**Chapter 14**

***The Sorceress***

The first thing Nessa noticed were the candles. There were hundreds of them, all yellow and cylinder shaped, in various stages of melting. Some were smooth and tall while others were shrunken down to drippy stubs. Rows of them were set on shelves that spanned opposite walls, floor to ceiling, of an enormous room. As the silky thread holding her lowered, Nessa noticed objects nestled in between the candles. There were stacks of tube-shaped vials, leather bound books, and bottles in all colors, shapes, and sizes. *Those look just like my shelves at home*, Nessa thought. Though as she got closer, she saw that some of the containers were wide, clear jars that looked like terrariums. They had strange plants inside of them and shiny insects pressed up against their curved sides.

On the far side of the room, Nessa saw a giant window. Through it, the full moon reflected on the rippled water and striped it silver. Below the rectangle of glass, a wide ledge stretched the width of the room. It was lined with pots of leafy vines with curling stems that snaked up the shelves and down onto the floor. Filling the narrow space between the walls and the window, there were columns of maps stuck with clusters of pins. Above the maps, in the high corners of the ceiling, hung thick nets of purple spider webs.

The thread that held Nessa’s lower body slackened. Her heart raced as she felt her legs drop and her body swing upright. Her feet smacked down on the solid ground. Posey thumped next to her. They looked at each other.

“Are you okay?” Nessa said.

“My skin feels like it’s burning off.”

“Where are we?” Nessa said.

Posey shook her head. The room was quiet except for the whirring sound that Nessa had noticed earlier. She’d forgotten about the noise, because it was so constant. Now, the pitch seemed shriller, an octave higher, and much louder. Directly in front of her, Nessa noticed a white marble pedestal with a shallow, oval-shaped dish attached to the top of it, tilted towards her at a slight incline. Inside, she could see a glittery residue that looked like black, metallic sand.

A hidden door near the front of the room swung open. A hooded figure in a long silver cloak hemmed with spiky purple fur walked into the room. She was holding a large candle. Just behind her, was someone else, a head taller and all in purple velvet. Her hood was drawn back, and as she approached, Nessa could see her face. Her chin and nose were bony and pronounced, even more angular than a Frake’s features. Her cheekbones were so high, they cast shadows over the lower part of her face. She had enormous wings that curved just like a Fairy’s but were the same muted-oily hues as Nessa’s own. Her hair hung past her waist. It was smooth and silky-looking, the white-silver color of the moonlight outside. Her eyelashes were the same eerie shade.

*What is she?* Nessa thought. *I’ve never seen anyone who looked like that before.*

The peculiar creature stopped a few paces away from Nessa and Posey. She raised her arms out in front of her. Her fingers were long, tapered, and ringed with jewels. She looked down at her prisoners with bright eyes that swirled yellow, purple and silver.

“Come forward,” she said.

Nessa shuffled her feet. She wasn’t sure if a spell had been cast on her or if that voice, alone, compelled her to move. There was something about the tone of it, so deep and clear, strange but familiar, the way the words carried around the room without shouting, or even raising the volume of her command, that felt like a pull.

“You’re the Sorceress,” Nessa said.

“And you are aFrake.” Her eyes dropped to Nessa’s clawed feet, then traveled back up her ripped, dirty tunic to her wiry hair. “So this is the full transformation in the flesh. Fascinating. I’ve been so curious.”

From the folds of her cloak, she drew out a thin, silver scepter, or maybe it was a wand, and reached out, tracing the curve of Nessa’s ear with its starry point. Nessa wanted to jerk her face away, but she remained still. She had a strong feeling that it was best not to provoke this creature. *Just stay calm*, she told herself.

“You are the first of your kind, ever, to cross into Excelsior,” the Sorceress said. She paused and blinked, peering down at Nessa through her white-silver lashes. “Tell me, Frake, how did you get here? You have no magic to speak of. Everyone knows that.”

“Don’t say a word,” Posey said, wiggling her body, moving forward, parallel to Nessa. “Don’t tell her anything.”

“And you, Fairy-child,” the Sorceress said, turning her swirly eyes to Posey. “You are far too young to perform the Fairy magic required to open the sky-door and cross between the worlds. How is it that *you* managed to arrive in Excelsior?” The Sorceress began to walk a slow, deliberate circle around the two of them. “And why are enemies, a Fairy and a Frake, here together? I have so many questions for you. It’s all so curious. Very curious, indeed.” She stopped behind them and was quiet for a moment. “You know what I’m wondering most of all?” She bent her head down and spoke softly, her lips practically touching their ears. “Does this curious behavior have anything to do with the missing, magical Saether stone?”

