The Myth of Blackbirds

by MaCall (misterpointy)

Summary

“No sooner met but they looked,
No sooner looked but they loved.”
—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

In a world that doesn’t revolve around vampires living happily ever after, Paul Lahote imprints on the Socially Awkward Witch of the Pacific Northwest and kickstarts a supernatural turf war in the process.

Notes

(1) I originally came up with the idea for this story before I read *Breaking Dawn* (the outline that sixteen-year-old me wrote in a Mead composition book in 2007 was hilariously bad). If you’re a purist, this fic is not for you. Paul doesn’t imprint on Rachel, Leah isn’t treated like garbage, Quil doesn’t imprint on Claire, more girls are werewolves, phasing doesn’t make shapeshifters immortal teenagers, queer people exist, Nessie doesn’t exist…you get the gist.

(2) Stephenie Meyer has a weird obsession with first love and with teenagers in general. Most of her characters don’t really get to grow up, and them being teenagers forever is
framed by the narrative as heaven on earth. (I think it would actually be hell on earth, but YMMV.) I wanted to write a postmortem *Twilight* fic where the world doesn’t revolve around Bella and things are less racist and misogynistic, and this is the result: an imprinting story that explores the implications of imprinting in a setting that isn’t wall-to-wall teen drama, with a side of supernatural politics and worldbuilding.

(3) If you’re using Chrome or Firefox, you should be able to read the annotations by hovering over the bracketed numbers. Otherwise, endnotes are at the bottom of each chapter.

(4) Story and chapter titles are scrumped from the poem “The Myth of Blackbirds” (1994) by Joy Harjo.

(5) Kudos and comments are always appreciated.
Paul Lahote exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils and stands barefoot in the dirt on the floor of the forest with his heels digging into the damp earth. It smells unfamiliar even to his human nose, underneath the froth of detritus and prey. Poulsbo isn’t their land. It’s not for him or the pack to protect, but this problem is bigger than boundary lines. Hell, the problem is big enough for them to team up with the bear shapeshifters from the Suquamish tribe. There’s some residual tension since the Suquamish massacred the Chimakum in 1847 and hunted that branch of the Quileute tribe almost to extinction, but for now they’re focused on the real enemy here: the scourge of undead white people.

Rachel is the one who brought the problem to their attention—she lives in Seattle and works as a computer engineer for a nonprofit organization with an initiative to bring the internet to rural Africa without being colonizing fuckwads in the process. Ashley, her girlfriend and imprint, is a trans lesbian whose six-year-old daughter Elodie was attacked by a vampire in the city. Apparently they’ve been eating the homeless, especially homeless teenagers. Until one of the bloodsuckers had a craving for a first grader. Elodie only got away unscathed because Rachel had phased and torn the vamp to shreds. If the leech hadn’t broken into their apartment, the smackdown between a sparkly vampire fuckboy and a giant werewolf girl would’ve gone viral a month ago.

Most bloodsuckers thrive in cities instead of nesting in small kitschy towns like Poulsbo or Forks, where they stick out like a handful of sore thumbs. Embry imprinted on a quiet girl named Angela who told him that everyone in Forks thought the Cullens were snobs because they never ate at restaurants in town and they bought their lunches at school, but they always threw everything on their lunch trays away. When she phased and he retroactively overheard that conversation in the egregore of their shared minds, Paul wanted to flip a table over how wasteful that was. There were people going hungry on the rez and those leeches threw away enough food to feed a whole family every day like it was nothing.

Rachel knows Winona, one of the bear shapeshifters, from the Cougar Pride Club at WSU. Most bears are solitary creatures, so the shapeshifters of the Suquamish tribe don’t have a pack or any kind of hierarchical structure. Winona had to wrangle the others into declaring a truce of sorts with the Quileutes before they set up the hunt at a park in Poulsbo.

Paul has no idea how they’re going to lure the leeches out of the city and into the forest, but he’s too primed for a fight to give a fuck. “What the hell are we waiting for?” he growls, his voice snarling deep in his bare chest and clawing its way out of his mouth.
“Our secret weapon,” Rachel informs him as she kicks off her own shoes, a pair of sleek black pumps. Most shapeshifters aren’t shy about being naked, and they’ve been a pack for over ten years—they’ve seen it all before. Beatrice, one of the other female wolves, had enough common sense to bring a laundry basket where Rachel drops her Werewolves Not Swearwolves tank top and skinny jeans before she reaches behind her back to unhook her bra.

Paul is unbuttoning his jeans when he hears a strange tread coming their way. There’s a strange hollow noise punctuating every step, the sound diluted by the dirt and detritus. When he inhales, the smell of black licorice invades his nostrils and he can taste a tang of sweetness on his tongue. It’s mouthwateringly subtle and tinted with a sharp edge of petrichor—a volatile scent that hangs in the fresh air in the aftermath of a downpour. Paul turns and looks over his shoulder at the girl who hobbles in among the wolves, a flush of red suffusing her pale cheeks and trickling down her neck at the sight of fifteen naked werewolves and twenty-three naked werebears.

Whoever she is, she’s nothing special to look at: she’s dressed all in black and she has frizzy brown hair twisted up into a bun held in place by a plastic clip. Stray tendrils slither around her face and unfurl at the nape of her neck. Tension is rooted in the hunch of her shoulders, and he can smell the sour residue of fear clinging to her like treacle gone bad—the telltale scent of anxiety. Music blares out of her earbuds in a soft cacophony, the cord attached to a device in the pocket of her faux vintage A-line dress. Something in her plump face makes him think of prey: the meek jut of her chin, the cute button of her nose under the chunky plastic frames of her glasses, the pink curve of her bottom lip that makes him think of biting.

Paul smirks as she makes a point of challenging a pile of dead leaves to a staring contest. “Our secret weapon is a fat white girl?” he asks.

“I hate the woods,” the aforementioned fat white girl mutters as she tucks her cane in the crook of her elbow. “I’m too crippled for this.”

Rachel waves to her witch friend with a wiggle of her fingers and smiles as she fiddles with the stud in her left earlobe shaped like a tarnished crescent moon. “Hey, Merrick,” she says. “Thanks for making these.”

Merrick smiles back, shyly. Rachel commissioned magic countercharms from her so the pack could keep phasing and grow their hair out—and because her cousin Judy wanted an undercut, but she was worried that her wolf would be half-bald if she shaved part of her head. “You’re welcome,” she mumbles.

Paul looks down at his countercharm: a pendant he wears on a thin leather cord around his neck. It does smell like geosmin with a wisp of ozone, an intoxicating scent of sweetness and rain. Merrick has ten piercings that he can see: an industrial earring shaped like an iridescent arrow shot through the shell of her left ear, two silver arrow-shaped studs in the cartilage of her right ear, and three sterling roses in each of her earlobes. It makes him wonder idly what kind of magic she worked into her jewelry, if any. When her sweater flops to expose the curve of her shoulder, he catches a glimpse of words tattooed on the pale flesh underneath the wide strap of her dress. “You’re the Wicked Witch of the Pacific Northwest,” Jacob deduces and smiles at her in a canid way that shows his teeth.

Merrick shrugs with one shoulder, like a crow. “Yup,” she says and softly pops the p sound as she makes a circle with her thumbs and index fingers. There’s no garish flash of light, no special effects—but the air pulses with a vibrant tremor of power and that sharp edge of petrichor in her scent gets thicker as she works her magic. “Barrier’s up,” she murmurs and breaks the circle of her fingers. “All of the vampires that have been killing humans in Seattle are trapped in these woods.
now. Barrier won’t break until they’re dead. Two species of supernatural creatures enter. One species leaves,” she adjusts her grip on her cane and smiles more to herself than at them. “Welcome to shapeshifter thunderdome.”[5]

Leah snorts. “You here to run with the wolves, Dr. Dealgood?” she asks. Being with Jacob as his imprint and as the alpha female in the pack has taken some of the bitterness out of her, but nothing can dull the sting of her snark.

Merrick shakes her head slowly and tugs anxiously on her sweater to stop it from drooping over her shoulder again. “I can’t run,” she retorts, “but give me a broomstick, and I’ll fly.”

I guess she’s not so meek after all, Paul thinks, she’s actually kind of cute.

Merrick tilts her head crowishly and catches him sizing her up. Paul smirks until he looks into her eyes, and everything is eclipsed by her—his loyalty to his pack, how much he loves his grandmother, the rage he’s been keeping in the cage of his ribs since his parents got divorced, his pride in being the most vicious wolf, how much he hates the leeches, the party size bag of chips on his shoulder, even his name. Merrick looks away, but it’s too late; it’s not like he can unsee her. Those huge gray eyes of hers are fucking gorgeous, and the way that she tugs her bottom lip in between her teeth and gnaws anxiously makes him wish his jeans were still on because he’s getting hard just from looking at her.

“You imprinted,” Sam murrums, his voice pitched too low for anyone but another wolf to hear. Tribal legends say that a pair of alpha wolves were transformed into the first Quileutes by Qati, a creator and changer god with too many names.[6] Which is why their senses are superior even in human form: wolf hearing is sixteen times more sensitive than human hearing.[7]

“You imprinted.” Sam murmurs, his voice pitched too low for anyone but another wolf to hear. Tribal legends say that a pair of alpha wolves were transformed into the first Quileutes by Qati, a creator and changer god with too many names.[6] Which is why their senses are superior even in human form: wolf hearing is sixteen times more sensitive than human hearing.[7]

“Congratulations.”

Paul clenches his jaw and fervently claws his fingers into his palms to keep his hands from shaking, his skin crawling with the need to change. Fuck, he thinks and takes an involuntary step towards his imprint before he grits his teeth and digs his bare heels into the dirt. Hell, he should’ve seen this coming a mile away. From the moment she hobbled into the woods and he caught her scent, he was more aware of her than he should’ve been. Like his wolf had instinctually recognized her as his mate before the human part of him wised up.

Jared snorts. “You imprinted on a hóquat,” he points out at the same low pitch. “Your grandmother is gonna kill you.”[8]

Paul unclenches the snarl of his fingers and exhales in a huff, the noise taut in the back of his throat. If he’d still been a hotheaded teenager he would’ve phased by now, but he’s been a wolf for almost thirteen years and he’s gotten his temper more or less under control. Jane Lahote[9] is still pissed that his father dropped out of tribal school to get a job in Tacoma, married a woman who wasn’t Quileute, got divorced a decade later and came crawling back to the reservation with his half-Purépecha Mexican son. After he phased, he was over the moon because he was never Quileute enough before he became a shapeshifter. Paul imprinting on a white girl isn’t something his grandmother—one of the twin daughters of Ephraim Black and former chair of the tribal council—is ever going to approve of.

Merrick curls the hand she isn’t using to hold onto the handle of her cane into a fist and unfurls her fingers to conjure up a fuzzy papasan chair in the patch of shade underneath a tall pine tree. There’s nothing overtly magical about it, except that suddenly a chair exists where a chair hadn’t been in existence before. Uncanny.

Paul watches her flop unceremoniously into her papasan chair and growsl as another scent invades
his nostrils: the brittle, repugnant anathema of the parasitic venom that makes vampires suck.

Welcome to shapeshifter thunderdome, he thinks, and phases.

Merrick Corrigan gnaws on the inside of her cheek and shuts her eyes as she tries to make sense of the multitudinous energies fulminating in the confines of her barrier. There are a few dozen shapeshifters and over fifty vampires to sift through, and she’s not going to walk away from this shit without a massive metaphysical migraine. Something about using magic to invade other people’s minds has always left a bad taste in her mouth, and telepathy has never come naturally to her because of that.

There’s also the weird magic flare binding her to one of the werewolves: the silver one with eyes like molten gold. Merrick thinks it’s a curse, until she tweaks the spell on her glasses to get a better look and sees the same odd thaumaturgical energy touching every shapeshifter in the pack. Some of the bonds are reciprocal: the alpha pair, a brown wolf and a brindled she-wolf, a dark brown wolf and a dark auburn wolf, an ash brown wolf and a black and brown she-wolf, a gray and black wolf and a gray and tawny she-wolf, an orange she-wolf and a blonde she-wolf. Seamless. Some are strangely one-sided, since the other half of the equation is elsewhere.

Merrick bites down on the inside of her cheek and forces herself to focus on the vamps, because they’re the ones who have the information she needs. Whatever this weird bond is, she thinks, I can’t dwell on it or I’m not going to get what I came for.

Flipping through centuries of memories simultaneously is not an exact science. Merrick can feel the blood pulsing in her brain, the power thrumming in her veins making this exercise in extrasensory perception easier on her than it would be for anyone else. There are perks of being the most powerful witch in the Pacific Northwest, possibly even the most powerful witch in North America. Blowback is going to hurt like hell, but she’s not going to incapacitate herself for longer than a day or two. Transferring centuries of knowledge into her archive of grimoires is worth the metaphysical hangover.

Some of the vamps keep smacking into the barrier and bolstering her power with blares of kinetic energy. Those who die are fueling her with even more power, because the magic that keeps vampires alive is a curse so elaborate and so potent that ending an immortal life is like causing the collapse of a supernova. If a witch isn’t around to recycle it, all of that energy goes to waste.

Witch, one of the vamps hisses telepathically before she hurls the viscous bite of his thoughts out of her mind.

Merrick smiles and breaks the circle of protection she cast around her chair. When the vampire runs at her, she holds up one hand to stop him and the volatile boom of power shakes birds out of their deciduous trees. Merrick forces the vampire to his knees in front of her so they’re eye to eye and she smiles wider despite being too self-conscious to show her teeth, curling her fingers like claws to hold him still. When she touches his forehead with the index finger of her other hand, every vampire left alive in the woods screams and drops to their knees with their heads in their hands. Merrick flicks his forehead and he shatters into glittering shards that catch fire and burn out before they touch the ground. Warmth oozes through her until a gooey, perfect ecstatic feeling calms the storm of nausea brewing in her stomach. Nothing is going to stop her migraine from hitting her like a ballistic missile later, but she’s not going to black out again with so much power in her system.

“You just shattered that vamp with one finger,” one of the werewolves says, “like he was made of glass.”
Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered. *Seth*, her mind supplies as she makes a valiant effort not to stare at his junk. *I made his countercharm out of a watch that belonged to his dead father. Leah, the alpha female, is his older sister. Which she only knows because their father Harry had been wearing that watch the night his daughter phased in front of him, and he had a heart attack. Sometimes psychometry can be a bitch. “Technically I shattered that vamp with magic,”* she mumbles, “using my hands to focus my power. I could’ve done the same thing with my toes, but that would’ve been awkward.”

Seth Clearwater is tall and muscular with brown skin, a strong nose, dark eyes, a thick neck, and tangles of long black hair oscillating over his broad shoulders. There’s a tattoo on his bicep, a circular tribal marking with two wolves howling at the moon inside a ring of black ink. When he smiles at her, the silver wolf snarls at him in warning. “Could you obliterate the rest of them like that?” he asks. “We usually set them on fire, but it takes a while for their bodies to burn.”

“Yup,” Merrick says and pops the *p* sound, “but I need to talk to your alpha. These vampires never should have been able to nest in the city like they did. Someone must have been keeping the Volturi in the dark about them. Which,” she huffs the *ch* sound and flicks her fingers to disintegrate the dead cold ones, “means this wasn’t a permanent solution to our bloodsucker problem.”

Jacob phases back and grabs his jeans out of the laundry basket. Seth catches the pair of boxers his alpha throws at his face and puts them back on. Jacob is six-foot-seven and built in a way that almost makes him seem unreal, like he belongs on the cover of a paranormal romance novel. “What makes you think it’s your problem?” he wants to know.

Merrick sighs. “If you want to unlock my tragic backstory,” she says, “you’re gonna have to wait until we’re out of the woods.”

Leah watches the remnants of the vampires they hunted down explode into fragments that sparkle before they fizzle out, the corners of her mouth unfurling into a canid grin. *Your imprint’s a boss ass bitch,* she thinks.[10] Paul would be pissed if anyone else said that, but Leah calling her a bitch can only be taken as a compliment.

*Yeah,* Embry chimes in, *the way she took out that leech was awesome.*

Paul can’t help feeling smug. Merrick incapacitated dozens of vampires from the comfort of a chair she pulled out of thin air. Paul can see the energy fluctuating around her, frequencies of photons invisible to the human eye. *No,* he thinks, *awesome doesn’t even begin to describe my imprint. She’s fucking magic.*

*She smells good,* Quil thinks, *like black licorice, but sweeter.*

Paul growls at him. *She’s mine,* he snaps. *She’s not for you to scent, you little shit.*

*It’s anise,* Rachel interjects, *not licorice. Merrick smells like anise. It’s pretty much catnip for dogs. Ash uses the seeds when she bakes me bread.*

Paul inhales deeply through his nose and exhales slowly. *Yeah,* he thinks. *She also smells like…* *Fear,* Sam thinks. *She reeks of anxiety.*

*She walked into a dark forest with a pack of giant werewolves and a sleuth of werebears,* Angela murmurs. *She can’t run. Wouldn’t you be afraid, if you were in her shoes?*
She’s my imprint, Paul growls as he digs his claws into the dirt under his paws. She has nothing to be afraid of—

She doesn’t know imprinting is a thing, Beatrice tells him. Winona told Rachel the bears don’t imprint, and neither do the Puyallup whales or the Skagit coyotes or the Palus cougars. It’s specific to Quileute shapeshifters, as far as the elders know.

Your imprint’s also an unknown quantity, Jared thinks. She’s not Quileute, or a werewolf, or a human with the werewolf gene.

Kim nods her brindled head. Our pack is kind of incestuous, she points out mildly, and Paul has already dated all of the girls from the rez who aren’t his cousins and a bunch of girls from Makah. I’m not surprised he imprinted over a hundred miles from La Push.

There are seventeen werewolves in the pack: Jacob, Rachel, Leah, Seth, Quil, Embry, Angela, Jared, Kim, Paul, Sam, Brady, Collin, Josie, Beatrice, Judy, and Dess. Josie is Jared’s younger sister. Embry is Sam’s half-brother. Jacob and Leah are fourth cousins. Their family trees are twisted in a way they don’t talk about to avoid the squick.

Sam imprinted on Emily, whose Quileute mother got married and moved from La Push to the Neah Bay with her Makah husband before their daughter was born. Jacob and Leah imprinted on each other, and they almost tore the pack apart trying to fight it before they got over themselves and fell ass over elbows in love with each other. Embry, Rachel, and Seth all imprinted on girls from Forks who either had a Quileute grandparent or great-grandparent. Jared imprinted on Kim, who didn’t phase until about a year after he did. Quil and Collin imprinted on each other; Josie and Brady imprinted on each other; Dess and Judy imprinted on each other. Angela’s great-grandmother was Quileute and neither of her brothers are werewolves, but that didn’t stop Beatrice from imprinting on one of them.

Maybe one of her ancestors was Quileute, Josie thinks. Kim’s dad is white and that didn’t stop her from phasing. Ang is more Mexicoamericanos than anything else, but that didn’t stop her either.

Embry guffaws, an odd sound for a wolf to make. Merrick can be the pack’s token paleface, he deadpans.

Leah snorts. She’s not just a paleface, she thinks. She’s a witch.

Jared watches Merrick extract her phone from the pocket of her dress and click through her music library. Maybe that’s why Paul imprinted on her, he thinks, we still don’t know why we imprint, but it was rare until this generation of werewolves. Ephraim Black and Taha Aki were the only shapeshifters with an imprint in the history of the tribe that we know of.

Sam’s theory is that it’s a biological imperative to make the next generation of werewolves stronger, Dess thinks, more capable of destroying vamps. I’ve never seen anyone or anything more capable of destroying vamps than her.

[1] A Guide to the Indian Tribes of the Pacific Northwest: Revised Edition (1992), p. 22–23, 28. According to tribal legends, the Chimakum were separated from the rest of the Quileutes by a flood a few thousand years before America was a thing and they eventually migrated to the other side of the Olympic peninsula. There were a number of disputes between the Suquamish, the Chimakum, and the Klallam that led to a war of extinction that began in 1847. Some people still identify as Chimakum, but they don’t have tribal lands because the Klallam claimed them and they’re not federally recognized outside of the Skokomish and S’Klallam peoples that absorbed them.
[2] Ashley Dowling is a minor character who appeared in the unpublished draft of *Midnight Sun*. I’m writing her as a trans lesbian in this story, because I can.

[3] *Twilight* (2005), p. 11. “They were sitting in the corner of the cafeteria, as far away from where I sat as possible in the long room. There were five of them. They weren’t talking, and they weren’t eating, though they each had a tray of untouched food in front of them…[Alice] rose with her tray—unopened soda, unbitten apple—and walked away with a quick, graceful lope that belonged on a runway. I watched, amazed at her lithe dancer’s step, till she dumped her tray and glided through the back door, faster than I would have thought possible.”


[6] Qati (otherwise known as Qwati, Q’wati, Q’waeti, Kwati, K’wati, K’wa’iti, Kweheti, Kwatee, Dokibatt, Dukwibal, etc.) is a creator god that appears in the legends of the Quileute, Skagit, Makah, Salish, and Quinault tribes. I found variations on the creation myth of the Quileutes (e.g. the first Quileute was a wolf transformed into a man, or the first Quileutes were originally a whole pack of wolves) but I made the first Quileutes an alpha pair because that is how wolves actually work in the wild: a typical pack hierarchy includes the alpha male and alpha female, the beta, the omega, the pups, and those in between omega and beta.

[7] Contrariwise, bear hearing is only twice as sensitive as human hearing.

[8] *Hótsquat* (ho-SKWAT) is Quileute for “white people.” *Hóquat* is singular.

[9] Jane Black is canonically the younger sister of William Black Sr., Jacob’s grandfather. Mary Black is her twin sister. Paul doesn’t imprint on Rachel in this fic, so making them second cousins by writing Jane as his grandmother isn’t creepy. There’s also a narrative reason Paul is a great-grandson of Ephraim in this story. Wait for it.


[11] This is actually a nod to the Washington State Cougars of WSU.

[12] Apparently the Quileute reservation welcome sign reads “Population: 357 people and 17 werewolves” IRL. Which gave me the perfect excuse to bring in a bunch of she-wolf characters.

[13] Angela as she appears in the *Twilight* movie pentalogy is portrayed by Christian Serratos, who’s Mexican-American.
The Myth of Ancient Love

She talks with wolves, without knowing what sort of beasts they are:

Where have you been all my life? they ask.
Where have I been all my life? she replies.

Margaret Atwood, “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women”

The Myth of Blackbirds
Chapter 2
The Myth of Ancient Love

After the bodies of the bloodsucking fiends are obliterated, Jacob orders most of the pack to run home. It’s cheaper than driving all the way from La Push to Poulsbo. Jacob and Leah drove his shiny red 1986 VW Rabbit, and he loads the empty laundry basket in the trunk before he turns and gives Merrick his most withering Alpha Male Stare. Paul growls low in his throat at the implicit threat to his imprint. Jacob ignores him. “So,” he says, “how do you know about the Volturi? I was under the impression their existence was a deep, dark secret.”

Merrick tilts her head up and looks him in the eyes without even flinching. There’s no chair sitting in the patch of shade underneath the evergreen tree anymore. Uncanny. “Who do you think made the first vampire?” she asks and answers the rhetorical question with another question as she hobbles over to where she parked her white 2005 Honda CR-V. “It was a witch in ancient Mesopotamia,” she clarifies before she clicks the button on her key fob to open the door, “and witches keep track of their accursed.”

Leah frowns and slants her gaze to Jacob in a nonverbal What the fuck? “So,” she says, “you’re saying the leeches are your fault?”

“I wasn’t alive at the dawn of time,” Merrick says, “but grimoires are a magical repository of memory. When a witch dies, their memories are metaphysically transferred into a book. I’ve psychometrically seen the casting of the curse that created the first vampire. Only she called the accursed Lilith, since the word ‘vampire’ wasn’t a thing etymologically until the eighteenth century. Lilitu and Lilin spirits from the Babylonian Talmud and Lilu spirits from Akkadian and Sumerian demonology cuneiform texts were vampires.”

Leah smirks at Paul, who’s staring at his imprint with his mouth ajar. “She’s too smart for you,” she tells him in a voice pitched too low for Merrick to hear, “and you called her fat.”

Paul clenches his hands into fists in a futile attempt to hide the shaking. “Sorry,” he mutters.

Leah snorts as Merrick puts her messenger bag in the passenger seat of her CR-V. “She’s totally oblivious to you,” she says. “She’s gonna make you work for it.”

Merrick extracts one of her earbuds and glances at him over her shoulder. Paul has a chest so defined that she can see all his taut muscles cutting through the thin fabric of his worn black t-shirt, high cheekbones, a sharp aquiline nose, dark stubble on his chin and his jaw that suffuses around his mouth, wild black hair and black eyes that seem fixed on her. Those eyes are a cosmic sort of black, and he’s looking at her in a way that makes her breath stutter and catch in the back of her throat. It’s almost predatory, but not quite. Somehow she doubts that he wants to hunt her down
and hurt her. When he holds her gaze, the magic binding him to her gleams in her periphery where her glasses can’t block the neon blare of that strange energy out.

*It’s him,* she thinks, *he’s the silver wolf and he’s making me feel all warm and fuzzy—like I can trust him. I’m not a warm and fuzzy person, and I sure as shit don’t trust men that I just met. What the hell is he doing to me?*

“For what?” Merrick asks him curiously, since all she heard was his apology. Maybe he isn’t doing this weird binding thing to her on purpose, and he’s apologizing because of that.

Paul swallows hard and unclenches his jaw. It’s a good thing she reeks of anxiety, or he’d be struggling to stop himself from burying his face in the crook of her neck and fervently burning her scent into his brain. “I called you fat,” he says.

“I am fat,” Merrick points out matter-of-factly as she shifts her weight onto her cane and turns on her heels to look at him, “you didn’t say anything that isn’t true.”

Paul folds his arms tight across his chest to make his biceps flex and bulge. Merrick tugs her bottom lip between her teeth and chews awkwardly, making soft wet noises that he wishes he couldn’t hear because he’s getting hard just from looking at her again. Paul unfolds his arms to tuck a slithering tendril of her hair behind one of her ears on the slim chance that touching her might calm him down, but he’s seen the first stages of imprinting through the eyes of his pack brothers and sisters. If those secondhand memories are anything to go by, he’s not going to stop craving her until he marks her and his scent is all over her. Just the soft whisper of his fingertips on the side of her neck is making her more anxious than she already was and the frenzied thunder of her heart beating might as well be the only sound in the world, because it’s all he can hear.

“You’re beautiful,” he says, his deep voice raw with how much he means it.

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered. When he strokes the calloused pad of his thumb over the soft curve of her ear, a fulminating jolt of heat shoots down her spine and she forgets how to breathe for a fraction of a second. *It feels like I’m about to have a panic attack,* she thinks, *but in a good way. What fresh hell is this?* “I can be both beautiful and fat,” she informs him. “‘I am large, I contain multitudes.’”[15]

Paul reluctantly stops touching her face because her phone buzzes in the pocket of her skirt and cuts the sexual tension like a hot knife through a stick of butter.

“Ugh,” Leah groans too low for Merrick to hear, “gag me with a spoon.”

Paul turns and glares at the alpha female while his imprint swipes her index finger over the screen of her phone to answer the call. There’s a woman on the other end of the line, her voice high and shrill like the call of a twittering bird. “Shut up,” he growls, “don’t you dare ruin this for me.”

“Thanks so much, Cheryl,” Merrick says before she hangs up and turns back to the werewolves. “Rachel said the hunt was your idea,” she says. “You planned all of

Jacob frowns at her as comprehension dawns. Merrick had ordered her pizza from the market down the lane before she drove to the park and Paul imprinted on her. Otherwise he would’ve overheard her make the call. “Rachel said the hunt was your idea,” he says. “You planned all of
“Yup,” Merrick says and pops the p sound as she gets in her CR-V and shuts the door behind her with a thunk, “and if you want to know why, you’re gonna have to follow me home.”

Merrick lives in a mansion. Paul can’t think of any other word to describe the place. It’s a gabled house with old and new wood shingles obvoluted like scales on the walls, fiberglass asphalt shingles on the roof, and fresh white paint on the exterior trim. There’s a pergola blooming with twines of wisteria that creates a passageway behind the front gate and a two-story shed moonlighting as a two-car garage. Cherry, pear and plum blossoms spill pink and white petals in fragile piles on the grass and fill the windless air with a mingling of floral stink. Three self-contained fountains trickle into glazed pots in the front yard, and Paul can hear two more babbling out of sight. Clematis vines creep along the chain link fence and sprout dark purple flowers. Those shingles on the roof would’ve cost about ten grand easy to install, he thinks. Fuck, her shed is bigger than my house. There’s no way in hell she lives here alone.

It makes his hackles rise to think of his imprint shacking up with some rich guy in this mansion. There’s no ring on her finger, but that doesn’t mean she’s his for the taking. Paul doesn’t know Merrick yet, but he has a hunch that picking a fight with her rich boyfriend and kicking his hypothetical ass in a show of male dominance isn’t going to impress her. Which is unfortunate, since asskicking is kind of his thing. Paul doesn’t have too many other marketable skills, and that one is only useful because he occasionally turns into a giant wolf to hunt vampires.

Merrick parks her CR-V in the garage and poofs the boxes of pizza in the backseat onto the dining room table before she gets out of the car and hobbles out of the shed.

“Where’s the pizza?” Leah wants to know. Jacob shoots her a look. Leah rolls her eyes at him. “What?” she asks. “If she’s gonna manipulate us with cryptic bullshit, we should at least get dinner out of the deal.”

Merrick snorts and keys in the code to unlock the front door. “I conjured the pizza inside,” she explains, “conjuration: the mystical art of being too lazy to carry things when you can use magic instead.”

Paul lingers in the doorway and inhales deeply through his nose. There’s a pair of more prominent human smells in the house on top of the domestic odors and a distinct scent of dog hair—not dog fur—and canine perspiration. Merrick calls this house her home, but it’s not where she lives. Otherwise her mouthwatering anise scent would be thicker than the smell of two older people and their poodle. “You live here?” he asks her as she props her cane against the wall by the front door.

Merrick shakes her head slowly and flops to sit at the bottom of a narrow staircase that punctuates the foyer before she unzips her combat boots. “No,” she answers honestly, “it’s my parents’ house. I’m staying here with them until I find a place to live in Forks, since I got a job working in the library at Peninsula College.”

_Hell yes, Paul thinks, she’s moving to Forks, thirty miles from La Push, and she’s not bringing her hypothetical rich boyfriend with her._

Leah stifles a yelp as a crow flies over her head to greet the witch in a series of shrill caws and trills. “What the hell is that?” she asks.

Merrick smiles as the bird perches on her knee and hunches to nuzzle its beak gently with her nose. “Oh,” she mumbles, “this is Scald, my familiar and early warning system. Scald, say hello to the werewolves.”
When the bird cocks its head and caw at them, it doesn’t sound as innocuous as a simple hello. Paul doesn’t speak crow, but he’d bet money that Scald is saying *Fuck you*. Leah arches her eyebrows at the bird until it flies back out to perch in one of the plum trees in the front yard before Jacob has a chance to shut the door behind him.

Merrick straps a brace around her left ankle with a scrape of Velcro and a slip of her skirt that gives Paul the perfect excuse to stare at her legs—she’s wearing shimmery black thigh-highs with seams up the back and he catches a glimpse of the line where the sheer fabric meets a tantalizing strip of black lace. “Please take off your shoes,” Merrick says as she rises to her stocking feet without her cane. “Unless you have claws in human form like some of the Children of the Moon do.”

Leah eyeballs the dangling chandelier surrounded by cardboard boxes stacked on top of a polished teak dining room table. Porcelain sets of fine china and tarnished antique silverware and copperware are displayed in a warped old wooden bookshelf in a corner next to a metal rack filled with bottles of wine. “You’ve met other werewolves?” she asks, genuinely interested. There’s a pack out in Kennewick,[17] but they’re all the way on the other side of the Cascades and that’s way too far outside Quileute territory for them to pop over and visit.

“Yup,” Merrick says and pops the *p* sound, “the bestiary in my archive of grimoires has entries on at least a dozen subspecies of therianthropes. Most of them are extinct now because the Volturi are basically vampire eugenicists who’ve historically exterminated other preternatural species for sport, but I’ve met a few lycanthropes whose ancestors survived the purge instigated by Caius in the Neronian era.”[18]

Jacob and Leah exchange a look behind her back as she hobbles past the antiques into a great room: another dining room, a kitchen, and a den of sorts all in one space. “Sexy librarian with filthy rich parents and an archive of information about the supernatural world that we don’t have,” Jacob says in that pitch inaudible to human ears. “Paul could do a hell of a lot worse.”

“Thanks,” Paul mutters as he glances up at the crown molding. There are four skylights and twelve windows in the great room, not counting the perpendicular double sets of French doors: one pair leading back outside into the front yard, the other leading onto a deck overlooking the backyard. It’s not defensible at all, not against the leeches or anything else. Neither are most of the houses in Forks, especially with Dr. Cullen still working at the community hospital. *I have to protect my mate*, he thinks, more wolf than man, *but how the hell am I supposed to get a girl I just met to move in with me?*

Leah snorts. “Question is, what the hell do you have to offer her?” she asks. “Besides an eight-pack and a kickass Harley.”

Merrick flops into the chair at the head of the dining room table and shrugs out of her deconstructed black sweater before she drapes it over the back of the chair. When she curls the fingers of her left hand into the hollow of her palm, four place settings appear on the wooden surface of the table: three glasses of water, plates, napkins, placemats, all pulled out of thin air. Merrick shuts her eyes and sucks in a sharp breath while pink liquid fills her glass almost to the brim.

Paul stops glowering at Leah and frowns at the sight of the braces on her hands that had been hidden under the floppy sleeves of her sweater. “You’re hurt,” he says. “What happened?”

Merrick opens her eyes and exhales a rueful laugh. “*HLA-DRB1* allelic variants,” she informs him, “one of the common genetic causes of rheumatoid arthritis. There should be eight separate bones here,” she taps her wrist, “but mine are fused into one lump of osseous tissue. I had surgery
last summer and they had to break my arm to make me bleed more during the procedure. I’m pretty much healed now, but I’ve had chronic pain for almost nine years. These,” she holds up both hands to shine a metaphorical spotlight on the braces, “help with that. Luckily my ankle isn’t being eroded by inflammatory erythrocyte sediment anymore, since my course of treatment stopped the progression of the disease six years ago. It’s just perpetually swollen.”

“So,” Leah says as she narrows her dark eyes into slits of skepticism, “you can obliterate a leech with a flick of your finger, but you can’t heal yourself?”

Merrick nods, a sharp descent of her chin. “All magic requires sacrifice,” she murmurs, “being in constant pain actually makes me more powerful. Of course it also makes me tired, but…” she shrugs and hunches one shoulder to meet her earlobe, “…it’s better than the alternative.”

Jacob sits in the chair across from the witch and flips open the pizza box on top of the stack in the center of the table. Leah snags a piece topped with pepperoni and sits in the chair to his left, one of her knees bumping his under the table as Paul takes the seat right next to his imprint and scoots his chair even closer to her surreptitiously. Jacob smiles at his wife as she wolfs down her pizza before he turns his attention back to the witch his hotheaded pack brother is mooning over. It’s kind of surreal to see Paul looking at someone that way. “What’s the alternative?” he wants to know.

Merrick gnaws on the inside of her cheek before she answers his question. “I could hurt other people,” she says as she opens another pizza box to get herself a slice topped with cheese. “I could take power and pleasure in causing pain and death. I took power in those vampires being ripped to shreds today. Which is one of the reasons why I wanted you here, where I could set up a barrier and contain the hunt.”

“What are the other reasons?” Jacob asks as the smell of her anxiety spikes. “What are you so afraid of?”

Merrick sighs. “I’m not related to the people who live in this house by blood,” she informs him, “my biological father is the supreme leader of the witches in North America and he’s been trying to kill me since before I was born because I’m more powerful than he is. I think he sent the vampire who attacked Rachel after her because you’re all wearing countercharms infused with my magic and he thought I might be consolidating power by forming alliances with other supernatural creatures. I was going to apologize for my lack of vigilance and offer to take my countercharms back, but things aren’t that simple anymore. There’s a magical bond between us…” she bites her lip and glances at Paul in her periphery before she mumbles, “…and I don’t know what kind of magic it is, but all the other wolves in your pack have it and it looks pretty unbreakable—”

Leah frowns, the space between her sharp eyebrows furrowing incredulously. “You can see it,” she says, “the imprint.”

Merrick stops chewing on her bottom lip before she wrinkles her nose in confusion. “Sorry,” she says, “the what now?”

“It’s a wolf thing,” Jacob says and squares the awkward slump out of his shoulders to make himself seem more like the alpha of a pack of werewolves as opposed to a man that wolfed down an entire meat lovers pizza in five minutes flat, “we look someone in the eyes and bond with them. It’s called imprinting. It’s how we find our soulmates. Leah is mine, and I’m hers. Paul is yours.”

Leah snorts. It took her husband a long fucking time to get that comfortable with the idea of being imprinted on anyone, but she was just as stubborn. Their imprint didn’t make them fall in love or get over the heartbreak and bitterness that had almost eaten them alive. It was unequivocally a choice they both made, to choose each other. Leah and Jacob are both too stubborn to make a
relationship work any other way.

Merrick turns to look at Paul and tweaks the spell on her glasses again to scrutinize the binding. It almost feels like the potential energy of a gravitational field is occupying the space between them, but gravity is exponentially weaker than the metaphysical force of imprinting.\[19\] Paul holds her gaze and hunches so his elbows are on the edge of the table, the look in his black eyes so heated that it can only be described as a smolder. “You’re serious,” Merrick whispers. “You think we’re soulmates.”

“I don’t think,” Paul growls and takes one of her hands in both of his, “I know. I feel it,” he strokes the soft corrugation of her knuckles with the calloused pad of his thumb and says in a deep voice that makes her clench tight inside, “tell me you feel it too.”

Merrick gulps audibly. Jeppers, she thinks in a futile attempt to resurrect her equilibrium as the fervent heat of his fingers seeps into her palm through the thick fabric of the brace on her right hand and burns away the ache in her arthritic wrist, he’s so hot. Maybe it’s another wolf thing. If a werewolf can be considered an isolated system, the laws of thermodynamics apply: the internal energy they use to shapeshift must be maintained in their human forms to maximize their potential for enthalpy of transformation, so the isothermal processes of their bodies are in a constant non-equilibrium state of pressure to facilitate that phase change.\[20\] “I feel something,” she tells him shakily, “but it’s kind of freaking me out.”

Paul reluctantly stops holding her hand. “Sorry,” he says.

Merrick sighs and shakes her head slowly. “No,” she murmurs, “you’re not freaking me out. I’m just…” she grits her teeth around a frustrated noise before she articulates, “…I’ve got issues.”

“Hey,” Jacob says and smiles at her wide and warm, almost like he swallowed a beam of sunlight. “We’ve all got issues.”

If they only knew.

\[14\] Specifically fragments of Sumerian, Assyrian and Akkadian cuneiform texts from approximately three thousand years ago, the Dead Sea Scrolls (c. 40-10 BCE), incantation bowls from Babylon (c. 4-6 CE), the Gemara of the Talmud (c. 500 CE), and both the Vetus Latina (c. 350 BCE) and Latin Vulgate (c. 4 CE) translations of the Book of Isaiah where Lilith is written as lamia in verse 34:14.

\[15\] Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” (1855).

\[16\] Newton’s laws of motion describe mass as a constant state of either inertia or uniform velocity, and objects at rest cannot increase their mass because they’re not in motion. There’s no real way to increase the mass of something instantaneously, but objects in motion can behave that way if they move fast enough.

\[17\] This is a reference to the Mercy Thompson series by Patricia Briggs—the Columbia Basin Pack of werewolves is based in Kennewick, one of the Tri-Cities in Eastern Washington.

\[18\] Breaking Dawn (2008), p. 445. “Will you defend that alliance, too, Aro?” Caius demanded. “The Children of the Moon have been our bitter enemies from the dawn of time. We have hunted them to near extinction in Europe and Asia.”

\[19\] Eclipse (2007), p. 101. “It’s so hard to describe. It’s not like love at first sight, really. It’s more like…gravity moves. When you see her, suddenly it’s not the earth holding you here anymore. She does.” I chose to take Jacob’s description of imprinting as a paragravitational force literally.
Those laws of thermodynamics Merrick is talking about typically don’t apply to living cells—isothermal processes can occur in living cells but most of the other concepts she mentions apply more to gaseous substances than solids or liquids—but werewolves are magic, so they’re scientific anomalies.
The secret must stay and—according to scientists—the love will live. The heart is quite comfortable with secrets.

Toby Barlow, *Sharp Teeth*

---

*The Myth of Blackbirds*

**Chapter 3**

A Story by Heart

Paul almost loses it when Merrick says her father has been trying to kill her since before she was born. When he gnashes his teeth around a sharp guttural noise that shouldn’t have been able to snarl its way out of a human throat, Leah kicks him under the table to make him shut up. Paul clenches his jaw and inhales deeply through his nose to breathe in the scent of sweetness and ozone, with a tang of sweat and a sour tinge of anxiety. There’s something about the soft cadence of her voice that makes him feel paradoxically calm, despite the gravity of what she’s saying. Just being near her is enough to mellow him out.

*Merrick’s alive, Paul thinks, and I’m gonna make damn sure she stays that way.*

Leah opens yet another box of pizza and inhales the smell of vegetables and delicious garlic sauce. *Ah,* she thinks, *sweet success.* “So,” she says as she piles two slices on her plate, “you’re fighting a magical turf war against your dad?”

Merrick takes a sip of her strawberry lemonade and sucks on the edge of her glass. “Sort of,” she mumbles before she asks, “how much do you know about witches?”

Leah stops with a piece of pizza halfway to her mouth. “You’re one of the only witches we’ve met,” she answers, “so not much.”

“Okay,” Merrick says, “witches are humans capable of tapping into the natural and supernatural energies of the world. We impose our intent—our will—on those energies, and that’s how magic works. If you want to quantify it, intent plus external and internal energy determines how powerful the casting is. We use things like wands or cards or herbs as catalysts to make the casting stronger, to focus those energies. I’m powerful enough that I don’t need rituals or catalysts to cast,” she curls her fingers into the hollow of her palm to conjure the empty pizza boxes into the plastic bin of yard waste outside behind the pumphouse before she clarifies, “I use my hands as a focus. Most witches have a finite capacity for internal energy. I don’t. We aren’t permitted to interfere with the ‘natural order’ of things in human society—” she rolls her eyes before she crooks her fingers like quotation marks around the words *natural order* because the notion that shit like slavery and genocide are part of the natural order of things sets her teeth on edge, “—but nothing in our laws prohibits making alliances with other supernatural creatures. We keep to ourselves because supernatural creatures are pretty clannish, and witches are no exception. I’m only friends with Rachel because we were friends before I knew I was a witch and before she knew werewolves weren’t just a myth.”

Leah abruptly nods, bobbing her head. “I remember you from her memories,” she says, “you’re the one who found her after she phased out in Pullman.”

Rachel had phased for the first time in her dorm at WSU after she decided to put herself in even
more debt and get her Ph.D. in computer science and engineering, and she couldn’t hear the pack because she hadn’t submitted to the alpha yet. Merrick had found her in the forest and talked her into being human again. Rachel had been messaging with Merrick in chatrooms for years, but they didn’t meet in person until that night.[21]

Paul fervently racks his brain for those secondhand memories and comes up empty. *Rachel’s known my imprint for eleven years,* he thinks, *and I had no fucking idea because I didn’t want her or anyone else inside my head.* Paul almost loses it again thinking about how much time he wasted fucking around with girls that he only went out with because he wanted to get laid, and he was bitter that he was somehow the only wolf in the pack without an imprint. Beckham, the floppy black poodle sprawled out on his doggy bed next to the fancy electric fireplace, whines and snuffles with his wet dog nose. Paul gnashes his teeth and tries to chill the fuck out because the last thing he wants to do is scare his soulmate’s puppy.

“I’m warning you right now,” Merrick says, “the Volturi are terrified of werewolves. What we did today is going to get their attention whether it was orchestrated by the asshole who jizzed out half my chromosomes or not, and chances are they’re going to respond with extreme prejudice.”

Paul barks out a laugh, a loud noise that brews deep in his belly and bursts out of his mouth. Merrick turns and looks at him over her shoulder, wondering if she made him laugh or if he was laughing at her. Paul takes her hand and squeezes her fingers, his wolfish smirk unfurling into a smug grin when she squeezes back.

“No way,” Jacob retorts, “the Volturi care too much about secrecy to start a war. There are seventeen of us, and if we all died—”

“Rachel told me that people in Forks and La Push think you’re in a gang,” Merrick cuts in sharply. “If you all die, human law enforcement will chalk it up to intergang violence and it’ll be the talk of the town for a few weeks before the local police stop giving a shit. I doubt it would even make the news.”

“You’re right,” Leah says before she clarifies, “the local police chief is my stepfather.”

“Charlie would care if we all died,” Jacob points out.

“Yeah,” Leah says, “but he wouldn’t have the resources to investigate our grisly murders. Hell, the entire Forks Police Department was almost cut a year ago because the city council couldn’t afford to keep the jail open.”[22]

Merrick nods bluntly. “How do you know about the Volturi?” she asks Jacob.

Paul scoffs, a scathing noise that snarls in the back of his throat. “Jacob had a thing for a leech-lover,” he mutters, “she got the Volturi to change her into one of them so her precious leech boyfriend wouldn’t break the treaty.”[23]

Merrick bites her lip and glances down at her plate as Jacob growls and shakes at the other end of the table. *Jeepers,* she thinks, *my soulmate’s an asshole. I should have seen that coming.* “What treaty?” she asks.

“Our great-grandfathers phased because the Cullens were hunting in our territory during the Great Depression,” Leah explains, “the treaty kept them from trespassing on Quileute land and stipulated that biting a human—drinking their blood or changing them—would break the oath their leader took.”

Merrick conjures a leatherbound book onto the corner of the table and shuts her eyes as she splays

“What’s white matter?” Paul asks her.

Merrick blinks and taps her index finger twice on the cover of the leatherbound book to conjure it away. “Myelinated axon tracts,” she informs him, “nerve fibers in our central nervous systems that regulate brain function and learning. Myelin is a fatty tissue made of proteins and phospholipids that insulates our grey matter, carries nerve impulses between our neurons, and passes electrical signals from brain structure to brain structure. It’s what the corpus callosum—the part of the brain that separates the right and left hemispheres—is made of. I’d love to get my hands on Carlisle Cullen and map his brain. It would be fascinating to see whether or not an immortal brain continues to develop post-change—”

“No way in hell,” Paul growls. “I’m not letting those leeches get anywhere near you.”

Merrick arches her eyebrows at him like a challenge. “What I do is not up to you,” she says, her voice flat and wickedly sharp as a serrated knife. “I’m a scientist, and if I want to research postmortem vampiric cognitive development, then I will.”

Leah snorts. “Seth loves the leeches,” she says, her tone dripping with disgust, “he can take you to see Dr. Bloodsucker after you move to Forks.” Paul glowers at her, but Leah doesn’t give a fuck. “Give it a rest, Paul,” she says, “you saw your imprint kick ass today. I almost pity the leech who messes with her,” she slants her gaze to the witch and her lips curl into a brutal smile before she adds, “almost.”

Merrick smiles at her in a shy innocuous way that doesn’t show her teeth. “It helps that vampire special effects don’t work on witches,” she murmurs. “Their so-called gifts are actually amplifications of latent magical abilities that never manifested when they were human. It makes them metaphysically weak, in spite of how physically strong they are. Which,” she says as she adjusts her glasses with the hand that Paul isn’t holding and smiles wider, “means they have no power over me.”[25]

Jacob and Leah drive back to La Push before the sun has a chance to dip below the horizon into the glow of twilight. Neither alpha is cruel enough to order Paul to run home and spend the night over a hundred miles from his imprint, especially since she’s still relatively in danger. Merrick uses magic to load the dishwasher and conjures the used napkins into the wastebasket that lurks underneath the kitchen sink while he stares at her with a soft look that almost seems out of place on his face.

“So,” Paul says as she splays the fingers of the hand that he isn’t holding above the tabletop and conjures the placemats away, “I have a house in La Push. It’s nothing like this place, but—”

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered. “I don’t need much space,” she murmurs while he strokes his calloused thumb back and forth over her knuckles, “I just need somewhere to sleep that isn’t
approximately a hundred and twenty miles from where I’m going to work. I’m too lazy to commute that far,” she muffles a yawn in the hollow of her palm before she asks, “how much would you charge for rent?”

Paul shakes his head so fast he almost shudders out of his skin. “I’m not taking your money,” he says. “I should be taking care of you.”

Merrick sighs. “I’m guessing that’s also a wolf thing,” she deduces.

Paul hunches so his elbows are on the edge of the table and nods. “Yeah,” he says.

Merrick cocks her head crowishly and stares him down. “I got a job that comes with a salary of forty-eight thousand a year,” she informs him, “I can afford to pay you six hundred bucks a month. Which, according to all my research, is the average cost of renting a one-bedroom apartment in Forks.”

“I’m not taking your money,” Paul says and strokes his fingertips into the soft hollow of her palm. Merrick arches her eyebrows at him again, and that unspoken challenge glinting in her huge gray eyes makes his dick twitch and throb in his jeans. “We just met this afternoon,” she retorts, “and I’m not moving in with you if you won’t let me pay rent. It’s your choice.”

Paul scoffs. “I don’t have a choice in any of this,” he says. Which should probably bother him, but it doesn’t.

Merrick frowns, the space between her eyebrows crinkling like tinfoil. “Why do you think you don’t have a choice?” she wants to know.

Paul shrugs nonchalantly, like it’s perfectly normal to look a girl in the eye one time and see her as your center of gravity. “I imprinted on you,” he says, “and that means I’m gonna be whatever you need me to be. I’m yours. I don’t belong to myself anymore.”

Merrick gapes at him with a gobsmacked look on her plump face. “Okay,” she says and ekes the y sound out until her voice pitches uncomfortably high, “you don’t seem as perturbed by that as you should be.”

Paul squeezes her fingers and doesn’t let go. Something about the way she looks at him makes him want to bare his soul to her. Paul has never been a deep thinker, but he’s thought about imprinting a lot in the past thirteen years and he has a hunch that she needs to know how he sees it. “I didn’t want to imprint at first,” he admits, “my parents got divorced when I was eight and I thought being forced to fall in love at first sight would just be the cherry on top of a shitty werewolf sundae. There was so much fucking drama in the pack back then because of imprinting, too. Leah was dating Sam before he phased and imprinted on her cousin Emily. Jacob and Leah imprinted on each other and they almost tore the pack apart before they got their shit together. Jared imprinted on Kim, a girl he never looked twice at before he phased. Quil and Collin imprinted on each other, and they got outed by our weird pack mindmeld. Embry imprinted on Angela, who already had a boyfriend. I went through all that shit like it was my shit, not just theirs. Until this afternoon, the only lone wolf in the pack was me.”

Merrick bites her lip and chews anxiously while she tries to process the implications of everything he just said even though she doesn’t know him well enough to contextualize it. Their bond is making her feel off-kilter, the warm fuzzies eroded by throbs of heat coiling down below her belly. Merrick has never been sexually attracted to anyone she just met before, and she’s not comfortable with feeling that way at all. “Okay,” she echoes, “does that mean you want a soulmate, or you don’t?”
Paul strokes her knuckles again, rubbing the calloused pad of his thumb in slow circles over each soft jut of bone peeking out from under the coarse edge of the brace around her wrist and grinning at the way she whimpers in the back of her throat. Would she make the same noise if his hand was between her legs, if his thumb was rubbing those slow circles over her clit? *I can smell her,* he thinks, *she wants me, and she’s afraid. What the hell could’ve happened to her that would make a girl who magically flicks leeches to death with one finger so fucking scared of getting turned on?* “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t,” he says.

“Okay,” Merrick says and ekes the *oh* sound out into a sharp *ooh,* “Rachel didn’t tell me shit about imprinting. I’m guessing she neglected to mention it because it’s a Quileute tribe secret known only to your council of elders and to the pack?”

Paul cocks one sharp eyebrow at the way she acerbically shifts gears from being emotionally invested to indulging her scientific curiosity. Merrick is nothing like what he expected. Paul had always imagined that his imprint would be Quileute and peripherally aware of the kwôli legends, or Makah and ordinary enough that he’d have to keep his wolf a secret from her until she fell in love with him so she wouldn’t run screaming.[27] There’s nothing ordinary about Merrick, from the murder of watchful crows perching on the branches of the flowering trees in her parents’ front yard to the resonant glow of power that clings to her pale freckled skin. “Yeah,” he says, “our legends don’t say much about imprinting anyway. Sam thinks it’s a mating instinct, but he only came up with that theory because he thought Leah was infertile before we found out she has PCOS and he was trying to understand why he imprinted on Emily instead of her.[28] Billy thinks it’s to make us stronger, as wolves and as people.”

“What do you think?” Merrick wants to know.

Paul shrugs again, curling his fingers around hers. “I used to think that being the only lone wolf in the pack meant I might not deserve a soulmate,” he tells her, “and that felt like shit even back when I didn’t want to imprint. I don’t know what I think now that I have you. I want you,” he says and smirks as a faint blush seeps into her cheeks. “I know that. I want you to move in with me because my wolf needs to keep you safe, and the rez is a hell of a lot safer than Forks because it’s our territory.”

Merrick tucks a stray tendril of hair behind one of her ears. “Rachel told me about you,” she mumbles, her ears turning pink. “Paul Lahote, her manwhore cousin.”

Paul groans in the back of his throat at a pitch too low for even the most extraordinary human to hear. “I’m gonna kill her,” he growls, *and we’re second cousins,* he thinks, even though it’s petty.

“I don’t care about your sexual history,” Merrick says and blushes even brighter as something occurs to her. “I have another question, though. For science.”

Paul cocks one sharp eyebrow at her again. “Sure,” he says, “ask me anything.”

“Okay,” Merrick says. “Please tell me you have a normal dick, not a knot.”

Paul laughs so hard he hunches over the table and muffles the howls of his laughter in the crook of his elbow. Jared thinks his imprint was a blessing, because otherwise he might’ve never looked twice at Kim—and he never would’ve known what he was missing. Paul has been calling him pussy-whipped for thirteen years, because he didn’t get it. *I fucking get it now,* he thinks, *fuck. I think I’m falling in love.*

June 9, 2018
After he stops laughing at her question long enough to explain that his dick is better than normal but still a human dick as long as he’s in human form, Merrick picks his brain for more information about shapeshifters until it’s after midnight and she has to muffle a yawn every few words because she’s physically and metaphorically exhausted. Paul wipes his sweaty palm on his jeans as she shuffles off into the kitchen to put her plastic cup in the dishwasher with a soft plunk, but he can smell her on his hand and he kind of wants to rub her scent all over his dick. Which is weird, but at least his wolf doesn’t want him to pee on her to mark his territory or something.

“Okay,” Merrick says and ekes the oh sound out into another yawn, “the guestroom upstairs has a California king, so you won’t have to sleep crosswise, and my room is across the hall. I’m going to brush my teeth before I burn out. There are extra toothbrushes in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom that you can use. If you use the shower in that bathroom, you have to clean the glass when you’re done. Otherwise it gets all gross.”

Paul watches her take the clip out of her hair as she hobbles into the foyer by the front door. It’s longer than he thought, oscillating over her shoulders and down her back in thick burnished coils. When she claws the fingers of one hand through the tendrils and gets rid of the dent her hair tie left behind, her scent hits him hard. It feels like being smacked in the face by the sweetest fucking smell on the planet. Paul groans low in his throat, his mouth watering as his instincts eclipse everything else and he pins her up against the door before he buries his nose in her hair.

Merrick is abruptly made aware of four things: one of his hands is pinioning both of her wrists above her head to take her hands out of the equation, his lean muscular body is hard and so hot that her glasses are fogging up around the rims, he’s flush against her from hip to chest and she can feel him making a low murring sound that resonates from somewhere deep in his peritoneum, and he’s holding her up like she weighs two pounds instead of two hundred.

Oh, she thinks as Paul nuzzles her hair and inhales deeply through his nose, he’s smelling me. It must be another wolf thing.

Merrick tugs her bottom lip in between her teeth as Paul snuffles along the curve of her ear and breathes down her neck, his lips hot on the meniscus of soft freckled skin where her neck melts into her shoulder. When he cups her face in the palm of the hand he isn’t using to hold her wrists above her head and slowly drags his teeth over the tender flesh on the side of her neck, she moans for him and he takes that sharp desperate sound as permission to slowly grind his hard cock into the apex of her soft thighs.

“Ů́·lich tá́d,” Paul growls in a language that she doesn’t understand.

Merrick has half a mind to hook her legs around his waist and let the man who thinks they’re soulmates fuck her up against the front door of her childhood home. Unfortunately the other half of her mind is screaming at her like a banshee who thinks that losing her virginity in a foyer is a bad idea, and that half kind of has a point. “Please stop,” she whispers.

Paul stops and pulls back to stare at her with those smoldering black eyes of his before he slowly lets her slip away from him until her feet are back on the floor and takes a step away from her. There’s a clench in his jaw and both of his hands are curled into fists, but he’s not angry at her. Paul is pissed that he lost his shit and scared his imprint, the center of his fucking universe.

Merrick gulps and leans with her back against the door because the heat of him made her feel lightheaded, woozy. Okay, she thinks, he’s an asshole, but at least he knows when to take no for an answer. “Were you purring?” she asks him.
“Hell no,” Paul tells her, fervent warmth seeping into his cheeks and creeping up the back of his neck. “I’m not a fucking cat.”

Merrick giggles and bites her bottom lip again to muffle the sounds fizzing out from under her tongue. “Okay,” she mumbles as she hobbles up the stairs into the bathroom. “I’m going to brush my teeth. We can talk about this in the morning when I’m not overwhelmed and running on fumes. Goodnight.”

[21] Rachel canonically graduates from WSU early in the summer of 2006 and ostensibly gets her Bachelor of Science in computer engineering. Here she gets her MSCS (Master of Science in computer science) in the summer of 2008, she phases in 2010, and gets her Ph.D. in computer science and engineering in the summer of 2013.

[22] Leah is being hyperbolic—the revenue from the jail in Forks actually increased in the first quarter of FY2017—but Forks only has a police department right now because contracting law enforcement from another city would cost more than keeping the local police in business.

[23] Just imagine Bella was smarter and marginally less self-centered, and that she made the choice to become a vampire in Volterra with the help of the Volturi in the aftermath of Eclipse so the treaty would remain unbroken.

[24] Scientists from the University of California did a study on the cognitive development in between adolescence (age 12-16) and young adulthood (age 23-30) in 1999 to determine that human brains continue to develop cognitively post-adolescence, and that we don’t reach the point of neuromaturation until we’re in our thirties. Which is why I’m squicked out by the idea of immortal teenagers: because they never get a chance to grow the fuck up and that is a recipe for disaster.

[25] This is how I’m answering the question: why do some of the sparklepires have superpowers while others do not? If they had magic in their human blood, that power was amplified by the change.

[26] It’s actually $589 on average to rent a one-bedroom apartment in Forks. Merrick rounded up.

[27] Kwòli (pronounced kwoh-LAY) is Quileute for wolf. “Quileute” etymologically comes from the word Kwòliyof (kwoh-LAY-yoh-T), so Quileute basically means “wolf people.”

[28] Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) could explain why Leah canonically stopped menstruating after she phased, if her androgen levels were elevated by the expression of her werewolf gene. Since the shapeshifters are prone to anger and violence, them having elevated levels of testosterone makes perfect sense.

[29] Paul is 6’4” in this story, since he’s canonically shorter than Jacob (who’s 6’7”) and Merrick is 5’2” so their height difference is ridiculous. Single beds are 75 inches long (6 feet, 3 inches—too short for a Meyerwolf). Queen and king-sized beds are 80 inches long (6 feet, 8 inches). California kings are 84 inches long (7 feet).

[30] Murring is a romantic sound that a wolf makes to communicate with their mate. Purring is the closest equivalent, but it has a different behavioral context.

[31] Ô·lich tá (oh-lich tah-AHĐ) is Quileute for “You’re mine.”
Beneath My Skin

I could call this body of mine
magic, but
really, it’s all
talk.
Legend.
Old wives’ tale.

You know, they say the full moon
brings out the wilderness
in everybody.
Maybe they
were just looking
for somebody to howl to.

Ashe Vernon, “Werewolves in Suburbia”

The Myth of Blackbirds
Chapter 4
Beneath My Skin

Paul texts Rachel **phase in, we need to talk** and shapeshifts on top of the California king as soon as his imprint falls asleep—he can hear the soft thrum of her heartbeat from across the hall, the soothing rise and fall of her inhales and exhales. Jared and Josie are patrolling the rez and he reports that all’s well in Poulsbo before he blocks them out.

*What’s going on?* Rachel asks him.

Paul stares at the crow looking down at him through the skylight and bares his teeth. *I want to know everything you know about my imprint,* he says.

Rachel has to resist the urge to roll her eyes at how possessive he sounds. *I can tell you about her,* she says, *but I’m not going to share my memories of her without her consent.*

Paul growls and lets the snarl of his want and need and rage bleed through his thoughts until she feels it too. *You told her I was a manwhore,* he snaps. *You owe me this.*

*Merrick doesn’t care about crap like that,* Rachel says and nudges him apologetically with her mind. *Just get tested and show her your clean STD panel before you deflower her—*

Paul chokes on a wad of wolf drool. It actually makes perfect sense. Merrick is comfortable talking clinically about sex, but she’s not comfortable with feeling all hot and bothered. It’s because all of her knowledge about sex is purely theoretical, not practical. *I imprinted on a virgin?* he asks incredulously.

*Yep,* Rachel says unapologetically.

Paul groans and shares the memory of him pinning her to the door, her sweet vivid scent mouthwatering even in echo. *It would’ve been nice to know that before I almost lost my shit and*
marked her in the fancy fucking foyer, he says.

Rachel chortles, her amusement fizzing up through her thoughts and into his mind. Look on the bright side, she says. Merrick didn’t panic and translocate you into the bay for touching her without permission.

Paul starts murring smugly and bares his teeth in a lupine grin. Merrick was overwhelmed, not scared. If his imprint had been afraid, she would have hexed him instead of moaning for him and begging so sweetly.

Okay, Rachel yelps to make him stop thinking dirty thoughts, I’m going to share one memory with you. There’s nothing in this one that Merrick wouldn’t want you to see. Just… her voice goes soft with worry before she says, …don’t hurt her, Paul. I know you think you can’t, but she’s been through a lot and you can’t treat her like the girls you’ve dated before. If you do, she won’t accept you or the imprint.

Paul gnashes his wolf teeth and huffs. It’s not like he lied to his exes or led them on with promises that he never intended to keep. After a while the whole casual thing got stale and he started to want his imprint, but most of the girls he dated before that knew what they were getting into and they wanted the same things he did. If they got hurt, that wasn’t his fault. Just fucking show me, he growls.

Fear and panic ooze through his mind and ferment into a frenzy as Rachel stops running and flops onto her belly in the dirt on the floor of the forest. What the fuck, he hears her think as she stares down at her forepaws and sharp black claws. What the fuck?

“Rachel?” a soft voice asks.

When she turns her head and sniffs out the sweet anise scent in the night air, Merrick is standing with one hand on the thick trunk of a hemlock tree for balance and the other gripping the handle of her cane. Rachel snuffles out a whine, a wolf cry for help. Paul is surprised to see that Merrick’s hair is dyed a bright shade of pink made pale by the moonlight, her eyebrows and eyelashes dark against her glowing skin. There’s no industrial piercing in her left ear, no words tattooed on the curve of her shoulder, and she’s not dressed all in black—she’s wearing a purple and green plaid shirt on top of a lacy green camisole, a floral print black skirt, purple fishnet stockings, and combat boots with rainbow shoelaces. Colorful even in the dark.

“You wolfed out and ran across state lines,” Merrick says and squints at Rachel from behind her glasses. “Jeepers, you’re ginormous. Okay,” she murmurs as she hobbles over to crouch in front of the wolf, “I’m going to help you turn back into a human. Please don’t eat me.”

Rachel whimpers as Merrick puts one tiny pale hand on her snout and shuts her eyes. Magic tingles in her veins and makes her muscles ache—although that might just be a side-effect of running forty-seven miles on all fours at full throttle. Rachel watches her claws turn back into fingers and throws herself at Merrick as soon as her forelegs turn back into arms, hugging her hard and howling.

Merrick squawks and flails awkwardly before she lets Rachel bawl all over her shoulder. “You’re not alone,” she whispers. “There’s a huge concentration of energies like yours in La Push.”

Rachel guffaws, a huff and a puff of rueful laughter. Billy had told her stories about her great-grandfather Ephraim, the alpha werewolf. Apparently her father wasn’t as full of shit as she always thought he was.[32] “Yeah,” she says and sniffs as Merrick offers her a tissue from the packet she keeps in her messenger bag, “Quileute legends say that we were wolves once. I guess
“Those myths are true.”

“There’s some truth in every myth,” Merrick says and smiles with something tragic lurking in the corners of her mouth. “Otherwise we wouldn’t keep telling ourselves the same old stories.”

Rachel sighs and takes the plastic bag full of clothes from Merrick. “These are mine,” she says, stating the obvious.

“Yup,” Merrick says and pops the p sound. “I conjured them from your dorm room on my way out here. There are always melodramatic scenes in movies with werewolves waking up naked in the woods, and I wanted to be prepared for all contingencies.”

Rachel shimmies into a pair of panties and puts the matching bra on backwards to do up the hooks before she shuffles the cups around and bends over. Merrick uses her cane to get back on her feet and winces as her ankle throbs with a stab of pain. Rachel yanks her Being a Computer Engineer Is Easy, It’s Like Riding a Bike, Except the Bike Is on Fire, You’re on Fire, Everything Is on Fire, and You’re in Hell t-shirt over her head before she steps into her jeans and hops to get them on.

“How’d you find me?” she wants to know.

“I sensed you,” Merrick informs her, “your magic has been pressurizing for weeks to prepare your human body for the phase change of transforming into a ginormous wolf. It’s a Sisyphean feat to block out all of the other energies in the world and focus on a singular essence, but you’re my friend. I’m gonna have one hell of a migraine in the morning, but…” she smiles and shrugs one shoulder like a crow before she says, “…you’re worth it. Nice to finally meet you in person, by the way.”

Rachel hunches over to put on her socks and tie her shoes: a pair of faded camo print Converse high-tops. “Nice to finally meet you in person, too. So,” she says, “I’m a werewolf. What are you?”

“Oh.” Merrick smiles wider and twitches her nose à la Samantha Stephens.[33] “I’m a witch.”

Rachel stops the memory and phases out. Merrick is still asleep in her room across the hall, if the periodic cadence of her pulse is anything to go by. Shit, Paul thinks and shifts back, she’s too fucking cute. Not to mention smart and funny and loyal as fuck. Hell, she drove over three hundred miles to help someone that she hadn’t met in person yet. We couldn’t’ve gone to get Rachel out of the woods. It’s almost a nine-hour drive from La Push to Pullman and running almost five hundred miles outside of our territory wouldn’t’ve been an option. We would’ve been too late to help her even if whoever was on patrol that night told her what was happening to her through the pack mindmeld. Merrick showed her that she wasn’t a monster, didn’t even flinch… he grins wolfishly in the dark and thinks, …that’s my girl.

When she wakes up, Merrick arches her back and stretches until her ankle twinges and throbs with a pang of agony. “Ow,” she rasps as she claws the gound out of the corners of her eyes. When she groggily tries to conjure her glasses back on, they end up smacking her in the face instead. Okay, she thinks and swallows in spite of how dry her throat is from sleeping with her mouth open. I’m too burned out to conjure, but I can still use telekinesis. Good to know.

It’s too bright in her bedroom, the blackout curtains on the windows rendered totally ineffectual by the skylight in the ceiling. Harsh daylight filters down through the slantwise fenestration in luminous fractals. It makes her want to gouge her eyes out.

Merrick sleeps naked, because she can’t get comfortable enough to fall asleep any other way. Crap, she thinks and slowly sits up before she holds one hand out to telekinetically get a sundress
out of her closet and a clean pair of panties out of her dresser, *my cane is downstairs.*

It all comes back to her with a vengeance: the vampires, the probability that her biological father is trying to murder her ass yet again by manipulating her into starting a war with the Volturi, the werewolf whose ancestral magic is telling him that they’re soulmates. There’s a litany of muffled spins ricocheting below her, the dryer turning and turning in a widening gyre.\[34] Paul is probably washing his clothes. It’s not like he can just borrow something else to wear, because he’s taller and buffer than her dad and nothing in her parents’ walk-in closet is his size. Since his sense of smell is hyperosmic,\[35] wearing dirty clothes is something he probably tries to avoid.

Merrick sighs and telekinetically grabs her phone from where she left it plugged into her lightning cable and charging to look at the time—none of the clocks on the walls of her bedroom work because the ticking and tocking noises kept making her migraines worse. It’s almost two in the afternoon. Which is early for a night owl like her, on the days she doesn’t have things to do or people to see.

*Canids are primarily nocturnal creatures,* she thinks, *and wolves are crepuscular. I hope the same holds true for werewolves. This whole soulmate thing isn’t going to work if Paul is a morning person.*

When she tries to stand up, a stab of pain flares up from her ankle to her knee and Merrick clenches her teeth around a startled wail. It blares through her nose in a tattered gasp as she squeezes her eyes shut hard enough to make herself see bright phosphenes behind her eyelids. When she opens her eyes, Paul is crouched in front of her and one of his warm hands is cupping her face. Merrick bites her bottom lip at the sight of his brow furrowing, his black eyes brimming with worry. “What’s wrong?” he asks. “Where does it hurt?”

Merrick sucks in a shuddering breath and telekinetically grabs her foot brace. “It’s my ankle,” she tells him as she straps on the brace and thanks all of the gods she doesn’t believe in that she put her sundress on before she tried to stand up. “After the magic I did yesterday, I’m not surprised I can’t walk. I need to get downstairs,” she exhales a soft whoosh of air before she clarifies, “my wheelchair’s in the hall closet.”

Paul scoops her up and carries her downstairs like a fucking princess. Merrick is suddenly made aware that he isn’t wearing a shirt, or pants. Just a pair of black boxer-briefs that leave absolutely nothing to the imagination. Merrick gulps and blushes from her ears to the tops of her breasts. Paul smirks and curls his fingers into the soft flesh of her thigh, the heat of his hand seeping in through the fabric of her skirt.

Merrick sits at the bottom of the stairs and tries not to spontaneously combust while he gets her wheelchair out of the closet and unfolds it. There are faded purple, blue, and pink ribbons woven through the wheel spokes—the colors of the bi pride flag. Merrick telekinetically grabs two bottles of pills out of the medicine cabinet upstairs before she clambers into her chair. “I need a glass of water and I don’t have the energy to conjure one right now,” she says as she pops the pill bottles open, “could you push me into the kitchen?”

“Yeah.” Paul wheels her into the kitchen and gets a glass for her from a cabinet that she can’t reach. Merrick valiantly tries and fails not to stare at his ass. Or the way the dorsal muscles in his back and shoulders ripple underneath his warm copper skin. “What’re you taking?” he asks.

Merrick holds up one puke orange pill bottle and puts it down on top of the granite island looming in the middle of the kitchen. “Meloxicam,” she informs him, “a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug and pain reliever. Paroxetine,” she holds up the other, “a SSRI prescribed for depression and anxiety. These medications can be yours for the low, low price of one incurable autoimmune
disease and…” she holds up two fingers while he fills the glass with water from the dispenser in the fridge, “…a chemical imbalance of insufficient neurotransmitters in the brain.”

Paul snorts and puts the glass of water down on the island in front of her. Merrick pops a handful of pills into her mouth and chews before she takes a swig of water and swallows them down with a grimace. Paul watches her drink the rest of the water in sips, puffing her cheeks up and swirling the liquid to swish the bitter taste of medicine out of her mouth. “I fed the dog,” he says. “It took him a while to notice because he’s so mellow, but he ate eventually.”

Merrick smiles at him in a soft way that makes her shine brighter than any celestial body. “Thank you,” she says. “Beckham is mellow because he was trained as a service dog, but then he lost the hearing in one ear and my mom adopted him. I guess not even a werewolf can ruffle his floof. What about you?” she cocks her head crowishly before she asks, “did you eat?”

Paul smiles back, like it’s contagious. “There was bacon in the fridge,” he tells her sheepishly, “and eggs. I kind of…ate them all.”

“Good,” Merrick says, “that bacon would’ve spoiled before my parents flew home from Amsterdam. I didn’t want to throw it away, but I wasn’t going to eat it. I’m a vegetarian.”

Paul arches his eyebrows at that. There’s something hilariously ironic about a werewolf imprinting on someone who doesn’t eat meat. “Is that a witch thing?” he asks.

Merrick shakes her head slowly. “No,” she mumbles, “I have a meat allergy.”

Paul flicks his gaze to Beckham sprawled out on his dog bed over by the fireplace and catches her checking out his abs in his periphery. “See anything you like?” he asks, his smirk audible in his voice.

“I…” Merrick stutters and changes the subject, “…I need to water the garden. After your clothes are done in the dryer, would you help me get my ramp out of the closet and push me outside? I hate to ask, but I can’t push myself because my wrist is immobilized.”

Rebecca met a Hawaiian surfer at Cape Flattery the spring before she turned eighteen and eloped with him to Kahului as soon as she graduated from Quileute Tribal School—she didn’t even stick around long enough to get her diploma in the mail. Billy kept it up on the wall in his house for years because he hoped his daughter would come back for it someday. Rachel got a full scholarship to WSU, and Jacob got stuck taking care of their dad. Jane nagged Paul until he spent his afternoons working part-time at Three Rivers pumping gas for tourists or helping Jacob with Billy, so he’s no stranger to the crippling kind of chronic pain his imprint has been living with. It makes him wonder how Merrick can be friends with Rachel, who all but abandoned her father.

“Rachel was suffocating,” Merrick says, “she was depressed. If you stay in the environment where you got sick, you can’t heal. La Push was toxic for her. It wasn’t easy, knowing her family and friends all resented her for taking care of herself.”

Paul narrows his eyes at her. “Jake was only fourteen,” he growls, “he needed his sisters. It wasn’t easy for us, me and Embry and Quil, picking up their fucking slack. Rachel and Rebecca should’ve been there.”

Merrick gnaws on the inside of her cheek and looks up into his eyes. “Sometimes the right thing for you can be the wrong thing from every other angle,” she murmurs. “Sometimes you don’t get an easy choice.”

“I do,” Merrick tells him matter-of-factly, “but if you want to help me out, I’m not going to say no.”

Paul wheels Merrick down a winding cement path that goes around one side of the house and stops at a weathered gate spackled with peeling yellow paint and a wire fence moonlighting as a trellis festooned with trees pruned to look almost like candlesticks. There’s another pergola looming behind the wooden gate, the wisteria blooms dripping out a sweet cloying smell. When he wheels her into the garden, all of the flowers turn and face Merrick like she’s the fucking sun. Uncanny. Paul unwinds the hose spiraling in a ceramic pot and she telekinetically spins the spigot to turn the water on.

There are sunflowers and stargazer lilies towering over him in one garden bed, sugar peas sprouting from vines climbing a wooden obelisk topped with a bird feeder on a small platform. Plastic arches of tubing hold strips of netting over bushes of blueberries and raspberries in another. There’s an urn full of garlic and chives, a patch of lettuce heads, spines of rosemary and oregano. It’s overwhelming, the cacophony of scents invading his nostrils.

Paul watches her water everything meticulously, stopping every so often to pick something ripe. Cabbage white and pale tiger swallowtail butterflies land on the crown of her head, her frizzy brown hair glinting with a copper burnish in the sunlight. Scald perches on the bronze cap on top of the fencepost in the northeast corner of the garden and stares at him with fathomless eyes.

“So,” Merrick says and ekes the oh sound out into a soft ooh to break the silence, “what was up with you sniffing me and biting my neck?”

Paul clenches his jaw and groans at a susurrant pitch too low for a human to hear as the vivid memory of almost marking her makes his dick twitch and throb in his jeans. “It’s a wolf thing,” he mutters, “you smell too fucking good. I lost my shit. I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” Merrick says quietly.

Paul huffs. “I won’t let it happen again unless you want it,” he says.

Something about the gentle edge in his gruff voice makes her believe that he means it. Maybe because he stopped as soon as she told him to stop. Sometimes actions speak louder than words. “Okay,” Merrick says and tilts her head up and back to look at him before she asks, “what do you think I smell like?”

Paul licks his lips. “You smell like ozone,” he says, “licorice and rain. Sweet. You taste even better.”

Merrick gulps and blushes from her ears to the tops of her breasts again. “Please stop flirting with me,” she mumbles. “I’m too awkward. I can’t take it.”

Paul grits his teeth around a frustrated growl because his imprint isn’t wearing a bra and her nipples are hard. If she wasn’t a virgin, he would take the faint puff of her arousal as a fucking invitation. “I mean it,” he says. “I want you so bad—you have no fucking idea.”

“You want me because of the bond,” Merrick tells him softly. “It’s not real.”

Paul inhales deeply through his nose and catches a sour whiff of her anxiety mixed in with all of the floral and herb scents in the garden. “It feels real,” he says.
“I know,” Merrick says, “that’s why it’s freaking me out. I don’t know if I’m attracted to you because of the imprint bond or because I can be myself with you…” she twitches her nose à la Samantha Stephens and bites her bottom lip before she articulates, “…I just know that I’m feeling really fucking overwhelmed.”

Paul watches the butterflies scatter in a tumult of fluttering wings as she claws the fingers of her left hand into the soft frizz of her hair. “I get that,” he tells her.

Merrick shakes her head slowly. “I don’t think you do,” she retorts. “I was normal, until I wasn’t, and unlike you, I am alone. I can’t do magic around my family because they’re all normal and it creeps them out that I’m paranormal. I’m not a pack animal. I don’t—”

Paul catches and holds her gaze. “You’re mine now,” he says with soft vehemence. “You’re not alone.”

Oh, Merrick thinks as he stares into her eyes. Please don’t say that. Or you’re going to make me think we actually belong together. “Look,” she murmurs, “we didn’t choose this, and we can’t change it. I like you so far. I don’t like being out of my comfort zone, but that’s not your fault. I have issues, like I said.”

Paul grins at her. Merrick is brutally honest—she doesn’t play games. Which is perfect, since Paul got sick of games before he imprinted on her. It makes him think the magic behind the mating instinct chose her because she’s exactly what he needs. “I like you too,” he says, like he means it.

Merrick smiles at him shyly. “Okay,” she says, “so let’s do what people in like do.”

Paul waggles his eyebrows at her as his grin devolves into a filthy smirk.

Merrick snorts. “Not that,” she giggles. “Jeepers. I meant we could go out to dinner and talk, like a date.”

Paul grins at her again, wolfishly. “You’re asking me out,” he says.

“Yup,” Merrick says and pops the p sound, “and you can say yes or you can say no. It’s your choice.”

---

[32] Rachel wasn’t aware that werewolves are real at this point because Paul didn’t imprint on her in this AU. Merrick found her in the woods in August of 2010, so Merrick had just turned 19 and Rachel was 24. Paul was 22.


[34] W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming” (1919).

[35] Hyposmia is another word for olfactory hypersensitivity.

[36] Three Rivers is a resort in Forks with a gas station and a convenience store. Paul had to quit his part-time job after he phased, because Sam thought he might lose his temper and wolf out in front of the tourists.

[37] I’m not condemning or condoning the choices Rachel and Rebecca made. I just think Paul would have a problem with those choices, because his loyalty to the tribe is one of the only character traits he canonically has besides “hotheaded” and “hungry like the wolf” (see: New Moon, Chapter 14). I’m actually kind of pissed off about how that scene was adapted in the book, because his anger was totally justified in the book and they replaced that nuance with Bella slapping him.
**New Knowledge**

_I know no love without teeth
and have the scars to remember._

_Trace those scars and you have a map
 to my heart. Open carefully. I will not die._

José Olivarez, “I Wake in a Field of Wolves with the Moon”

---

**The Myth of Blackbirds**

**Chapter 5**

New Knowledge

Merrick has always been a catastrophizer and being a witch has only made that old habit go from bad to worse. Paul is the kind of guy that she would hate under any other circumstances: cocky, loud, tall, dark, and handsome, and too hot to handle in the literal and figural sense of the phrase. If he’d imprinted on her when they were teenagers, she would’ve thought he was fucking with her like the assholes who used to ask her out as a joke in junior high and then laugh in her face. There’s no way a guy like him would be going out with her without the magical intervention. Merrick isn’t ugly or undateable, but she’s not in the habit of being noticed—especially not in the aftermath of attracting the kind of attention that almost got her ass killed by the Ard-Rí of Seattle.[38]

This whole imprinting thing is just one more disaster she can add to her generous supply.[39] Meeting her soulmate is something that she never saw coming, but she’s not opposed to seeing where it goes. If only it were that easy.

Merrick parks her CR-V in a handicapped spot and glances at Paul in the passenger seat as she telekinetically pulls her blue placard out of the glovebox and hangs it from the rearview mirror. “I should warn you that dating me could be hazardous to your health,” she says. “I do have genetic risk factors that predispose me to rheumatoid arthritis, but those HLA-DRB1 genes didn’t express themselves until my biological father put a curse on me. Negative energies can exacerbate or even cause diseases, and—”

“We don’t get sick,” Paul interjects, “except for Leah, but PCOS is a hormonal thing.”

Merrick shakes her head slowly. “PCOS has genetic risk factors too,” she informs him as she unbuckles her seatbelt. “Most health problems are caused by a combination of contributing genetic and environmental risk factors. Negative energies like stress or anxiety or depression can be used as catalysts for curses to cause health problems or make those problems worse. I just…” she bites her lip and looks at him over the awkward hunch of her shoulder, “…don’t want you to get hurt.”

Paul exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils and smiles more to himself than at her before he impulsively leans in and kisses her on the cheek, his lips hot enough to make her legs quake and spine quiver even with only the quickest and quietest touch. “Consider me warned,” he whispers conspiratorially.

Merrick sits in her CR-V with her mouth ajar until Paul opens the door for her and holds it while she grabs her cane and tries to ignore the goosebumps revving up all over her arms, her pilomotor
reflex going into overdrive because of him.

On the bright side, she’s not in pain anymore. After she took a hot shower and popped two Advil, her ankle stopped being too inflamed for walking. On the dark side, this is her first date—her first date ever, not just her first date with Paul.

Merrick takes him to one of her favorite restaurants at the Poulsbo marina, the waterfront on the kitschy side of town. Paul inhales the smell of fried fish as she hobbles inside and stops in front of the host, who seats them at a booth in one corner. Merrick tucks her cane against the wall and sits on the side of the booth facing the entrance, not even bothering to look at the menu. Paul smiles at the sound of her stomach growling, a soft gurgle that he only hears because he’s more wolf than man at the moment. Merrick smiles back shyly and takes one of her earrings out, a small tarnished silver disk.

“I’m going to charm this and make an omnicountercurse,” she informs him. “I want you to wear it until I can make another one for you using a piece of jewelry or something else of yours. Rachel told me that you’re immune to some vampire gifts, but not all of them. Which,” she curls her fingers into a fist around the earring and he inhales the spike of petrichor and ozone in her scent, “means your ancestral magic probably won’t protect you from the kind of power that my biological father has. I’m not saying your ancestral magic isn’t powerful—it’s powerful enough that looking at all of you in the woods yesterday was sensory hell for me and that means it’s pretty damn strong—but he can use the collective energy of every witch bound to him. Unless the energy of every Quileute who’s ever lived and died is empowering your wolf pack, you’re metaphysically outgunned.”

Paul takes the earring in the palm of her hand and fills the empty hole in his left ear. It tingles with the resonance of her power, and he can feel the residual warmth of her palm on his fingertips. “I’m not just Quileute. I’m Purépecha too,” he tells her, “my grandfather on my mother’s side is a sikuáme[^40]—a medicine man.”

Merrick cocks her head crowishly. “Maybe you have my kind of magic in your blood,” she murmurs.

Paul frowns, the space between his sharp eyebrows furrowing. It never occurred to him that his grandfather might actually be magical—he only met the man once, when he was five years old. What if his mother isn’t just the bitch who abandoned him after she moved back to Mexico and married some asshole who wasn’t his father? Maybe she’s a shikuápiri,[^41] like his imprint. “Wouldn’t you be able to see it, if I did?” he asks.

“No,” Merrick says and shakes her head so her damp braid oscillates like a pendulum behind her back. “Magic is pure metaphysical energy. Those energies can be tainted by your intent and your emotions and influenced by your personality and your bloodline, but the raw magic in your blood is just internal energy. I can’t tell what kind of power you have if you’re not using it. Unless you bleed for me,” she wrinkles her nose in disgust before she clarifies, “I could probably taste the difference between the Quileute shapeshifter magic and potential for Purépecha sikuáme magic in your blood.”

Paul grins at how careful she is with the pronunciation of the words she doesn’t know. There’s no stumbling or fumbling in her soft voice, only respect. “It’s sikuákua,” he tells her, “the Purépecha word for magic.”

“It’s híḳshil in Quileute, right?” Merrick asks. “Rachel told me.”

Paul flips the menu in front of him open and nods his answer to her question. Merrick orders the arctic cod fish and chips with extra coleslaw on the side as soon as the server comes to the table.
Paul cocks one sharp eyebrow at that before he orders the sourdough onion ring platter and a Poulsbo burger to start. “So you’re actually a pescatarian,” he says.

“Yup,” Merrick says and pops the p sound. “I’m not allergic to fish.”

*Good to know,* Paul thinks. There’s a traditional salmon bake during the Quileute Days festival every summer, and he wants to bring her as his date. It would be kind of a downer if she couldn’t eat salmon without going into anaphylactic shock.

“Rachel also said your tribe has secret societies,” Merrick says, “are those something an imprint is allowed to ask questions about?”

Paul takes a sip of his water and nods again. “Yeah,” he says. “There are five: the tlókwali or wolf society is for warriors, the ñsayík society is for fishermen and sealers, the ḥsixwsłlayo or elk society is for land hunters, the sìbåxwolåy or whale-hunter society was for whalers, and the čcalá’låyö society is for people with a guardian spirit that lets them control the weather.[42] Our tlókwali ceremonials were outlawed by the federal government because the warriors used to mutilate themselves during the rituals. It’s not like my great-grandfather or his pack brothers could explain werewolf healing to the feds. Our pack are hètsáq, members of the wolf society with guardian spirits—members who don’t have guardian spirits are hètåyalsa’. “[43]

“You hunt whales?” Merrick stares at him with her gray eyes wide and incredulous behind her glasses. “Eschrichtius robustus are an endangered species.”

Paul shakes his head and smirks, because of course his imprint knows the scientific name for gray whales. “We don’t hunt whales anymore,” he says, “the Makah are trying to fight for the right to hunt whales…”[44] he shuts his mouth and narrows his eyes at his imprint as her shoulders go taut and the stench of her fear invades his nostrils. Paul follows her line of sight to a gangly white guy with tousled brown hair and a wispy moustache clinging to the edges of his upper lip. There’s a blonde with him, short and curvy like a pinup girl—like Merrick, in fact. “Who’s that?” he asks, voice low and dangerous.

Merrick gnaws on the inside of her cheek. “Daniel,” she mumbles, “my ex-boyfriend. We dated for three months in high school.”


“Daniel isn’t just my ex-boyfriend,” Merrick tells him, “he raped me.”

Paul stares at his imprint and a look of feral rage fumes on his face before he almost explodes out of the booth. Merrick stops him with a hand on his forearm and calm smacks into him like a sucker punch. It reminds him of that blond Southern leech, the one who had the power to force anyone to feel anything.

“I’m sorry for bewitching you without your consent,” Merrick whispers urgently, “but you’re not going to shapeshift into a ginormous wolf in this restaurant. I love their coleslaw and I’m not in the mood to expose the existence of the paranormal to the general public because you have no chill.”

Paul inhales deeply through his nose and lets the sound of her soft voice calm him, more natural than supernatural. It doesn’t matter how he feels, so volatile that his blood is boiling with the need to phase. This isn’t about him or his anger. It’s about his imprint, the center of his universe.

“Rachel said you were a virgin,” he blurts out, “you can’t be a virgin if you were raped.”

“Okay,” Merrick says and ekes the y sound out awkwardly, “if you want to get technical, I lost
my virginity to a high beam when I was twelve. It tore my hymen in the aftermath of a straddle jump that went horribly wrong. I’m just lucky that I didn’t bleed on the apparatus, or I would’ve had to buy the gym a new beam.”

Paul barks out a laugh as the calm trickles into a pure warmth that blooms deep in his chest. It makes him wince to imagine her falling and getting hit between her legs, but the fact that a beam popped her cherry on the fly is pretty hilarious. “Seriously?” he asks.

“Yup,” Merrick says and pops the p sound. “Also, virginity is a social construct anyway. It’s not like sex is quantifiably defined as one penetrative act. There’s vaginal sex, oral sex, intercrural sex, anal sex, fingerfucking, handjob, titfucking, all that jazz. What matters is whether or not the act is consensual. Which is why I’m still a virgin. What happened with me and Daniel wasn’t consensual. Ergo, it wasn’t sex—it was rape. It’s mechanically the same, but quantifiably different.”

There she goes again, talking about sex like it’s something that can be analyzed to death. Almost clinically detached. Which, he realizes, must be a coping mechanism—a way for her to stay in her comfort zone and distance herself from her trauma. It’s no wonder his imprint is terrified of her feelings, if her first and only experience with sex wasn’t consensual. This must be what Rachel meant when she told him Merrick has been through a lot. Daniel is watching them in his periphery, and it takes every ounce of his self-control not to phase and eliminate the threat to his mate. With his teeth.

“I wanna bite his fucking head off,” Paul growls.

Merrick smiles at him, the soft twist of her mouth slow and sweet like strychnine. “I don’t need you to fight my battles for me,” she murmurs. “I already cursed him to never get an erection again.”

Paul grins at her, wide and warm. Never in the history of the world has impotence been so fucking sexy. “So,” he says and stretches the oh sound out into an innuendo, “why didn’t you curse me last night?”

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered. “I feel safe with you,” she tells him, “and I’m not just saying that because of the imprint bond. Unlike him, you stopped when I told you to stop. Maybe you were a manwhore once upon a time, but I can tell you have more respect for me and my bodily autonomy than he ever did.”

Paul swallows hard. “I will never hurt you,” he says with slow vehemence. “I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do.”

Merrick smiles at him again. There’s nothing poisonous in the curve of her lips now, only a fragile something that he almost doesn’t recognize as hope. It makes his heart ache for her and he impulsively takes her tiny pale hand, curling his fingers around hers protectively and possessively. “I don’t want to make you be something you’re not,” she says. “I don’t want you to change for me.”

“Okay.” Paul squeezes her fingers and reluctantly stops holding her hand because dinner is served. “I won’t.”

Paul has such a good time with Merrick that he almost forgets about his niggling gut feeling that he might have the genetic potential for witchcraft, but it keeps simmering in the back of his mind until it bubbles up and boils over. “So,” he says and shuts the front door behind them as she hobbles into the foyer and kicks her shoes off, “can I bleed for you now?”
Merrick turns and looks at him over the hunch of her shoulder. “What?” she asks.

Paul shrugs with forced nonchalance as he curls his hands into fists to hide the way his fingers and palms are trembling with anticipation. “We might have to fight the Volturi over you,” he points out, “or the witches who want you dead. If there’s some other kind of magic in my blood, I want to know about it so I can learn how to use it.”

Merrick bites her lip and chews anxiously before she nods. “Okay,” she says. “Just let me put my extra coleslaw in the fridge.”

Paul extracts a chrome Zippo lighter with a howling wolf emblem on the casing from his pocket and uses the flame to sterilize one of the knives from the carving block in the kitchen. It’s not like he can get blood poisoning, but his imprint is immunocompromised and he wants to use the lighter he inherited from his father for something other than setting dismembered leeches on fire for once. Paul slices one of his fingertips and holds it up in front of her lips. “Hurry,” he tells her. “I heal pretty fast.”

Merrick gulps audibly before she curls the fingers of both hands around his wrist and takes his finger into her mouth, her sweet tongue swirling gently over the open wound. Paul can’t help imagining her on her knees with his dick in her mouth, his fingers in her soft frizzy hair. It’s pretty hot, until she stops sucking on his finger and chokes on a gagging noise she makes in the back of her throat.

Paul watches her spit a wad of saliva and coagulated blood into the sink, feeling kind of insulted by the look of pure revulsion on her plump face. “What,” he bites out, “do I taste bad?”

“No.” Merrick shakes her head and covers her mouth with one hand while she awkwardly flails the other to reopen the fridge. “There’s a spell in your blood,” she informs him as she telekinetically pours herself a cup of strawberry lemonade.

Paul frowns, the space between his sharp eyebrows furrowing. “What?” he asks.

Merrick slurps a sip of lemonade and puts her plastic cup on the granite island. “It’s a binding spell,” she clarifies, “I tasted the intent fueling the binding in your blood. It tasted vile. It’s also rooted deep in your cells. Whoever did this has been dosing you with some kind of brew for at least ten years. It’s in the marrow of your bones, where blood cells are made. Who would want to stop you from being a witch that badly?”

Paul growls low in his throat. “It was my grandmother,” he says and gnashes his teeth around the words as the sting of betrayal sinks in, “her twin sister is a wà·sañò·patñì·kàt—a medicine woman. It must’ve been her.”[45]

Merrick flops to sit on a stool by the island and hunches her shoulders as she exhales a loud whoosh of air in a futile attempt to decompress. “Crap,” she mumbles before she slurps another sip of strawberry lemonade. “Paul, I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to open up a magical can of worms—”

Paul shakes his head so fast he almost shudders out of his human skin. It hurts, knowing that his grandmother stole a piece of him that he never knew he was missing. “No,” he snarls. “Not your fault.”

Merrick slips off her stool and shuffles around the corner of the granite island to wrap her arms around him, splaying her small fingers and palms over the convulsing muscles in his back. Paul knows he should tell her to get the hell away from him, but he’s not Sam and she’s not Emily and he’s too selfish to push her away for her own good. Merrick is warm and intolerably soft, with the lingering smell of mayonnaise and fried cod still clinging to her skin on top of her sweet anise
scent. Paul folds one of his arms around her shoulders and scoops the other around her waist to crush her against his chest, tangling his fingers in her soft frizzy hair and lifting her up so he can bury his face in the crook of her neck. “I’m sorry you’re hurting,” she murmurs, “whether it’s my fault or not.”

Paul inhales deeply through his nose and nuzzles her neck before he unsnarls the fingers in her hair and pulls back to look at her. “I want you to break the binding spell,” he says. “I know you’re burned out right now, but can you?”

“It’s not that I can’t,” Merrick tells him, “but I don’t know if I should. This binding spell is part of you. It’s in your bones, like I said. I won’t be able to break it without seriously hurting you. I’d have to burn the residue out of every cell in your—”

Paul clenches his jaw and snarls more in frustration than at her. “I don’t care,” he snaps, “just fucking break it. Please.”

Merrick cocks her head crowsishly and stares up into his eyes before she nods, a sharp descent of her chin. There’s nothing she can do about his grandmother being a bitch—all she can do is be here for Paul by undoing the binding spell and giving him back the choice his grandmother and her twin sister took away from him. Hell, she’s one of the only people in the world capable of countering magic rooted so deeply in the body of someone who’s been spellbound for so many years. Maybe that’s why he imprinted on her. “Okay,” she says, “let’s go upstairs. There are seventy trillion cells in our bodies, and thirty-eight trillion of those are human. I don’t care how fast you heal. Chances are you’re going to pass out from sensory overload, and I’m too crippled to carry you anywhere.”

Paul narrows his eyes at that. “What’re the other thirty-two trillion?” he asks.

“Bacteria and other microbial cells,” Merrick tells him matter-of-factly.

Paul wrinkles his nose in disgust. “Ew,” he says.

“Be careful what you ask for,” Merrick deadpans as she hobbles up the stairs into the guest bedroom.

June 10, 2018

Merrick puts up a soundproof barrier so the neighbors won’t hear him scream and burns the binding spell out of his body. It takes eight hours because she’s running on thaumaturgical fumes. After the overstimulation from the counterspell makes him pass out, she opens her eyes and stares at him while she works. Paul is even prettier with the angry furrows in his brow smoothed out and his mouth ajar in a way that makes him look almost vulnerable. There’s sweat beading like pearls on his forehead and staining the fabric of his shirt with blots, damp and darker than black. Merrick has this absurd urge to lick the drops of sweat on his upper lip, and it’s making her uncomfortable. Nobody has ever seemed lickable to her before.

Underneath the vile binding spell, the magic in his blood tasted like saffron: musky and bittersweet. Those intentions behind the binding weren’t bad—his grandmother wasn’t trying to hurt him. It was still a violation of the worst kind.

Merrick sighs. Okay, she thinks. Maybe I’m projecting. It’s not like she left him defenseless against his enemies. Paul was still able to shapeshift into a ginormous wolf, the wound on his finger healed before I spat his spellbound blood out in the sink, and he’s preternaturally strong.
Quileute lycanthropes are ostensibly human with a genetic mutation that confers the potential for shapeshifting. If the locus of their werewolf gene is a recessive allele with a transgressive phenotype, recombination with the witch gene might have been able to non-additively supersede the expression of that phenotype. I think his grandmother just wanted to make sure that he would be a werewolf, not a witch.[46]

Paul groans as she dabs at the sweat on his face and grabs her hand, curling his fingers around the bend of her wrist and nuzzling his cheek into the hollow of her palm.

Merrick drops the crumpled tissue in her hand on the pillow by his head and touches his face with tentative fingertips. “How do you feel?” she wants to know.

Paul exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils, his breath hot on the heel of her hand. “I feel like shit,” he rasps.

Merrick gulps as he strokes the calloused pad of his thumb back and forth over the soft thin skin on the inside of her wrist. “Jacob called,” she murmurs, “and your friend Jared is coming to pick you up in…” she glances at the digital clock on the dresser in one corner of the guestroom and sees that it’s fuck off o’clock in the morning, “…six hours. If you’d told me that you were missing work to hang out with me, I would’ve told you to go home yesterday. I’m not actually the center of the universe, and I’m not going to ruin your life by making you revolve around me like a moon in orbit.”

“I can’t just go home without you,” Paul growls. “I can’t protect you from La Push.”

Merrick arches her eyebrows at him like a challenge. “I’m one of the most powerful witches in the world,” she informs him. “I’m perfectly capable of protecting myself.”

[38] Ard-Rí is ancient Goidelic for “high king.”


[40] Sikuáme is the Purépecha word for “medicine man.”

[41] Shikuápiri is the Purépecha word for “witch.”

[42] Frachtenberg, Leo J. “The Ceremonial Societies of the Quileute Indians.” American Anthropologist, vol. 23, no. 3 (1921): p. 320-352. I have no idea how accurate this information is, since (a) the research was conducted by a white guy, and (b) the article was published almost a hundred years ago. Frachtenberg himself calls his descriptions of the ceremonials a “bird’s eye view” of the Quileute secret societies. Still, the self-mutilation aspect of the tłókwali ritual makes perfect sense if the dancers were werewolves with accelerated healing capabilities. Although most of these secret rituals aren’t specifically Quileute—the wolf, fishing, and whale-hunting ceremonials were borrowed from the Kwakwá̱k̓a’wakw by way of the Makah, while the weather ceremonials were borrowed from the Quinault tribe. Only the hunting or elk ceremonials originated from the Quileute tribe.

[43] Hétsáq (heh-T-ss-ah-Q) is Quileute for “spirit-people.” It literally translates as “he who sings.” Hétáya’sláqa’ (heh-T-ah-ya-ss-la-QUA) is Quileute for “people-without-spirit.” It literally translates as “he who is sung for.”

[44] According to the 1855 Treaty of Neah Bay, the Makah tribe have the right to hunt North Pacific gray whales (Eschrichtius robustus). Since gray whales are endangered, the Makah didn’t go whaling for seventy-three years (1926-1999). Now they’re fighting to regain the right to whale, despite opposition from animal rights groups and government agencies.

[45] Wi-sats̱ó-patfí-kat (weh sat-SO pah-tay-AH kah-T) is Quileute for “medicine woman.” I’m including the actual
words in this story because terms like “medicine people” or “shamans” aren’t terms that tribes actually use to
describe their religious leaders or faith healers—they use specific words in their native languages and I want to
respect that.

[46] According to Stephenie Meyer, the Quileute shapeshifters have an extra pair of chromosomes (see: Breaking
Dawn, Chapter 12). Ostensibly the locus for their werewolf gene is somewhere in that extra part of their genomes.
This would suggest that Quileute shapeshifters are a product of hybrid speciation: an extant species or subspecies.
Which doesn’t mean they’re not human, but they’re not *H. s. sapiens* (e.g. witches are taxonomically classified as
*Homo sapiens magi* as opposed to *Homo sapiens sapiens* and werewolves are taxonomically classified as *Homo
sapiens lupi*). Some hybrid species express genetic traits inherited from either one or both of their parents, but
epistatic and hypostatic genetic traits can be additively or non-additively expressed through recombination and
mutation. Basically, if Paul inherited the genetic potential for both witchcraft and werewolfism, his witch gene
could’ve rendered his werewolf gene inexpressible. Jane and Mary started dosing him with the binding potion as
soon as the Cullens returned to Forks in 2003 to make sure that he would be able to phase and protect the tribe.
Ancestors Who Do Not Forget

Even the subatomic particles were a lie,
first three, now four, then dozens. Are quarks a mythology?
Pluto a non-planet, at most a moon? Remember:
one, top scientists believed the Earth was flat,
leeches cured pneumonia, girls could not be colorblind
or dyslexic. Reserve your skepticism not just
for the annals of religion, or politics, but also for the article
about fish oil, that latest study on hematology. Remember:
policemen read skulls for evidence of murder.
Your experience may not be statistically significant.
Observation changes your outcomes. Measurement matters.

Jeannine Hall Gailey, “Introduction to Junk Science”

The Myth of Blackbirds
Chapter 6
Ancestors Who Do Not Forget

Jared knocks on her front door at nine AM sharp. Merrick is too burned out to get up and hobble
downstairs, so the witch telekinetically unlocks and opens the door instead. “We’re upstairs,” she
tells him without bothering to shout. Paul was able to hear her cry out in pain even with the dryer
toiling and troubling. Jared should be able to hear her from the foyer at a volume that won’t
exacerbate her massive metaphysical migraine.

Paul is still clinging to her wrist. Merrick could’ve used magic to give him the slip or make him let
her go, but instead she crawled into bed with him and took a power nap. Paul is preternaturally hot
—his euthermic body temperature is a smoldering 108.9 °F. Merrick has always run cold, at
97.6 °F. When she woke up warm and woozy, she found herself with her head on his chest. It felt
so right, being tucked under his muscular arm with the heat radiating from his body seeping into
her skin.

Merrick translocates herself out of bed to put some distance between her and her alleged soulmate.
When he opens the door to the guestroom, Jared narrows his eyes at her bedraggled hair before he
looks her up and down. Merrick is fully dressed in a wrinkled green floral print sundress and black
leggings with braces wrapped around both of her wrists and strapped to her left ankle, the shiny
black strap of her balconette bra slipping out from underneath her dress to droop over the curve of
her upper arm. There’s no telltale smell of sex permeating the room or lingering on their bodies,
just the scent of cold sweat and a residual stink of pain.

“Embry owes me twenty bucks,” Jared says. “I told him Paul wouldn’t seal the deal.”

Merrick rolls her eyes at him behind her glasses. Jared’s been my best friend since fifth grade,
Paul had told her, he’s one of the smartest guys I know. If they’re best friends, she might as well
spill her guts. “Paul was busy letting me cast a counterspell on him,” she informs him, “his body
was tearing itself apart on a cellular level trying to break the binding spell in his blood. Whoever
brewed the binding potion didn’t understand that one dose would’ve sufficed, and he ended up
taking a supplementary dose every week for almost fifteen years. I tasted a drop of fellenwort in
“What the hell is fellenwort?” Jared asks.

Merrick conjures a sprig of a plant with ovoid vermillion berries into the palm of her hand. “Solanum dulcamara,” she says, “also known as Amara dulcis, bittersweet, felonwood, violetbloom, poisonflower, snakeberry, and blue nightshade. It’s an herb typically used in potions or brews to protect the drinker from witchcraft,” she conjures the sprig in between her fingers out of sight and sighs. “It’s also toxic, especially the berries. Ingesting a minor dose over time causes liver necrosis and cardiorespiratory failure. If your species didn’t have a phenomenal healing factor, he wouldn’t be a werewolf or a witch…” she adjusts her glasses and tilts her head crowishly before she clarifies, “…he would be dead.”

“Shit.” Jared slants his gaze to Paul, who’s dead to the world but still breathing—and snoring like a garbage disposal clogged with loose screws. “Your magic worked, right?” he asks her. “You broke the spell he was under?”

Merrick hums, a quiet uh-huh. “I’m probably the only witch in the country with the power to cast that kind of counterspell by myself,” she murmurs, “undoing the binding and healing all of his damaged cells was a thaumaturgical working that would typically take the power of a whole circle of witches to cast.”

Jared stares at her with a shrewd look in his dark brown eyes. “What makes you so powerful?” he wants to know.


“How much danger is our pack in because of you?” Jared asks. There’s no accusation or anger in his voice, only a cunning pinch of curiosity. Merrick didn’t choose Paul, and she can’t change who her biological father is. It’s not like she intended for him to imprint on her and drag the wolf pack into a supernatural turf war in the process.

Merrick shrugs again, tilting her earlobe to meet her shoulder. “I don’t know,” she answers honestly. “There are way too many variables and unknown quantities with the Volturi involved. I can tell you that I charmed an omnicountercurse for Paul, and I made it with the intent to protect all of you from harmful energies through your pack bond. Which is pretty similar to how witches consolidate power—by forming magic circles and binding themselves to each other with hemomancy—but I’m not going to make any of you swear a blood oath to share your magic with me. I have more than enough power by myself. If you want to know anything else about the minutiae of witch politics, ask me. I’m an open grimoire.”

Jared nods curtly. “I’ll save the interrogation for after you move to the rez,” he says. “Paul imprinted on you for a reason. I may not trust you, but I trust the magic of our tribe.” It was the magic of his tribe that got him together with Kim, after all.

Merrick steals a glance at Paul and gnaws on the inside of her cheek. “Maybe your ancestral magic knew somehow that I was powerful enough to save his life,” she murmurs. Unfortunately, her theory fails to explain her instant attraction to Paul or how absurdly safe she felt sleeping in the protective circle of his arms.

“Yeah.” Jared catches her sneaking a glance and smiles more to himself than at her as a flush of pink suffuses her pale cheeks. “Maybe.”

Paul wakes up with a grunt and sits up abruptly. “Merrick?” he rasps, his deep voice drenched in the hoarse dregs of sleep.
“I’m right here,” Merrick tells him softly.

Paul turns and looks at Jared standing in the doorway before he stares forlornly at his imprint. “You’re seriously kicking me out?” he asks.

Merrick arches her eyebrows at him. “I have a moving truck to rent and a metaphysical archive of memories I absorbed from the vampires we killed to psychometrically read through,” she retorts, “you have a job to get back to and a grandmother who poisoned you with fellenwort to confront. I’ll text you after—”

Paul huffs. “Why can’t you come back with us and conjure your crap into my house?” he wants to know.

“Same reason I paid an exorbitant amount of money to ship my shit here from Missouri after I finished grad school,” Merrick says, “because moving without any kind of record is too suspicious. I don’t want to give the F. B. I. or the Department of Defense or the C. I. A. an excuse to lock me up in a secret lab somewhere and turn me into a test subject for their mad science experiments. Stargate Project is still active, you know. Only it’s called the Spectrous Project now and its primary area of investigation is determining the origin of a strange venomous substance that has been discovered in trace amounts by forensic scientists at the scenes of thousands of murders and unexplained disappearances all over the country in the last few decades.”

Jared has to shut his mouth to stop himself from gaping at the implications of that. “Wait,” he says incredulously, “the government is investigating bloodsuckers?”

“Yup,” Merrick says and pops the p sound, “although they don’t know exactly what they’re investigating. Yet. Luckily vampires are fast enough to avoid getting caught on camera and most of them are smart enough not to let anyone witness their feedings, but they secrete microscopic amounts of venom instead of sweat and they can’t avoid leaving trace evidence behind even if all they did at the scene was snatch their victim.”

Paul frowns, the space between his sharp eyebrows furrowing. “How do you know all that?” he asks.

Merrick bites her lip and chews anxiously before she answers. “I have a friend who infiltrated the Science and Technology Branch of the F. B. I. five years ago,” she informs him, “she’s a dhampir—a half vampire, half human hybrid. I provide her with charms and spells to help her pass for pure human, and in exchange she feeds me top secret information about what shady paramilitary scientists are doing to investigate the existence of the supernatural.”

Paul stares at her with his mouth ajar. Jared is gaping at her with a similarly gobsmacked look on his face. What the fuck, Paul thinks. Seriously. What the fuck? La Push is their corner of the world and their job is to protect the people in their corner from leeches, so they never paid attention to what might be going on in the otherworld outside of their territory. Hell, they only know about the pack of werewolves in Kennewick because they caught one of the wolves—also named Paul—hunting in the woods near Second Beach one summer while he was on vacation.

“Wait,” Jared echoes and breaks the silence, “did you say a vampire-human hybrid?”

Merrick nods, a sharp descent of her chin. “Yup,” she says and pops the p sound. “There aren’t many in the world, since human women aren’t typically capable of carrying a half-vampire fetus to term and it’s been illegal for male vampires to have sex with human women since the eighth century according to the laws of the Volturi. I know four dhampirs personally, and they all had the same vampire father. Serena, May, and Nahuel were all born in the nineteenth century—
Serena in Norway in 1810, May in Algeria in 1820, and Nahuel in Argentina in 1850—and Jen was born in 1991.”

“How?” Paul wants to know.

Merrick sighs, a soft whoosh of air that slips out of her mouth. “It’s a long story,” she mumbles. “There was a vampire born in Portugal in the late sixteenth century—his name was Joham, and he was a mad scientist. When he traveled to the Balkans in the eighteenth century, he became intrigued by the legends of dhampirs and decided that his destiny was to sire a superior race of vampire-human hybrids. Since he discovered that vampire ‘gifts’—” she crooks her fingers like quotations marks around the word, “—were rooted in diluted witch bloodlines in the seventeenth century, his first experiment was forcibly impregnating a witch and a human and studying the progress of their pregnancies. Neither of his subjects was able to carry a hybrid fetus to term, and both women died. Serena wasn’t born until almost forty years after that, and May was born a decade later. When he traveled to South America, they called him Lobisomem.[54] Ironically, people in Brazil thought he was a werewolf, not a vampire.”

“So,” Jared says as Paul growls low in his throat and curls his hands into fists to stop them from shaking, “is this leech someone we need to worry about?”

Merrick bites her lip and shakes her head slowly. “No,” she murmurs, “I killed him eight years ago. Nahuel is anomalous, because he’s venomous even though his sisters aren’t. After he was born, he chewed his way out of his mother and unintentionally changed her and his aunt Huilen into vampires. Pire and Huilen stopped Joham from taking him, and they spent the next century tracking him around the world and disrupting his attempts to create more hybrids. Which is why he only sired four children who survived into adulthood. Nahuel was able to track his father to this house and they found me outside by the bonfire pit roasting marshmallows over his burning corpse. Joham was using his daughters as breeders—with semen from other male vampires with ‘gifts,’ not his own sperm—but Serena and May are infertile and Jen was able to induce miscarriages with the magic she inherited from her witch mother. Jen is actually part of the reason I got a job at Peninsula College, because she lives in Forks with her grandmother now.”

Paul frowns exponentially harder, because he knows a girl named Jennifer who lives in Forks with her grandmother. “Jennifer Ford?” he asks.[55]

Merrick nods again, a quick bob of her head. “Yup,” she says and pops the p sound. “How do you know Jen?”

“Jen is Seth’s mate,” Jared snarls, “he imprinted on her four years ago.”

Merrick chokes on a cackle and slaps her left hand over her mouth to muffle the sound. “Jeepers,” she mumbles into the hollow of her palm. “Disney was right. It’s a small world after all.”

After she explains that dhampirs can subsist on human food and that Jen hasn’t drunk even a drop of human blood since Nahuel broke her out of the compound where she was being held captive and forcibly inseminated with semen from “gifted” male vampires,[56] Jared unceremoniously drags Paul out of her parents’ house and Merrick calls the moving truck rental company before she takes another power nap. When she wakes up, she takes a hot shower and eats a macaroni and cheese sandwich with a side of coleslaw before she conjures her archive of memories and psychometrically searches the books for evidence that her biological father was responsible for orchestrating this whole mess. Until her phone buzzes and a text message from Jen pops up.

Get your ass to La Push right now! her phone screams at her. Merrick can almost hear Jen
shouting from two hundred and nine miles away, even though she hasn’t spoken to her in three and a half years. Okay, she thinks, at least now I know why that bitch ghosted me: she met her soulmate and dropped our friendship like a hot potato.

When she hobbles back downstairs, Beckham is chowing down on the kibble she poured into his bowl. Merrick clips his leash to his collar and loops the soft nylon rope around her arthritic wrist before she opens the French doors with a wiggle of her fingers and a dash of telekinesis. Scald flutters inside to land on her shoulder with a caw. Merrick shuts her eyes and focuses on the paragravitational force of the imprint bond tugging at her in a visceral way she was trying and failing to ignore. When she opens them, she looks up and sees an unfamiliar house.

Paul’s house.

It’s a cabin in the woods, a two-story post and beam log home surrounded by pine trees with branches that dangle over the roof in drooping arcs. There’s a balcony with a wooden staircase that descends onto a deck occupied by cluster of people sitting around a small circular table. Jen is the only person she recognizes: a petite girl with dark amber eyes, warm ivory skin, a round face, full pink lips, a dainty nose, and thick wavy ash brown hair. There are three other women sitting with her, all of whom appear to be in the twilight ebb of middle age. Jane Lahote and Mary Foster, the twin daughters of Ephraim Black—the last Quileute chief—and Bonnie Ford, their cousin. Bonnie is half Quileute, half Scottish; she doesn’t look much like her granddaughter with her deep brown eyes, pale brown skin, and dark hair shot through with threads of fuming gray, but they both have the same round face and dainty snub of a nose. Jane is who Paul got those wickedly sharp eyebrows of his from, if nothing else; she doesn’t look impressed by the girl her grandson imprinted on, but Merrick doesn’t give a fuck. Mary is scrutinizing her with an eerie look in her black eyes, like she can see backwards and forwards in time.

“You’re late,” Mary tells her airily. “You should have been here years ago.”


[47] Nicholas Culpeper, The Complete Herbal (1652) originally published as The English Physitian. “It [Amara dulcis] is excellent good to remove witchcraft both in men and beasts, as also all sudden diseases whatsoever.” Culpeper was wrong. Solanum dulcamara is toxic as fuck, although not fatal in trace amounts. Just don’t eat the red berries.

[49] Stargate Project was a codename for a secret unit of the U. S. army established at Fort Meade, Maryland by the Defense Intelligence Agency—a component of the Department of Defense—in 1978 to investigate the existence of ESP and the military applications thereof. It was actually terminated by the C. I. A. in 1995, but in this story the Project is still conducting research in secret.

[50] According to the official illustrated guide, vampires have no circulatory system and they absorb the blood they consume with every cell in their bodies. Somehow. I have no idea how that works if they don’t have a way to circulate the blood they drink. Unless they bathe in blood instead of chugging it, but I digress. Also, “drinking the blood of one human is enough to satiate a mature vampire for a week or two.” So, a mature non-“vegetarian” vampire eats anywhere from twenty-six to fifty-two people a year. There are fifty-seven mature non-“vegetarian” vampires in canon. So, they eat a total of one thousand four hundred and eighty-two people a year at the minimum—and a maximum of two thousand nine hundred and sixty-four people a year. This is something that would eventually get noticed. Which is probably why so many non-“vegetarian” vampires are nomadic, but with advancements in forensic science and technologies it would be possible for human law enforcement to find a pattern. Just saying.

[51] Bella is canonically intoxicated by Edward (see: Twilight, Chapter 13). It’s also canon that changing into a
vampire transmutes all of your biofluids—except seminal fluids, apparently—into venom. Since werewolves can track vampires, ostensibly by scent, I can only assume that vampires secrete venom instead of sweat.

[52] According to the timeline in the official illustrated guide, the Volturi first introduced vampire law in the sixth century and began executing immortal children on a case-by-case basis. Later, in 750 CE, they outlawed the creation of immortal children altogether. Here, male vampires having biological offspring was also outlawed—not because the Volturi gave a shit about the possibility of human women dying in childbirth, but because freaky magical pregnancies were too visible and strange for their liking.

[53] Serena, Maysun, and Jennifer are mentioned by Nahuel in *Breaking Dawn*—they’re his half-sisters. I’m writing my versions of the dhampirs more as the creatures of Balkan folklore than whatever Stephenie Meyer was doing, and Nahuel is less emo in this story because his backstory is different.

[54] Gallop, Rodney. *Portugal: A Book of Folk-Ways* (1936). Stephenie Meyer says Joham was called “Libishomen” in *Breaking Dawn*. Which isn’t even a word. I’m thinking she just misspelled Lobisomem, a Brazilian Portuguese word for a mythological creature—often denoted as a werewolf—that attacks women in particular.

[55] Jennifer Ford is a minor character who appeared in the unpublished draft of *Midnight Sun*. I amalgamated her character with Jennifer the dhampir because reasons.

[56] If you’re wondering how Joham got those seminal fluid samples, his “gift” was hypnotic persuasion. Huilen says he “bewitched” Pire (see: *Breaking Dawn*, Chapter 38) into thinking he was an angel and even though it’s never explicitly stated in canon that he has a “gift,” him being supernaturally persuasive makes perfect sense. Which is how he evaded Pire, Nahuel, and Huilen for over a century and why the Volturi were never able to stop him. So yes, he basically used his “gift” to hypnotize other vampires into jizzing in a cup. For science.

[57] Stephenie Meyer canonically states that being the alpha werewolf automatically makes you chief of the Quileute tribe in *New Moon*, but they haven’t actually had a chief since their constitution was approved by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1936 and their governing body was designated as a tribal council of anywhere from three to five elected officials serving three-year terms. THE MORE YOU KNOW.
Merrick tweaks the spell on her glasses and tilts her head crowishly to look at them as she hobbles up the stairs onto the deck. Bonnie and Mary are bound in a circle with another witch, the glowing cord of their shared power connected to someone in the house. Jen isn’t bound to their circle, probably because she’s a dhampir. Since vampires and Quileute shapeshifters are supernatural enemies, it’s only natural that Quileute witches wouldn’t want to swap blood with a half vampire hybrid. Merrick knows it’s petty, but a surge of cruel happiness coils in the bottomless pit of her stomach like a venomous snake at the implication that Jen doesn’t fit in perfectly here. Jen smiles at her. Merrick glares and bites down on the inside of her cheek, hard.

*Your abandonment issues are showing*, she thinks as Scald preens her beak through her soft frizzy hair.

Bonnie hunches over to scratch Beckham’s floofy ears. “Richard Malone and his ilk have no power here,” she murmurs. “You’re no enemy of ours, kwodī-fsīxī-łsop.”

Merrick frowns at the unfamiliar word. *I should’ve worn my omniglot charm*, she thinks, only three people in the world are fluent in Quileute and none of those people are me.

Jen crouches in front of Beckham and smiles at the poodle. “Hi, puppy,” she says and rubs his belly to make his fluffy tail wag. Beckham flops onto his back and lays spread-eagled on the deck, his forepaws curled like commas to punctuate the floofy hair on his sternum.

“Scald,” Merrick says, “go find a murder and set up a perimeter. Report back in half an hour and use standard warning protocol to send messengers if necessary.”

Bonnie watches Scald wing it off into the wild blue yonder and flock with a murder of slender crows that shriek and fill the sky with a disjointed symphony of raucous caws. “Your familiar?” she asks.

Merrick nods, a sharp descent of her chin. “Crows are smart,” she murmurs, “their memories are sharp and they come with their own battle tactics. You don’t fuck with crows.” *You don’t fuck with me* goes unspoken, but not unheard.

Jen sighs. “Nobody is fucking with you,” she says. “Mrs. Lahote tried to give Paul some tea and he blew up the teapot. With his magic.”

Merrick adjusts her glasses with two fingers. “Yeah,” she says, “because she tried to poison him again. I get why you wanted to bind his witch bloodline—the genetic potential for witchcraft on both sides of his family made you think his witch heritage might supersede his werewolf lineage.
and that was a reasonable assumption for someone who knows nothing about magical hybrid speciation to make—but a singular dose of the brew you used to bind his magic would’ve sufficed. Ergo, any subsequent dosage was overkill and Paul would’ve died without the intervention of his werewolf healing factor. Mrs. Lahote is lucky he blew up the teapot instead of setting her on fire.”

Jane exhales with enough force to flare her nostrils and holds her head up high, her jaw set in a stubborn line. “You’re his imprint,” she retorts with an edge of scorn in her voice, “but I’m his family. I did what I thought was best for him and for our tribe. I’m not sorry for that.”

“I don’t think you should be sorry for that,” Merrick says matter-of-factly, “but I was inside Paul metaphysically while I was undoing the damage you caused with that brew and I psychometrically absorbed some of his memories. Until he met me two days ago, there was nothing he wanted more than your approval. What you should be sorry for is making the choice to bewitch him without his knowledge or consent, especially since he would have bound his magic willingly just to make you happy. I promise that I will never misuse my power over him. Unlike you.”

Mary grins at her outraged twin as Merrick turns on her heels and hobbles into the house. “I like her,” she whispers conspiratorially.

“Paul imprinted on the daughter of a carrion crow,” Jane mutters, “the spirits are fucking with me. There’s no other logical explanation for this.”

Merrick can feel the magic in the house—the thaumaturgical residue from the explosion that obliterated the poisonous tea, the cord of power connecting the third unfamiliar witch in the circle to the other two to close the circuit of their combined magic, the ancestral magic that binds the werewolves as a pack illuminating three Quileute men, and the raw magic bubbling and toiling and troubling inside of Paul in particular.

There’s a pair of small bedrooms and a great room on the ground floor of the cabin: a cozy kitchen and a dining area on her left, a reading nook occupying the space to her right. Paul is sitting in his reading nook hunched over in one corner of a worn brown sofa arranged in front of his bookshelves, with the books themselves strewn all over the floor. When he catches her scent, he clenches his jaw and hunches even further back against the cushions because he’s the worst version of himself right now—volatile and boiling with anger to the point that the cage of his human body is barely keeping the wolf inside—and he doesn’t want the center of his fucking universe to see that. Seth turns and smiles at her while the man she recognizes more by energy than any human form of sight—he’s the gray and black wolf mated to the gray and tawny she-wolf whose name she doesn’t know—stares at her the way Jared had at her parents’ house, sizing her up. There’s a middle-aged woman sitting on the edge of the sofa with hazel eyes, warm brown skin, and pitch black hair that seems to swallow the beams of sunlight filtering in through the windows. “Jen misses you,” Seth tells her, “she talks about you all the time.”

Merrick huffs. “Sure,” she ekes the ur sound out with a hiss of spite, “she hasn’t talked to me in three and a half years because she fucking missed me.”

“I’m Tiffany Call,” the woman says and slants her gaze to her lean but muscular and ludicrously tall son, “and this is—”

Embry smiles with a shy twitch of his mouth and waves to her with one hand. “Embry Call,” he says, “we haven’t officially met.”

“I’m Merrick Corrigan,” Merrick says and frowns as Paul stares down at his shaking hands instead of looking at her. “It’s nice to meet you.”
There’s anisotropic plasma residue in the kitchen, she thinks and tweaks the spell on her glasses to get a better look at the aftermath of his meltdown, *he must’ve used his magic to create an electromagnetic field and ionized gas to generate an explosive charge.* Since plasma theoretically has infinite conductivity, the explosive charge generated by his magic could’ve blown up a hell of a lot more than just a teapot. Paul didn’t intend to hurt his grandmother; he just didn’t want to drink another dose of the poisoned tea, so his magic obliterated it out of existence.

“Seth,” Paul growls through clenched teeth as Merrick reconstitutes the remnants of the teapot and haphazardly conjures the books on the floor back onto the bookshelves by curling the fingers of the hand she isn’t using to grip her cane into a fist to focus her power, “get her out of here. I can’t hurt her. I won’t. I promised.”

Tiffany shakes her head slowly and stares at Merrick as one corner of her mouth unfurls in amusement. “Your magic can’t hurt her,” she tells him, “she’s not human enough for that.”

Paul stops trembling and narrows his eyes at Merrick, the space between his sharp eyebrows furrowing and crumbling in confusion. “What do you mean?” he asks.

Merrick shuffles over to the sofa and flops to sit on the corner of the section facing him before she sweeps her skirt underneath her thighs. Paul can’t help but notice that she changed out of the sundress that she wore on their date and fell asleep in after she unbound his magic—she’s wearing a black sleeveless blouse with a row of buttons that begins in between her breasts and ends at the edge of a corset belt hiding where the blouse is tucked into a blue A-line skirt printed with rainbow tinted periodic tables. It makes him smile in spite of everything. Just looking at her pretty face is enough to deflate his anger like a balloon stuck with a needle and spark a flare of overpowering warmth that burns and takes root in his chest. “I’m half human, specifically half witch,” she clarifies, “and half aes sídhe.”

“You’re a changeling?” Embry asks her.

Merrick gnaws on the inside of her cheek before she answers. It would be one thing if she were fey, but she’s not; the fey are inhuman and immortal, and she’s neither. “Worse,” she murmurs, “my biological mother is the Mórrígan. Celtic goddess of war, fate, death, prophecy, magic, fertility, and sovereignty…” she anxiously claws her fingers into the hair tumbling in frizzy tendrils over the slump of her left shoulder before she says, “…also known as Badb Catha, Morrígú, Neman, Macha, Anand, Danu, Herodias, Nicnevin, Habondia, and Zobiana. Sometimes depicted as a triple goddess with her aspects spilt into three sisters known as the Morrígna. Often depicted as a carrion crow, but also capable of shapeshifting into a cow, an eel, and a gray she-wolf.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that?” Paul wants to know.

Merrick huffs. “What,” she mutters, “that I’m a half witch, half Celtic deity hybrid freak? It’s not exactly a first date conversation, Paul.”

“So you’re a demigoddess,” Seth interjects. Jen must have told him about her, since he doesn’t seem bothered or bewildered by the revelation of her semidivine lineage.

Merrick nods, a sharp descent of her chin. “When he became the supreme leader of the witches in North America,” she says, “my biological father summoned my biological mother in her capacity as a sovereignty goddess and they had ritual sex to cement his metaphysical claim over the land. Unfortunately, he didn’t read the mythological fine print and he got a daughter he never wanted nine months after the ceremony. When he told her that he already had a magical heir, the Mórrígan got offended and told him that his fate was to have a child that would grow up and usurp his
throne. It doesn’t matter to him that I don’t want his fucking throne,” she bites down on consonant in the word want with a snarl that slips out from in between her teeth, “the goddess of prophecy herself foretold that I would come to burn his kingdom down and that’s all he cares about.”

“Wait,” Jen blurts out from where she was eavesdropping beyond the doorway, “you told him and Jared that I’m a dhampir, but you didn’t tell him what you are?”

Merrick bites down on the inside of her cheek and stares down at her hands instead of looking over her shoulder at her estranged friend. “I didn’t know you were mated to Seth,” she points out, “because you didn’t bother to tell me that or respond to any of the messages I sent you in the last three and a half years.”

“Yeah,” Jen retorts and folds her thin pale arms tight across her chest, “because I knew you’d want to know everything about imprinting and I couldn’t tell you.”

Merrick swallows thickly. It’s a truth universally acknowledged that she’s a slut for information, but she’s not so thirsty for knowledge that she would ask questions her friend unequivocally couldn’t answer. “Maybe if you hadn’t ghosted me, I would’ve met Paul sooner and I wouldn’t’ve lost my only witch friend in the world!” she snaps.

Jen flinches as every lightbulb in the house buzzes and blares with a surge of power. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, her mellifluous voice trembling.

“Yes,” Merrick whispers back. “Well, apology not accepted.”

Paul growls low in his throat and fury unfurls on his face as his imprint ducks her head to hide the tears stinging the corners of her eyes under the sweep of her blunt burnished bangs. “Seth,” he snarls, “get your leech mongrel bitch the fuck out of here.”

Embry winces as Seth bares his teeth in warning. Any other wolf in the pack would’ve phased and kicked his ass for insulting their imprint with tooth and claw, but Seth isn’t going to give the asshole the satisfaction. “Ease up, Paul,” Embry says.

Paul glares at him and the light fixtures in the ceiling go boom. Merrick sniffs and squeezes her gray eyes shut as she holds up one hand, splaying her fingers and blocking out everything in the universe but the bright thrum of her own internal energy. Paul stares at her as the scent of ozone invades his nostrils and he can see the glow of her magic, a resonant pulse of power fulminating under her pale freckled skin in radiant veins of ultraviolet light invisible to the human eye. Maybe that’s why all the flowers in the garden mistook her for the fucking sun. When he looks at Merrick, he doesn’t see how she could be the daughter of a war goddess—everything about her screams peace. [63]

“Okay,” Merrick says in a soft voice as she fixes the broken light fixtures and reconstitutes the detonated teapot, “everybody out.”

Paul watches his imprint as the glow of her magic fizzes out and she opens her eyes. Those eyes of hers are fucking gorgeous: pale gray like smoke with soft dark eyelashes long enough to smudge the lenses of her glasses. When she catches him staring at her, she blushes from her ears to the tops of her breasts and bites her bottom lip but she doesn’t shy away.

“So,” Merrick says and ekes the oh sound out awkwardly, “how’s your day been?”

Paul barks out a hoarse laugh and smiles at her, wide and warm. “It’s been shitty,” he says, “how about you?”
Merrick smiles back and shrugs, one-shouldered. “It’s getting better,” she informs him.

Paul grins wolfishly at her. “Now who’s flirting?” he asks.

Merrick blinks and flushes even brighter. “Most witches have power they can instinctually use before they learn to hone their witchcraft,” she murmers, “some forms of magic are rooted in the four classical elements and the four states of matter. Obviously, fire is your element. Thermogenesis is a pretty cool power, if you can learn how to control it.”

Paul swallows hard, his throat dry and raw from yelling at his grandmother. “Thermogenesis,” he says and decides he likes the way the word feels in his mouth, “that’s my power?”

“Yup,” Merrick says and pops the p sound. “It’s the ability to generate heat. Subsets include pyrokinesis, the ability to create fire,” she conjures a fireball and holds it above the palm of her hand to demonstrate, “and fragokinesis,” she holds out her other hand and blows up the reconstituted teapot again, “the ability to make things go boom. I’m using the magical art of ergokinesis—the ability to manipulate any kind of energy—but my magic manifested as photokinesis—the ability to create light—before I learned how to manipulate the other energies on the electromagnetic spectrum. Morrígú presides over bodies of freshwater like rivers and lakes, but my element is earth and I can manipulate solids much better than liquids. Which,” she clarifies before she reconstitutes the teapot again, “is why I’m a conjurer. I can move things with my mind not only by creating a psionic field and using telekinesis, but also by creating a subspace and translocating things through it.”

Paul watches the cherry red flame burn in her hand. “You conjured us drinks the other night,” he says.

Merrick nods. “Yup,” she says and pops the p sound again, “because I’ve been a witch for almost nine years and I’ve mastered all four kinds of stoicheiomancy. Which is why I can do this,” she points at the fireball with the index finger of her other hand, “but I’m not a natural like you. It took years of study for me to be able to conjure a flame instead of just a fume of smoke. Thermogenesis can manifest as the ability to create plasma, so you’re basically generating an electromagnetic field and ionizing gas to make explosive charges. With study and focus, you should be able to use your power to obliterate vampires just by looking at them.”[64]

Paul gapes at her with his mouth ajar before he grins at her again, wolfish and with a hint of sharp white teeth. “Show me,” he says, his voice low enough to make those words sound more intimate than innocuous. Like he wants to see a hell of a lot more than just her magic.

“Not in the house,” Merrick tells him as the flame hovering above the palm of her hand smolders from cherry red to deep orange.

Paul shrugs and smirks at her as he scoots over and puts his hand on her knee. “I guess we’re gonna have to think of something else to do,” he says and smirks wider as the flame gets hotter.

Merrick rolls her eyes at him before she takes his hand off her knee and holds it underneath hers. “Here,” she murmurs and turns her left hand over to let gravity work its magic. “Hold it, but don’t touch it. Sometimes being pyrokinetic means you can’t get burned, but not always.”

Paul instinctually catches the fireball and stares at the flame in fascination as it seethes above his palm and burns from deep orange to white hot.[65] “This is the coolest,” he intones, “can I throw it?”

“Not in the house,” Merrick echoes. “I can keep reconstituting the shit you break if I have to, but it’s kind of exhausting to sort through all of those pulverized molecules and regenerate them into
what they were before you broke them apart.”

Paul exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils. “Yeah,” he mutters, “I break things. I almost fucking killed my grandmother.”

“No,” Merrick tells him softly, “you didn’t.”

Paul frowns, the space between his sharp eyebrows furrowing. “How do you know?” he asks.

“I told you,” Merrick says, “magic is a combination of energy and intent. Ergo, if you wanted to hurt someone, you would have. Since you blew up a teapot instead of burning or exploding your grandmother, I’m guessing your intention was to destroy the fellenwort tea. When you killed the lights, I’m guessing your intention was to get Jen and Seth out of the house because you didn’t want to cause them any harm. I have an older brother who’s a park ranger and some of the wildfires in California that he volunteered to fight last year were started by a pissed off pyrokinetic witch. Thermogenesis at its worst is the Thomas Fire,[66] and what you were doing wasn’t that. Not even close.”

Paul inhales deeply through his nose and breathes in the bittersweet smell of his magic. “Thank you,” he murmurs.

Merrick tilts her head crowishly and narrows her eyes at him in confusion. “For what?” she asks.

Paul hunches over and nuzzles his nose against hers as the flame in his hand smolders from white hot to pinpoint blue. For most of his life, he thought he had a black hole where his heart should’ve been. Paul desperately wanted to feel something other than being lonely and pissed off, but nothing could fill that void. After he phased, he found his calling as a protector of the tribe—but he still couldn’t shake the feeling that something vital was missing. This fat white girl is that something: his magic, his imprint, his heart. “Showing me what I’ve been missing,” he says.

[58] There’s no Quileute word for goddess, and their word for “god” is a compound that literally translates as “high chief.” So, I made up a compound word for demigoddess: ḷwōdī-fspi-flpōp (quo-DAY suh-HEK suh-OHP). It literally translates as “small high woman.” So, the Quileute word for goddess would be fsipi-flpōp (suh-HEK suh-OHP).

[59] Quileute is actually an endangered language. It’s taught at tribal school to all grade levels, but only two of the current tribal elders are considered fluent.

[60] There are four elements (earth, air, water, and fire) that correspond with the four states of matter (solid, gas, liquid, and plasma). Paul is hotheaded and volatile, so fire is his natural magical element and plasma is the state of matter he can instinctively manipulate.

[61] Aes sídhe (AYS sheeth-uh) is another name for the fey or elves, but it’s also a name for Gaelic deities and deified historical figures in Irish mythology—also known as the Tuatha Dé Danann (too-THA deh DAH-ann). Here it means the latter, although it’s arguable that Irish deities and the fey are the same thing.

[62] Táin Bó Cúailnge (tr. “The Cattle Raid of Cooley”) is a Celtic legend set during the first century (1 CE – 100 CE) wherein the Mórrigan shapeshifts into an eel, a white cow with red ears, a gray she-wolf, and a crone to attack Irish hero (and demigod) Cú Chulainn and punish him for not wanting to fuck her. (No, really.) It’s the oldest known version of the Ulster cycle. Its original text is part of the Lebor na hUidre manuscript (written circa 1100 CE, discovered in 1844 CE).

[63] Breaking Dawn (2008), p. 97. Jacob: “It was hard being around imprinted people. No matter what stage they were in…the peace and certainty they always radiated was downright puke-inducing.”
Stoicheiology is the study of elements. Stoicheiomancy is the magical equivalent.

Merrick conjures a cherry red flame (between 1,500 °F and 1,800 °F). Paul flirts with her and the flame gets hotter (2,000 °F), and it heats up again (to 2,700 °F) after he takes it from her because he’s a natural pyrokinetic and she’s not.

On 4 December 2017, a massive wildfire started near Steckel Park in Santa Paula, CA. By 22 December, the fire had forced approximately 104,600 people to evacuate from Ventura County and Santa Barbara County. It was unequivocally the largest wildfire in the history of modern California, since the state didn’t start keeping accurate records of such things until 1932. 281,893 acres were burned, 1,063 buildings were destroyed, 22 people died (2 fatally injured because of the fire, 20 killed by subsequent flooding and debris flows in the aftermath), and 2 more people were nonfatally injured. It was named for Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, CA. On 12 January 2018, the fire was fully contained.
Disorder of Systems

You are the sun
in reverse, all energy
flows into you and is
abolished.

Margaret Atwood, “They Are Hostile Nations”

The Myth of Blackbirds
Chapter 8
Disorder of Systems

After she turned eighteen and got her adoption papers in the mail, Merrick fell asleep in her bedroom and woke up outside on top of the trampoline in nothing but a pair of skimpy black panties. Luckily none of her neighbors saw because it was fuck off o’clock in the morning. Although she didn’t know it then, a spell the Mórrígan cast on the papers had unbound her magic.

“I was a somnambulist when I was a kid,” Merrick says, “my bedroom was on the second floor of the house and my parents had to tie my ankle to the bedpost so I wouldn’t break my neck falling down the stairs. I thought I was sleepwalking again at first when I woke up naked on the trampoline, so I got my sister to buy me fuzzy handcuffs and chained myself to the headboard.”

Paul barks out a laugh and files away the fantasy of Merrick naked and handcuffed to his headboard with his head between her thighs for future reference. Maybe someday he can make it a reality, but for now he just wants to listen to her talk about anything and everything. “How many siblings do you have?” he asks.

“I’m fourth of five,” Merrick says. “Puck, Mitch, and Sabrina are older—twenty-eight, twenty-five, and twenty-two years older. Technically my older siblings are my half siblings, but since Cillian and Sabrina and I were adopted we don’t really do the full versus half siblings thing. