like him? Or your little sister?"

"I don't know."

"They both have blonde hair and literally the bluest eyes I've ever seen. Apart from maybe Jen's." Ash's head snapped up and she stared at me, her eyes widening with comprehension. "What did I say?"

"Come with me," replied Ash, not answering my question. She grabbed my hand and I couldn't help but notice the way it felt when her skin touched mine: like an electric shock at first, but then like a slow, burning fire. But in a good way. It was weird. She led me all the way through the house and out into the back garden, which was almost as unruly as the front.

We wove our way around thickets of brambles and stands of nettles and, just as I was despairing that the garden was going to go on forever, we came to a kind of weird water-feature, which looked predominantly out of place in this wilderness. It looked like a sheet of water, magically floating in the air, and I walked all the way round it trying to figure out how it worked. It was oval shaped, about three feet across and six feet tall, and almost a foot off the ground. The sun reflected off of it in weird ways, casting ethereal light and shadows on Ash's face as she gazed into my eyes, trying to figure outâ ¦ Something.

She grabbed my hand and pulled me so that we were standing together, right in front of the strange fountain-thingy. It looked kind of like liquid light, somehow staying in a fixed shape in the air, and I couldn't for the life of me figure it out. Ash stepped right through it, and pulled me through. I expected to emerge on the other side, and when my brain comprehended what it was seeing I looked around in amazement.

"Welcome to my world."

Chapter 9: Tell Him

Author's note:Please don't hate me! I realise I took forever to reply, I've been really busy lately with Science exams and my school production (I got to be a bar wench. It made me happier than it probably should have done) but I promise I will update much quicker next time. I had real problems with this chapter, I kept going back and changing it and I'm still not entirely happy with it, but I thought that I really should post it seeing as I've made you guys wait so long. I realise it's a lot of info to absorb, but please comment some feedback :)

Chapter Nine

Aislinn

Even though I was used to it, I still stared. I do every time. Going through into the Caster world is a weird thing. You don't go from one place to another, you stay in the same place but cross through a tear in the fabric of our world and into the other one: the Caster world. Our particular portal emerged in one of the most beautiful nymph gardens I had ever visited.

Nymphs look a lot like Mortals (specifically beautiful young women) but their bodies are impervious to age and illness, meaning that in theory they could live forever. Because of this little quirk, my great-grandmother Magdelane looks younger than my mother, and always will do. It's quite disconcerting. The difference between nymphs and Mortals is that nymphs are attached to a part of nature: it's where they get their life force, it's part of their soul, and without it they would die. The most common nymphs are the dryads, who are each attached to a tree, but there are nymphs for stars, the sea, freshwater and pretty much any other part of nature other than animals.

They're very proud of their gardens, each of which can contain the attachments of up to a hundred nymphs, and they spend most of their time singing and dancing together. Nymphs are generally harmless (as long as you don't say their leaves look funny or insult their hair or something) but there is one big problem with them: Mortal men are infatuated after one kiss. And nymphs love nothing more than tempting men away from their lovers. It's how they amuse themselves. Sometimes, like in the case of my grandmother's sister Dariah, a nymph will actually fall in love with a Mortal, but it happens very rarely because it will inevitably end in heartbreak for both of them. I mean, how would you feel if you were steadily getting older and your partner was going to stay eternally young and beautiful? And the Mortal man eventually dies, leaving the nymph utterly devastated, at which point she normally commits suicide. Fun stuff.

I realised how dangerous it could be to take Gabe to the nymph gardens, but that was where the portal in our garden led to, and they really were beautiful. They would show him the most natural and stunning part of my world, which might make my explanation slightly easier for him.

Looking over at him, I realised he was still staring around himself in disbelief, and to be honest I wasn't surprised. This particular garden belonged to my (sort of) cousin Demeter and her friends. Demeter was a dryad, and her tree, like all dryad trees, looked similar to a willow tree, but with a wonderful bright red fruit which is often used in Fae foods, but can be poisonous to Mortals if not prepared correctly. Of course, if it is prepared correctly it still has a huge effect on Mortalsâ ¦ But more about that later. The entire garden was full of red flowers and leaves, and a large pool in the centre of it reflected the bright blue sky back at us. Underneath the surface I could just see the hair of the water nymph who was attached to it, and I knew the rest of the nymphs would be hiding, watching us like this one was.

"Where are we?" asked Gabe, finally finding his voice. His eyes were wide as he tried to take everything in, and he turned to see the other side of the portal behind us. He walked all the way round it, peered closely at it, and even stuck his hand back through before turning to look at me, expecting an answer to his question.

"A nymph garden," I replied.

"A what now?"

"A nymph garden," I repeated. "A garden where nymphs live."

"What the hell are nymphs?" asked Gabe. "How did we get here? What is that?" He pointed to the portal. "Why is it in your garden? Why are we in this garden? How did this-"

"A nymph is a spirit of nature," I interrupted him. "Part of their soul is in the form of a part of nature, like a tree or a star. For example, this tree," I patted the trunk of the nearest tree. "Is part of my cousin Demeter."

"Your cousin?"

"Well, sort of. She's my grandmother's sister's granddaughter. On my mother's side."

"And she's a treeâ¦"

"No. The tree is part of her. The rest of her is in a body just like yours. Well, not really. She'll never get old or sick. But basically the same." Demeter peered out from behind her tree, then danced over to my side and gave Gabe a shy smile. He looked stunned. Demeter had long, chestnut hair which fell down her back in effortless waves, and her eyes were a light hazel colour. What really caught people's attention, though, was her face: she had the perfect bone structure, and her skin was flawless porcelain, with just a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. "Gabe, this is my cousin Demeter. Dem, this is Gabriel, from my school." *Touch him and I'll kill you, touch him and I'll kill you, touch him and I'll-*

"Uh, hi," said Gabe, extending his hand towards her. She shook it, then quickly dropped it when she saw the look on my face.

"It's nice to meet you," said Demeter. "I hope you'll find our gardens hospitable. Would you like something to eat?" She plucked one of the fruits from her tree and held it towards him, and he was about to take it when I knocked it from her hand.

"Dem, are you crazy?" I demanded. "He's Mortal!" Her eyes widened, and she took two quick steps backwards.

"I-I'm sorry, Ash, I didn't realise," she said quietly. "You know I would never- I mean, I wouldn't do that. Never."