Nessa felt as if her heart had stopped. Her mouth went dry.

“It was you!” Posey said. “You’re the one who sent those awful Terps to steal our stone.”

Nessa snapped her neck around to look at Posey. She could see the angles of her fists clenched underneath the purple webbing.

“Yes,” the Sorceress said in her low voice, pushing between them, jostling Nessa, who struggled to keep her balance. Then, she turned, facing them. “The Terps acted on my command.”

“All of Emery is in danger because of you,” Posey said loudly. “Your monster Terps almost killed me.”

“Almost killed you?” The Sorceress repeated, crossing her arms over her chest. She tapped her wand against her shoulder. “My Terps were sent to help Emery. They had orders not to hurt anyone.”

“To help?” Posey’s cheeks reddened. “My father’s face was all slashed up by one of your brutal, hook-nosed beasts.” She jutted out her chin, her voice growing even stronger. “The last time I saw my mother, she could barely fly, her left wing didn’t even look attached to her body. Everywhere, Fairies were falling out of the sky in battle. Little Teira…” Posey sucked in her breath.

“This is bad news,” the Sorceress said, fingering her wand. “My Terps knew not to injure anyone. They must have been trying to protect themselves. That’s the only possible explanation.”

“Ha!” Posey said.

The Sorceress took a step closer to Posey and bent down, eye-level with her. “Listen to me, Fairy-child. If I find out that my helpers acted against my wishes and hurt Fairies, they will be punished. I promise you that.” She reached out and touched Posey’s chin with her long fingers. “I’m sorry that you had to go through something so awful, seeing your parents hurt like that. That isn’t what I wanted.” She lifted her hand up and stroked Posey’s yellow hair. “But you’re safe here now, that’s all over. You must be hungry. You should eat something.” She clapped her hands.

Nessa, who had been watching Posey and the Sorceress argue, standing there frozen and terrified, was suddenly distracted by a familiar smell. She looked up and saw the silver-cloaked attendant walking towards her, holding a shiny tray. Nessa sniffed. The air was thick with yeast, cinnamon and nutmeg. *It can’t be*…she thought. Her stomach growled loudly as she pushed herself up on tiptoes, trying to get a look at the top of the tray. The attendant caught Nessa’s eye, smiled, and lowered her arms. There was a row of chopped figs topped with minced walnuts and drizzled with nectar. *Fairy food*, Nessa thought, wrinkling her nose. But then, behind the lumps of fruit, she saw a row of square-shaped biscuits, golden-brown, and dripping in dark honey. “Kraycakes,” she whispered.

“Would you like one?” asked the attendant.

Nessa’s mouth watered She felt as if she could eat the air. The whole room smelled like her childhood. She craned her neck. The flakey crusts were marked with black currants in star-shaped patterns. *That reminds me of something…* she thought.

“Here, let me make things a little easier for you,” said the Sorceress said.

She lowered her wand to Nessa’s shoulder, and humming sound throbbed through it. It was the same kind of buzz that Nessa kept hearing. Then, the wand’s silver color changed to a bright, glowy purple. It seemed as if the whole thing was going to burst from all that color, sound, and light.

“What’s going on?” Posey said. “What are you doing to her?”

Frightened, Nessa recoiled just as jagged lines of silver and violet shot from the wand’s tip into the webbing around her shoulders. The threads crackled with light, and, in seconds, vaporized into puffs of purple smoke. Nessa’s arms flew free. Before she knew what she was doing, she had snatched up a kraycake.

Her mouth exploded with the sweet, doughy taste. *This is so good*, she thought, gulping the food down. She reached for another one. The sweet honey coated her tongue and she let the currants stick in her back teeth so she could keep chewing and tasting them. Just when her she wished for something to wash the food down, the attendant handed her a cup of warm, chamomile tea. Nessa slurped it up, feeling heat flow through her body, into her toes and fingertips.

“That’s better, isn’t it?” the Sorceress said. “There’s more where that came from, if you’re still hungry…”

Nessa looked at the Sorceress. *What is it about her voice?* she thought. It made Nessa’s skin prickle. She brushed the crumbs off her lips, letting her fingers linger to cover her face. Less famished now, she felt ashamed and greedy for getting so distracted by the food and her own hunger. She turned to Posey, relieved to see that she was licking her fingers. *She ate, too,* Nessa thought, checking the silver tray. It was empty. On it, she could see her reflection. She noticed how dirty her face was, how crazy and wild her hair looked.

