

Of Murders and Magicians:  
The Tales of the Cabin

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## Unexpected Places

My love of writing began when I was only eleven. Being the youngest in my seventh-grade class made me feel like I had something to prove, and during a time when we all thought we'd be the next New York Times Bestseller, that meant taking pen to paper and creating stories. At first, my stories went no further than the lunch tables. They were fun, trashy little romances that appealed to my friends' preteen yearning for soft boyfriends and even softer kisses. But, as the year went on, my stories got bolder and so did my friends. As we neared 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation, they convinced me to post my work online.

By then, I was already familiar with Wattpad, a website that allowed members to post or read self-published works. The site was filled with stories of werewolf love-triangles and fanfictions in which the reader was kidnapped by her favorite boyband. It was a weird place, but my strange preteen brain loved the chaos. It was there that I posted my first story, a fanfiction romance between my character and Teen Wolf's Stiles Stilinski, one chapter at a time. With each upload my comment section was flooded with praise and encouragement. My little girl brain soaked it all up and I continued to post my writing.

It was when I began my third or fourth story on the platform that I got a message that changed the way I saw my writing. *Why are all your characters black???*, the comment said. For context, my Wattpad profile picture was not me, it was a cropped photo of Dylan O'Brien in a red hoodie – so I can only assume that my followers were unknowing of my race. At the same time, however, I never thought my followers would imagine me as anything but Black. Still, the

comment shocked me into a realization: all my original characters, all the characters I made myself, were Black. Whether they were African American, Afro-Caribbean, or in the case of my last Wattpad protagonist, Afro-Hawaiian, they were all Black.

That comment made me realize what I was actually using my platform for; I was writing Black girls into situations I'd only seen white protagonists in. My characters had healthy relationships with their fathers; they were good students; they lived in nice houses in nice neighborhoods. My characters existed in spaces where people didn't expect Black girls to exist. And that was the sentiment I brought over when I began writing my senior project, *Of Murders and Magicians*. As a child who loved reading fantasy, I rarely found books that centered around a Black girl or woman, and as an adult, I hope to use my project to bridge my identity as a Black woman with my love of the fantastical.

*Of Murders and Magicians* follows three magic users, Erekusi, Oluchi, and Magnús, as they discover their place on the fictional island of Erekusu – exploring the connectivity of time as well as the connectivity of people through multiple points of views from different time periods. The story, however, heavily focuses on the connections made through/with Oluchi, essentially deeming her as the “chosen one” for this story. Because of this, I spent the most time creating and refining Oluchi's character.

When I first created her, Oluchi was Okhethiweyo (oh-cah-theo), whose name literally translates to “chosen one” in Zulu. She was only meant to be the protagonist of my Black Panther fanfiction, but when I drew her in my Advanced Art class, put her down on paper, I knew she was so much more.

Okhethiweyo started off as many characters created by 16-year-old Black girls do. She was a strong, independent Black woman, about 20 or so years old. She was quick to anger, not willing

to deal with anyone's bullshit, but quiet in her own right. Her magic was tethered to her emotions, making her anger the crux of her power. She was an immigrant, making her way through New York City as a teacher with her boyfriend, Magnús.

I won't lie, it took me all of two months to get bored with Okhethiweyo. Now that I think back on it, it may have been the Strong Black Woman archetype that was frustrating me, but at the time, I just believed that it was a flaw in Okhethiweyo's character. So, I went back to her beginning; what was she like as a child? Where were her parents? Who were her parents? As I asked myself these questions, I discovered more about her as a character, and she began to change.

Before long, Okhethiweyo became Okhethiwe, which was shortened to Khethiwe. Her parents were royalty, but her father had recently passed while she was away in the States. Khethiwe spoke five languages and mastered three forms of martial arts; she was a mirror of T'Challa, and I hated it. Even if T'Challa was a perfect example of a Black man in an unexpected place, Khethiwe was never meant to reflect him. So again, I made changes.

I spent the summer between high school and college researching, trying to reinvent Khethiwe into something that wasn't already owned by Disney. I started with setting; what if she wasn't in America, but in her home country? But honestly, what if my story wasn't about America? I thought about my mother's homeland, the sunny island of Jamaica, and it was there that I found Erekesu.

The island was made up, but Erekesu's place in the map would affect how Khethiwe spoke and acted. I knew Khethiwe's name was Zulu, but the homeland I had in mind for Khethiwe didn't match the environment of South Africa. Looking into global environments brought me up north to West Africa, and Khethiwe found her home in the Gulf of Guinea.

However, the shift in location created a shift in all the other aspects of who Khethiwe was; her name, beliefs, and language would have to change... and it did. One last time, I changed her name, giving birth to Oluchi Rotimi, the thirteen-year-old daughter of a high-ranking politician. Oluchi's society is steeped in magic and its casual use, and their culture is heavily influenced by Igbo culture and West African Vodun. The people of Erekesi believed in Mamun, a goddess I created inspired by West Africa's Mawu, and see her love as protection.

However, it's important to note that my writing is not based in West African Vodun. If I'm honest, I was simply inspired by something I don't have. Olu is a fleeting attempt to connect to the African culture I've lost, just as she will be for the other colonized Black girls that read my story. As a Black American, I have little connection to Africa as a continent or as a culture. Even as Jamaicans, my family comes from a colonized country; they have no close connection to Africa. We can't say where our ancestors are from; we can't pinpoint a village or a tribe, so we grab at the collective Black experience. In the fray of trying to find what connects me to all the other women who look like me, I grabbed at the idea of Olu.

To make sure that Olu was not a mockery of African culture, I put most of my effort into my research. What is known about pre-colonized magic and mythology is often told from the perspective of the colonizer. I didn't want this for my writing. I wanted a world largely unaffected by colonization, however, in instances of colonization, the perspective would be from the people who are being colonized. Through these voices, I wanted to display what there is to offer without the influence of colonizers.

This is what I start *Of Murders and Magicians* with. In a few short moments, you will meet Erekesi, who has not yet made it to the island that will later be named after her. First, you will have to see her struggle through the changes happening in her mainland village, and how

colonization directly impacts her family life and her connections to her faith. Erekusi, as a character, works to connect the reality of colonization, of the pillaging of Africa, to the fictional and fantastical world I've created. Hopefully, she will teach you to understand the world you're about to step into.

However, I also hope that Erekusi and Oluchi spark something within you. I hope they can show you just how well Black girls can fit into unexpected places. I hope, for all the Black women and girls who will read this story, that you get a fleeting sense of "she's like me" and hold on tight to the idea that you too can fit into any space.

Map of Erekesu



Character Visual List

Oluchi Rotimi



Magnús Heidisson



Mrs. Rotimi



Trú (Móðir)



Heidi (Mamma)



Fatima Ayad



1

# Oluchi

## 813 After Island Establishment (A.I.E.)

The town car is like every other town car Olu has ever ridden in: black, sleek, and boring, and she ends up in the middle seat for crying out loud. Olu doesn't even know why the middle seat exists. Like, what crazy person thought a good place to sit would be directly between two other people. Olu shifts, arms rubbing uncomfortably against the fabric of Mama and Nanan's own clothes, but at least the radio is on.

Olu bobs her head along to the music playing, trying to drown out her own morbid thoughts. The song is slow, something you play when you're looking for sprites in the woods, but it's familiar. It was Papa's favorite song, the background music to the man's very existence. Olu smiles sadly; it's like Papa was in the car right now... like he never left. But the older women make it obvious that he has. Mama looks like she's about to burst into tears and Nanan simply stares blankly out the window.

Olu slowly stops moving, looking back and forth between Mama and Nanan. Her shoulders slump and she purses her lips. Singing should help, right? It doesn't. Olu only gets a couple of words out before Mama goes from sad to angry.

"Little girl, can you just shut up!" Mama curtly snaps her fingers, the tips flaring blue with magic, and the music stops. "We are going to a funeral, Oluchi. Not a concert." Olu nods, scooting closer to Nanan.

"Yes, Mama."

The rest of the drive is silent.

The funeral procession moves slowly, dragging out the moments before Olu can just go home and cry. Davin is driving, stoic as usual, but Olu knows that he's sad. Davin has been working as a chauffeur for Mama's family for as long as Olu can remember; but even though he was their employee, Davin and Papa were the best of friends. He had been there for Olu those first few days after Papa died, keeping her as happy as he could while he hid his own sadness.

Mama, however, can't hide her sadness. Papa's death has broken her, leaving her hard shell cracked and crumbled and letting her sad, gooey innards seep out. It was particularly bad this morning as Olu watched Nanan pull Mama from her dark, dank bedroom. She was a slump of a woman then, hair messily plaited and skin ashy to the point of gray. Olu still isn't sure what Nanan said or did to get Mama ready, but it seems to have filled in a few of Mama's cracks.

The funeral itself makes Olu want to panic. Some of Olu's cousins are there, a couple of aunts and uncles, and even Papa's best friends Trú and her wife Heidi – who flew down from Iceland with their son, Magnús. But it's the massive crowd surrounding the temple that frightens Olu. She knew her parents were influential, Mama working as the Supreme Chancellor of Etití City and Papa's charity and work as historian, but she hadn't expected these people, these strangers, to force themselves into something so private.

Olu can't focus as Trú gives the eulogy, barely hears as the dark-haired woman recollects Papa's achievements. Instead, she just holds onto Magnús as they both rock and cry, eyes red and noses runny. When Trú is finished, Davin urges Olu to wipe her nose before ushering the girl towards Etití's Head Priestess.

Now that she's 13, it is Olu's responsibility to perform the death rites for her immediate family. The tradition is old, mostly useless because most people don't expect to lose family so

young, but Olu kind of hates it right now. She hates the sob that her sadness pulls from her throat, hates the tears in her eyes, hates that her Papa is dead. But the Priestess kisses her cheek, encouraging her to step towards her father's linen-wrapped body.

Olu sloppily wipes her face as she stands before her family. The altar before her is laden with all the things she needs for the ritual: sprigs of lavender and bushels of Moonflowers.

Vibrating with nerves, Olu looks out the temple window instead of at her family. She locks eyes with a crow perched on the sill, speaking to it instead. "We are all," she hiccups quietly. "We are all here today to witness the passing of Obi Rotimi, my father. Today, he... he moves on to be with his ancestors with these gifts."

First, Olu raises the lavender above her head. She wills her love for her father into the flowers, closing her eyes as the green wisps of her magic sink into the petals. She does the same with the moonflowers, instead pouring her protectiveness into the plant. Then, slowly, she walks around her father's swaddled body, tucking each flower into the folds as she silently prays. The green of her magic swarms around him, humming and warm with her love for him before everything catches fire. Olu hiccups as she watches her father burn before turning to look at the group before her.

"We have lost a great power, but we will persevere," she recites.

"We will persevere," her family repeats.

Davin pulls Olu into a hug as she steps away from the altar, and Olu doesn't miss the fact that it's not Mama who hasn't come to comfort her. Olu looks over Davin's shoulder and watches as Nanan tries her best to console Mama as she screams and cries. Nanan holds Mama the way Davin is holding her. Magnús runs up to join the hug too, whispers that she'll be okay, even if she doesn't believe it.

Wrapped in the arms of her two favorite people, her two favorite *living* people, Olu lets out a heartbreaking wail and the crows wail back.

The reception is a morose event; Oluchi gets separated from Davin and is instantly bombarded by drunken guests. They keep reminding her that she looks like her Papa. Olu knows what she looks like, sees her face every day to know that she has her Papa's face: his flat nose, his round lips, and his deep brown eyes. Aunt Mina is telling her about her father's similar lanky body during childhood before she's cut off by Mr. Mabu, who wants to know if Olu will follow in her father's footsteps. Olu doesn't know how to answer, doesn't think she even can with the way the crowd circling her, making her sweat. She looks around, searching for an out, somewhere she could dash and hide.

Thankfully, the waitstaff comes around with another tray of champagne, and Olu dashes up the stairs. She can hear everyone's voices in her head as she stands in the darkness of her bedroom. She walks like him: lifted on her toes in a way that creases all her shoes; she talks like him: voice surprisingly deep and words just as fast. Oluchi hates every part of it now.

Mama sees her as a relict now, a shoddy copy of her father, and Olu finally understands why Mama won't look at her anymore. If Oluchi lived with someone who looked exactly like her dead husband, she wouldn't want to look at them either.

But the crow on Olu's windowsill *is* looking at her. It taps the window with its beak, and, through the curtains, brown eyes meet brown eyes. They look at each other for a moment before the crow taps at the window's lock.

*Open the window*, it squawks. Olu jumps back, starring wide-eyed at the bird.

“What!”

*Open. The. Window.* The bird rolls its eyes, sighing as it looks up at the sky. “And I thought humans were supposed to be smart,” it whispered to itself.

“Hey! I am smart!”

The bird whips its head down to look at Olu.

*Child, you can understand me?*

“Yeah, aren’t you just talking?”

*Have you ever met a talking crow?* it replies haughtily. Olu purses her lips and cocks her hand on her hip.

“Well, I’ve met you. Doesn’t that count?”

*I’ve met you,* the crow mocks. *Can you please let me in now, child? If we are going to speak, I would much rather do it face to face.*

Olu narrows her eyes, raising a sharp eyebrow. She could let the crow in, but it could attack her. But at the same time, why would it attack her; as far as she knows, she's never hurt any animal so it wouldn't be a revenge act. Hesitantly, she pries open the window.

As soon as there's enough space to fit, the Crow swoops in, bringing with it four more crows and an ironic beam of sunlight. Olu screams, ducking to avoid the murder. Around her, the birds find their places to perch, their black feathers a startling contrast to the pastels of her bedroom furniture.

Everything freezes, however, when there’s a knock on Olu’s door.

“Olu, are you okay in there,” Magnús asks through the door.

“Uh... yeah. I just...” Olu searches for a lie. “I just dropped a book. It almost hit my foot.”

The boy hums, “Okay.” Olu lets out a breath of relief as Magnús footsteps get farther from her room. She quickly turns her attention to the first crow, hissing.

“What the hell was that about?”

The crow caws out a reedy laugh, and Olu scoffs at the disrespect.

“Answer me,” she hisses. The bird continues to laugh. Olu glares at the thing, screwing up her face. “Don’t make me hurt you,” she threatens, a ribbon of green magic swirling around her fingertips.

The crow’s call is cut short by that, as it looks at Olu wide-eyed.

“That’s what I thought,” the girl says smugly. She plops down at the foot of her bed, right in front of the crows at her desk.

“So,” she starts, “what’s all this about? What do you guys want?”

The main crow, the Laughing crow, looks at its friends as if they’re deliberating.

*We noticed you at the funeral earlier, your magic specifically.*

“What about it?”

*Your magic is green; you’re very powerful.*

“Is green magic special or something? ‘Cause Mama says it doesn’t mean anything.”

*Humans have some type of blue magic; magic creatures can have blue or green magic, but I’ve never seen another human with green magic.*

“Another human? Does that make me special?” Olu wrings her hands, anxious about what she’s just learned.

*Yes, it makes you powerful. And that’s why we’re here.*

“Are you guys gonna give me cool powers?” she asks excitedly, sitting up straighter.

Laughing Crow scoffs, *Oh, Mamun, no! We’re here because you lack control. You are extremely talented, but talent can only get you so far. What you need is training.*

“Training! I don’t want to train.” Training isn’t going to be fun anymore. Papa had made it fun, supplementing Olu’s work with days at Waha beach and sneaking in lessons that Mama wouldn’t approve of, but these crows weren’t Papa. They didn’t know Olu, not like Papa did. Training with them would be like training at school, and Olu hated training at school.

“I don’t want to,” Olu protests again.

*Well, we can’t have you running around with this much power. We’ll practice in the woods at the end of the week. There’s no way around it.*

Olu groans, there has to be a way around it.

It takes a day for Olu to realize that there’s a way around her training, at least she thinks there is. Papa had always been talking about the ways their ancestors had strengthened their magic with spells and charms. Olu was sure if she found one of Papa’s old journals, she could find a spell that would give her control. And that same night, Olu sneaks down to the basement. The bottom of the staircase is dark, so Olu clings to the railing as she descends. At the bottom, she lets her magic pool into her hand, creating a ball of light. There are still books strewn across the desk from where Papa had been working before he died.

Olu swallows thickly, closing her eyes. She sighs before flicking her light off her finger. The ball bounces around the room, lighting all the pine-sap candles Papa had collected and stored around the room. Now that she can see, Olu moves straight for the bookshelf. The book she’s looking for is well hidden, a book of religious rituals Mama doesn’t want Olu getting into. It isn’t in the shelf behind the desk, so Olu moves to the one on the wall to her right.

As she traces the spines, there are footfalls above her head. Olu freezes, her heart in her throat. She pulls the flames from all the candles, drowning the room in darkness as she presses herself into a corner. She quiets her breathing, focusing only on the steps.

She's not supposed to be down here; she can't get caught, not by Mama.

The steps come close to the basement and stop. Olu swallows. The person hums, waits for a moment, and then calls out.

"Olu, are you down there?"

The girl almost cries with relief; it's Davin.

She stumbles to the steps, climbing them two by two before swinging the door open.

"Hey!"

"Hey? What are you doing down there? Shouldn't you be asleep?"

"Shouldn't you be at home?"

Davin narrows his eyes. "I was just about to leave when I saw the light under the door. Your mother hates going down there, so I knew it had to be you."

Olu sighs, "Are you going to tell?"

Davin presses a kiss to her forehead, letting out a breath of disappointment. "Not if you go to bed right now. Did you brush your teeth?"

Olu nods.

"Alright. Up to bed. I'll see you tomorrow, 'kay?"

"Okay." Olu pulls Davin into a tight hug. "I'll see you tomorrow," she whispers into the man's chest. He runs his hands over her braids before nudging her towards the stairs.

"Up you go."

Olu waves one last time before heading to her room. She'll have to get the book tomorrow.

"Where are you?" Olu asks the room when she enters the basement the next day. Whispers of green magic float off Olu's lips. The whisps float around the room before diving into the top draw

of Papa's desk. Olu smirks. She pulls on the knob, but the drawer is locked. Olu groans and goes to search for the key, but she can hear Mama's heels in front of the basement door. She stops short, listening as Mama speaks with her personal assistant, Şindé, over the phone. Mama pauses, then grumbles.

"Fine. I'll be there soon. It seems like you guys can never get anything done without me."

Olu can hear the scrape of her mother's heels as the woman turns and struts towards the front door. The door opens, then slams shut, and Olu is left in the quiet house.

Olu exhales. Oh right, the key.

"Reveal yourself," she whispers to the space. It takes a moment, but a book shoots out of the bookshelf. It falls open and nestled between the pages is a brass key.

"There you are," she smiles, gripping the key and rolling it between her fingers. She unlocks the drawer swiftly. The book inside is the size of Olu's head, brown and leatherbound. It smells like Papa, like the herbs he wore in his sachet. Olu pulls the book to her chest, squeezing it and breathing it in. It smells good.

The book tells her about the multiple complicated spells that bring the user great power, but Papa's hand-written note, taped to the back cover of the journal, is what Olu really pays attention to. The entry recalls the first Queen Priestess of Erekusu, Queen Erekusi Ahoro, who discovered the island that was later named after her. Erekusi was the first to summon Mamun on her own, a process that usually required an extreme amount of power or a large group of people to perform. The only people who seemed to be able to contact Mamun on their own were the Queen Priestesses, who regularly convened with the goddess.

Papa's notes claimed that Erekusi summoned Mamun with a simple Requesting Ritual, normally used by farmers and villages to ask for protection or the gift of crops, that had been

enhanced with other herbs to concentrate the woman's power. Olu soaks it up, memorizing the spell and the ritual; perform on the full moon, requires all three plants of Life and Love, 10 participants minimum is recommended. Olu winces at the last part; she *knows* she shouldn't do this alone, knows that she's no Queen Priestess, but Nanan says that grief is as strong as any magic. Olu is full of grief; she should have enough to spare.

The night before the full moon, and two days before Olu is to start her training, the girl decides to collect her ingredients. Papa's stash in the basement is meager, with only the plants of Life and Love wilting in the corner, so Olu has to go to the local herb shop. She sneaks out when Mama isn't paying attention, which is more often than Olu knows it should be.

"Take me where I need to go," she whispers. A green whisp floats from her lips and Olu follows it to the shop. She's never been to this shop before, but she can feel the residue of her father's own magic on the doorjamb – runes that he had implemented as a favor for the shop owner. They're losing strength now that he's dead, and Olu wonders if there's a metaphor there. The shopkeeper is a balding man, head shining under the ceiling lights. He waves to Olu but doesn't speak, leaving her to her own business as he watches her. He knows who she is, obviously knew her father; she ignores his curious stare. She moves from bin to bin, collecting what she needs to restock Papa's pantry. She checks them off in her head as she picks them up: African violet, frankincense, club moss, peppermint, white sage, witch hazel, angelica, and camphor.

As Olu ruffles through the bin of Bat's Head roots, the shopkeeper speaks.

"Asking Mamun for something?" Olu doesn't look at him. "You know, she can't bring people back." Olu grips the roots tighter, almost crushing them. She swivels around, glaring at the man.

“Is it any of your business,” she hisses. The keeper leans back in surprise and Olu smirks. This must be how Mama feels when she yells at Şindé. Think like her mother, Olu taps her toe impatiently. “Answer me when I speak to you. Does what I’m doing effect you in any way?” The man shakes his head. “That’s what I thought. So why do you feel the need to question me? Do you think I’m stupid? I know Mamun can’t resurrect people, so why do you taunt me? My Papa is dead, and you taunt me; what kind of person does that make you?”

The man swallows thinking, but answers.

“I’m truly sorry, Miss Rotimi. It was out of pocket for me to say such things. I apologize. How about a discount on those products?”

Olu rolls her eyes and turns back to the roots in her hand, but her heart swells. This is how Mama gets people to do things for her. Nice to know that it works.

When Olu gets to the register, the man is gone – replaced by his daughter. Olu doesn’t ask where the man has gone, just watching as the young woman rings up her items. She pays for everything with the last of her allowance and walks home as fast as she can.

Mama’s office light is still on when Olu gets back to the house, so she sneaks in through the employee entrance. Davin spots her as he’s helping the chef pack up for the night, raising an eyebrow at the girl. Olu knows she’ll be getting a talking to when the man is done.

If there’s anyone that Olu loves as much as she loves Papa, it has to be Davin. He’s sweet, and caring, and supportive, but right now, he’s looking down at Olu with disappointment in his eyes. Olu can’t help the feeling of guilt that floods over her. They’re in the kitchen, Olu at the island and Davin standing across from her. Dealing with Mama would have been easier than this; Mama

wouldn't have cared about where Olu went, just yell at the girl for sneaking out. But Davin is different; he cares and that makes him noseey.

“So, where were you?”

“I went into town. I know, I'm sorry. I just... I had some stuff to do.”

“Some stuff? Like what? You know you shouldn't be out by yourself, at night. What if something happened to you?”

“I can protect myself. You've seen what I can do.”

Davin sighs. “I know you can defend yourself, but does it hurt to have an adult there just in case. Your parents are very—”

“High profile. I know,” Olu rolls her eyes.

“If you know, then you know why I'm upset. Now tell me what you have planned for tomorrow.”

Olu freezes. “I- I don't have any plan for tomorrow. Why would I have a plan? I'm not gonna do anything wrong.”

Davin purses his lips and narrows his eyes. Olu feels weak under the stare, and eventually she cracks. She goes on about the crows and the ritual.

“What! No,” Davin protests. “You can't do that on your own.”

“Then help me,” Olu begs.

Davin closes his eyes in frustration, a face Olu is all too familiar with.

“I can't, Olu. Rituals like this take entire groups of people! Even with my help, nothing would change. I'm not as powerful as you; I didn't get the training that you did. My father couldn't stay home and teach me; I didn't have tutors to help me. I'm working with secondary school level magic here, Olu.”

“I need to get this done, Davin.”

“Not right now you don’t. Just go to training; what’s the rush to be in control all of a sudden?”

The question breaks something in Olu. There were so many reasons she wanted to be in control, of both her magic and her own life. Olu was always stuck in the middle of something. Where Papa was alive, Olu knew that she was the only thing keeping her parents together. It wasn’t hard to see how different her parents were from one another. They wanted different things in their lives, but they both shared one thing: Olu. Papa loved Olu, and Mama loved Papa.

And now, here she was, caught in the middle of something else, of untapped magic potential. Olu refused to coast in the middle, to just let things *happen* around her.

“I need to do this Davin. So, you’re either gonna help me or you’re not. Either way, I’m doing this.” Olu’s voice is steady as she makes her declaration, and Davin is forced to agree. He doesn’t want to see her get hurt.

The next day is nerve racking. Olu doesn’t have to do much to avoid Mama’s curious glances, but she still tries to act normal. Davin is waiting in the garage, still in his uniform, after Mama falls asleep that night.

“Are you ready,” he asks. Olu nods, eagerly slipping into the front seat of the town car with her leather backpack of supplies at her feet. She motions for Davin to hurry and the man laughs.

“Don’t rush me, kid.”

They reach the border of the forest in no time – the streets clear at this hour – and Olu whispers for a path. The whisps of her green magic light the way to a small clearing. The space is beautiful under the moon light, giant oaks reaching out for the stars. There are pixies floating in

the bushes, flickering green and blue as they whisper to each other. They all fall silent when Olu enters the clearing. It's time.

In the very center of the clearing, Olu places down a carved bowl, one that had been passed down from her father's side of the family. She sets out the other bowl she'll be using directly behind where she'll be sitting as Davin imbeds candles in a circle around her. Together, they dole out the herbs, Davin doing his best to bless each one as he lays them out in hopes to protect Olu.

"African Violet," Davin prompts as he drops it into a leather satchel.

"For extra spirituality," Olu answers.

"Frankincense?" The clump of resin is dropped into the satchel.

"For success."

"Club Moss?" Into the uncarved bowl.

"For clear communication."

"And peppermint?" Into the bowl

"For protection and to give the spell an extra boost."

"Smart girl," Davin smiles.

"I know."

The carved bowl is filled with the plants of Life and Love, each delicately arranged in the bowl.

With the circle complete, Olu takes a step back.

"I guess we're ready," she shrugs.

Davin nods, pulling Olu into a hug. "Let me know if something goes wrong; I'll break the seal and get you out." Olu buries her face into the stiff material of his blazer.

"I will," she promises.

Davin moves towards the tree line, and Olu smiles at him one more time before stepping into the circle. She focuses her energy, creating a stream of magic that flows around her. She kneels, touching her forehead to the cool, dewy grass, and the candle roar to life. The green-blue flames raise high; Olu can feel their heat, but she tries not to get scared. Behind and in front of her, she can feel the heat of the bowls catching fire, amplifying her spell. Olu takes a deep breath, centering herself, and sits back on her heels. With her eyes closed, she begins to pray.

“Mamun, Sister of my Soul and Protector of My People, I call upon you. I ask for your attendance; I ask for your help, I ask for a gift from the ever-watching Sister. Fill me with your power, Mamun, and bestow upon me a control like no other. I see you, full in the Moon, and ask you to come down upon me. Mamun, I beg of you; Mamun, I plead.”

Olu can feel a jolt in her chest, a heat rising from her toes, and she throws her head back. Around her the wind picks up, and Olu can feel an intense pressure in her skull. She pushes on.

“Mamun,” she starts again, “Sister of my Soul and Protector of my People! I call upon you...” Somewhere in the distance, Olu hears a branch snap. “I see you, full in the Moon, and ask you to come down upon me! Mamun I beg of you! Mamun, I plead!

The last think Olu feels as she collapses is the chill of the wind now that her fire is gone.

# Erekusi

0 A.I.E.

“Nanan, tell me about the Birth,” Erekusi asks, looking over at the elderly woman beside her.

“You always ask for that story,” Baba laughs, not looking up from the bowl he is carving. Erekusi laughed long with him before setting her pleading eyes on her grandmother.

The older woman rolls her eyes, setting down her half-eaten soursop. “Fine, but your old enough to be telling this story yourself.”

“But you were there when it happened,” Erekusi jokes.

The old woman scoffs, “You’re lucky I love you, you brat.”

They say that old things are meant to die out, but Erekusi does not feel that way. She loves her old grandparents and the old temple they live in. She loves their old traditions and the old religion they cling too. Erekusi clings to it too, eager to hear Nanan tell the same story over and over again.

“It starts with the beginning of the world. Billions of summers ago, the Earth was created. With a blinding spark and a roaring bang, the world came together, and out of the darkness crawled the Gods and Goddess.” Erekusi laughs as her old Nanan gestures wildly. “They had worked together to create the planet, landmasses that were to be split among them all. Bukun was gifted the western coast of the second largest continent, and she laid her claim by covering the region is lush tropical forests and beautiful beaches.”

“And she was pregnant with Mamun,” Erekusi adds, spewing excitement despite her age.

“Yes, nestled in Bukun’s belly was Mamun, our Goddess. As a gift for her child, Bukun created humans, vessels for her overflowing magic. The vessels varied in shape, size, sex, and gender, but they all had one thing in common – within each vessel was a seed of magic. The magic is what connected them to Mamun, and without it, a human can never truly connect with Mamun.”

“But you have to care for the spark, or it will die,” Baba cuts in.

“Exactly! Your mother has already let that happen. The woman can’t even cast a spell. That’s basic magic! This is why I said your father should have married another girl.”

Erekusi rolls her eyes. “Nanan... the story?”

“Oh right, anyway. When Mamun was born, the humans gathered plants of Life and Love. Bouquets of Moonflowers and Night Glories wrapped in Serpent’s Tongue were presented at the temple they had built in Mamun’s honor. The gifts gave Mamun a boost of love, and she declared herself the protector of our people. In exchange for Love, Mamun offered to protect us from the beasts that roamed our forests and the sicknesses that swept through settlements. It was an even exchange; Love for Love.”

Erekusi sighs dreamily. She likes knowing someone was looking out for her, but her bubble pops when her mother shoves through the temple doors.

“Erekusi, didn’t I send you to the market? This is not the market,” the woman fumes.

“Yes, Mama, I understand, but everything is at home; I made sure to drop it off.” The answer does not seem to calm Mama down, however.

“You can’t keep running off like that Erekusi, it’s not safe.”

“But Mamun will pro—”

“Mamun, nothing! Is this what you’ve been filling her head with,” Mama addresses her elderly in-laws.

“I am teaching my granddaughter about our Goddess, don’t insinuate that I’m telling her bedtime stories,” Nanan growls.

“But you are! Love as a source of power? That makes no sense.”

“Child! You have been conditioned by those new Gods and their people. Those Newcomers have led you down the wrong path and I will not let you do that to Erekesi.”

Mama scoffs. “It is you that is wrong. I’ve prayed to Ceteus and he has told me what will happen to people like you. You best be careful, old woman.”

Erekesi cringes at her mother’s words. Personally, Erekesi did not believe that Ceteus was the god they should be praising. He is encroaching on Bukun’s land, his humans convincing the people of the village to abandon Mamun and killing the ones who wouldn’t. He promises the converted a place in “the Promise Land,” but Erekesi does not believe him. A soul’s resting place is not controlled by the gods, but the entity of Death itself; how could Ceteus control that? He was a god without love, a god not worth praising.

“Don’t threaten me in this temple. You may have lost your ties to magic, but I have not. Now leave, you are not welcome here.”

“Fine! Erekesi, let’s go.”

The young woman freezes. She looks back and forth between her mother and Nanan.

“I don’t want to go with you,” she swallows.

Mama scowls, and Ereкуси tries to hide behind Baba.

“I did not ask whether you wanted to come; I said we are leaving.” Ereкуси swallows, looking back at her grandparents. She knows she could stay with them if she dares to disobey her mother, but Mama has not been in her right mind for several moons.

“Okay.” With that, the young woman follows her mother away from the temple. She hopes it is not her last time there.

Ereкуси is locked in her room as soon as they return home.

“You do not know what is best for you,” her mother spits. “You are clueless and inobservant, and that will come back to harm you.”

“But, Mama,” she tries to argue. The older woman raises a hand to shush her daughter.

“You are not to leave this room until I believe you can be trusted.”

“Mama, I am a grown woman. I can care for myself.”

“You may be of age, but you are no woman. You are a child and will be dealt with like one.” Mama hands Ereкуси a stack of tomes, titled in an unfamiliar language. “You will read these, and I will test you on them. You will be released when I believe you know enough.” The door locks swiftly, and Ereкуси is forced to listen as her mother’s footsteps fade.

Ereкуси places the books down next to her sleep mat and scowls at them. They are the teachings of Ceteus; Ereкуси recognizes a few of the symbols from the new temple that has been erected in the center of the village. She paces, mind stuck on the books and their implication. Her mother wants her to convert, to renounce Mamun and praise a god that does not know of love.

While she does not praise him, Erekusi knows much of Ceteus. He is a god of Power – one of many in fact – from the northern continent, the patron of soldiers, brutes, and the power-hungry. The people of the village are not soldiers, but she can see the ways they have been transformed into power-hungry over-seers and brutes.

The young woman sighs, listening to her siblings move freely within their home. She feels like a wild cat, trapped by hunters, scared and angry. She is angry at her mother for not understanding, scared of what the future holds and if she will be set free. Luckily, Erekusi is pulled from her spiral by a reedy call, almost like a laugh, coming from her window. The young woman looks up to see a crow perched in the opening. It looks at her, turning its head curiously.

“What can I do for you,” she calls out to the crow. It blinks, and Erekusi rolls her eyes. It has not even been a day yet and she is already talking to animals. But the talking helps. Instead of reading, Erekusi tells the crow, and its friends that arrive shortly after, her entire life story.

“She locked me in here this morning,” Erekusi confesses, “But I can’t help but be worried about my grandparents. Do you think you can watch over them for me?” The crow with the laughing call nods like it understands before squawking at its flock mates. Instantly, three of the birds depart and Erekusi smiles despite her concern. They will watch over Nanan and Baba, she is sure of that.

Mama comes back to test Erekusi two days later. The woman startles when she hears her mother’s key in the lock and her back snaps up straight so she can look at the door.

“I hope you’ve done as you were told.”

Erekusi does not know what comes over her, but she scoffs, “I will never read those books or pray to that sham of a god you love so much.” Mama physically recoils at the verbal assault, brows drawing together.

“You spend too much time with the old ones! Old things are meant to die.”

“Are you threatening my grandparents?” the woman seethes.

“I am merely stating facts. The tide has shifted in this village, but you are too blind to see it. That will come at a cost.” When Mama locks the door again and leaves, Erekusi is left to stew in her anger and fear. Nanan and Baba are all Erekusi has of her father. He had been captured by the Newcomers when they first arrived, had been tortured and murdered when he refused to renounce Mamun and Bukun.

After his death, Mama has done whatever the Newcomers told her, too scared that they’d come after Erekusi and her siblings, but Nanan and Baba only seem to have planted themselves deeper in their beliefs.

“No Newcomer is going to take my goddess and my culture from me,” Baba had said.

“And no one will take it from you,” Nanan told Erekusi. They both trust her to keep Mamun in her heart, and Erekusi knows that she always will. She will always love Mamun, and she will always love her grandparents, and Erekusi will not let them get hurt.

Replaying Mama’s threat in her head, Erekusi tries to plan her escape. She had thought about it earlier when she had been first locked away. The singular window Erekusi has access to is too high up for her to climb through, and with the door locked, she cannot leave the room.

*But what about your magic,* a voice asks in the back of her mind. Erekusi startles when she hears it, spinning around to see who is talking to her.

*In the window, the voice prompts. There, looking down at her, is the crow. It lets out its reedy call, but now Erekusi can hear its words in her head. We need to leave now, it says, looking over its shoulder. There is something sinister in the air.*

“How will I get out,” Erekusi asks.

*The magic. Your spark has been nurtured but not disciplined. Still, you may be able to perform a simple unlocking charm without blasting the door off the hinges.*

Erekusi takes a deep breath as she sits in front of the locked door. She thinks back to Baba’s lectures: magic is a constant flow of energy, and it must flow through your spark if you wish to manipulate it. The familiar feeling of magic rolled in Erekusi’s chest, and she can hear the crow whispering in her ears.

*Now unlock the door. See the lock turning; see the door swinging open. Invision it and it shall be.*

Erekusi feels the resistance as the green whisps of her magic brushes against the door, feels it working at the lock and pushing it open. As soon as the pressure is gone, though, Erekusi bolts up from her seat and dashes out the room. Her siblings are not home, probably working at the market or the mill, so she slips out easily, rushing towards the temple at the edge of their village.

A crowd has already encircled the building, angry and yelling, and Erekusi can see where Nanan and Baba are hiding inside. Leading the crowd is one of the Newcomers, a man named Draco Servius. He is the source of all of her strife. This man had killed her father, manipulated her mother, taken over her village, and is now coming for her grandparents. She does not think, does not have time to think, as she simply launches herself at the crowd. She wrestles her way to the front, crows following her overhead, and stops only to stand in front of Servius.

“Leave this place,” she demands. The pale man scoffs as he looks Erekesi from head to toe.

“You think you have the power to tell me what to? You have no claim, child.”

Erekesi goes to open her mouth, but she cannot move, cannot speak. At first, she thinks it was Servius’ magic but a wave of warmth, of love, bathes over her and she calms down. Again, her mouth opens, but the words that come out are not her own.

“On this land, in the presence of this temple, I hold all power! You will leave at once!”

“Oh really,” someone in the crowd shouts. Erekesi feels her magic bubble in her chest without her permission and her eyes burn as they glow green. She panics, trying to tamp the power down, but the wave of warmth washes back over her. Erekesi can hear the crow in her head, telling her to stay calm and let Mamun work. Erekesi wants to ask what Mamun is doing, and when would it happen, but her thoughts are interrupted by a vision: a swift force of wind that blows the crowd onto their backs.

*Do not worry, Erekesi. All will be well.*

It is only when the woman relaxes again that the vision comes to fruition. Erekesi feels her magic roll and rattle as it gains enough strength to push the crowd back. They all look at her, stunned. Brown and pale faces alike, are shocked by the power coming off of Erekesi in waves.

Her mouth opens and Erekesi recites the words being pushed into her mind. “I am a vessel, a funnel for power you have either chosen to ignore or forget. Never again shall you come to this place with hate in your hearts lest you want for my wrath! Now be gone, and do not return!”

Erekusi does not return home after the crowd disperses. Mama probably already knows what happened, and Erekusi doubts she will be allowed to step foot back into the village without being watched or attacked.

“You’ll just have to stay with us,” Nanan laughs softly. Erekusi smiles, and even though it’s fake, it seems to make Nanan feel better.

Nanan and Baba also seem to accept the crows with little fuss. “Crows are the messengers of Mamun and Bukun. They are to be respected,” Baba explains, even though Erekusi already knows that fact. The old couple allow the birds to make nests in the crevices of the temple, and Erekusi feels the magic in the air settle.

Mama does not come looking for Erekusi, which is both a relief and a concern. Mama always looks out for her children, even when they do not listen. That is why she locked Erekusi away in the first place. She had just been trying to keep her daughter safe in whatever twisted way she believed would work. The fact that she has not come looking for Erekusi has everyone in the temple on edge. Nanan had expected Mama to at least come to yell at Erekusi, but it never happens.

“Do you think she’s planning something?” Baba asks skeptically. He has never been one to believe that Mama would do something outright evil, but the attack on their home has truly shaken his trust in Erekusi’s mother.

“I don’t think so,” Erekusi replies hopefully.

The old man hums in acknowledgement. “Fine then. Your Nanan said you’re going to the market; can you get some more soursop for her? She’s almost out and I don’t want to hear her complain.”

Erekusi laughs at his words, securing her linen bag over her shoulder. “No problem, Baba.” He hands her some coins and sends her on her way.

She makes sure to take the long way to the market, hiding from the villagers that may recognize her. Erekusi has not been in the village since the riot at the temple, but she can feel the tension in the air. As she walks closer to the village center, Erekusi notices that no one seems to be in their homes. The streets are empty, children nowhere in sight.

The market seems to still be running, but many of the merchants are not there, their booths empty and unmanned.

“Where is everyone?” Erekusi asks one of the merchants as she packed two soursops into her bag. He does not seem to recognize her, so he is happy to help.

“There was a convene at the church this morning. Those damned Newcomers are doing something at the old temple today.”

Erekusi’s heart rockets into her throat. “Do you happen to know what they’re going to do?”

“Servius wants to knock it down. He’s trying to get the old couple who live there to move out.”

The man says it so casually. If Erekusi did not already know Servius, she may have assumed that he is going to simply speak with her grandparents. But Erekusi knows who Servius really is, how he really is; Baba and Nanan are in danger.

The young woman tries to be as calm as she can as she walks out of the market before sprinting back towards her home. As she runs, she calls out to Mamun, praying that the goddess would keep her grandparents safe.

Erekusi can see that most of the villagers surrounding the temple, waving torches and swords alike, kept out by a shimmering forcefield that Nanan struggles to keep up. Baba stands in front of her, protecting her body with his own. At the temple steps stands Servius, Mama standing next to him as he calls out for Nanan to surrender. The man is seething, face red and angry as he holds his sword high.

Then, it all happens at once. The shield flickers, wavering with Nanan's strength, and Servius jabs his sword forward. The blade pierces Baba's chest before sliding through him and into his wife. Erekusi screams as she watches Baba sag.

The crowd goes silent at the sound of her wail, and Erekusi runs towards her Nanan and Baba. Servius turns quickly, pushing Baba off his blade as he prepares to strike Erekusi. He is too slow, as Erekusi's magic bubbles up in her chest, stinging and uncontrollable. She lets out a shriek as she grips the man's face as green mist pours from her fingertips. In her mind's eye, she can see him gasping for breath, can feel his heart pause in his chest. She envisions him disintegrating, fading into dust and dirt before her. She has seen what Servius deserved and lets her magic gift it to him.

The crowd around Erekusi screams as their leader crumbles before them. The last bits of him float in the wind like ash as the young woman opened her eyes to greet the chaos around her.

Erekusi locks eyes with her mother, and the uncontrollable anger in her chest begins to fester. "You did this," she yells. "You killed them!"

"I was just trying to keep you safe!"

The young woman looks back at where Nanan's lifeless body laid on the steps of the temple before facing her mother.

“This is what you call protecting me? You were protecting yourself,” she growls. Her angry rolls and shakes within her body, and Erekusi swears she could feel the ground itself quake. She presses forward, marching towards her mother and the crowd of betrayers. “You didn’t care about me, about what I wanted! You set yourself aside and let these *Newcomers* walk all over you.” The crowd slowly starts to retreat. “You speak of power, but you have none! You have no strength! No backbone! No *love*! You are nothing! Just a spineless worm seeking affection and false protection!”

Something in Erekusi snaps, and the ground beneath her truly begins to shake. She can feel the power rising within her, the need to protect what was left her family boiling over in her chest. Erekusi pulls at the feeling and earth cracks. Chasms etch themselves along the perimeter of the old temple, and from the grows a wall of solid stone. The wall pushed the crowd back and away, trapping Erekusi and her dead grandparents inside.

“You are no longer welcome here,” she growls. “You never will be.”

Erekusi sobs as she grabs the large gardening shovel Baba keeps behind the temple. She digs for what feels like hours, making one large but neat grave. When she is done, her arms heavy with exhaustion, Erekusi goes to prepare the bodies.

She starts with Baba. She cleans his body, taking special care to clean around the wound that killed him, before wrapping him tightly in white dotted linen. It takes her a moment to realize that the linen is not spotted, but that her tears have just darkened little patches. The realization makes her cry harder, and she has to pause, slump back against the wall, as her chest tightened to

the point of suffocation. She stays there for what feels like forever, hiccupping until she can truly calm herself.

Erekusi struggles to move Baba's body towards the graves before tucking little bundles of lavender and moonflowers in the crevices of Baba's wrapping. She repeats the process for Nanan, this time with drier eyes and body-racking sobs. Erekusi stares at the bodies when she finished.

"They didn't deserve this," she says to the crows as they watch her. "Why did Mamun abandon them?"

The crows squawk sadly, refusing to meet Erekusi's eyes. Somewhere in her grief, Erekusi's sadness becomes anger. Her grandparents had done everything that was expected of them; they tended to the temple, prayed daily, cared for wanderers and spread love throughout her daily routine. But still, they had their lives stole from them. What had they done to deserve this?

The young woman closes her eyes, trying to reel herself back in. She slowly reaches into her bag and pulls out the two soursops.

"One for me," she laughs sadly, "and one for you." She placed the fruit between the two bodies and goes for her shovel. She knows it was tradition to burn the bodies, but the smell of ash in the air will only serve to remind her of the man she killed. Plus, Nanan and Baba may have preferred to stay as one with the earth.

With her grandparents buried and her chest empty, Erekusi searches the temple's storeroom for plants of Life and Love. It is not a full moon, so Erekusi will need all three of the scared plants, as well as a few others, to strengthen her spell.

“African Violet,” Erekusi whispers to herself as she plucked the flower from its plant, “for extra spirituality. Frankincense for success. Club Moss for communication. Peppermint for and extra boost.”

She then gathers two bowls – one that had been carved by her grandfather and imbued with his magic as well as a simpler one that would hold her the club moss and peppermint – and sits on the floor in front of Mamun’s shrine. She kneels, leaning forward to figure out where she needs to place her bowls. The carved bowl is placed right in front of where Erekusi’s head would be, and the bowl of herbs was placed behind her. Around her, Erekusi creates a circle of candles, and after ensuring that each one is in the right spot, she tucks the frankincense and violet the small sachet on her hip and begins the ritual.

She lights the candles first, letting her magic flow through her arms and out into the air. Next was the bowl of moss and mint. The herbs catch fire quickly and Erekusi can feel their power as add strength to her own magic. Erekusi sucks in a breath and leaned forward until her forehead touched the floor.

“Mamun,” she starts quietly, “Sister of my Soul and Protector of my People, I call upon you. I ask for your attendance; I ask for your guidance. I ask for no gift, simply answers. Fill me with your power and provide what you can. I see you and ask you to come down upon me. Mamun, I beg you.”

Erekusi repeats the chant, and almost messes up when she felt the plants of Life and Love catch fire. Luckily, she catches herself and continues on. Around her, the air buzzes, weak lines of power zapping across the room like lightning. Suddenly, all the flames go out, and Erekusi falls to the floor.

# Magnús

819 A.I.E.

“I don’t have a magic class on my schedule anymore,” Magnús says as he thrusts the piece of paper in Mamma’s face. He has mathematics and literature and history, but the advanced magics course he had been looking forward to isn’t listed.

“It’s alright, sweetheart. I’ll still teach you.”

“But they said I’d be able to keep learning magic in school,” Magnús groans. “Biological essentialism or whatever, my vagina grants me legal allowance to use magic and whatnot.”

“We can go to the school and sort it out tomorrow if you’d like? In the meantime, I’ll continue to teach you at home.”

Damn right Magnús would like. He spent exactly two years and three months fighting the school about changing his gender identifiers on school documents. It was only last year that they changed his name to Magnús in the school system.

He calls Olu to rant about it.

“It just isn’t fair, you know,” he whines as he pulls his curls into a neat ponytail. “I did all this work, and now they’re try’na take my magic from me. It’s my last year of secondary school and they’re try’na take my magic from me.”

“Magnús, you’re being a bit dramatic.”

The boy rolls his eyes; he is not being dramatic. Magic is important to him, to his family. Iceland isn't like Erekesu; there are barely any magicians left on the island. After the non-magicians took over during the Great Witch Hunt several centuries ago, they criminalized magic use for men, who they believed were stronger and more dangerous than female magicians. Anyone who broke the law was arrested, beaten, or sometimes put to death if the non-magicians deemed them dangerous. So, with so few magicians left, men couldn't risk being caught. However, when the western world began to experience what Magnús calls the Gender Enlightenment, a new issue came knocking on Iceland's door: Should trans men be allowed to practice magic?

"I'm serious, Olu. They've taken me out of all of my magic courses, which, by the way, I'm legally allowed to be in because the Icelandic Parliament still hasn't voted on it yet."

Olu's concerned sigh reverberates over the phone line. "When do the results come in?"

"Tomorrow night. We find out tomorrow."

The sigh they share is heavy, like a weight on Magnús' chest.

"If anything goes wrong, you can always leave Iceland. My mom will definitely let you guys stay with her."

"I know."

Principal Jónsdóttir is waiting for Magnús and Mamma in her office the next morning before classes start. She's in her typical pantsuit, straight blond hair pulled into a tight bun at the back of her head.

"What can I do for you, Heidi?" she says to Mamma.

"Why has Magnús been removed from his magic courses? According to the current law, he is still allowed to practice and learn spellcasting because he was assigned female at birth."

“They may be true now, Heidi, but with the upcoming vote, all trans students have been assigned courses that align with their gender presentation, not sex. This keeps the administration here at The Secondary Academy of Magician Culture from having to remove him from those classes at a later date.”

“What makes the administration so sure the Parliament will vote for the ban.”

“The country is progressing,” Jónsdóttir states almost sadly. “All men, no matter their sex, are men. Parliament will vote in alignment with that ideal, even if it sets people like Magnús back.”

Mamma’s face is as red as her hair when they leave the meeting.

“This isn’t fair,” she seethes, as Magnús leads her toward the exit. He hums in agreement; it isn’t fair at all.

“But you shouldn’t worry,” Mamma goes on, cupping Magnús’ face. “If the school won’t teach you, than I will.”

Magnús wants to deny this, tell Mamma that it’s not that important, but it is. No matter how illegal it is, Magnús is and will always be a Magicians, like his ancestors before him. And Mamma is right; between her place as a community leader among the magicians and Móðir’s job as a Magic Historian and conservator, they had enough knowledge and connections to teach Magnús whatever they wanted. And if Alda, Magnús’ little sister could keep her mouth shut, they wouldn’t have to worry about getting caught.

“We’ll have to be careful,” he says instead. Mamma nods, knowing that this could all go up in flames if they get caught.

“We will be.”

Magnús spends the rest of the school day fretting about the Parliament announcement. It makes his hands sweat, and he can barely sit still in his classes. It doesn’t get better when he gets

home. He hides immediately, locking himself away in his room and pacing until Móðir calls him down so they can watch the news together. He has Olu on the phone with him when the news program starts, on speaker so she can hear it all, retell him what he'll miss when he dissociates.

*Welcome back to Fréttir. Tonight's story: will all men be banned from using magic? This debate has been running through the public like wildfire for years. Currently, all cis-gendered men cannot legally perform magic outside of sigils and protective runes. However, with the growing inclusion of transgendered men and women, the ancient lines of this law have been blurred. There are people on both sides...*

Magnús' mind goes blank. He can see the anchor's mouth move on the television screen, but he can't hear her. He knows what she's saying already. There are people who believe that it's unnecessary to add this extra ban when the number of magic users left is so insignificant. Some who believe that the ban will validate these "weird crossdresser" and should therefore be rejected. But there are people who believe that it's a way to show respect to people who have transitioned and allow the trans women of the magician community access to magic. Magnús knows he's being selfish, but he kind of wants the assholes to win because he wants to keep his magic. Is it standing in the way of process? Yes. Is it allowing Magnús to stay connected with the magic he's been using all his life? Also, yes.

The teen is pulled out of his thoughts when the anchor finally makes the announcement.

*This morning, Parliament held a legislative vote and ruled that all legal men, both cis and transgendered will not be allowed to perform...*

The anchor can't even finish what she's saying before Mamma swoops Magnús into a hug.

"It'll be okay," she promises. Olu says something similar over the phone, voice muffled but loving; Magnús doesn't believe her.

It takes a little over a month for Magnús to feel like himself again, to feel like more than a shell as he walks through the halls of his school. The never-ending light of Icelandic August has given way to the cozy autumn colors of mid-September. As he walks out the doors of the building, he spots Sophia, an old classmate of his. She's beautiful in the way fictional Viking women are: tall and visibly strong. Her hair is long and braided, shining bronze under the weak afternoon sun.

They had been in a few classes together before the ban, and Magnús thought of them as friends maybe more with all the flirting they did, but she was definitely someone he could trust just enough to get the information he was looking for.

"Sophia," he calls out, jogging toward her. She stops near the entrance of the Kronan, smiling as she waves back at him.

"Hey, Maggie, what's up." Her voice is thick, almost deep, and Magnús flushes. He hasn't spoken to her in so long.

"I- we... We haven't hung out in a while. I wanted to see if you're willing to come chill at my place. Alda's at a friend's house so..." he shrugs. Sophia laughs – it's more of a giggle but the flush of her cheeks and the smile on her face distract Magnús from that. She looks up at him, brown eyes glittering through her lashes.

"Yes! I – uh, I mean yeah. Sure. That would be so cool."

Sophia tries to kiss him as soon as they get the front door closed. It shouldn't shock Magnús – they walked to his house holding hands – but it does. She pressed his up against the wall, but Magnús slips a hand between their lips before the kiss can land.

"What are you doing!" Magnús' voice cracks a little, but he tries not to falter.

"Isn't this why you invited me over?"

“What? No! I wanted to hang out. I haven’t seen you since May.”

Sophia backs away awkwardly, give Magnús the space he needs to get away from her. He isn’t upset, necessarily; he likes Sophia, might even have a crush on her, but he hadn’t been expecting her to dive at him like that.

He offers her a drink, trying to push away the tension in the room, and she accepts. Magnús comes back with two bottles of Appelsín, and plops into the couch next to Sophia. She takes it, casually unscrewing the cap as Magnús looks on awkwardly.

“I wanted to ask you something,” he says softly, and he cruses the way his voice cracks. Sophia nods, taking a sip of her soda. Magnús clears his throat, “do you mind showing me what you’ve been learning in your magic classes?”

The question makes Sophia choke on her drink.

“You want me to what!” she coughs out. She obviously heard what Magnús says, because she doesn’t even give him a chance to respond. “Why would I,” Sophia pauses. “Are your mothers still letting you practice magic?”

Magnús swallows thickly, nodding.

“Magnús! This is unbelievable.” Sophia jumps from her seat, making her way to the door and Magnús follows.

“Sophia please, It’s not that big a deal.”

“Oh really? Not that big a deal? Not only is it illegal but asking me is inappropriate.”

“Inappropriate? I thought we were friends. You tried to kiss me not even five minutes ago!”

“I wanted to kiss you so maybe I’ll break the law for you too?”

“No, I just—” Magnús sighs, unable to finish the sentence.

“Magnús, I’m just trying to respect you. You’re a man, right? I’m doing this because that’s what I would do to any man, friend or not, that asked me for something like this. Would you rather me treat you like a girl?”

Magnús balls his hands into fists, frustrated with all the complications popping up in his life. He just wants to keep doing magic, wants to keep that part of himself. Being a man wasn’t supposed to take that from him. It wasn’t supposed to be an exchange of identities: his identity as a man at the cost of his identity as a magician. And no matter what he does, he feels like he’s still losing something.

When he takes too long to answer, Sophia sighs.

“... I need to go.” She pulls on her coat.

“But, Sophia.” The door slams shut, and Magnús is left in the house by himself. He lets out a shuttering breath. *Everything is fine; everything will be fine*, he thinks to himself. As long as Sophia doesn’t tell anyone, his family will be fine.

The next morning, Magnús learns that Sophia is one hell of a gossip. Móðir has already left for work when he wakes up, but he can hear Mamma at the front door talking to someone. Peeking out of his room, he can see that it’s a police officer. A couple of them actually.

“We just need to speak with your son,” the first officer says.

“And I said no. He is under 18 and I will not let you speak to him without telling me what this visit is about.”

“We’ve gotten a tip that an unauthorized magic user is living and practicing here.”

“At this exact address?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Magnús watches Mamma's shoulders slump as she thinks.

*"Take Alda and run,"* her voice echoes in his head. He doesn't know how to respond, never learned telepathy, so he pushes the feeling of confusion back at her.

*"I said take Alda and RUN!"* she says more aggressively.

Magnús sets into action immediately, tiptoeing into his little sister's room. He gently shakes the little girl awake. She's a bit groggy as she sits up, but Magnús pushes her sparkly pink backpack at her anyway. It's full of clothes and other emergency items; in case of a fire, Móðir had said.

"C'mon, Alda. We need to be very quiet while we leave."

"Leave?" she says, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

Magnús panics a little. What should he tell her? The last thing he wants to do is scare her. An idea pops into his head.

"Yeah. Mamma said we don't have to go to school today. Instead, we're gonna go on a little family field trip."

That makes Alda smile. "Can I change first?"

Magnús frowns. "Sorry, kid, but we're already late. You can change when we get where we're going."

Alda frowns down at her superhero pajamas, but nods.

They sneak out the back door after Magnús grabs his own emergency pack. As they tiptoe through the yard as quietly as possible, their neighbor's dog sees them and barks. Magnús curses in his head as he makes eye contact with one of the police officers.

"Stop!" the man calls.

Magnús swoops Alda up into his arms, her weight offsetting the heft of his backpack, and dashes down their street.

He stumbles as he turns the corner of their block, running towards the camping grounds where he can hide on the rocky shore. Alda is screaming in his ear, begging to know why the police are chasing them, but Magnús can't answer.

He doesn't know what to tell her. This is his fault; he knows that much. But how does he tell Alda that? How does he tell her that he might get arrested, that Mamma might get arrested? He pushes the thoughts away, focuses on finding a place to hide now that they're on the camping grounds. His chest heaves as he looks around, and Magnús thanks the gods his not in his binder.

He knows that over that cliff is a little cave, so Magnús makes the dash for it, hands still wrapped tightly around his sister. But, as he nears the edge, Alda shifts – possibly to look at the officers chasing them – and Magnús loses his balance.

They're falling.

They're falling, and Magnús doesn't even get to watch his life flash before his eyes as he clutched Alda close to his chest.

They're falling, and Móðir taught him what to do in this situation, what spell to cast. He closes his eyes, pulling in the scent of Alda's fine hairs as he takes a deep breath, and Magnús snaps his fingers.

When he opens his eyes, Magnús is somewhere else. From the looks of it, he's at Hellnar Viewpoint; he can see Adam's Rock behind him. He had gone there with Mamma and Móðir once when he was younger, long before Alda was born, to meet one of Móðir's work friends.

He takes a few moments to breathe, to hold Alda close to him as she lets out whimpering cries.

“It’s okay. We’re okay,” he whispers into her temple. “I know where we are; I can find help. I’ll call Mamma on my phone.” Magnús slips his hand into his back pocket and wants to cry when he finds it empty. He tries not to panic, not to scare Alda, so he whispers, “There’s a café up ahead. We can call Móðir with their phone instead.”

The owner of the café will only let him use their phone as long as he agrees to buy something before, but Magnús has no money in his backpack, and neither does Alda.

“Fine,” he grumbles as he leaves the store.

“Have you been here before?” Alda asks, walking beside him. Her face is still red, but she’s not crying anymore.

“Yeah, we came to see Móðir’s friend.”

“Do you think they’ll help us?”

Magnús looks up at the sky, unbelieving. Why didn’t he think of that?

He presses a kiss to Alda’s forehead, “You’re a genius.”

Magnús has a foggy memory of where Professor Olaf’s house is, but he knows to travel south along the rocky cliffs until he starts to see houses. He remembers his time at Olaf’s house quite well. Magnús and his mothers had visited not too long after Magnús came out, and looking back, Magnús understands why. Olaf is trans too, and at the time, had been living his life as one of the few men allowed to practice magic. Magnús remembers spending most of the visit asking Olaf questions that were far too personal, wanting to know everything he could before he started hormone blockers. Olaf had been happy to help then, back when before Magnús had even gotten his first period, and Magnús can only hope he still is.

Magnús raps on the white door of the little house, waiting as Alda hides behind him.

The elderly man who comes to the door is familiar, long white hair pulled into a neat braid.

“Magnús, what are you doing here?”

The teen tries to look as innocent and sweet as possible as tries to explain himself.

“I got myself into a bit of a situation, Olaf, and I...” His voice cracks in the middle of his plea, and the elderly man smiles. “Can we use your phone, please?”

“Sure thing. Come with us.”

Magnús ushers Alda in first, closing the door behind him. Olaf gives them their space for a while, letting Magnús call his Móðir without listening in. However, as soon as Magnús is off the phone, Olaf is waiting for him.

“So, care to explain your ‘situation’ to me? It’s not every day my friend’s children come to my house in their pajamas,” Olaf laughs as he sinks into his armchair. Magnús takes a seat in the sofa across from the old man, nodding to Alda to come and sit with him.

Magnús sighs, unsure of how he can explain himself. He starts from the beginning, running through his mothers’ idea to keep teaching him after the Parliament vote and how he had been betrayed by Sophia. And it hurt to admit that, that he had be *betrayed* by Sophia. That his own friend, the girl he used to practice magic with since they were kids, had turned around and reported his family. And he knows he asked her for too much, but it couldn’t have been that hard to simply say no, to simply remove herself from the situation.

And now, he can’t even think about what’s going to happen to his mothers. They may get arrested for teaching him, for housing him, all because he couldn’t let go. What’s going to happen to him, to Alda? He’s going to get arrested for practicing magic, but if Mamma and Móðir get arrested too, who will take care of Alda? Who’ll make her favorite breakfast or sneak her candy in exchange for favors?

It's Alda who pulls Magnús from his spiral, her little hand squeezing his. Their eyes meet, green and green, and Magnús sighs.

"I'm okay," he whispers.

"It's okay if you're not," Olaf says solemnly.

2

# Erekusi

0 A.I.E.

The woman standing before Erekusi is not what she had expected. Nanan always spoke of Mamun as a great and powerful goddess: tall with beautiful brown skin, shining coils of hair, and piercings adorned with glittering stones. The woman in front of Erekusi now is weak and tired. She is hunched over, using the wooden shrine to support her weight, and her skin is dull and ashen. This cannot be Mamun.

Erekusi looks around the room – the flames of her candles are out and Erekusi can see a single torch-fly paused midair. So, this is Mamun.

Erekusi offers her bowl of charred plants, hands shaking and head bowed in respect.

The goddess accepts the bowl, popping the plants into her mouth and absorbing the power Erekusi has pushed into them.

“What can I do for you, Erekusi?” the goddess sighs, voice rumbling like thunder. “Is this about your grandparents?”

Erekusi swallows. “Yes, Mamun. I want... Why did you not protect them?” Erekusi does not meet Mamun’s eyes, just stares at the floor as speaks in shuttering breaths. “They did everything for you, dedicated their lives to you, and yet... and yet, you let them die.”

“I am truly sorry, Erekusi, but there is nothing I could have done for them. I wish I could protect them, the last of my devout followers, but I am without strength.” Mamun sighs, settling more of her weight on the shrine. “I cannot control Death. Death comes and goes whenever they

choose. What I do is delay Death, trick them and steer them away for just a moment. I cannot do that without my power.”

“But where is your power? You speak as if you’ve lost it!”

“Because, my sister, I have. I pull my strength from the love I receive from you humans. Without it, I have no strength, no power to grant wishes and provide protection, not for you or even for myself. My sky is empty, Erekesi. There are no stars left.”

“What are you saying? Is there no one left? Am I the last believer?”

Mamun coughs. “Yes and no, Erekesi. You are not the last believer, but you are the last practitioner. There are no leaders left among my believers, no guides, no stars.”

“Let me be your star,” Erekesi suggests. “I’ve learned from my Nanan and my Baba. What must I do for you, Mamun?”

The goddess leans back, thinking.

“I ask for only one thing,” Mamun says, tilting Erekesi’s head up to look into her eyes. “Gather as many believers as you can and bring them to this temple. Let them reside in the homes that surround the temple. With you all together, I can protect you.”

“Protect us from what?”

“I do not know, Erekesi, but something is coming, something much too strong for me. I will send my entrusted guardians to help you. Look for them, and you shall see the way to save us all”

Erekesi wakes up splayed out on the floor, still surrounded by ousted candles. Above her, there is a single crow perched on the temple’s windowsill.

Erekusi feels guilty to say it, but she regrets offering herself up to be Mamun's new star. Between her turbulent relationship with the native villagers and her hostile relationship with the Newcomers, Erekusi has no one to recruit. She sighs; there is too much going on.

While making repairs on the land around the temple, Erekusi has been haunted by the reedy voice of the crows. They have been whispering to her since her dream with Mamun, but Erekusi refuses to listen to them as she wallows in her grief and frustration. Today, as she is reinstalling the trampled fencing around the temple garden, the crows tell her to go into the village. Erekusi shakes it from her head.

"The village is not safe," she says. At least, she thinks it is not. The amount of rioters that rally at her walls has dwindled, but not enough for Erekusi to feel safe.

There is a scoff, and a crow, the one with the laughing call, perches on the end of Erekusi's mallet. It stares at Erekusi as the voice pushes.

*What you seek is in the village. They seek refuge only you can provide.*

Erekusi rolls her eyes, "I cannot save anyone. My grandparents' deaths have proven that."

*And still, you work to save Mamun. Does that not show your capability?*

"I have not saved her yet."

*Yet is the most important word in that sentence. Now, go to the village; it is where we must be.*

The crow moves to rest on Erekusi's arm as she sets the mallet down. She knows she needs to start on her mission, actually take action, but something acrid bubbles in her throat when she thinks of it all. Erekusi was never a leader. She is the middle child, closer to the youngest, and was always coddled by her grandparents; there was not a leading bone in her body. But this is not about

Erekusi, this was about Mamun; the life of a goddess rests in Erekusi's hands and she cannot let it slip through her fingers.

“Fine. I will go into the village today. Who am I looking for?”

*You will know when you see them.*

Erekusi changes her clothes before she leaves, donning her grandmother's traditional pale-yellow tunic, beaded and embroidered flowers glittering along the edge of the tunics collar and hems. A jeweled belt holding the soft fabric to Erekusi's skin. It is a little short – Erekusi was much taller than her Nanan – but it fit her shoulders and would have to do. Erekusi is not sure why, but it feels necessary to look the part of a Priestess, to show these refugees that she was who she will claim to be. But at the same time, each piece of enamel and stone that Erekusi adds to her body, each piercing she accentuates with a gem, makes her feel lighter.

She looks in the reflective glass in her room as she puts on her headpiece, a simple corded band that held her braids away from her face – made of serpent's tongue and studded with Spessartite Garnets – and sees a young Nanan staring back at her. The reflection smiles and Erekusi's heart swells. She can do this.

The villagers stare at Erekusi as she walks into the square, and she cannot tell whether they're dazzled by her or scared. They keep away, giving her wide berth as she struts around with the laughing crow on her shoulder.

The refugees are easy to spot, a family of five in foreign clothes and sacks full of what Erekusi assumes are their personal belongings. Erekusi can guess that they're from a town, deeper inland based on that alone. The one of the oldest two, with his broad shoulders and greying braids, were dressed similarly to Erekusi. They lock eyes, and Erekusi waves the group over.

“I assume you are looking for somewhere to stay?” she asks politely. The leader nods, stretching an arm out in greeting.

“I am Emeka,” he points to the other older man, who is at least a head shorter than Emeka is, “and this is my husband, Amadi.” Emeka waves his arm to gesture at the three people standing behind him. “These are our children, Chidi and Nwanneka, as well as Nwanneka’s wife, Abeni.”

Erekusi smiles, taking them all in. Chidi and Nwanneka are obviously related, with a wide nose and hooded eyes they inherited from Emeka and a smile copied right from Amadi. Abeni stands out quite a bit compared to everyone else, though, with her pale skin, yellow-blond curls, and obvious pregnancy. She has freckles sprayed over her wide, round nose and a rosy set of full pink lips.

Erekusi has seen people like her before; Baba used to say that they were blessed by the moon and pale just like it.

“I am Erekusi,” she states, introducing herself. “I am the last of Mamun’s followers in this village, but I am hoping to change that.”

Emeka raises an eyebrow. “How so?”

Instead of answering, Erekusi leads the group to the temple. It’s there that she explains herself. Clenching her fingers nervously, Erekusi swallows back her fear.

“Well, Mamun is, uh.” Erekusi curses the anxiety that runs through her, rolling her magic in her chest to calm herself. “Mamun is sick,” she states bluntly “I was able to contact her—”

“You were able to contact her *on your own!*” Emeka interrupted.

“Well, yes. Sort of. I enhanced the spell with multiple herbs, and it rendered me unconscious for some time. It was then that I was able to speak with Mamun in my dreams. Still, she is not well.”

“What do you mean, not well?” Chidi asks, his deep voice rolling through the room for the first time all day.

Erekusi rolls her magic again, taking a deep breath. “She is losing power. She draws her power directly from her believers and the love we have for her, literally converting the love into magic. With a decline in believers, the lack of love is... it is killing her, slowly.”

“What does this mean for us? How are we going to change that?” Chidi speaks up again.

“I was thinking about finding more followers, it may be our best chance at first. And if the crows can lead me to you all, I’m sure they can help me spot more believers nearby. Hopefully, we have enough time to get them all here.”

Nwanneka hums, “Why would we run out of time? Are you planning something?”

“No, not planning. When Mamun came to me in my dreams, she warned me of something on the horizon, something she cannot protect everyone from because of her weakness. I was told to find as many believers as I could, and she would protect as many of us as she could.”

“What about the villagers? Who will protect them?” Abeni asks meekly.

Erekusi cringes, thinking of her family. She does not wish them harm, but they have made their choices. They chose to side with the Newcomers and must be steadfast in that choice once again.

“The non-believers will have to ask their new gods for protection,” she says curtly. She doesn’t mean to be so aggressive when she says it, but she continues on. “If they had not turned from Mamun in the first place, we could have all been protected.”

Emeka sadly hums in agreement. “How can we help?”

Erekusi thinks, feeling much more comfortable now that she has convinced this family to help her. “Right now, I’ve been fixing up the smaller homes around the temple; I’m hoping the

land will serve as a commune of sorts. I will need someone to help with that, as well as someone to help me find people to recruit from the neighboring villages. With a little effort, we can fill those homes.”

The Temple commune expands faster than Erekusi expects. As she and Chidi travel deeper inland, the rest of the family stays behind to tend to the land. Nwanneka, who seems to have a magical green thumb, tends to their crops while Amadi and Emeka care for the temple itself.

Divvying up the work has been great for Erekusi, who can now focus on learning how to lead, how to stand strong in her place as their priestess. Every speech she gives, every mission she runs, brings people to her commune, believers old and new. And soon enough, the empty houses are full. Children run around the courtyard, playing and making friends. Abeni has taken her place as the head caretaker for the children, watching the young ones play as she and Nwanneka own newborn. They even have boats now, long sturdy canoes meant for riding the raging river not too far from the temple.

Erekusi is so immensely proud when, three full moons after starting her homestead, Erekusi and her people are able to present Mamun with their first gift. Mamun thanks Erekusi in her dreams, promising protection from the inevitable terror that will soon strike.

It comes in the form of sickness. Erekusi is on a trip to the market, alongside Chidi – who has become her second in command – and the laughing crow, when she sees her own mother collapse. The older woman hacks out a cough. She looks terrible, covered in rashes and boils, as she struggles to stand back up.

Erekusi goes to help but the crow lets out a warning caw.

*Do not touch that woman! She doesn't smell right.*

“But she’s my mother.”

The bird squawks again and Erekusi steps back as her younger brother, Ekene, comes to help their mother. He and Erekusi lock eyes, and the hatred she feel radiating off him frightens her. Mamun’s warning rushes back into Erekusi’s mind. This is the bad thing; this is what Mamun was scared off. Erekusi and Chidi leave the market with no food.

She takes a bath as soon as she gets back to the temple, scrubbing her skin until it hurt, before gathering everyone in the courtyard.

“No one is to leave the courtyard until Mamun tells me otherwise,” she starts sharply. “I have told many of you about the warning Mamun gave to me, and I have mentioned the misfortune she predicted. Unfortunately, that misfortune is upon us now. There is a sickness that will soon spread through the village. It has already infected my relatives. When I saw my mother today, she was *sick*, sick in ways I have never seen. She was covered in bumps and boils and coughing like she was drowning.

“For everyone’s safety, we must all stay home. Do not go into the village; do not talk to anyone from the village; and for the time being, we cannot accept any new members to the commune. You are all important to me, and I cannot have any of you at risk. So please, for your safety and the safety of those you love, stay on the commune until further notice.”

# Magnús

819 A.I.E

Móðir pulls Magnús into a tight hug as soon as she gets through Olaf's front door, pulling his head down so she can press a kiss to his temple. She's rambling, stumbling over her questions, as she pushes her short black hair from her face.

“Are you okay? Did you get hurt?”

“Móðir, I'm fine. Olaf and Helga have even given us breakfast and lunch,” Magnús explains, gesturing to the man and his wife.

Móðir sighs in relief, letting Magnús go.

“Oh, Olaf, I can't thank you enough.” Magnús doesn't pay attention to the rest of Móðir's sentence because Mamma sweeps him into a tighter hug, Alda on her hip.

“I'm so happy you two are okay. You did such a good job, Magnús. You did perfect.” The boy wants to disagree. If he had been perfect, the police wouldn't have seen him, or maybe they wouldn't have had to run in the first place. He sighs instead, sinking into the warmth of his mother's hug.

He doesn't know what they're going to do from here, where they're going to go. He remembers Olu's offer to take them in if anything happened, but he doesn't have a phone to call her on and he doesn't have her number memorized. Still, he brings the idea up to his mothers.

The suggestion makes Móðir's eyes sparkle as she racks her brain to remember the Rotimi home office number. It had been the number she used to call Olu's father, Uncle Obi, before he passed, and Magnús could only hope that the line was still in service.

Magnús' mothers spend about a week going back and forth with Mrs. Rotimi, signing immigration forms and other documents. Magnús uses the time to read over some old tomes with Olaf or ask to speak with Olu. Mrs. Rotimi always seems to change the subject when Magnús asks, so he goes to play with his sister instead. Alda does pretty well throughout the week, too, Magnús always checking in to make sure she's okay. Something snaps in the little girl when Mamma announces that they're going to be leaving for good, though. They're all sitting at the kitchen table when Mamma says it, and Alda lets out a pitiful cry.

"You said we were only leaving home for a little while," the girl wails, and when had they told her that? Did they not tell her they would be leaving Iceland?

"Alda, sweetheart," Móðir tries.

"No! You said I was gonna see my friends again, but if we leave, I won't never see them. Why do we even have'ta leave?" she says, tears already streaming down her face.

Mamma and Móðir share a look, probably unsure of what to say, so Magnús jumps in. He scoops Alda into his lap, using his thumbs to wipe the tears from her cheeks. He looks her in her eyes and feels the sting of his own tears as he talks.

"I made a mistake and... and we broke a law."

"All of you?" she hiccups.

"Yeah. The law says I'm not supposed to do magic, but I did and Mamma and Móðir helped me, so now we're all in trouble."

The girl's bottom lip trembles as she throws herself into his chest, wrapping her little arms around him.

"I... you didn't do nothing bad, though. I don't want 'em to take you away," she whispers into Magnús' neck.

“I know Alda. That’s why we have to leave; we can’t stay in Iceland.”

“But I don’t wanna leave neither,” she huffs, face still hidden. “I won’t get to see my friends or my teachers or nobody.”

Magnús closes his eyes as a stone of guilt settles in his chest, hold Alda close as his mothers watch. “I’m so sorry, Alda. I didn’t mean to do this to you.” With that, he lets the girl go. He needs air; he needs to step away from everything.

He slips out the back door, leaning against the side of the house. He looks up at the sky, taking in the chill of the wind. The horizon is draped in greens and blues, and Magnús does his best to save the image in his head. No matter how things turn out, he won’t be seeing it much longer.

*Gods, The Lights are stunning tonight,* Magnús thinks as he slides down and sits against the side of the house. The beams ripple slowly, waving, and it feels like they’re saying goodbye. He’ll miss them when he leaves. He’ll miss the snow too, and the cold. Oluchi always says that Erekesu is warm year-round, so there is no snow, and he knows it’s too far south for any phenomena like The Lights. Magnús sighs, sliding as far into the ground as he can. He can feel the cold, biting and frigid, through the thin sweater he’s wearing – sliding up his back and making him shiver– but the pain is a good distraction.

Olaf is the one who comes out to check on him, pulling Magnús from his thoughts. Magnús will miss the man, more than anything else on the whole island. He’s going to miss this man so damn much. This man, who taught him how to bind with pantyhose, who taught him how to dress in a way that made Magnús feel the most like himself, who let him know that he could live a long, happy life.

“I’m going to miss you,” Magnús says, looking up at the man with tears in his eyes.

Olaf smiles a sad smile, “I’m going to miss you, too. I liked having a grandson for a little while.”

A grandson, that’s what Magnús was. Olaf had always been someone Magnús could trust. When he first came out to his mothers, Olaf had been there to guild them and Magnús himself through the process. He helped with everything, from helping Magnús choose a new name to buying Magnús his first real binder. Magnús didn’t even know his own grandfathers, on either side of his family, but he always had Olaf.

“Yeah,” Magnús confesses, “it was nice.” Magnús pauses, thinks about what he’s going to say and finally asks, “Why didn’t you turn me in? When you heard me tell my mom what happened, why did you let me stay?”

“Would you have turned me in?” Olaf struggles to sit on the ground next to Magnús, and the boy leans into the older man. “Magnús, we’re the same. Both of us too attached to the magic we’re so used to having to let it go. I couldn’t turn you in for wanting to keep what you know is yours.”

“I think you should’ve.”

“Why? So I could lose you, or your mothers? You think this week wasn’t a blessing for me? In this week alone I got to see you now that you’ve become a man, to see how you handle your sister. You’ve grown up right before my eyes, *krakki*, and I wouldn’t trade that for the world. You know what it’s like to find your family, right?”

Magnús looked over at Olaf, nodding. He found family in the man, too, found a mentor; he found family in Olu and had once had an uncle in the girl’s father.

“So, you know how hard it is to let that go? I don’t regret taking you and your family in, Magnús. I’ve been friends with your Móðir since she started her career; it was nice to have you all

in the house again. And I won't lie, I'll miss you when you're gone." Olaf nudges the boy with his shoulder and they both laugh.

"I'll call you; don't worry."

"Phone calls for grandpa," Olaf chuckles.

"Of course, once a week!" They laugh together and Magnús feels so much laughter with it.

They leave early the next morning, but not without breakfast with Olaf and Helga. The old woman goes banging on all the doors that morning, waking everyone up. Magnús is slipping on his second sport bra – his binders were mixed in with his dirty laundry – when Helga bangs on his door a second time.

"C'mon, sweetheart. I need to give you hugs and kisses before you go," she calls through the door.

The boy laughs, shimmying to disperse the pressure across his chest. He straightens, looking out the window at the dark of the Icelandic morning. It's well before 6am, but Magnús can feel the adrenaline pumping through him. Today will change everything, forever... permanently. Oh, Gods, will Magnús every be able to come back to Iceland? Would his family be able to come back? He can feel his chest heaving as he stares up at the sky. Will he ever see this sky again?

Helga knocks on Magnús' door again, braking him out of his trance.

"C'mon, krakki, or Alda will eat your breakfast."

That kicks Magnús into high gear. He flails as he pulls his jeans up and stumbles towards the door.

“I’m coming,” he calls, “keep that little runt away from my plate.”

Breakfast in a fun, but sad event. Mamma shares a cup of coffee with Helga one last time, and Magnús pulls Olaf into one last hug before they leave. They all joke and laugh and ignore the weight of everything around them. After they’ve eaten, Olaf offers to drive them to the airport.

“Oh, Gods no. Olaf, that’s a two-hour drive,” Móðir exclaims.

“It’s fine, Trú.” He grips Móðir’s hand in his, “Let me take you.”

They leave at seven, with the sun in the sky and Olaf in the driver’s seat of Mamma’s car. The sea shanties that Olaf’s father used to sing to him as the drive along the coast. Every so often, Magnús will look at Olaf through the rear-view mirror and smile even though he wants to cry.

After Olaf drops them at the airport, Magnús realizes that he hates traveling. The three-hour coach flight from Iceland to London is nerve racking. Magnús has never been on a plane before, and Mamma cursed him with the window seat. Three hours becomes twelve as they grab a connecting flight from London to Lagos and then a cramped, two-hour ride straight to the capital city of Erekusu, Ekiti, on a general aviation aircraft.

When they land, it’s already 9 pm in Erekusu. The sky is dark, save for the burst of stars shining overhead that remind Magnús of the open skies of Iceland. Olu’s mother, Mrs. Rotimi is waiting for them when they get off the plane, still in her neat, lilac skirt-suit. She’s shorter than Magnús remembers her being, but he had been smaller the last time they were face to face. Magnús is shocked to see that Davin is still working as her driver, even after everything Olu had told him about. He’s waiting by the open trunk of the car, ready to pack their things.

Magnús cranes his neck to look for Olu, but she isn’t there. He wonders if she’s still in the car, but a glance through the windows lets him know that the car is empty. He looks forward and

meets Mrs. Rotimi's eyes. She half-smiles as they walk towards her, making steps to meet them in the middle.

"Trú, Heidi. A pleasure to see you and you children," Mrs. Rotimi says pleasantly. It's the same tone she used when Magnús was younger, not sweet but nice enough. She doesn't hug them, not even Alda, just gives them all a simple handshake. That hasn't changed either, Magnús notices. Even before Uncle Obi's death, the man's wife wasn't much of a toucher; she didn't seem to like hugs or anything remotely affectionate unless it was coming from her husband.

"Thank you for allowing us to stay with you," Mamma says in lieu of a greeting.

"Anything for Obi's friends. Plus, you're helping me out, too."

The statement makes Magnús raise his eyebrows, curious.

Magnus falls asleep as soon as they're all in the car, the hours of travel catching up to him. He doesn't get a chance to really look at Mrs. Rotimi's house when they arrive, sleepily taking in the peachy brown brick exterior and the traditional *Uli* murals decorating the smoother clay walls. It's not until he gets inside that he wakes up enough to notice more things about the house. The guest room Magnús is staying in – the room that used to be his room when he'd visit – is now painted an earthy brown, contrasting the new white wood furniture.

"Do you like it?" Magnús nearly jumps out of his skin at the sound of Alda's voice. He turns, glaring at the little girl, but the smile on her face makes him melt. He grabs her under her arms, spinning her around and kissing her soft cheek.

"Do I like what?" he asks, setting her on his hip.

"Your room, silly. Do you like it?"

Magnús shrugs, "I liked it better when it was painted green. But it is nicer than our old stuff." Their rooms back home, their real rooms, weren't as grand as these rooms. They were small

little things, packed into the roof of the house they lived in, and the beds were just as small. Magnús' chest aches something fierce as he thinks about their old red and white house by the water, the clear sky and crisp water-front air. His eyes sting and he can feel Alda's soft little fingers wipe the wetness of his cheeks.

"I'm okay, Alda. I'm fine," Magnús confirms, wiping his face dry. "Why don't we look at your room?" Alda squeals in delight, forgetting about Magnús' tears, and jumps out of her brother's arms. Magnús lets himself get dragged down the short, familiar hallway into a room that should be painted a deep burgundy with soft, pastel purple furniture. Instead, the room is a soft turquoise with wispy white curtains and light brown furniture.

As Alda rambles about all her new toys, Magnús takes note of everything that's changed. The bed frame is the same, lilac paint stripped off and wood restrained. Same with the desk in the corner and the wooden toy chest on the opposite side of the room.

Magnús rushes forward, pulling the desk drawer open, but it's empty. All of Olu's books are gone. He checks the dresser, almost panicked as Alda tries to find out why he's opening all her new drawers.

"I... I gotta ask Mrs. Rotimi something. I'll be right back," he says instead.

The woman in question is walking out of his mothers' room when Magnús bumps into her.

"Where's Olu?" he says instead of apologizing.

The look in the woman's face tells him that she wasn't expecting that question at all.

"I thought you knew that."

"What?"

She sighs, ushering Magnús into the dimly lit living room.

"Olu left me. I don't know where she is, but I thought she would at least tell you."

“She hasn’t told me anything! You don’t know where she is?” Magnús’ voice is raising as he speaks, his anger getting the better of him.

“No! I don’t know where she is,” Mrs. Rotimi snipes back. “She left ages ago, almost two summers now; she didn’t tell me where she went.” It all must stir up something in the woman because suddenly she’s crying. “I should have paid more attention to her,” she sobs. “I didn’t even notice that she left! I saw her in the grocery store; that’s how I knew.”

Mamma rubs Mrs. Rotimi’s back as the woman sobs into her hands. Magnús swallows, taking in the information. Olu had left home almost two years ago. Two years! And she had told Magnús nothing of it. She, she... Magnús turns on his heels, storming out of the room.

Olu left! She moved out and didn’t even tell him! And Magnús tells her everything. He told her about his classes; she was the first person he came out too! But she can’t let him know that she moved out of her mom’s house? What was she hiding, and why hide it from him of all people?

The questions swirl in Magnús’ head as he steps into his room. He swipes at the wetness on his cheeks, snuffling. Didn’t she trust him?

Magnús tries to call Olu the next morning on Mrs. Rotimi’s house phone, since his phone has yet to be connected to an Erekesu phone company. It rings four times before going to voicemail. He tries again, sighing as he dials up the number.

Mrs. Rotimi spots him as she walks into the living room.

“Can’t get her?” she asks knowingly.

“No,” he whines. “I know you guys don’t have the best relationship, but I wasn’t expecting... this.”

The woman swallows, looking shockingly older as the morning sun hits her face.

“There’s a lot you may not know about what happened between Olu and I. I wasn’t a good mother; I won’t deny that. I didn’t want children. I didn’t take care of her, didn’t want her. But I grew to love her, especially after Obi died. I,” she pauses, “I guess I didn’t show it in the right ways; I was too late.”

“I.. If you could find her, Magnús, I’d owe you the world. I just want to make sure she’s safe. She’s so powerful and I, I don’t want someone to use her for her powers.”

Magnús understood what Mrs. Rotimi meant. Olu had always been strong with her magic, just like Uncle Obi, but Magnús new she was much more accepting than her father was. Olu loved everyone she considered family – she brought Davin back from the brink of death just because she loved him for crying out loud. Magnús couldn’t imagine what would happen if someone abused Olu’s love for her power.

“I’ll help you find her,” he promises. Mrs. Rotimi smiles, and it makes Magnús’ skin crawl a little; he’s never seen her smile like that before.

Three days after coming to Erekusi, Mamma has Davin drop them off at Etití Secondary School. It’s a big campus, considering the population of the island, and Magnús finds himself suddenly nervous. He used to dream about this when he was younger, coming to Erekusu and going to school with Olu. But Olu wasn’t with him now, and he has to navigate the building on his own. Magnús sighs as he and Mamma make their way to the main office.

Mamma talks with the secretary, filling out his registration forms, when Magnús sees a girl waving at him, friends standing off to the side. He raises an eyebrow in question, pointing at himself. She nods, waving him over. Curious, Magnús walks out of the office to meet her.

“You’re a new transfer,” she states. “I was a transfer too. Where you from?”

“Uh, I’m from Iceland. My name is Magnús,” he says in butchered Erekusu, embarrassed that he’s not as fluent as he used to be. No one laughs at him though.

“Well, hello Magnús. I’m Fatima, moved here from Egypt. I’m usually the one they put in charge of helping the new students who aren’t fluent in Erekusu, but you seem pretty good at it.”

Heat spreads over Magnús’ cheeks, hiding his freckles in the blush. “Thanks, uh, I have family here so…”

“Really!” one of the boys say, his accent tells Magnús that he’s Slavic, and Magnús understands his confusion. It’s not very believable that he has blood relatives here, and he explains that technically he doesn’t.

“Yeah, my mom’s best friend was from here. I’m still pretty close with the guy’s daughter. We’re actually living with his wife right now.” Fatima hums in understand, leaning back against the wall.

“So, you’re the kid staying at Chancellor Rotimi’s place. Neighborhood’s been buzzing with gossip since you guys came.”

“I didn’t know my family was such a big deal,” he shrugs.

“It’s not often Chancellor Rotimi gets guests,” a Japanese student says bluntly. “Plus, the only other thing people around here talk about is the Lady in the Woods.”

“The Lady in the Woods?” Magnús asks. There hadn’t been a lady in the woods the last time Magnús was in Erekusu.

“Oh yeah,” the Slavic boy states, obviously excited. “She’s some old hag who lives in the forest by the river. No one’s ever seen her, though.”

“My dad’s seen her. He’s been trying to get her to make a potion for him,” Fatima chimes in.

The statement makes the group erupt, some people denying Fatima’s statement and others speaking over each other and asking more questions.

“I’m so serious! She lives in this enchanted cabin in the forest. My dad says you can only see it if she wants you too.”

“What do you think she looks like?” an American girl asks, twirling a neat dreadlocks between her dark fingers.

“I think she’s an old lady,” Fatima says, fussing with the bottom of her hijab. “I’ve met her in real life, but someone that powerful can’t be young.”

“I’m not sure,” Magnús says, thinking about Oluchi. A woman living alone in the woods, away from everyone so she can practice her powerful magic. Oluchi had been a level 14 magician when Magnús had last seen her in person, a full four levels above the normal 13-year-old and that in itself screamed “powerful magic”.

“You think she’s young,” the Slavic boy, Magnús still can’t remember his name, asks.

“Yeah, why not,” an Erekesu girl chimes in. “She’s powerful. My mama says she’s so powerful that she has to keep herself isolated from everyone else, so she doesn’t accidentally reverse them. I bet she could reverse her own age if she wanted to. And Fatima, you said your dad mentioned her having something to do with the school. This school can’t have been around long enough for this woman to be a hag.”

“Damn, you’re right. She can definitely be young,” the Slavic boy exclaims. “Do you think she’s hot?”

Magnús thinks about Oluchi again and shrugs. “Maybe.”

Suddenly a bell rings and the group disperses, heading towards their classes. Magnús asks Fatima to wait though, eager to ask for her help.

“What do you need?” she asks.

“Can you show me where the Lady in the Woods is?”

“What!”

“The Lady in the Woods. I want to go to her house.” Fatima looks at Magnús like he’s crazy, side-eying him as she slips past him.

“Uh, no. Are you stupid? There’s a powerful magic user in the woods and you want to, what, walk up to her house?! You have to be stupid.”

Magnús sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Look, I know it sounds weird, but I think I know her. We grew up together, and I’m living in her old house, but she didn’t even tell me that she left. And what’s up with that? Like, we’re best friends and you didn’t even tell me that you moved out of your mom’s house? And now I’m rambling, and I need your help.”

Fatima blinks at him, face almost blank except for the explicitly judgmental twitch in her eye. “How bad do you need this? Just call her.”

“On what? I don’t have a phone.”

Fatima rolls her eyes, sighing. “Fine, fine, I’ll help you. But only under one condition.”

“Anything.”

Fatima grabs Magnús by his face, looking deep into his eyes. “That woman is a healer; According to my dad, it’s her specialty. My little brother is sick; it’s normal illness, no magical cure. My dad’s been trying to get her to use this new type of spell to help us out, but she keeps saying no. I’ll get you to her house, but you have to get her to listen to me and help.”

Magnús blinks at Fatima. If the woman in the forest really is Olu, this plan works out for all of them. Magnús can get find out why Olu's hiding, probably get her back to her mother, and Fatima could save her brother. But if this woman isn't Olu, shit, if she isn't really her, then Magnús doesn't know what will happen. He sighs before agreeing, praying that this won't be a goose chase.

# Oluchi

813 A.I.E

Olu can see Mamun standing before her, bathed in the pale moonlight. She's just as beautiful as Papa used to say she was, tall with stunning brown skin and a halo of wooly hair. Her soft yellow dress seems to swim around her as she levitates, taking Olu's breath away.

Around them, everything is frozen. Davin is paused, running towards what Olu can only assume is her own unconscious body and even the trees are frozen in the breeze.

The goddess steps up to Olu, hand reaching out. Olu takes it as is hoisted off the ground, almost like she's weightless. Olu stumbles over vowels and consonants as she tries to thank the goddess, but Mamun shushes her.

"It is okay, young one. Take your time."

"I-uh... I didn't think this would work," Olu chokes out.

"Well, why not? You are quite a powerful magician, Oluchi Rotimi. Though, I have not seen someone this powerful since..." Mamun pauses, looking down at Olu, eyes glazed with sadness. The goddess swallows, "In a very long time." Olu hums in understanding, unable to stop staring. She can't believe she summoned Mamun on her own. And oh, Mamun is beautiful; Olu has never seen anyone, or anything, as magnificent.

Mamun abruptly clears her throat, "What can I do for you, Oluchi."

Olu gasps, remembering what she had done all this work for.

"Oh, yes. I asked for control."

"Yes, I heard that part in the spell, but control over what?"

“My powers.”

Mamun blinks in surprise, head jerking back.

“Control over your powers? As in all of your power? Sweet child, I cannot give that to you.”

“What! Why not?” Olu yells before she can stop herself. She swallows back some of her anger when Mamun gives her a stern look. “It’s just,” Olu tries again, “I put a lot of effort into this, and you can’t give me a little control? That isn’t fair. What’s the point of asking you for stuff if I can’t even get what I want?”

“Listen to me, child. Whether I can give you the control or not, I will not give it to you. You cannot get everything you want. While I can bestow gifts of power, and control for certain aspects of said power, it is important that each magician learn to interact with and control their own magic. Good magicians work hard, Oluchi, and I will teach you that if I must.”

Suddenly the wind picks up, swirling around Olu and Mamun. It knocks Olu to the ground and when she looks up, Davin is holding her against his chest. She groans and Davin lets out a sigh of relief.

“I thought you died.”

Olu simply groans, curling up on her side to catch her breath. She doesn’t know how long she sits there, head in Davin’s lap, but when she feels her chest loosen, she lets out a sob.

“I blew it.”

“What do you mean?”

“She wouldn’t give me what I wanted, so I yelled at her an—”

“You what!” Davin grips her chin and forces the girl to look at him.

“I was upset!”

“That doesn’t give you the right to take it out on other people. This is Mamun for crying out loud. It’s not every day that you get to face to face interaction with the *goddess of our people*, Olu!”

“But it works with other people! Mama does it all the time, and she gets what she wants.”

Davin sighs. “Firstly, your mother is the worst example of what you should do when you’re asking for help. Secondly, it’s practically your mother’s job to yell at people. Politicians aren’t known to be the nicest of people, kid. Oh, and let’s not forget the most important part – your mother doesn’t yell at her Goddess!”

“I know that now. She won’t help me.”

“I can’t say I blame her.”

Olu looks away; she can’t take the look of disappointment in Davin’s eyes.

Olu takes Davin with her when she goes to meet the crows. Her magic leads her to the same clearing she was in the night before, but it looks completely different. Off to the side is a small cabin hidden among the trees. Well, it’s small compared to Olu’s house, but it takes up most of the clearing. The entire right side is covered in moss and flowering vines, and the potted flowers on the porch have wrapped themselves around the railings. It’s beautiful, something right out of Olu’s dreams.

Laughing Crow and her flock are perched on random spots on the porch, waiting.

*Glad to see you could make it*, Laughing Crows says as Olu nears the building.

“I didn’t have much of a choice,” the girl mutters under her breath.

Laughing Crow rolls her eyes. *Let us go, we have introductions and then a lot of work to do.*

“Introductions? Who am I meeting?”

**Me**, says a soft voice.

Olu spins around, looking for the owner of the voice. Laughing Crow snickers before perching on Olu’s shoulders. She gestures to the cabin.

“You’ve got to be kidding. The house is not talking to me.”

**Yes, I am**, the Cabin replies. **Now come in**.

Olu looks at Laughing Crow then over at Davin.

“How about I go in first,” he offers. Olu picks at her fingers. She doesn’t want to go in first, but she doesn’t want to imagine the horrible things that may happen if Davin does and something goes wrong.

She takes a deep breath.

“It’s okay. I’ll go.”

The door swings open as Olu steps onto the front porch, and the girl is stunned by the interior. It’s just as beautiful and overgrown as the outside, with flowering plants climbing the walls and support beams. The entire wall to her left is lined with bookshelves, each one overflowing with tomes and literature alike. There is a cozy-looking couch set to the right, in front of a sturdy tea table and two leather armchairs. They face the fireplace, which radiates a dim, soothing light via a fire that makes no smoke. In the far back there is the kitchen and steps that lead to the loft bedroom above it.

It was a beautiful space, but Olu’s reverie is ruined by Laughing Crow’s reedy voice.

*This is where we will be training. Every week’s end, just before sundown.*

Olu groans.

Davin takes a seat in one of the armchairs as Laughing Crow guides Olu through a boring meditation routine. Olu breathes in and out and doesn't bother to clear her mind. Meditation was boring and useless. How was breathing connected to control? Papa had great control over his magic and Olu had never seen him meditating. Instead, he would dance. There was never any music, but when the mood struck, Papa would pull Mama close to him and flutter around the room. Sometimes, when Mama was busy, Papa would scoop Olu into his arms and sway with her. He used to call it his "empty time;" Olu misses empty time far more than she'll admit.

Laughing Crow finally lets Olu leave after two hours, giving the girl extra work to do at home.

**And take this**, the Cabin adds. An old leather tome wiggles its way out of a shelf and drops into Olu's hands. *Gardening for The Young*; written by Erekusi Ahoro, the cover reads. Olu raises an eyebrow. A book handwritten by the island's founder; impressive.

**Nature magic is the easiest to learn**, is all the Cabin says.

It frustrates Olu to admit it, but she isn't really into these control lessons. It's been almost two full moon-cycles, and the lessons have all been super boring; Laughing Crow hasn't moved past mediation techniques and Olu isn't all that interested in doing her "homework." Between going back to school, seeing her friends again, and testing out the spells from her new gardening book, Olu hasn't sat down to meditate at home. Sometimes, when schoolwork and control work are piling up, Olu skips lessons with the crows – putting up a force field that won't let them into her house.

She tries to explain herself to Magnús, who'd gone back to Iceland not too long after the funeral, but he scoffs over the phone.

“You know what I would do for super special magic lessons? Be appreciative,” he says, sounding out the last word.

“But they’re so boring,” whines, rolling over on her bed.

“They only teach us basic stuff in my grade. The extra stuff you learn has to be cool.”

“Not as cool as what your moms are teaching you.”

“It’s only the basics. And I bet having magic crows teach you ways to control your awesome powers is *way* cooler than anything wither of my moms could teach you.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Magnús yells, laughter tinny as it travels through the phone. “You gotta try,” he says more seriously.

Olu sighs, “Fine.”

Let it be known that Olu doesn’t try, and the consequences come faster than she expected. She’s in the backyard, casting a spell on the weeds in the garden. According to her book, she should be able to zap each weed and kill it. So, Olu points her finger at one weed and whispers the spell under her breath. Nothing happens.

She tries again. Nothing.

Olu points angrily at the weed over and over, waiting for her magic to shoot forward and kill it. The weed dances in the wind and Olu loses it. She turns quickly, throwing her hands in the air, not caring to check if anyone is outside with her. A bolt of sizzling green magic shoots from her hands and hits Davin right in his stomach. Olu stares in shock as the man falls back, clutching his abdomen. She swallows, waiting for him to get back up.

She screams when he doesn't, rushing to his side. She calls his name, praying that she hasn't actually hurt him. Oh Mamun, what if she's hurt him? This spell is meant to kill plants; plants and humans are both living things. Davin can't die, not now, not right after Papa.

Olu hiccups as the kitchen maid comes running outside. "What happened," the woman demands as she runs to Davin's side.

"I," Olu sobs, "I was trying to kill the weeds, but it wasn't working, and I hit Davin."

The woman's face goes somber before panic sets in.

"We need to bring him to the hospital. I'm going to call the ambulance; don't move."

Olu grips Davin's hand tightly, promising not to move.

For the second time in about three moon-cycles, Olu finds herself in the back of an ambulance. She swallows, watching the emergency responders use their magic to stabilize Davin the best they can. It's like her Papa all over again, Olu thinks as she holds Davin's hand. She prays to Mamun that he'll be okay, but she knows he'll die just like Papa did, that part had been confirmed when Olu explained what spell she used. Davin was dying and it was Olu's fault. If only she had a little more control.

Oh, Mamun, control. That's where this all started. If only Olu had listened to the damned crows, she wouldn't be in this situation. Davin would be helping her kill the weeds, not fighting for his life because Olu was reckless. The weight of it all sets Olu off again, and she's bawling.

They send Olu off to the waiting room when they reach the hospital, and it only takes five minutes for Davin's husband to burst through the doors demanding to see Davin. The man's eyebrows furrow when he spots Olu, and she can tell that he knows.

"I'm so s—"

"I don't want to hear anything from you. Now, where is my husband!"

Olu snaps her mouth shut and waits for her mother.

Mama doesn't say anything to Olu other than "get in the car and be quiet." Olu climbs into Papa's old pick-up truck, hands still shaking. Mama doesn't take them home; no, she detours to Nanan's house. She pulls a duffle bag from the back seat and tells Olu to follow her.

"You're staying here for a while. I can't watch you while I'm at work and I don't need you killing any more of the staff while I'm gone."

The words sting: Olu already knows that what she did was wrong, but Mama doesn't stop.

"If you'd just listen to me. No magic in the house! That's all I ask for. Your Papa's just died, and you've gone and killed Davin too."

"He's not dead," Olu yells back, trying to convince herself that she's right.

"Not yet. There's no cure for that spell. It's not meant for humans. Davin is rotting from the inside out like a weed, and you did it to him."

"That'll be enough of that," Nanan interrupts, face hard. "I won't have to talking to her like that; her day has already been stressful enough. Now come inside."

Olu dashes towards her grandmother's door, hiding behind the woman.

"You can leave now, N'keti," Nanan tells Mama.

"But—"

"But nothing. I will handle Oluchi. Go home and rest."

"How much trouble am I in," the young girl asks, looking up at her grandmother as the older woman enters the house. Nanan sighs, dragging a hand over her face. Suddenly, Nanan looks so much older as the weight to the situation comes down on her.

"So much trouble," she whispers. "So much trouble."

“I’m sorry, Nanan. I really am.” Nanan’s face is blurred by Olu’s tears, and the girl lets out a chest-racking hiccup. “I didn’t mean to hurt him. He can’t die, Nanan, I need him.”

Nanan pulls Olu into her arm, pressing a kiss to the girl’s forehead. It has been so long since Nanan held her like this, pulling Olu into her chest. Olu doesn’t want Nanan to ever let her go, wants to waste away in the warmth she’s missed so dearly, but Nanan pulls away. The older woman runs her hands over Olu’s shoulders and sighs.

“I don’t know how to fix this one, Olu.”

Olu’s room in Nanan’s house is smaller than her own back home, but it’s cozy. Some of Olu’s old toys and books are still there, and the girl uses them to distract herself from the thoughts swimming around her head.

She hadn’t meant to hurt Davin; she really hadn’t. And now... now he was going to die.

“What can I do,” she asks the stuffed goat in her hands. “Is there anything I can even do?”

*Yes, there is.*

Olu’s head snaps towards the window, where Laughing Crow is looking back at her.

“How’d you find me?”

*You are not hard to find, child. Now, you have asked a question and I answered it. There is something you can do to help your... protector.*

“You mean Davin?” Laughing Crow nods. “So, what is it?”

*Actually do what I tell you. Control is the key to all magic. You learn control and you should be able to fix your mistake.*

Olu looks at the bird warily. Before she can respond, Laughing Crow continues.

“The spell you used will kill him in a week. Your Davin is much larger than a weed, and much stronger too. Tonight, you will do all the meditative practices I have given you. Tomorrow, you will meet me at the Cabin for more lessons.”

Olu nodded. She had a week to save Davin. She had to.

Laughing Crow is perched on the porch railing when Olu gets to the Cabin.

**Hello**, says the Cabin. Olu bows her head at the building. **Are you ready to start?**

“Yeah.”

They start with one more meditation.

*To make sure you are actually doing the work*, Laughing Crow explains smugly. *Now close your eyes and focus on the forest. What do you feel?*

Olu takes a deep breath through her nose. She can feel the wind as it whips around her and moves towards the mountains. She can feel the dew on the grass beneath her fingers, can smell the spice of the trees. She takes another breath, and more information comes flooding into her; there’s a lost Wokulo, invasive but passive, looking for its mother a little ways west; there’s a group of fairies gossiping in the leaves; a wailing Egberé, the chitter of M iengu in the river.

*What do you feel, Oluchi?*

“Everything.”

Something in Olu’s chest locks into place as the word rolls off her lips. She opens her eyes and smiles at Laughing Crow.

*I think we’re ready now*, the bird says.

Target practice is much more fun. Olu tries to project narrow beams of magic without hitting anything else. She does well on her first try, but Laughing Crows says that she had much room to improve. The next day, they practice intention.

*The spell has a job, you can't change that, but you can change how the spell does its job,* Laughing Crow explains as she perches on the fireplace mantel. *What do you want this spell to do,* she asks.

“I want it to heal Davin?”

*How? Do you want his body to revert back to how it was before the incident, or do you want to push the injury forward through time and have it healed that way?*

Olu's eyebrows pinch together in confusion.

“But healing spells only move the injury forward. That's why they can't save Davin.”

*Do they?*

Olu had learned about healing spells in her advanced magic class, remembered the texts that explained how magic cause change by changing the state something was in. Healing magic was just pushing the injury from fresh to healed. But, if Olu could change how her spell worked, she could change Davin's state in reverse.

“We can do it backwards,” she admits.

*Ah, so you understand. Good. Let us practice.*

The next day, Olu is gifted another handwritten book by Erekesi Ahoro.

“*Healing with Intent?* Where do you get these books?”

**I've had them since they were written. They are gifts,** the Cabin replies. Olu looks down at the book, wanting to press for more information. If the Cabin has always had these books, then Erekesi used –

*Come, Oluchi. We only have three days left to save Davin,* Laughing Crow calls out, pulling Olu out of thought.

“Oh, yes. Coming.”

Laughing Crow has a struggling frog under her foot when Olu walks up to her. Olu stares as it wiggles against the wood of the porch and bleeds everywhere.

“What is this?”

*Fix it,* is all the bird says.”

“Fix it? You mean like—”

*Heal it, yes. If you don't, I'll eat it right in front of you.*

Olu swallowed thickly. “Okay! Okay,” she says, waving her hands frantically.

The girl takes a deep breath, focusing on the cut going up the little frog's belly. She whispers a spell she remembers from class, willing the cut backwards instead. Before her eyes, the blood flows back into the wound, cut knitting itself together. But then everything is moving too fast. The frog starts to shrink, its tail grows, and before Olu can do anything; it's a tadpole again. Great, she thinks sarcastically.

Laughing Crow stares at the wiggling, suffocated creature under her foot, eyes wide with shock.

*If I do say so myself, this is a little bit too far back.*

Olu panics, running into the Cabin.

“I need a bowl or a tank!”

A round little fishbowl floats out of the kitchen, courtesy of the Cabin, and Olu grabs it. She fills it with water and rushes back to the porch. The tadpole is still struggling, wriggling and

twisting. Olu pinches it between her fingers before dropping it into the bowl. It sinks to the bottom, frozen for a moment, before it starts swimming again.

“I guess we need to try again,” she says to Laughing Crow.

She tries a squirrel next, closing up the small tear in its hind leg. Thank Mamun, it doesn't revert to a baby. Instead, the rodent looks down at its leg before scampering off, chittering in thanks.

*Better*, the crow says. Olu nods.

“Tomorrow, we go to the hospital,” she says hopefully.

*Tomorrow we go to the hospital.*

Getting into Davin's hospital room is harder than learning the spell to save him. His husband has told the nurses that Olu isn't allowed in the room, so Olu has to devise another plan.

*Maybe we can get in through a window*, Laughing Crow suggests.

Olu narrows her eyes, looking up at the side of the hospital.

“Laughing Crow, I don't think that's the right plan.”

*Laugh- Laughing Crow? Who's tha- it that what you call me*, the bird asks, offended.

“We don't have time for this.”

The bird rolled its eyes. *Well fine. My name is Etiti, yes like the city, and we can get through the window. Just*, Etiti pauses, knocking her head against Olu's. In a flash of yellow magic, Olu finds herself in the hall of the hospice unit. Davin's room is right in front of her; his kids are outside the room, gripping each other's hands. Olu had gripped Davin's hands like that when Papa died, when she had been sitting in those chairs lost and afraid. They didn't deserve that.

“Put them to sleep and I'll slip in,” the girl says to Etiti.

*Are you sure?* the bird asks. Olu nods. She had to make this right, Olu knows how hard it is to lose a dad.

With Etiti's help, Olu learns that Davin's daughter snores. The older teen is going off like a chainsaw as Olu sneaks into Davin's room.

Olu gags at the smell of the room, eau de compost that makes it seem like Davin is truly rotting from the inside. Davin is still in his hospital bed, unmoving and quiet as he struggled to breath. Olu closes her eyes as shame floods over her. She did this.

But, Olu pulls herself together. She can fix this; she knows she can. With a deep breath, Olu hovers her hands over Davin's stomach. This is where she'd hit him, where her magic had slammed into Davin and began to steal his life from him.

"You can do this," Olu hears Etiti whisper. She can do this.

Her magic grows from her fingertips like vines, curling and twirling as it stretched towards Davin's body. The first vine slipped through his hospital gown and into the festering wound in his stomach.

Olu thinks about before, before she hit Davin, before everything went wrong, and she imagines the wound healing itself. Olu is sickened by the sound of the rot, wet and tacky as it moved backwards through time. She can hear Davin's skin knitting itself back together, blood squelching as the man's organs return from the brink of collapse. It all makes Olu lightheaded.

When the wound closes, Olu is left dizzy and confused, struggling to stand as Davin gasps for breath. The machine tracking his heart rate sounds an alarm as Davin basically comes back from the brink of death. Olu falls to the floor as the nurses rush in and everything goes dark. Oluchi prays that she's done the right thing, that she's saved Davin. She doesn't know what she'd do if she hasn't.

3

# Erekusi

## 0 A.I.E

It is only after four full moons that the sickness leaves the village. During that time, Erekusi practices her magic, strengthening and feeding it. So, the next time Mamun visits, she comes to Erekusi in person. They stay locked in the prayer room as Mamun urges Erekusi to inspect the village.

“Much of the sickness has receded, but something dark still weighs down the villagers. Find out what it is, and we shall find a way to keep the commune protected,” Mamun states from where she stands gracefully across from Erekusi.

“Of course, Mamun, but may I ask: Will I be safe?”

Mamun has been looking healthier, but Erekusi knows that her commune can only provide so much power.

“I will protect you as much as I can but take this just to be safe.” Mamun slips a small satchel into Erekusi’s hand. “Wear this on your hip and you shall be safe.”

A gust of wind blows through the room and Mamun disappears. Erekusi checks the satchel, finding peppermint, witch hazel, and burnt white sage, before tying the pouch to her belt. Her walk to the village is quite. The homes on the outskirts are strangely empty, the air still and sad with death. Everything around her feels cold, and the frost gets worst as she gets closer to the square.

In the streets are bodies, all wrapped in ceremonial white linen. There are so many that some have even been stacked on top of one another, creating piles of dead, wrapped in their thin cloth cocoons. It makes her stomach flip with nausea.

Erekusi is about to turn back and go home when someone calls out to her. She turns, seeing her eldest sister, Adanna, storming towards us.

“Have you come to see your work?” the older woman bellows.

“My work? Adanna what are you speaking of?”

“You did this to us, cursed us. This, this sickness started right after our grandparents died. You used your *magic*, Erekusi. I know you did.”

“I was upset with their death, but I would nev—”

“Yes, you would! Mama warned us about you, about what you believe in. She died because of you!”

No, she did not! I had nothing to do with Mama; I did not even know of her dying. I am not at fault for this sickness.”

“You are, and we will remove you if we have to, Erekusi. I give you one moon cycle from today to leave this village and take your magicians with you.”

Erekusi can barely control her sobbing as Chidi and Abeni hold her. She cries for her Mama, for the villagers who have died, but most of all she cries for her temple. This is all she has left for her grandparents; she couldn't just leave it behind. It is a part of her family and stands in her memory as not only her grandparents' home, but her home as well.

“I cannot leave this place,” she whispers into Chidi's chest.

“Then we stay,” xe says.

Erekusi sighs, pulling away from the pair. “If we stay, we must protect ourselves. I need to speak with Mamun.”

The ritual is easy to recreate now that Erekusi has done it so many times, and Mamun is eager to find out what Erekusi has learned in the village.

“They’ve threatened us.”

“How so?”

“My sister approached me while I was there, claimed that the sickness was a curse I placed on them for killing Baba and Nanan. She threatened to attack the temple if we do not leave.”

“And what is your plan?”

“I refuse to leave. This temple is a sign of hope and happiness for all who live here. My sister will not take that from our people. At the moment, I believe that protection runes carved into the base of the wall would be best for extra protection.”

Mamun smiles, and Erekusi raises a playful eyebrow.

“You’ve grown into this role quite well, Erekusi,” Mamun says proudly. “You are my brightest star so far.”

“A bright star is the best guide,” Erekusi admits.

“That is true, my sister. Quite true.”

Abeni, who works best with charms, is more than happy to help Erekusi etch and bless the runes. With little baby Chinwe secured to her back, Abeni breeze through the initial sketches, done with a chard twig. Erekusi follows behind her with a knife, carving over Abeni’s sketched lines. She pushes some magic into each pass of the knife, praying for protect and safety that Abeni will reinforce with a paste made of common protection herbs.

When their done, the two women join hands, doing one final blessing.

“Just in case,” Abeni says.

“Just in case,” Erekusi repeats.

Not even a day after the runes are set and blessed, a mob marches toward the commune gate, a mix of Newcomer Pale and Native Brown. Adanna is at the head, leading the villagers towards the temple. The crows spot them first, squawking an alarm to warn everyone before the laughing crow swoops down to perch in Erekesi's shoulder.

Erekusi marches towards the gate, visibly angry as she locks eyes with her sister. Erekesi is not shocked by her sister's leading position; she had been the first of their family to start interacting with the new gods willingly. It had caused the first of many rifts between them, seeing how Adanna was the one who convinced the rest of their siblings to reject Mamun in the first place. Seeing her sister's face, backlit by the torches in the crowd, makes Erekesi tremble with anger.

"Leave now, Adanna," Erekesi demands, standing just inside the closed gate.

"I told you what would happen if you did not leave."

"My people and I have no reason to leave, and we will not be intimidated by you lot."

"You cursed my village; you will not be allowed to stay."

"I told you this once, Adanna. I did not curse your people. Mamun protect what is hers"

"They why did she not protect the rest of the village? Why did you ever loving goddess leave us to die?"

Erekusi rolls her eyes and kisses her teeth.

"You are the reason so many people died, all of you," Erekesi states, gesturing to the crowd. "Mamun uses our love as power to protect us. You all turned your backs on her, and she became weak. Do not be upset with a Goddess who decided to only help the people who believe in her. You don't love Mamun anymore, so she could not protect you."

Adanna makes a noise of disbelief. “A god should never become weak,” she shouted at Erekusi. “She was never fit for us. Love is not power, Erekusi. Power is power. And for you, magic is power. A way for you to control us. How can I believe that you did not send the sickness out of spite?”

Erekusi heart is beating too fast as she argues with Adanna. The world around her begins to spin and Erekusi is back, seven moons ago, when she killed Servius. She feels out of control, like her body is not hers, as a pulse of magic throws the crowd off their feet. The people who had seen her in action moons before fleeing, running back towards the village, but Adanna levels her with a glare.

“This isn’t over Erekusi,” Adanna seethes as she walks away. “I’ll be back, and you best be gone.”

As the rest of the crowd disperses, following Adanna back to the village, Erekusi is shocked to see her younger brother. She hadn’t seen Ekene since her mother first collapsed all those moons ago.

“What can I do for you, Ekene,” Erekusi asks softly, still picturing him as the little boy who once played in her arms.

“I... I need you to take me in.”

“Take you in?”

“Yes, please,” he begs, stepping towards the gate. “Adanna, she has changed since Mama died. She’s always so angry now and so,” he pauses, then whispers, “violent.”

“Is she hurting you?” Erekusi looks him in the eyes, searching for an answer, but Ekene looks away. “Ekene, is Adanna hurting you?”

“Not, not really. It is only when she’s angry.”

The image of Adanna taking her hands to their brother makes Erekusi's magic thrash in her chest. She swings the gate open, pulling Ekene into the commune and into her arms. But he twists, pulling himself from her grip and run towards the temple. With a sweeping arch, he throws a bottle at the temple. The bottle crashes into the room and explodes on impact, fire spreading across the surface.

Erekusi is frozen for a moment before she runs to Ekene and tackles him to the floor. Around her, members of the commune fuss to get the fire up out, but Erekusi holds her brother down and stares into his eyes.

"Why would you do that," she screams. Instinctually, her hand draws back before coming down across his face. "Why did you—"

"Because you killed mom. First you left, you broke her when you left, and then the sickness swept in, the sickness you casted on us."

"I did no such thing, and you know it!" She wants to hit him again, to feel the sting of her hand against his face, but someone pulls her off of him. It's Abeni.

"The fire isn't going out," the woman rambles. "It has spread to a few other homes and we don't know what to do."

Erekusi wants to focus on her brother, keep him from running off, but her people need her.

"Tell everyone to pack their things, take whatever they can and get down to the river. Tell Chidi and Emeka to get the boats ready. We set sail tonight."

Abeni runs off, gathering any children she can find as she does. Erekusi turns to the temple. The fire hasn't burned too far into the building, she notes as she runs inside, but the smoke makes it hard to breathe. Erekusi makes her way to the back room, her bedroom, and packs her things as fast as she can. She mostly grabs clothes and things that belonged to her grandparents, but she

takes special care to grab a map her Baba had once showed her as well as his carved ritual bowl and Nanan's old Priestess tunics that Erekusi has taken to wearing.

With everything packed, Erekusi dashes out of the burning temple. It hurts to watch the roof cave in, to watch her home collapse like her mother had, like Baba and Nanan had. The building burns, smoke rising up into the night sky, and Erekusi had nothing left; nothing left but her people.

“So, where are we going to go now?” Chidi says as Erekusi drops her sack into one of the canoes. She pulls out a map, showing it to xir and xir family.

“This was my Baba's map of the village. Here,” she points to the small drawing of a temple, “is the village. Here,” she traces her finger over the wide blue line, “is this river. The river leads out into the ocean when we can sail to this island.” She finally points out a small island in the corner of the map, just a bit away from the coast.

“Are there no other people there.” Nwanneka prompts.

“According to Nanan's notes on the place, no. She had gone there in her youth with my Baba. It is just animals and magic folk – spirits and gnomes and such.”

“And we will be safe there,” Chidi asks, locking eyes with Erekusi.

“I can only hope so. I hope everyone's ready to be sleeping on the floor, though, because I doubt there will be read-made housing,” the woman jokes. Chidi rolls xir eyes, but Nwanneka and Abeni laugh.

The three boats are just big enough to hold the twenty of them, with one being captained by Erekusi and the other two by Chidi and Emeka. Erekusi leads the way, following the stars and

her Baba's map. Overhead, the crows fly a similar course, stopping every so often to perch on a sail like imitation gulls.

Erekusi tries to appear happy, strong, for her people, but she cannot shake the feeling of failure. She lost the temple, the place she vowed to protect. She's lost her Nanan and Baba, their graves unmarked saved the soursop sprout from the fruit she buried with them. She wonders if it will grow into a tree, if it will flower and grow fruit. She hopes it does, that the ash and smoke of the fire hasn't killed it.

The laughing crow seems to pick up on her foul mood because it swoops down and lands on her outstretched arm.

*Feel no shame, you have done the right thing.*

"I ran; I broke my promise."

*You saved your people. You selflessly sacrificed your home in exchange for their safety. And to think, many moons ago, you believed you were unable to save anyone.*

"I was unable to save my family," Erekusi points out.

*You were unable to save your relatives. Your family is right here.* The bird looks back at the boat full of people. These people followed her, unshaken in their belief that she would protect them... and she has. Erekusi smiles before a child on her boat pulls her attention.

"Priestess Erekusi, what do you think the island will be like?"

She hums loudly for the child's benefit, but genuinely considers their question.

"Well, it is not too far from our old home, so the weather will most likely be the same, maybe windier because it is an island. I think there will be a lot of water spirits, too. My Nanan's journal pointed out a population of Miengu."

The child lets out an excited squeal that makes Erekusi smile uncontrollably.

“What do you think it will be like?”

When they reach the island, the crows usher Erekusi away from the group and into a small clearing as everyone else sets up camp for the night. As she stands there, she can feel the overflow of magic, either from the abundance of magical creatures or some other explanation. Erekusi kneels in the moss and grass, pressing her fingers into the ground to feel the thrum of the land’s magic.

*Call Mamun*, the crows suggest.

She has nothing to call Mamun with, but she tries, nonetheless. Still in her kneeling position, Erekusi begins the ritual, the chant just a little different.

“Mamun, Sister of my Soul and Protector of my People, I call upon you. I ask simply for your attendance; I ask for your presence; I ask for my sister to sit with me. I see you, Mamun.”

Under the light of the moon, the trees rustle in the wind and Mamun steps out of the darkness.

“So, I see you have found my island.”

# Oluchi

817 A.I.E.

After the incident with Davin, Olu is put on strict lock down. Mama puts limits on when, where, and how Olu uses her magic. And for the last three years, Mama has the new chauffer tail Olu, reporting any misbehaviors. Olu doesn't like him all that much, not when she knows that he's only there because Mama paid David's family off to keep the man away from Olu.

As Mama got stricter, Nanan got looser. Every few moon-cycles, after Mama would have Olu's control tested, Nanan would give Olu a new tome to study – in addition to the tomes Olu got from the Cabin. The books were her fathers, heirlooms passed from generation to generation. After he died, they went back to Nanan. However, as Olu got closer and closer to adulthood, Nanan began secretly gifting the books to her granddaughter.

The crows get excited when Nanan gives Olu a dusty old book, *A Summary in Site Cleansing by Amara Ahoro*, and urge the teen to bring it up into her room immediately.

She meditates before she reads, centering herself before she dives into a new topic. She breathes deeply willing her magic to hold the tome up for her so she can read it. The content of the book is exactly what the title dictates: a collection of spells that can be used to cleanse places where bad incidents occurred. Olu can see how it would be helpful to know this kind of stuff, eradicate curses, remove hexes and the like, but she's still a bit confused.

“What am I supposed to do with this,” Olu questions.

*Your Nanan is sending you a message, and we have to agree with her,* Etitì responds.

“What message?”

*She wants you to cleanse the land this house is built on. Many horrible things have happened here, changing the energy of this site will change the lives of all who live here.*

It takes a day or two for Olu to warm up to the idea of cleansing her mother's house – and Oh, Mamun, she's already begun to think of it as solely her mother's home. The teen sighs. She should do the cleansing; the negative energy from Papa's death and Davin's incident have been festering within the land for years. They had collapsed in the same spot, Papa and Davin, and the plants in that area still haven't bounce back. The flowers are dry, wilted stalks that look more like wheat than lavender, and all the animals in the big Oak Tree have died before they could truly grow – all still born squirrels and dead hatchlings.

Olu can see a baby bird from her window, helpless and broken in the dirt beneath the tree's shade. She could help it, cleanse the land and heal it in the process. And maybe the new positive energy would have its way on Mama, change her somehow.

The ingredients are easy to get, this time around. Olu grabs the sea salt, vinegar, and cayenne from the kitchen, hyssop from the medicine cabinet, and barberry from the garden. She mortars it all together, spreading the past on rocks she's used to line off the perimeter of the yard.

Olu sits under the Oak Tree when everything is read, using deep breaths to pull her magic close. She holds the dying baby bird in her hand, eyes sliding close as she pulls her magic forward. She can feel the mist of her magic spreading out around her, feels as it engulfs the house, feels as it connects to all the rocks she's set. Olu can hear curious voices from within the house, but she ignored them. With a harsh breath through her nose, Olu pushes her magic into the ground, into the plants and the house itself.

There's a beat of nothing, then a pulse of magic that shoots back up into Olu. She can feel the lightness of the magic, the happiness of the earth beneath her, and she smiles.

In her hands, the baby bird takes a gasping breath and everything thing around Olu begins to bloom. The oak tree above her head is green with life and the flowers in the garden dance in the wind.

Olu smiles, but Mama is not happy with what she's seen.

"What did you do?" Mama seethes, staring at the bird in Olu's hands.

"It was just a little cleansing—"

"No! You cannot just bring things back to life, Oluchi! There's a balance." Mama's voice is colder than Olu expects, sending a chill down her spine. She tries to explain herself, describe that her magic only gives, that the bird wasn't dead in the first place, but Mama cuts her off.

"Power comes from a transfer, Oluchi. There is a give and take, and you're messing with things you don't understand. You could have gotten someone killed!"

"But—"

"No buts. Go to your room and we will talk about this later."

"No, you need to listen to me," Olu demands, getting in her mother's face. "I know how my magic works and where it comes from. You don't know as much as you think you do, Mama."

Olu watches as Mama's nostrils flare, anger pumping through the older woman's veins.

"You'll regret this, Oluchi. We are going to the Queen Priestess tomorrow. You are reckless with your power and a danger to others. As Supreme Chancellor of Etit City, I demand you be stripped of your powers!"

The works shock Olu into taking a step back. Take her powers?

"You can't take my powers! They are not yours to control!"

"As your mother, yes I can. We will meet with the Queen Priestess and you will have your powers stripped."

“No! Can’t you just try to understand? Papa would have tried.”

“Well,” Mama whispers, voice cracking, “he’s not here. As much as I wish he were, as much as I wished I could trade you for him, HE’S NOT HERE! I didn’t even want you to begin with! He wanted a baby; he wanted a kid! And now he’s gone. So – because we’re stuck together, because I’m all you have left – you will listen to what I say, and you will do as I command!”

Olu chokes on her response, stumbling back as her head suddenly fills with thoughts. Olu always knew that Mama loved Papa, loved him with everything inside her, but was Olu not important to her? She didn’t want Olu, still doesn’t, if this is anything to go by. And don’t get Olu wrong, she was used to being ignored, even shunned, by Mama, but did Mama hate her? Did she really want Olu dead?

No wonder Olu could never get Mama to love her. She used to try, back when Papa’s death was fresh for all of them. Used to climb into Mama’s bed at night and hope the older woman would hold her. It feels the same now, like Mama has pushed Olu out of the bed, scolded her for daring to come in, daring to want comfort and love, and told her to stay in her own room.

Olu looks up and Mama is gone.

Olu only lasts thirty minutes in her room before she gets thirsty. She’s tiptoeing downstairs, making her way to the kitchen, when she hears Mama on the phone. Olu doesn’t mean to listen in on Mama’s phone all. She was never a nosy child, but the sound of her own name has drawn the girl in.

“She did it again,” Mama hissed, most likely in the phone with someone.

There’s a beat of silence, the other person talking, and Mama replies.

“I thought it was a fluke, a one of chance that her prayers had worked but I saw her do it again with my own eyes. She brought a bird back to life right there in the yard!”

Mama is silent again, and Olu wants to know so badly what the other person is saying, who the other person even is. She racks her brain for a spell, something to allow her to hear, but she doesn't know any.

“I know it's amazing; that's why I can't let her leave.”

Silence.

“She's my child; I can do what I see fit! She is powerful enough to bring a new age to Erekesu. Imagine our island unbound by untrained queens randomly chosen by Mamun; I work with the Queen and I know that she would not be able to rule if not for the other chancellors and I. We need strong leaders who hold strengths in magic as well as diplomacy.”

Silence.

“I will do what I must for Erekesu. I swore to do what is best for my people, and a strong leader like what Olu could be is what we need.”

Olu doesn't wait to hear what else Mama has to say. She's never thought of her mother as someone to turn her back on tradition, but Mama has always been one for power. Olu has never been and never will be stupid, so it isn't hard to figure out her mother's plan. With Olu at the helm of the country, Mama can come into an immense amount of political power. With a better relationship, Olu will be nothing more than her mother's puppet.

The thought makes Olu sick, her mother's greed leaving a sour taste in her mouth. She rushes back upstairs, dry throat forgotten.

“We're leaving,” Olu says before Etiti can greet her. She pulls a suitcase from the back of her closet and begins to pack.

“And where are we going?”

“The Cabin. We can’t stay here any longer. My mother, she... she either wants to strip me of my powers or use them to take over Erekesu. I refuse to let either happen all because she thinks I’m too powerful.”

*Well, you are.*

“Excuse me?” Olu drops the bundle of shirts in her hand to glare at the crow.

*You are quite powerful, Oluchi. Much more than your mother could handle. Your mother has only ever seen the Queen Priestess use the kind of power you have. Add your curing of Davin years ago and you’re too strong for her to understand.* Etití comes to perch on Olu’s shoulder. *You created a new way to do magic, Oluchi, and to your mother, that is too powerful to leave uncontrolled.*

“But I am controlled.”

*Not by her,* Etití points out.

“Then I can’t stay.”

*I am not asking you to. The Cabin will accept you no matter what, but are you ready to leave? Are you ready to hide from your family?*

“I thought we were just hiding from my mother.”

Etití sighs, hopping down onto Olu’s bed so that she can face the girl.

*But will Magnús be able to keep this secret?*

Olu sighs. Magnús would never be able to keep this to himself, especially if Mama asked him for information. Magnús loved to see the good in everyone, even Olu’s mother. If he thinks the woman needs to know Olu’s whereabouts, Olu has no doubt that he’ll tell.

“Okay, so we don’t tell Magnús. But how do we keep other people from finding me when they go hiking in the woods?”

*Do you remember that book of folktales I told you to read when we first met?*

“Yes, of course.”

*Do you remember the tale of Erekesi’s Cabin?*

Olu’s eyes widen. Erekesi, the founder of the island, built her home as the first temple to Mamun in Erekesu. She was the first Queen Priestess, and she enchanted the house to appear only after the current Queen had moved out and the next Queen had come into her powers. With Queen Priestess Amaka already in the Palace that could only mean—

“Wait! You don’t mean that—”

*That you are the next Queen Priestess?* Etití looks at Olu blankly, like the bird is dying to roll her eyes. *Obviously, Oluchi. Do you think Mamun would just send her guardians to babysit some random little girl. You are more special than you think.*

Olu swallows thickly, gripping the edge of her bag before letting go and grabbing another shirt. She can’t say that this is what she wanted. She wanted to learn, yes, to get stronger, but she has never dreamed of becoming the Queen of Erekesu. It was the queen’s job to lead the country, but also to work as the high priestess for the entire island. It was her job to use her magic to do what was best for the island, to be a funnel for Mamun’s power on Erekesu. Olu didn’t know if she was ready for that... but did she have a choice? The crows, the Cabin, everything has already been set into motion. Could she stop it? Did she want to stop it?

Olu doesn’t get to contemplate anymore because Davin of all people walks into her room, completely unannounced. She lets out a little shriek when she finally turns and spots him, and he laughs. His eyes zero in on the bag on her bed; his smile drops

“What are you doing here?” she yelps.

“I could ask you the same thing,” he says, gesturing to Olu’s suitcase.

Olu swallows, looking at the man nervously. She’s missed him, wanted to see him for the longest, and Oh, Mamun, she’s taller than him now. Davin points at the bag again and Olu cringes.

“I’m leaving,” She explains. “I... I can’t live with Mama anymore. She wants to strip me of my magic. “Have you tried to convince her not to?”

Olu rolls her eyes so hard it hurts a little. Of course she hadn’t tried that. Mama is not a woman you pleaded to. You don’t ask Mama for forgiveness, you don’t beg. She tells Davin that much.

“I’m not risking her anger with this; I’d rather leave.”

“And what if she searches for you.”

“She won’t be able to find me. I’ll make sure of that.”

Davin raises an eyebrow, leans himself up against the door jamb.

“Don’t worry,” Olu tells him softly. “I’ve gotten better with my magic since I last saw you. I know what I’m doing.”

The man sighs, “I don’t doubt that.”

“So, why are you here?”

“I was going to ask for my job back. I missed seeing you.”

Olu sighs, “I don’t think getting your job back will give you access to me anymore.”

Davin shrugs, “Maybe I can help, make sure she really never finds you.”

They share a smile, then a hug. “I’d appreciate that,” Olu says softly.

It takes a week for Olu to go through with her escape. She had originally planned to just walk out the front door, but Mama's typical monthly meeting with the Queen and her Financial advisor was cancelled, and now she has to figure something new out.

Surely enough, Etití, who seems to be loving these "spontaneous" plans, is the one who suggests climbing out the window. If Olu really thinks about it, it's not hard to do, to shimmy along the roof and weasel her way down the Oak tree in the back yard. Down the block, her father's old pickup truck waits, truck bed overstuffed with the things she's taking with her. Boxes of clothes, old tomes from the Cabin, and everything she's ever loved is in that flatbed, covered by a loose tarp.

Olu looks out the window, stares at the sliver of roof that she needs to step out onto, and her vision spins as she accidentally looks down. She pulls her head back into the room, hand to her chest. She's fine, she's okay. She won't fall. But what if she does? Then she can heal herself. But what if it doesn't work? It has to work. She repeats it to herself; this has to work.

Again, Olu sticks her head out the window, not hesitating to let her body follow. She sticks to the side of the house, breathing slow. Olu is right above Mama's office window. One step at a time, she tells herself. One step at a time. When Olu reaches the thick branch of the oak tree, she freezes, eyes roving over the bark. She'll miss this tree; she's fallen out of it so many times growing up. She wonders if it will miss her too, miss the weight of her on its limbs, miss the feel of her as she climbed the trunk. She hopes it will.

In the moment, she thinks of the bird she saved earlier. Was it still there, living among the swaying leaves, or had it fled? Was it even alive? Olu sighs, pulls in the scent of the tree one last time to calm herself, before stepping into the flurry of branches. She makes quick work of her descent and dashes out the yard, looking back on the tree on last time.

Her brain is empty as she drives towards the forest. There's nothing to think about, not yet. She left a note for her mother, asking the woman to forgive her for leaving so abruptly, but not to look for her. She tells Mama to sell what she's left behind; she won't be needing any of it. She asks her mother to tell Davin Olu loves him and that she'll miss him. Everything she had to think about was already written down on that paper. Instead, Olu follows her instincts, not really paying attention as her headlights cut through the still night air. She isn't surprised when she finds a road leading into the woods, a road that didn't been there before. The Cabin is leading her to it, bringing her home, and Olu follows it instinctually.

It's not until Olu collapses in the big green armchair by the fireplace, boxes piled up in front of the bookshelves, does her brain being shooting off questions. How was she going to finish school without Mama finding her? How was she going to call Magnús? She needs a phone to call Magnús, but how will she pay bills? Does she need a job now?

She must be voicing her thoughts out loud because Etití laughs.

*Do not worry, child. You'll be okay.*

# Magnús

819 A.I.E

Magnús doesn't know how to feel about his hunt for Oluchi. Everyone he speaks to seems to have something against her. She abandoned Mrs. Rotimi; she refuses to save Fatima's brother; she's hiding stuff from Magnús. It all makes his skin crawl.

He sighs, laying back in his bed. He wishes he could figure out when Olu changed, why she changed, but he's clueless. It couldn't be because of Uncle Obi's death, could it? It's been five years now; Magnús doubts any of this could be because of that. He sighs again, feeling listless, when Alda walks in the room.

There's a leatherbound journal in her hands and her eyebrows are pulled together.

"I found this book, but I can't get it to open."

Magnús sits up, gesturing for the book. He runs his hands over the smooth leather cover before trying to flip through the pages. It doesn't budge. He tries again, fingers white as they try to pry the book open.

He scratches at his forehead, flipping the book over to get a good look at it. At the bottom, right on the edge of the cover, is an embossing – *Say the magic word* – with a little smiley face next to the words. Magnús lets out a little laugh.

"Soursop," he states, remembering Olu's favorite fruit. It had been her magic word for whenever he wanted something from her.

Immediately, the journey swings open, presenting Olu's looping penmanship on the first page.

*Dear Magnús,*

*If you are reading this letter, you have found yourself at my house, in my room, once again.*

*It also means there is so much I have yet to tell you. Before I explain, you can't let my mother get her hands on this book. This is for your eyes only and will lead you directly to me. When we meet again, I will answer all your questions. Until then, enjoy these poems and stories I have journaled for you, the first story will bring you to me.*

*With love,*

*Oluchi Rotimi*

Magnús smiles, clutching his one and only clue to finding Olu. At the same time, he wonders what he's missing. Why doesn't Olu want her mother to find her?

Magnús waits for Fatima at the edge of Etití Forest right before school ends. He had originally planned to go on without her, to find Olu and see her for himself, now that he has Olu's journal, but a deal is a deal and Fatima is only trying to help her brother. So, Magnús waits, accompanied only by reedy crow calls coming from all directions. The sound sends a chill down Magnús' back, and he clutches the satchel of protective herbs Mamma packed for him. He looks around, trying to find the crow – keep an eye out for them, but finds nothing.

“Don't worry about that. They sound off all the time,” Fatima says, as she walks up to him, backpack slung over one shoulder.

“The crows?”

“Yep. People in the neighborhood say they belong to The Lady.”

A shiver runs down Magnús’ spine. He shakes his head, “Let’s just get this over with.”

Fatima nods, pulling out the directions she swiped from her father’s home office. As she unfolds the sheet of paper, the ink begins to disappear.

“What! No,” Fatima cries out, staring at the paper in disbelief. They lock eyes and Fatima sighs, hanging her head. “How are we going to get there now?”

Magnús thinks back to Olu’s journal; the hint is in the first story. Magnús had read the piece the night before; it was a short story about a child finding fairies in a clearing in the woods. The details of the journey were surprisingly detailed. That was it! The child’s journey is the map to Olu!

“I think I know another way,” he explains, pulling the journal from his pack. He flips to the right page, the beginning of the child’s adventure, and begins to direct.

“It says to go past the tree line and walk until you see a tree with striped mushrooms. Then we turn left.”

“Striped Mushrooms?”

“That’s what the paper says.”

Fatima nods sharply and the two teens disappear into the tree line. It’s not long before they get to the Tree, the entire right side covered in giant striped mushrooms. “Make the left,” Magnús says.

“I know; I heard you read it.”

“Just making sure.”

“Where do we go from here,” the girl asks, stepping over a shrub.

Magnús reads over the paragraph again, stumbling behind Fatima. “There should be a stream in a bit, we follow that until the forest gets very dense.”

“Then?”

“It says to look for the trees with black feathers in them.”

The stream is short, and the black-feathered trees pop up more and more until the pair literally trip into a large, empty clearing.

“What is this,” Fatima gasps, surveying the empty space. Magnús’ eyebrows furrow. This is where the child finds the fairies, where Magnús should find Olu, but the clearing is empty. “No! No, no, no; it’s supposed to be right here.” She looks like she’s about to cry, like she’s worrying for her brother’s life, and Magnús tries to comfort here.

“Fatima, please calm down. There is something here, I can feel it.”

“There is?”

“Yes, I just need to get a closer look.” Magnús tentatively takes a step forward, hand stretched out to feel the forcefield, when suddenly the crows are on them. The birds swoop down in a flurry of shining black feathers, coming from the trees from every angle and trying to pick at them. They pinch Fatima, tugging at her hijab and nipping at her shirt, but Magnús’ satchel radiates a forcefield that protects him. He can hear Fatima crying from where she’s curled up on the floor, begging the crows not to hurt her. He thinks quickly, diving to cover her with his body. The protective field of his satchel is large enough to protect them both.

Still, the crows angrily continue to swoop until the sound of a door slamming radiates through the clearing. Suddenly, the image of the empty clearing begins to warp and fall, revealing a hut-like cabin made of wooden logs and peachy brown mud bricks. The front is beautifully decorated, with red and purple poppies in the flower beds under the windows, a wreath of Ague

Root and African Violets on the door, and murals almost as extravagant as Mrs. Rotimi's. The entire right side is covered in creeping plants and flowering vines, and the potted flowers on the porch have wrapped themselves around the railings.

On said porch is Oluchi in all her glory. She's taller than Magnús remembers, possibly as tall as him, with long twists that stop at her rounded hips. He can see the remnants of her childish face when he looks at her, still sweet and round, but Magnús has to admit it: Oluchi is hot. She's grown into herself: feet no longer too big, arms no longer too long. And there's a confidence that wasn't fully there all those years ago.

Her eyes widen when she sees Magnús.

"What in Mamun's name is going on here?" she demands. The sound of her voice gets rid of any lingering doubts; that's Oluchi alright.

The crows back off immediately, moving to perch in the trees or on the cabin itself. A crow lands smugly on Olu's shoulder.

Magnús stands, brushing himself off. "I could ask you the same thing," he snarks back, helping Fatima to her feet. "Nice house you got there, too. Want to tell about it?"

Olu rolls her eyes at his blatant call out, walking towards him.

"Oh, shut up," she whispers as she pulls him into a hug. She fits neatly under his chin when Magnús sinks into it, wrapping his arms around her broad shoulders. Swimmer's shoulders, she used to say. He breathes in the cocoa butter scent that rises from her skin, and sighs. He's missed her. Sure, they talk on the phone, but he hasn't seen Olu face-to-face, hasn't hugged her, since he was twelve. Magnús presses his face into the joint of Olu's neck and squeezes her one last time before pulling away.

They look at each other for a moment, eyes locked until Etití ruins the moment with a loud squawk as she lands on Olu's shoulder.

Olu sighs, but her smile doesn't drop.

"Oh, right. Introductions," she says looking at the bird. "This is Etití and," Olu gestures to the small flock of crows perched on the porch railing, "this is her flock. They live here with me. Etití, this is Magnús; you may remember his voice from phone calls. And this is..." Olu pauses looking at Fatima.

"Oh, sorry. This is Fatima. She helped me find you."

"Fatima Ayad? Like Sameh Ayad?"

Magnús turns to look at Fatima, who is just as shocked as he is.

"Yes; how did you know?"

Olu sighs, standing up straighter. "I saw you in the photo your father showed me of your brother. Is that what you're here for?" She leads them back towards her home. "I'm almost done with the spell and I have a few potions that will help your brother recover after I've removed his sickness."

"But... But I thought you weren't going to help my father."

Olu looks back at Fatima as she climbs the front steps, her eyebrows so gracefully arched.

"I never told him that," she says seriously. "I told him he had to wait. Creating a new spell is hard enough as it is, but your brother is sick far beyond anything I've ever cured. I need to make sure I can help without hurting him. The last time your father came, the spell still wasn't ready."

Olu ushers them into the house as Fatima chimes in.

"What's so hard about this spell anyway. You reversed illnesses all the time. Isn't that what got you so famous?"

Olu gestures for them to sit on the large sage green couch in her living room as she moves towards the kitchen.

“Yes, but those cases are usually short-term illnesses, maybe a few spell accidents or curses,” Olu starts as Magnús takes in the room around him. From his seat, he can see the loft where Olu’s bedroom must be, nestled above the kitchen. “When I healed for the first time, I reversed the man’s entire body back in time to before he got sick. If I did that to your brother, he’d turn back into a six-year-old.” Behind them is a wall of bookcases, each shelf filled with a rainbow of leather-bound tomes. There’s a jar of gods-know-what on one of the shelves, glowing a bright yellow. “So, I had to create a spell that only reverses a specific body part. That is much more complicated.”

“Can you teach me,” Fatima asks as Magnús looks over the other jars and beakers that litter the living space – nestled between crows’ nests and all filled with a type of plant or a colorful liquid.

Olu comes back, drying her hands in a dish towel. She purses her lips, arching that eyebrow again. “We have to see if it works first.”

“So, you’ll help my brother!”

“Of course, Fatima. That’s what your father and I agreed on. Tell him that I’ll be over by next week’s end.”

Fatima sobs out a laugh, giving Olu a watery smile as she as she stands. “Thank you! Thank you so much.” Olu smiles softly. “You coming?” Fatima continues, looking at Magnús. He looks up at her, happy to see her smiling.

“No... I’m gonna stay for a bit. I’ll see you at school next week.”

Fatima nods again before Olu instructs one of the crows to lead her out of the woods.

It's quiet as Magnús and Olu stare at each other. The crows are all in their nests, watching as Magnús sighs and scratches at the peach fuzz on his chin.

"This is a nice place," he says, trying for casual. The look on Olu's face lets him know he's failed.

"I know your upset with me, for not telling you I moved out, but I had my reasons."

"What, you didn't trust me?"

"Well—"

"You really didn't trust me!"

"No, Magnús, I..." Olu drags a hand down her face. "I trust you more than I trust myself sometimes. But this secret, it's important. I couldn't risk you accidentally saying in front of your Móðir and her accidentally telling her friends."

"Oh, really? What's so important that you had to hide it from me. What could be so groundbreaking that you had—"

"I'm the next queen of Erekusu."

"What?"

His mind is racing, trying to put together what meager clues he may have bypassed when they were younger, but all he could think of was Olu's ability to learn advanced magics faster than everyone else.

Olu takes a deep breath. "Usually, about a year before the next Queen Priestess dies, Mamun's guardians," she gestures to the crows, "Pick up on the signs of the next Queen. They use that time to train the heir so she can fill her role when the Queen dies." Olu swallows. "The thing

is, when my father died and I did his rites, I... I guess I revealed my power and they locked onto me early. They've been training me for the past six years."

"That doesn't explain why you didn't tell me where you were and when you left."

"Be honest, if I told you where I was, would you have come looking for me?"

"Yes."

"And if I need to keep my state of being a secret, wouldn't telling you blow that?"

Magnús bites at his lower lip. Olu is right, but that doesn't change how Magnús feels. He was left out of the loop in a way he'd never imagined. Years of talking with Olu on the phone, of imagining her in her bedroom, the bedroom Alda sleeps in now, just to see that it was all a lie.

"Look, I'm sorry I lied to you, Magnús, but I had to. Erekusu is peaceful now, but there are people who want to destabilize our government, take our little island for themselves. I couldn't put myself in that kind of danger. This place," she gestures to the cabin, "is a place of legend. It's the place where Erekusi founded this country; this was her home. It exists only to house the next Queen of Erekusu. If I told you where I was, it would blow everything."

"But what about your mother? If you couldn't trust me, why abandon her?"

Magnús jerks back as something flares up in Olu. She takes a deep breath, and the air of anger dissipates.

"My mother is the last person who needs to know any of this, Magnús. She..." Olu sighs heavily, shoulders visibly sinking. "She has plans for the country, plans to overthrow the Queen and she wants to use my powers to do it."

"But she said—"

"My mother is a politician, Magnús; she manipulates the public for a living. Don't be naïve."

“Olu, it can’t be that bad. She obviously loves you.”

Olu scoffs. “Loves me! Love me? This is why I didn’t tell you! My mother has never loved me, Magnús; I know that for a fact. She tolerated me when Papa was a live, and ignored me after he died, but she has never loved me.”

Magnús looks away, unable to meet Olu’s gaze. There’s so much he didn’t know, so much she hid from him. He feels selfish for thinking of it that way, but he thought they were close enough to share secrets; he thought she’d feel safe enough to tell him about her relationship with her mother. He had always known it wasn’t the best, but he had hoped that it was just the stress of being a single mother weighing down on Mrs. Rotimi.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly, wringing his fingers. “I didn’t know.”

Olu sighs, “I should have told you, at least about my mom. It’s not your fault that you wanted to trust her.”

Magnús nods, unable to speak. Magnús has no right to be this mad, but he is, and it hurts. The ache in his chest moves up to his throat and Magnús knows he has to leave. He’s out of the house before he can explain what’s happening. He just needs to get out of there.

“I’ll see you later,” is all he says before he follows the reedy crow calls back to civilization.

Magnús doesn’t look for Olu after that. He sends her a text when he gets his new phone, but he spends most of his time texting Olaf. He laughs at the similarities: Olu and Olaf. Magnús likes to think that they’d like each other, bond over telling Magnús what to do and supporting him as he does it.

“I’d love to meet her,” Olaf says on the first of many phone calls. “She seems sweet and it’s obvious that she means a lot to you.”

“She does, but...”

“But?”

“I might be selfish, but I still wish she’d told me her secret.”

“You said it was for her own safety, right?”

“Yeah,” Magnús confirms as he curls up on his bed.

“And you trust her, right?”

“Of course.”

“Then trust her to know what’s best for her. You may know Olu well, but you don’t know her better than she knows herself. You have to let her make her own choices, but you should always be there to support her if they don’t work. That’s how you make it last.”

Magnús groans, “Make what last? I don’t think we’ll stop being friends, Olaf.”

“I’m not talking about friendship, Magnús.” He can hear Olaf’s smirk through the phone.

“Olu seems like a nice girl. I can’t wait to meet her.”