"And you didn't even think to check? You could have killed him!" That thought scared me so much that I stopped short in the middle of my rant, suddenly lost at the thought of a world without Gabe. At that moment, I realised what had happened. *Oh shit*.

"What the hell is going on? What do you mean I'm Mortal?"

"Um, there's a lot to explain. Come with me." I took his hand and led him through the gardens until we came to a tiny pool which I knew was uninhabited, as the water nymph who had been attached to it had been killed

in an argument with a succubus.

"Where am I?"

"You're in my world. The Caster world," I said slowly. "This is where my family comes from, originally."

"Caster? What the hell is a Caster?"

"Mortals often called us witches or sorcerers. Depending on our parents and whether we choose Light or Dark, our powers can vary from the ability to manipulate people's emotions to being able to control one of the elements, like fire or water. We have to Declare ourselves for either Light or Dark before our twentieth birthday, at which point we develop our full powers and can perform full Casts. Once you've Declared yourself, you can never go back. You're on that side forever."

"Soâ ¦ You're magic?"

"No. Well, sort of. Yes. I suppose you could call it that. But not really."

"What are your powers?"

"I have no idea," I replied honestly. He was taking this remarkably well. Then I remembered what had happened. *That's why he's not freaking out*. "I haven't Declared myself yet."

"Why not?"

"Because I haven't decided yet," I said simply. "You'd be able to tell if I'd Declared myself, because I'd have either bright blue or purple eyes."

"Like your brother and sister?"

"Yeah."

"So how come you haven't decided yet? Why don't you just choose Light?" asked Gabe.

"It's not that simple. Light and Dark aren't like your ideas of good and evil, they both have good and bad points. They both have a leader, who controls all of the Casters who have Declared themselves for that side, and there are certain laws which preside over both sides. No mass killing of Mortals, for example."

"Seems a lot like good and evil. What's so different?"

"Light Casters can still be bad, and Dark Casters can still be good, they don't fit into specific categories. Casters make the choice based on which side they think will benefit them the most. A Declaration is an entirely selfish thing. Both sides have opportunities, and both have drawbacks. Most Casters have a sense of which side they want to pledge themselves too very early on, and many Declare themselves long before their twentieth birthday. Not as early as Adi, but still. A Dark Caster isn't necessarily evil, but a Light Caster could be, depending on if they've been drawn in by Chaos." He raised an eyebrow. "You can't Declare yourself for Chaos, but once you've Declared yourself you could be recruited by Chaos to work for them. They have no morals, no boundaries, and no problems with manipulating or taking Mortal lives."

"Basically they're the bad guys?"

"Pretty much."

"So in your world there are nymphs and Casters, both of which look like normal people. Why do they live here?"

"Well, the nymphs choose to live here because they know what Mortals are like when it comes to nature. And Casters generally do live amongst Mortals, but this is where we originate from. We come back for festivals and celebrations, and just to see somewhere unpolluted. But nymphs and Casters aren't the only people who live here, and some of the others look rather noticeably different to Mortals."

"What else is there, then?" asked Gabe. His face was open and his eyes were bright, as though he was having the time of his life. I was expecting his face to show shock or confusion, but instead it looked more likeâ ¦ Wonder. *He actually likes it here. He understands. He accepts you.* These three thoughts were bouncing around in my head and I had to resist the urge to jump up and do a little dance. *It's not his choice to like it,* said a little voice in the back of my head. *He doesn't have any other options, after what you've done to him.* I shook my head, trying to dislodge the irritating little voice, then focused back on Gabe and his question.

"Well, there are incubi and succubi, like Uncle M, who feed off of Mortal energy, and they look quite a lot like Mortals. Slightly creepier versions, but still. And then there are lycans, like my father, who look like normal Mortals other than their eyes, which are usually quite yellowish. They're much stronger than Mortals, but their strength changes with the moon, and so does their mood. They can turn into wolves at any point in the lunar cycle, but the pull towards the wolf is much stronger at full moon. The longer they spend as a wolf, the more of their normal self they lose. Normally they choose to live off of Mortal energy, a bit like incubi, but they can live on Mortal or Fae food as well."

"So you're half werewolf?"

"No, I'm half lycan. Werewolves don't exist - the idea of them is based on old legends of lycans, but they've been warped and distorted so much that most Mortals wouldn't recognise a lycan if they walked past one in the street."

"They still look like Mortals though."

"I'm getting to the others. The other two main races in this world are Fae and sprites. Fae are humanoid, but very different. They have silvery skin, green eyes and white-blonde hair, and they can change size at will. Most of them are very athletic. If you find out a Fae's true name you can control them, they'll become a slave to your will. Oh, and they can't lie."

"Really? Like not at all? Ever?"

"Nope. If they try to lie their mouths just won't form the words, and they'll start gagging," I told him. "And if you want protection from Fae, always carry around iron, they can't go anywhere near it, like literally anywhere near it, or rowan. They can't harm anyone or anything touching rowan because it's sacred."

"Iron and rowan equals protection against Fae. Got it."

"They have glamours, meaning they can make things appear to be something they're not, but no matter what they say or what it looks like, *never* eat their food. You'll be stuck forever, unless you have iron or rowan with you."

"Stuck forever?"

"Yup. You'll never be allowed to leave. You'll have to serve them until the day you die."

"Brilliant," muttered Gabe. He glanced around for a second, as though scared that a group of Fae would appear from behind a tree and attack him with bagels or something, then turned back to me. "What about the other ones you mentioned? Sprats, or something?"

"Sprites," I corrected him. "They're tiny elementals, the kind of things your fairy stories are based on. They're not malicious, but they can give a nasty bite if they're provoked, particularly fire sprites."

"There's more than one type?"

"Yeah, there a whole bunch of them. The four most common are earth, which are green, fire, which are red, water, which are blue, and air, which are white. They live in huge colonies in nests, a lot like bees or wasps, and each have their own powers. A whole nest of them, even though they're only the size of my thumb-" I held it up for him to see, "-can be formidable. They're determined little buggers, won't give up once they've decided on something."

"Why are you showing me all this?" asked Gabe suddenly, gesturing around us. "You could have just let me think you were normal." For some reason his words stung, and I sprang to my feet.

"Yeah, okay, I get it, I'm a freak. Just forget about it, alright?" I knew why I was really freaking out, but I didn't want to admit it to myself: we were soul bonded. I took off between the trees, leaving him sat on the grass.

Gabriel

I sat there for a second, shell-shocked, before jumping up and running after her, following the brief glimpses I could catch of her bright hair between the trees.

"Ash! I didn't mean it like that! Ash wait up!" She ignored me. "Come on, Ash, you know that's not what I meant!" The trees in this part of the garden were getting closer and closer together and it was getting harder to spot her between the dark trunks. "Just wait up a second! Come on Ash, please?"

"Leave me alone!" I kept thinking I'd lost her, but I always caught sight of a flash of red between the trees and I carried on following, not caring that I didn't know where I was or where I was going or how I was going to get back.

My breath was coming in short gasps and my legs were screaming when I realised I'd lost her. I spun around, hoping I'd see her hair in the corner of my vision. Nothing. I sank to the ground, panting, and realised I was truly lost. The trees around me were dark and crowded, nothing like the graceful nymph trees I'd seen in the gardens. *Am I even in the gardens anymore?* The second that thought entered my mind I was back on my feet, acutely aware of the dangers of Ash's world. I knew I had to find a way back, but no matter which way I turned the forest looked exactly the same.

"Crap," I muttered. "Now what the hell do I do?"

"Come with us," said a silky voice behind me. I jumped about a foot in the air and spun around to face its owner, equally apprehensive and curious. The creature stood in front of me was vaguely humanoid, like Ash had described, but at the same time entirely different. He had a kind of ethereal beauty, and his skin glowed with a silvery inner light which somehow managed to mask all of his features in shadow. If I'd been asked to describe him afterwards, all I would have been able to say was 'beautiful'. I couldn't see anything about his

face clearly apart from the white hair framing it and his piercing green eyes. "Hello, Mortal. My name is Raphael. I believe you've met my cousin."

"Uh, hi, I'm Gabriel," I said. Normally I would have shaken his hand, but I was somehow reluctant to touch this otherworldly being. "And, uh, have I?"

"Aislinn Orviatti." As soon as he said her name I knew I was in trouble, but at the same time I was slightly calmer. If he knew Ash, he could easily be dangerous, but at the same time he might be less inclined to hurt me. *And she might be able to find you.*

"Yeah, I came here with her," I told him. He nodded, then turned to his two companions.

"These are my friends, Luri and Candar," he said, gesturing to the Fae girl and boy who were with him. They both nodded to me, and I noticed that their faces were shrouded in shadow like Raphael's.

"So Ash is your cousin?"

"In a way. My grandmother Madrigal is Magnus Greenfeld's half-sister." The more I heard about it, the more complicated Ash's family seemed. *I need to get her to draw me a family tree.*

"Half-sister?"

"Their father had an ill-fated relationship with a Mortal. It did not end well for her. My grandmother was the result."

"Ill-fated?"

"My great-grandfather Jonathan was an incubus. He killed her shortly after she gave birth."

"If he was an incubus, how come you're Fae?"

"My grandmother is a Dark Caster. She had a brief relationship with my grandfather, Candril, who is Fae, and gave birth to my mother, also Fae. My father is a Mortal, and I am the result of my mother's stupid decision to have a relationship with him."

"So you're only half Fae?"

"Technically, yes. However because Mortals have no powers or real importance, I still have full Fae powers."

"Oh."

"Come with us," repeated Raphael. Although I knew I should stay away from Fae, particularly as I didn't have any iron handy, his voice was oddly compelling, and I couldn't help myself from following him and his friends.

They led me through the trees, navigating with ease despite the unending monotony of the landscape, until we came to an abrupt halt in front of an intricate metal gate.

"Open the gate please, Mr Williams," said Raphael. Again, I found myself doing exactly what he asked me to before I even realised I was doing it. I should have been alarmed that he could so easily control me but my thoughts were slow, like they were moving through syrup. I closed my eyes for a second, trying to break

through the sticky barrier in my mind.

"Why can't you open it?" I asked, keeping my eyes closed.

"Do you have to be so childish?" replied Raphael impatiently. I heard the gate swing on its hinges, and felt a gentle hand on my arm, guiding me so I didn't have to open my eyes.

"Where are we?" I asked. Even though it should have made me uneasy, having my eyes closed in such a dangerous place, it somehow made me feel slightly more comfortable. The syrup effect was lessening the longer I kept my eyes closed, so I guessed that it wasn't just Raphael's voice that was controlling me. I had to be looking at him.

Chapter 10: A Different Viewpoint

Author's note: hey guys, thanks for sticking with Ash so far :) I realise how irritatingly short this chapter is but I've had super writer's block recently so I thought I should at least post something. I was intending for this chapter to be longer but I promise I'll make it up in the next one :D

TheNinjaShroom

Aislinn

I knew it was a mistake to leave him sat there in my world without any protection, and I knew it was selfish to run away from a soul bond just because I was scared. *You'll never forgive yourself if something happens to him. You're linked now.* A soul bond. The most powerful and dangerous thing that can possibly happen to a Caster.

"How did this happen?" I whispered to myself. "I met the guy yesterday."

Logically, it wouldn't matter if I'd known Gabe two seconds or twenty years, we would still have formed the soul bond. They're rare, but if a Caster and a Mortal are meant to be soul bonded then they will be. It's inevitable. It can happen instantly, or over decades, but it will happen, and it will never go away.

Thousands of years ago, Casters and Mortals had no interaction at all. They each lived in their own, completely separate worlds. There were very few portals between the two worlds, and they were heavily guarded. It was forbidden for any Caster to even set foot in the other world, let alone actually meet a Mortal.

However, over the years the fabric between the worlds began to tear and fray, not enough to cause problems but enough for more and more portals to keep cropping up, and eventually the Caster Councils realised it was impossible for them all to be guarded. Crossing the portals was still forbidden, but with no one to stop them Casters began to go into the Mortal world, and many stayed there. They soon realised that with certain Mortals, and under the right circumstances, special bonds were formed, between the very souls of the two individuals. It was a rare but powerful phenomenon. The two individuals could communicate without speaking, sense when the other was close, and the Mortal could even use the Caster's powers, to some extent.

Over time crossing into the Mortal world became a regular thing, and eventually it was the norm for Casters to live there and only go back to their own world for special occasions. However, because of this extended interaction with Mortals, soul bonds became much more common. They were still rare, but most Casters had at least heard of someone who had one if they didn't have a soul bond themselves. Because of this increased frequency in the formation of soul bonds, the problems with them quickly began to show. The link was so strong that the Caster would do anything, even sacrifice their own life, to keep the Mortal alive and happy. This could easily be used to manipulate the Caster, and because of the fickle nature of Mortals some of them could even be bribed into betraying their own soul, and the Caster bonded to it, for material gain.

The main problem with soul bonds, however, was the fragility of Mortals compared to Casters, and the additional dangers presented for them as part of the Caster world. If the Mortal was killed, the soul-bonded Caster often committed suicide, unable to live without the other half of their soul.

And yet I left him alone here, I thought. I knew I had to go back and find him before it was too late. *What if it already is?* whispered a little voice in the back of my mind. I shook my head, trying to dislodge it. If something had happened to Gabe I would feel it, but I knew that until I found him I would still be worried about him, so I set off in the direction I had come from.

I had no idea when or where I'd lost him, but I knew it was well away from the nymph gardens. *You could search for weeks and not find him*. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block out the voice in my head. Then I remembered something I had once read about soul bonds:

Soul bonds are the most complex, dangerous and joyous things a Caster can possibly experience, but with them comes a great deal of power and the responsibility to use it wisely. A Caster meant for a soul bond, even if they never meet their soul partner, will often have power over Mortal minds or in some extreme cases even their souls and this power in the hands of Chaos would be disastrous. Although those with soul powers are often the most upstanding and compassionate of the Casters, and therefore the least likely to turn to Chaos, if their soul partner is threatened they can be manipulated into almost anything to keep them safe, which makes soul bonded Casters, and their Mortal counterparts, extremely susceptible to manipulation from agents of Chaos. These risks can, however, be minimised by some of the benefits of a soul bond: the ability to communicate over long distances, sense each other's presence and locate the other no matter how far away they are.

All I needed to do was figure out how to unlock these benefits and then I could find Gabe and get him out of the world I never should have brought him to. I had no idea how these things were supposed to work, and realised that I should have paid more attention to my mother when she taught us about soul bonds. I slowly counted to three in my mind and then tried to imagine Gabe.

Almost instantly my mind snapped to a completely different view to the one in front of me and I cried out, completely deaf and blind to my surroundings. I felt myself stumble on something and fall, and abruptly my vision and hearing returned. I lay on the damp ground, panting, as I waited for my heart to slow to its normal pace.

"That was the most terrifying thing I've ever experienced in my life," I muttered, sitting up slowly. My head was still spinning and I felt alarmingly close to vomiting.

Determined, I once again counted to three and thought of Gabe, and once again I had the alarming sensation of not being able to see anything in front of me. I kept focused on the blurry scene in front of me and it gradually sharpened until I could see a clearing with a large table in it laid with a huge feast and several Fae who seemed to be looking straight at me. I was irritated to find that I couldn't see Gabe anywhere in my field of vision, and no matter how much I tried I couldn't move my viewpoint to look for him. *How is this supposed to help me find him if I can't even see him?*

Just as I was about to give up, my viewpoint lurched and began to move. One of the Fae looked up, and I suddenly realised that it was my cousin Raphael.

"Mr Williams, I assume you have some questions about why you are here?" he said, his voice silky smooth. He was looking right at me, and I realised with a jolt that I was seeing out of Gabe's eyes. I watched, fascinated, as Raphael continued talking to him. "We will answer all of your questions shortly, but first, would you like something to eat? Or a drink, maybe?" *Oh my God, Raphael, what are you doing?*

"Uh, no I'm fine thanks," replied Gabe. I could hear his voice how it must sound to him, and it was weirdly different. "Why have you brought me here?"

"All in good time, Mr Williams. Have something to eat," insisted Raphael, his voice dripping with Fae magic. My viewpoint began to move again and I watched, helplessly, as Gabe moved closer to the Fae food. He reached for a piece of fruit and brought it to his lips.

"Gabriel no!" I screamed, and for a brief second I saw the fruit fall from his hand before I rushed back into my own body and vomited.

Chapter 11: Slow Fire

Gabriel

"Gabriel no!" I dropped the fruit and fell to my knees, clutching my head. It felt like someone had driven a railroad spike through it, yet somehow it also felt like something had clicked into place that had never been there before. I couldn't really focus on the newfound clicking feeling, but something in my subconscious must have registered it before I blacked out from the pain.

When I woke up I felt a dull pounding in my head, like my brain was bashing on the inside of my skull trying to escape. I tried to sit up, then quickly turned my head to the side to throw up.

"If you're quite finished," said a silky voice. I looked up and glared at Raphael, who was staring down at me with derision. "There is something we need to discuss."

"I'm not discussing anything with you," I spat. "You just tried to enslave me."

"Ah, I see little cousin Ash has told you about us after all," he said calmly. "Please accept my apologies. It was nothing personal."

"Oh of course not," I replied sarcastically. "No hard feelings, it's not like you just tried to *kidnap me forever*!"

"Mr Williams please calm down, I assure you we meant no harm."

"Course you didn't, you just wanted to feed me your fucking poison fruit by accident!" I stood up completely ready to storm out of wherever the hell I was and find Ash but my knees buckled and I crumpled to the floor. Raphael sighed and held out a hand to me but I knocked it away. "Don't touch me," I snarled, shakily getting to my feet again.

"Don't get feisty, Mortal," warned Raphael. "Even without our powers we outnumber you. Be careful."

"Bite me," I spat, staggering towards the gate. Before I could even blink I had been pushed back to the ground and Raphael's friends were blocking the gate, their arms folded.

"Please do not make us hold you against your will. We are just trying to get some information about my dear cousin."

"I'm not telling you anything until you answer some of my questions." Raphael rolled his eyes but gestured for me to go ahead. "Why doesn't Ash live with her mum or dad?"

"Her father left her mother, who then went into a deep depression. She is now in therapy, so Aislinn and her siblings are living with their grandfather." *No wonder she doesn't talk about it.*

"Okay, um, how come she has so many cousins? And how come you're all like different species?" As soon as the words were out of my mouth I suddenly realised they could be considered offensive, but then I remembered that Raphael seemed offended by my mere presence so I stared at him, waiting for an answer. He stared back. I blinked.

"Aislinn only has three first cousins, however there are lots more of us the further into the family tree you go. Most of us are related through grandparents or great-grandparents," explained Raphael grudgingly, looking

like he would rather be anywhere else in the world. "And we are not different species, as it is impossible to produce offspring with a partner of a different species. Fae, nymphs, lycans etcetera are all technically the same species as Mortals. I suppose we would be considered different, superior races." *Oh wonderful, I'm about to be interrogated by a Fae Nazi, brilliant*, I thought dryly.

"So Mortals and Casters can be together?"

"In theory yes. In practice, it rarely works. This world is too dangerous for a fragile little Mortal. Most die terribly within a few weeks, normally at the hands of the Caster's family or friends."

"You're lying."

"I can't." *Oh yeah, forgot about that.* I shrugged and turned away from him, not wanting him to see my reaction. Why did I care so much about things not working with me and Ash? We'd known each other for two days and I'd already met half her family and found out that if we got together I'd die. I took a deep breath and was startled to realise I was choking back tears. *What the hell is wrong with me?* "Is that all of your questions? Good. Now, why has Aislinn brought you here?"

"No idea," I replied honestly.

"Is she any closer to Declaring herself? Does she know the-"

"Raphael what the hell are you doing?" My head jerked up at the sound of her voice just in time to see Ash shoving her way between the Fae at the gate and storm up to her cousin, rage sparking in her eyes.

"I was merely asking him some questions," he replied smoothly. "There is no harm in that, and more importantly there is no law against it."

"Of course there's no law against it, he's only Mortal!" exclaimed Ash. I looked away, slightly stung that she thought of me as 'only Mortal'. "If you shoved a Caster to the floor, blocked their escape and then interrogated them you'd have their Council all over you, so don't you dare say you were only asking some questions, because evidently he doesn't want to answer them!"

"How did you find me?" I asked her, ignoring the Fae completely.

"Luck I guess," she said, not meeting my eyes. I frowned at her and was about to question her further when Raphael spoke again.

"The Fae are beginning to get anxious, cousin. We know of the prophecy surrounding your Declaration and the Elders are getting nervous."

"Tell the Elders to suck it," hissed Ash, grabbing my hand and dragging me through the gate. The second she touched me electricity zinged through my body, once again replaced by the wonderful fire slowly burning every cell in my body and making my blood sing with the rightness of it. "We need to get out of here," she muttered, more to herself than me. "Can't let the Elders find a Mortal here, especially not with the prophecyâ¦"

"What prophecy?" She ignored me, so I used her grip on my hand to swing her round to face me, not realising until it had happened that this would put her lips just inches from mine.

"There was a prophecy made by the Fae Elders, way before I was born, that a Caster with 'mixed blood' would one day affect our entire world with their Declaration. Turns out I'm that Caster," said Ash slightly breathlessly.

I saw her gaze shift from my eyes to my lips for a second before she looked back at me, and I could see the uncertainty in her wide, innocent green eyes. I closed the space between us and gave her a small, sweet kiss, intending for it to only last for a second. I felt the electricity from before magnified by a thousand and Ash's reaction was instantaneous. Within a second her arms were around my neck, her fingers tangled into my hair, her lips fierce on mine, and she had crushed her body against me, both of us being burnt by the contact but craving more. I put my arms around her waist and felt her shiver when my hands brushed the exposed skin of her lower back where her top had come up slightly. I smiled into our kiss.

As her hands ran up and down my back leaving trails of invisible flames I began to get breathless but I ignored it, too caught up in the moment and the amazing physicality of Ash's lips moving against mine, our bodies as close as they could be yet yearning to be closer. It was only when I felt my heartbeat beginning to stutter and I realised that I really couldn't catch my breath that I pulled back, panting. When I opened my eyes I saw that my vision was tunnelling alarmingly, and just as I was about to say something I felt myself dissolve into blackness again.

"Gabe? Gabriel? Oh my God please let him be okay, please oh God please," I heard her saying. I mumbled something incoherent and opened my eyes, my heartbeat still worryingly fast. "Gabe! Oh thank God you're okay," said Ash, letting out a long breath and throwing her arms around my neck. Even that tiny touch sent sparks of electricity down my spine and she let go of me immediately, backing away from where she was knelt next to me on the ground until she was watching me warily from a few feet away, her eyes wide and anxious. "You are okay, right?"

"I'm fine," I told her, but my reassurances were somewhat opposed by the fact that my voice was wheezy and I still couldn't get enough oxygen in my lungs. "I just need a minute."

"W-what happened?" asked Ash quietly. She looked so uncertain and unsure, so completely vulnerable, that I suddenly realised how scary this must be for her too. I scooted over and wrapped my arms around her, careful to make sure that our skin wasn't touching. She stiffened for a second before relaxing into me, and she felt so absolutely right tucked into my side. *I love you.*

Wait what? Where the hell did that come from? Don't even think about saying that out loud you idiot, you barely know her.

After a few minutes it occurred to me that Ash didn't have any idea what was going on with us either. *Does that not normally happen?*

"I wouldn't know," replied Ash. *Shit, did I say that out loud?* "When I was living with my mother I had a very sheltered life, I've never seen Mortals up close before, let alone touched one." At the thought of what had just happened her cheeks went pink and she began to fiddle with the hem of her top, avoiding my eyes.

"So what now?"

Chapter 12: Father

Author's note: hey guys, I'm back! I am so sorry about the long wait (over two months) but I've been super busy with exams and relationship stuff and have also been suffering from severe writer's block, but I powered through it and here is (finally) Chapter Twelve! I know it's quite short but like I said, my mind was pretty blocked. I promise that the next chapter will come along much faster and will explain everything, and be much longer. Sorry again about the wait, love you guys!

Aislinn

I thought about it for a second. What now? I was still trying to get over the fact that I had answered a question that Gabe had asked *in his head*.

"Uh, I guess we should get back," I mumbled, standing up quickly. "Won't your parents be wondering where you are?"

"Ash, can we please talk about what just happened? That's not normal, I can tell, so what's going on?" *We're soul bonded and I almost killed you, that's what's going on!*

"Nothing," I muttered. "Mortals and Casters aren't supposed to mix, they're not compatible. When they get too close their bodies react." He knew I was lying but he didn't press the subject. "We need to get back." I got up and walked back in the general direction of the portal, not looking back to see if he was following me; I could *feel* that he was.

We trudged through the forest and back to the gardens in silence, a million thoughts running through both of our heads but none of them being said out loud. As we drew nearer to the gardens I started to feel uneasy, as though I was being watched, but whenever I looked around I saw nothing. It took a while for me to realise that this was why I was feeling uneasy; there was always something happening in the Caster world. For it to be so quiet and empty was disconcerting. Gabe quickly picked up on my mood and began to glance around nervously every few steps, evidently trying to figure out what was bothering me.

"Ash? What's going on?"

"I don't knowâ¦" I replied slowly. "I think we're being watched. Something's not right here, it's too quiet." As a half-lycan I had a stronger sense of smell than most people; the second I picked up his scent I whipped around to face the man who had been following us, who attempted to dodge out of sight a fraction of a second too late.

"What the hell are you doing?" I demanded, trying to keep my voice steady. The man stood up and walked towards us sheepishly, his eyes drinking in every detail of me.

"I needed to see you, sweetpea. I've missed you so much," he said, taking another few steps forwards. He half-raised his arms, as if hoping for a hug, but quickly lowered them when he saw the look on my face.

"Ash? Who is he?" asked Gabe quietly, eyeing the man with apprehension. I ignored him.

"If you missed me so much why didn't you come back?" I challenged, my voice shaking with fury. "Why didn't you come visit all three of us at Uncle M's? Why didn't you at least write to us?"

"You need to understand how difficult this was for me -"

"No, you need to understand! You need to understand that whatever you felt was *nothing* compared to what we had to go through!" I screamed, completely losing any semblance of control. "You left us in the middle of the night with no warning, no reason why, not even anything to let us know where you were. Just a note that said 'I'm leaving, I'm sorry'. What do you think that did to us?"

"Ash, please -" -

"For weeks we sat there staring at the door, waiting for you to come back. Mum never stopped waiting. She just sat there staring." I realised abruptly that I was sobbing, but my brain couldn't remember how to stop. "Eventually me and Mal had to take over everything or we would have starved. We had to try to keep up some pretence of normalcy for Adi when all we wanted to do was break down and actually be able to *feel* our emotions, there were times when both of us almost gave up and I think that if we'd been alone we would have done, but we had to look after her. We had to live like that for *two years* before anyone actually bothered to come and find us, before anyone responded to the hundreds of letters I wrote begging for help. You abandoned us and left us with no option but to steal food to try and survive!" I was screaming again, my voice still catching in my throat. "Me and Mal missed meals for days in a row to try and keep Adi fed, but even then she went to bed most nights crying because she was so hungry! So don't you *dare* say that this was difficult for you, because you broke us completely." I stopped talking abruptly, my breath heaving and tears streaming down my face.

"Ash, I don't understand," said Gabriel softly, and I realised that I was gripping his hand tightly.

"Gabe, this is my father," I said, then I turned and marched towards the portal, dragging him along behind me until he jogged to catch up. I heard my father running after us, calling my name, but I ignored him. As we stormed through the gardens I saw out of the corner of my eye the nymphs watching us from behind trees, whispering and pointing to our joined hands.

I walked through the portal without looking back, knowing my father wouldn't follow us onto Uncle M's land for fear of what the incubus would do to him.

"Ash, that - I - what?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I said shortly, dropping his hand and walking on ahead of him. He struggled after me through the weeds, his speech punctuated with swear words as the plants snagged at his feet and clothes.

"What happened? Why did he - crap - just leave like that? And you guys had to - shit - look after everything all by yourselves, how come no one - fuck off you stupid plant! - noticed and helped you?"

I whirled around to face him, my hands still shaking from the encounter with my dad and my nerves stretched to breaking point. "I said I didn't want to talk about it, just leave me alone!"

"Ash, please," he said softly. I felt myself deflate and reluctantly waited for him to catch up before leading him at a slower pace towards the house. We walked in silence again, tension crackling in the air as we approached the back door and stepped inside the house.

I led him up to my room and we sat together on the bed, my hands fidgeting with my sleeves in my lap.

"I'm going to tell you everything, as much as I can remember," I said slowly.

Chapter 13: Pitch Black Outside

Gabriel

I couldn't help staring at her as she sat cross-legged in front of me, her eyes still shining with tears and her sleeves pulled down over her hands. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, and I was absolutely in love with her.

"A lot of my memories from that time are kind of blurry, I don't really know why, but this is what happened, as far as I can remember," she said, her eyes on her hands.

She then proceeded to tell me everything that had happened: how her dad had left them; how her mum had gone into a deep depression that they could not lift her from; how she and Malachi had slowly watched all of the life fade from their mother's eyes until she was just a shell; how they had tried to bring her back to help them look after Adina, but nothing had worked; how they had started to steal from their neighbours to try and keep their mother and sister fed but they still went hungry; how both of them had contemplated giving up or leaving, but both stayed for their sister. How Ash had written hundreds of letters to Casters all over the world, begging anyone to help them. How eventually someone had realised what was going on and had taken all of them away: Ash and her siblings to Uncle M's house and her mother to a facility to try and help her recover.

"I - wow," I said quietly when she was finished. "I had no idea."

"It's just - seeing him today, acting as though he was the one who suffered the most, as though we would just forgive him," she said. "Something inside me just snapped. I shouldn't have lost control like that; I should be staying strong for Adi. If she saw me like this -" I stopped her by putting a gentle finger to her lips. Her eyes moved up to meet mine, wide and innocent and open.

"There is nothing wrong with losing control in that situation. *Nothing*," I tell her fiercely. "You've been strong for so long; you're allowed to lose control. You are the strongest person I know, and it is not a sign of weakness to show emotions." She blinked and a single tear rolled down her cheek, leaving a silvery track in its wake. Without thinking I brushed it away with the pad of my thumb, leaving my hand cupping her face. I could feel the fire burning between us, but this time it was different; not flaming and passionate but warm and comforting. She gave me a small smile and in that moment I just wanted to bundle her up and take her somewhere she could never be hurt again.

"Aislinn? What's going on?" We both looked up to see her brother stood in the doorway, looking between us with his eyes narrowed.

"We saw Dad," she replied quietly. Malachi stared at her for a moment before opening his arms. She launched herself into them and clung to him, sobbing, his large hands stroking her hair soothingly. Although he was helping to comfort his sister I could clearly see the anger in his eyes as he stared at me, but I knew it was not directed towards me. From her position in his arms Ash choked out the whole story of our encounter with her father in the Caster world and I watched as Malachi's hands curled into fists and his face turned white, his expression beyond fury.

"Where exactly was this?" he demanded when Ash had finished.

"I don't remember. Somewhere near the nymph gardens I think," she mumbled, wiping her eyes on her sleeves as she stepped back from her brother. He turned without another word and left the room, his hands still clenched at his sides.

When she turned back towards me her eyes were puffy and she looked so vulnerable that instantly I got up and folded her small form into my arms, feeling the warmth of her body and of the fire between us. I stroked her hair as her brother had done and felt her relax into my embrace.

"Don't you need to get home?" she murmured into my shirt.

"Not if you still need me here," I replied, kissing the top of her head and inhaling the wonderful scent of raspberries. I knew that I could never leave her alone if she needed me.

"I'm fine," she assured me, pulling back from me. I felt the loss of her warmth not just from my skin but from much deeper inside of me and I longed to pull her closer again, but I reluctantly allowed her to step back from me, her eyes still wide and confused but dry.

"You sure? I can stay here if you want," I told her. A large part of me was hoping that she would ask me to stay so that I could bring her back into my arms.

"No, you need to get home," she said, gesturing to the window. I was shocked to see that it was almost pitch black outside and I quickly pulled out my phone to check the time: 22:37.

"Oh crap, when did it get so late?"

"Time moves differently in the Caster world," said Ash. She looked worried as she said this and she bit her lip, staring out the window for a second longer before turning back to me. "Seriously though, go home," she said, smiling and attempting to push me towards the door.

***

The second I walked into school the next day I was ambushed by Kevin and Derren, both of whom were trying to make their plans for the party heard. As they were both talking at the same time I only heard snatches of what was actually being said:

"Jonny said he wants to bring Hanna -"

"Kara can only come if her older brother comes too but that should be okay because he can bring beer -"

"Jas says she needs to know where we're having it so she can figure out where to set up her kit -"

"People keep asking about the venue and the party's in a week so we need to get it sorted now -"

"Yeah okay, I get it!" I interrupted them both. Truth be told I had completely forgotten about the party in light of everything that had happened with Ash, but as I wasn't sure what was actually going on with us I decided not to mention it to my friends; instead I just told them that I hadn't had a chance to think about it yet.

"What? This is the most important party of the year and you haven't thought about it yet? What the hell are we gonna do when we have a hundred people hanging around waiting for us to sort out a venue?" demanded Derren. He looked kinda pissed.

"I know, I'll sort it out," I said distractedly, pushing past him into the building and looking around, hoping to catch a glance of Ash's bright hair.

"Gabe!" I looked around to see Nate battling through the crowds of students towards me, Dexter in tow.

"Oh hey Nate," I said, smiling at the pair of them. "What's up?" I heard Kev muttering something about 'supposed to be his best friend' and made a mental note to apologise to him later.

"I just wanted to ask how it went with Ash yesterday," replied Nate, winking. I didn't miss the frown that passed over Dex's face for a second for a split second before he rolled his eyes, trying to look indifferent.

"It was fine," I told him. "We just sat and talked about school and her family and stuff." Not the whole truth, but not technically a lie either.

"Her family? That must have been an eye-opener," remarked Nate, but thankfully he didn't press the subject. "Hey listen, when you get the chance can you tell Ash that Jack was looking for her?"

"When?" I demanded sharply.

"Yesterday, the same time we were," he replied, raising his eyebrows at me. "And this morning as well. Said he didn't wanna go to the house because that was an 'invasion of privacy' or something, so I didn't tell him we went up there."

"Why can't you tell her?" I asked, trying not to sound antagonistic but failing slightly.

"I can," replied Nate testily. "But I just thought you might see her first. Don't worry about it then."

"No, I didn't mean to sound like such a dick," I said, grabbing his arm as he turned to walk off. "If I see her, I'll tell her."

"Okay thanks, listen I gotta run but I'll see you at lunch?"

"Uh yeah sure," I replied, and he grinned at me before turning and disappearing back into the crowd, Dexter close behind him.

I passed through the rest of the morning in a kind of daze, my mind totally occupied by what Ash had told me the day before and the bubbling excitement I felt every time I thought of seeing her again. When lunch finally came I was one of the first in the dining hall, eagerly searching for Ash's bright red hair in the swelling mass of people pouring in through the double doors.

"Gabe! Over here." I turned to see Nate, Dexter and a few others waving at me from their table across the hall and I went over to join them, still scanning the crowds for the addictive Caster girl.

As I sat down at their table I realised that there was one person there who I didn't want to see: Jack. I narrowed my eyes slightly, not wanting to provoke a confrontation but unable to keep my emotions from playing out across my face. I had never had a problem with Jack before, truth be told I had never had a proper conversation with the guy before but the few times I had spoken to him he seemed pretty cool, but suddenly all I could think was how much I hated the guy for the way he had instantly sparked a connection with Ash.

I shook my head to clear all the weirdly possessive thoughts and gave him a tight smile, not wanting to start a confrontation. I didn't miss the look of confusion that crossed his face for a second before he smiled back; he must have noticed the look on my face a moment before.

"Hey guys," said a familiar voice behind me. My head whipped around at the sound of her voice and I grinned at her, my stomach fluttering when she smiled back and slid into the seat next to me.

"Oh hey Ash, where were you yesterday?" asked Jack. It took a moment for me to process that everything had happened had only been over the past twenty four hours.

"I, uh, I just had some family stuff," she muttered, looking at the table rather than meeting his gaze. She glanced at me for a second and her cheeks turned pink. Nate raised his eyebrows at us but mercifully didn't say anything as Jack was still watching Ash closely.

"Okay well Mr Murton wanted us to read through a Romeo and Juliet scene in preparation for our role play next lesson so if you're free after schoolâ ¦?"

"Uh no, not today actually, I have plans," she replied, a little too quickly.

"Do you? With who?" asked Jack, frowning. I didn't think it was any of his business who Ash was hanging out with however I had to admit I was kinda curious; who could she possibly have plans with if she'd only been here three days?

"With, um, with Gabe," she said, shooting me a 'please-back-me-up-on-this' look. "He's coming to mine to help me make cupcakes for my little sister's birthday tomorrow, right Gabe?"

"Uh yeah," I said. I would happily spend more time chilling with Ash but I wasn't really sure why she was so eager to stay away from Jack. She shot me a grateful glance and Nate looked between the two of us, smirking. I could practically see the cogs turning in his intuitive mind and I knew that before long he would be asking us exactly what happened last night. I wasn't sure if I wanted to tell him or not.

Author's note: I know that this chapter was a bit lacking in plot development and for the next few chapters things will probably be quite mellow, there will be lots of fluffiness between Ash and Gabe but not a great deal of major events but I promise it's all building up to some serious shit.

TeaandKate: Did you notice the reference to our favourite teacher? And I hope you appreciate that your favourite Mortals are back, I extended this chapter just to include them for you :)

- TheNinjaShroom

Chapter 14: Unravelling

Aislinn

Making cupcakes with Gabe was fun despite both of us ending up completely covered in flour and icing sugar, and after several hours of attempting to decipher recipe instructions we eventually produced a dozen edible-ish cupcakes, to our immense pride. We decorated them with squiggly lines (the initial plan was to spell out 'Happy Birthday' but this was quickly abandoned when we realised how difficult it was) and left them in the fridge, then headed upstairs to my room to watch a film on the laptop which Uncle M had acquired for me the day before.

I wasn't exactly sure what our relationship was and I had no idea how I was supposed to act around him, so I felt distinctly awkward as we sat on my bed to watch the film. It had been okay when we were actually doing something productive that required thinking, but now I just didn't know what to do with myself.

"Ash, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just thinking about my dad," I lied. Easier to tell him that than try to explain the hurricane in my mind.

"Don't worry about him, everything'll sort itself out eventually," he told me, smiling. The corner of my mouth lifted in response, but I couldn't help thinking that my problems seemed to be stacking up higher and higher each day.

"Hey," he said, gently lifting my chin so that I looked him in the eye. "Stop thinking so much. Everything will be fine, I promise."

That was all it took for me to start crying. I'm not one to cry easily, but when I was already only hanging onto my sanity by a thread, it didn't take much. He didn't say anything, just pulled me into his arms and murmured comforting words, kissing the top of my head.

"I'm sorry, I'm just such a mess," I mumbled into his shirt, and he pulled back to look at me.

"Never apologise for how you feel," he told me seriously, looking me dead in the eye. I didn't know how to respond to that, so I did the only thing I could think of: I kissed him. It didn't start out sweet like the last one, this was all fire and need.

"Ash?" called a voice from the hallway. I shoved Gabe away from me just as the door opened and Adina poked her head around the doorframe.

"Hey Adi, what's up?" I asked her.

"Uncle M wants to see you right away," she replied seriously. "It's about the portal."

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"Aislinn, Gabriel, please take a seat," said Uncle M, gesturing into his office.

"Actually Gabe was just leaving," I said hurriedly. Even though he already knew a lot about my world and my family I wasn't sure I wanted him to hear this conversation, especially as I had no idea what it was actually

about.

"Was I?" he asked as I pushed him towards the front door.

"Yeah, you should probably be getting home," I told him. "And anyway, I don't think this is really something you should hear."

I saw the look on his face as he walked out of the door and realised I'd upset him, but I didn't have time to worry about it now.

I sat in one of the hard-backed chairs in front of Uncle M's desk and looked around his office, one of the few rooms in the house I had yet to explore. Bookcases lined the room and what little of the walls were visible were covered with maps, charts and articles. Some of them were from over a hundred years ago, but even at a glance I could see that they were all about sightings of people and creatures from the Caster world. There were all sorts of interesting artefacts scattered through the room, some in their own display cases and other balanced haphazardly on top of bookcases and piles of books and papers.

"Ash, I'm afraid I have some grave news," said Uncle M.

"What is it? Is Mum okay?" I demanded. My thoughts instantly turned to all of the things that could possibly have happened to the people I loved; Mum, Malachi, Adina, Gabriel, even Dexter, Nate, Eva and Jack.

"No, Lillian is fine. No one has been hurt, but things are happening to our universe which even the Fae Elders cannot predict. If things are not stopped soon irreversible damage could occur."

"What's going on? All Adi said was that it was something to do with the portal."

"Not just our portal, but all of them all over the world. The fabric of our universe is unravelling, Aislinn. There are already small rips everywhere, which we use to get from one world to the other, but they are expanding rapidly. Every year there are more sightings of creatures from the Caster world which have stumbled into the land of Mortals, and this year that number has skyrocketed. The number and size of portals is growing exponentially."

"Why?"

"Because of you," he replied bluntly. I stared at him, nonplussed. "All of this is somehow linked to your Declaration and the Fae prophecy. If you don't choose soon the barrier between our two worlds will collapse entirely and there is no telling what might happen."

"But I don't even know what will happen when I do Declare myself! How am I supposed to make this huge decision without knowing what effect it will have on the whole universe?"

"I understand how difficult this is, but the decision needs to be made soon. Maybe then we will discover why you have become so important to the timeline of the universe."

"I don't get it; I'm not even a powerful Caster. Adi had manifestations of her powers before she Declared herself and she was much younger than me. Everyone's always told me that the stronger a Caster is the younger and more obviously their powers start to show."

"That is true, and is exactly why I think you have the potential to become one of the most powerful Casters in our history," the incubus told me.

"What?"

"I believe - and I am rarely wrong about these kinds of things - that you possess the power to manipulate and control Mortal souls. You say that your powers have not yet shown themselves, but you have already demonstrated several signs of a Soul Caster."

"Like what?" I demanded. I racked my brains but couldn't think of anything that had happened that would even remotely signal that I had power over people's souls.

"You have formed a soul bond."

"That can happen to any Caster, it doesn't mean I have any kind of weird power," I said firmly. The idea of having that kind of control over people terrified me.

"Not only have you formed an unbreakable soul bond, but you have already used it to find your Mortal, communicate through that bond and read the Mortal's thoughts."

"He's not *my Mortal*, his name is Gabriel and he is a person," I said quietly. "Don't talk about him like he's some kind of farm animal."

"My apologies. I know this must be very hard for you but you need to Declare yourself soon, before the universe tears too much to be restored."

"How long do I have?" I asked, hardly daring to hear the answer.

"Just over two months. You must have made your choice before your seventeenth birthday."

Author's note:

Okay so I originally posted this chapter yesterday but I read through it today and realised that I really shouldn't write whilst sleep-deprived. I edited it and added some stuff today to try and make it seem less rushed and I hope it's a bit better now.

I originally intended to have finished this novel by the end of the year but because of the setbacks I've had I don't think that's very likely to happen. I'll try my hardest to update much more regularly (I'm hoping once a week although I doubt that will happen) but even then I don't think I'll have it finished by January, so please keep reading even though it may take longer than planned.

Thank you so much for sticking with me and Ash so far, and I hope you continue to enjoy reading.

Your lovely comments inspire me and push me to keep writing. I love you guys.

-TheNinjaShroom

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