“You poor children,” the Sorceress said. “All alone here, in a strange land. How terrifying this must all be for you.”

“I’ve been here before,” Posey said. “I’m not afraid.”

“I’m not afraid either,” Nessa said, wiping her soiled cheek.

“You’re both so brave. You must have been through a great deal for the two of you, a Frake and a Fairy, to come together like this.” The Sorceress nodded slowly. “And now your partnership has brought you here, to Excelsior. You’re searching for the missing stone now, together, as a team. Am I right?” She inhaled deeply, her nostrils flaring slightly. “That’s a lot of pressure,” she said. “Far too much for two children to bare, finding the Saether stone by yourselves. You must know what terrible danger Emery is in right now.”

“Because of *you*,” Posey said.

“Me? All I ever wanted was to protect Emery,” the Sorceress said. “That’s all I

want now.”

Posey snorted.

“You don’t believe me?” the Sorceress said, raising a silver eyebrow.

“No,” Posey said.

“Haven’t you noticed, my child? The Saether stone isn’t working like it used to. Emery isn’t thriving. It’s dying.”

“The stone works perfectly,” Posey said.

“I’m afraid it doesn’t,” the Sorceress said softly. “I’ve been watching your

land for some time now. Your Fairy queen, Arabel, is either unable or unwilling to

use the stone’s full power. I’m not sure which, but your land and its creatures are

suffering.”

“What are you talking about?” Nessa said.

“When I was a child, I spent my days playing in the area you now call the Wastelands. Back then, the stone spread its magic over all of Emery, and those lands were beautiful green meadows full of flowers, a flowing river. Many people made their home there. Now that’s all gone.”

“You used to live in Emery?” Nessa said.

“Yes, and I will again.” She fixed her swirly eyes on Nessa. “Look at you, not even magical anymore. The Frakes, a whole species, with only remnant powers. The Fairy population, the most magical in Emery, is now reduced by what, half? It’s shameful.”

“I like being a Frake,” Nessa said.

The Sorceress smiled thinly. “You don’t know any different.”

“You sound like my father.”

“Sometimes adults know best. This is one of those times. You’re just children and you cannot do this on your own.” The Sorceress kneeled down and looked up at them, resting her chin on her wand. “Let me help you. Tell me where the stone is. We can save Emery together. We will restore your homeland to its true destiny.”

Nessa watched the Sorceress’s huge irises switch colors again, from violet to silver to yellow. *The yellow is the same shade as my eyes,* Nessa thought. *As Frake eyes*. Suddenly, there was a loud, smacking sound. Nessa jumped and looked up. The door by the window was banging hard against the wall. A silver-cloaked figure with glittering, blue wings rushed into the room.

“Is that *a Fairy*?” Nessa said, turning to Posey.

But Posey’s face had gone completely white. Her eyes were still locked on the front of the room. She raised her arm and pointed. “That’s the one who stole out stone,” she said.

Nessa followed her gaze. Standing by the window was an enormous Terp, bigger than any other she’d seen. It had a striped purple head and a shiny, ebony beak. Slowly, it rambled into the room, slightly off balance, its talons flapping across the floor. Then, it came to a stop beside the cloaked figure who was bowing before the Sorceress. He’d put down his hood, and Nessa could see that his profile was sharp and his skin was rough. Tiny, white curls covered his head like a layer of foam. *He’s not a Fairy*, Nessa thought. *He’s whatever she is.*

“Why do you disturb me, Slorin?” The Sorceress’s voice was low and cold. “Surely, you can see I’m in a meeting?”

“I have urgent news, my lady.”

“What news?”

“The Terps have returned from Emery. They’ve brought new information, but the report seems unbelievable. It must be verified. That’s why I’ve brought Ezili.”

The Sorceress pressed her lips together. “Very well,” she sighed. “But we must move quickly. I’ll use the transarium.” She walked towards Nessa and Posey. “I have business I must attend to, young ones. We will resume our meeting momentarily.” She pulled her blue horn out of her cloak pocket.

“Please, no.” Nessa shook her head. “Not the spiders.”

“Have no fear,” the Sorceress said, holding the horn in front of her mouth. “They have instructions not to hurt you.”

“Just like your Terps?” Posey said.

The horn’s low call sent a chill up Nessa’s spine. She heard the creepy, scuttling sound behind her and held her breath. In seconds, they were surrounded by hairy legs, slits of sliver eyes and then, streams of purple thread. Nessa’s limbs felt heavy, tired, and itchy, and she let her body sag, surrendering. In minutes, they were back in the gray cell, lying on the floor, and watching the thick purple threads pull the trap door shut. The rectangular opening slided into a smaller square, but just as it shifted to the smallest sliver of light, the floor stopped. It made a muffled, whirring sound.

“I think it’s jammed,” Nessa said. “There’s a wad of thread stuck in there.”

“So?” Posey said. “We can’t squeeze through a crack like that. We’re tied up anyway. And *she* is right there. We’re spider food, just like I said before.”

“But we can watch her,” Nessa said, wriggling up to the line of light and pressing her face down against it. “Come on, look with me. Maybe we’ll learn something that will get us out of here.”

“I don’t see how we’re ever getting out of here,” Posey said, but she jerked herself up to Nessa’s side, grunting loudly.

“Shhh…Listen.”

Nessa could see the Sorceress standing before the wall and looking up at it. She was scanning the rows of cluttered shelves. Then, she leaped up into the air and hovered in front of a line of glass bottles. She reached out her arm and ran her long fingers across their necks so that they chimed together like an instrument. “Ah ha,” she said, pulling out a large, clear one and holding it up to the moonlight, examining its contents. “This will do.”

She flew down, landing next to the marble pillar. After securing the bottle’s lid, she shook the whole thing vigorously. “Let’s get moving,” she said, pulling the cork out with a pop. She poured a thick, black, metallic liquid into the shallow dish.

“Ezili,” Slorin called out, snapping his fingers.

The Terp turned its small, purple eyes to Slorin, shuffled its wings, and marched forward. It stopped by the pedestal which it towered over, and bowed its head slightly. Slorin flew up, over the beast, holding what looked like a soft, silver cap circled with purple wires. When he placed it on the Terp, the material stretched from its beak all the way to its neck. Slorin flew around, adjusting wires, unwinding some. He placed two frayed edges into the dish so they sunk below the dark liquid.

“Down, Ezili,” Slorin said gruffly.

The giant creature lowered its head, as close as it could get to the dark, glittery puddle as it could get without actually touching it. Slorin landed by the Terps and stroked its side. “Now, I need you to clear your thoughts,” he said. “Release your mind to the Sorceress.”

The room was silent.

“I can’t believe he’s petting that thing,” Nessa said.

“Why doesn’t it peck or eat him,” Posey said.

“Or fly away. ”

Nessa watched Slorin’s clawed hand moving almost rythmically across the Terp’s dark feathers.

“He’s ready, Sorceress” Slorin said.

The Sorceress stepped forward. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a silver compact. After clicking it open with her thumb, she sprinkled pastel colored powders into the black liquid as if she was salting soup. Bubbles began percolating up, rising up to the surface, and then gliding around. Growing larger, they started to collide with each other and pop, releasing a purple vapor and filling the air with a thin, foul smell.

“Ugh,” Posey said. “I’m going to be sick.”

“It smells just like the Sludge,” Nessa said.

The scent was awful, like rotten meat or dead animals, but the Sorceress was bent low over the dish with colored plumes of air floating up around her. *Why doesn’t it bother her*, Nessa wondered, watching her lean even closer. She pointed her wand over the black liquid, just where the two purple wires entered into it. Then, the Sorceress began to chant, long melodic phrases that rose and fell in pitch and volume. Nessa gave Posey a confused look and then listened as hard as she could, but the words were in a language that she didn’t know or understand.

Nessa saw the Sorceress’s long wand start to buzz and glow, just as it had before. Flecks of purple light were surging through it, up to the tip, and finally bursting out in shards of brightness. The entire dish pulsed with light. The liquid inside grew more metallic, shinier, until it had lost the darkness completely, turned silver, and lay so still it seemed hard.

“That looks like a mirror,” Nessa said.

“Do you see that?” Posey said. “In the middle?”

An orange glow had appeared that was quickly sharpening into an image of flames.

“Look, another one, over there!” Nessa said.

Pictures of clusters of fire began springing up all over the surface. Above those, bands of color started to form, almost like rainbows. But then they began to divide and separate into smaller sections, focusing into curved wings.

“It’s Fairies!” Posey said.

The pictures were clear now. Everywhere, there were images of Fairies getting whipped through the air, thrown around by what looked like strong winds. Some were clinging to tree. Nessa could see their terrified faces. The branches they were holding on to were snapping, falling to the ground. Bright fairy homes crumpled and crashed, too, falling in tatters, into the flames that were spreading everywhere.

“It’s Starbirch!” Posey screamed. “It’s on fire. My mom can’t even fly. How is she going to get out of there?”

“Someone will help her…” Nessa said.

Suddenly, the whole dish was full of raging fire. A ring of trees appeared around most of the perimeter, a fringe of mountains on top.

“That’s the meadow!” Posey said. “It’s buring.”

“Is that Mount Tavia?” Nessa said.

She was looking at a stream of lava sliding down from the highest peak. The whole dish filled with images of mountains. Billowing ash was everywhere and then, all Nessa could see was smoke. Then, there were trees again, larger and thicker than the ones they’d seen before. Many were twisted and odd angles, piled on top of each other in layers. Nessa’s chest tighetened. “Bernal Forest,” she said.

“It doesn’t look like a forest,” Posey said.

The dish showed the series of Silver Lakes had blended together into a massive body of water, churning and muddy. Kezar River had grown so wide, Nessa couldn’t see its banks. The water was rolling endlessly in all directions, almost like an ocean. Where the Great Ridge was, there wasn’t a cliff anymore but a wall of water.

“Kezar!” Nessa whispered. “It’s flooding.”

She jammed her face hard against the floor and stared in horror. Frakes were flying over the water, bundles strapped to their backs. Some carried howling children in their arms while others were frantically grabbing possessions from soggy piles of sticks that used to be their homes.

“Do you see Maef?” Nessa said. “Do you see him anywhere?”

“It’s hard to get a look at anyone,” Posey said.

Nessa was trying as hard as she could to see faces. But, suddenly, all of the images started to wave and jiggle. “What is that?” Nessa said. “Did you see that?”

Everywhere she looked, nothing would hold steady. She scanned where the stumps of houses were, then back up to the wall of water and the flying Frakes, but everything was impossible to see, elongated and warped. It was like looking at Kezar through a distorted mirror.

“No!” the Sorceress cried out. “It can’t be.”

Nessa squinted at the Sorceress. She was gripping the sides of the dish, and her knuckles were white.

“This is impossible!” the Sorceress said.

“The walls are weakening. It is as Ezili told me.” Slorin removed the hood from the Terp, and its head sagged. “Thank you Ezili,” he said.

The Sorceress waved her hand across the dish, and it frosted over to silver. She lifted her head up and took a deep breath. Her skin glistened with perspiration as she stood there, breathing. “So I am right about the stone being in Excelsior,” she said. “But for the walls to be coming down like this, it’s been lost here for much longer than I thought.” She closed her eyes. “A full day.”

“We planned for minutes,” said Slorin.

“This is my worst nightmare,” the Sorceress sinking to the ground. “After four cruel years of imprisonment, when Emery is finally mine to rule, all of it, destroyed.”

“We’re too late,” Posey said, her voice high and frightened.

“No! We can’t give up now,” Nessa said. “We need to find a way out of here.”

Her eyes traveled frantically all over the room below, tracing the edges of the large window and then the hidden door. *Is there another door somewhere?* She watched Slorin walk across the room, over to the Sorceress.

“There is more I must tell you,” he said.

She looked up. “Speak!”

“Fairies were seen here, many of them, flying under the bridge and headed East. Rodantha and Arabel were spotted.”

“My mother!” said Posey, thumping her feet on the ground, the only part of her body she could move.

“Shhh…” Nessa said. “We need to listen.”

“They know that the stone is here,” the Sorceress said. “Otherwise, they would never leave Emery.”

“There are reports that Frakes are here as well,” Slorin said.

“Nothing is going according to plan! “ the Sorceress shouted. “We will be imprisoned here forever with the death of Emery tormenting us until the end of time. How are Frakes even getting here?” She looked up at the trap door. “Those two, they know something. They must!” She stood up, her face set hard, and began to pace around in circles. Then, she headed for the window and pressed her forehead against it. She was still. “Maybe we can turn this around,” she said.

“How?”

“Don’t you see?” She turned around. “Everything is coming to us. The battle can be fought *here*.”

“In a land the Fairies don’t know…” Slorin said, walking towards her.

“Close to our source of power.” She pressed her fingers together and tapped them against her lips. “No one knows our home is in this factory or what we’ve hidden here. If Frakes get in the way, there’s nothing I can do about that.”

“It’s a great advantage to us.” Slorin smiled.

“The only thing working against us is time. We cannot attack until we’ve secured the stone. But it’s here. It’s close.” She looked up at the trap door again. “It’s just information we need. Where the stone is and how to release its magic. I have a feeling those answers are very close as well.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

“It’s time to deal with the prisoners more…efficiently.” She smiled. “If all goes well, the stone, Starbirch, and all of Emery will be mine before the moon sets. Bring the Fairy and the Frake to me. Now!”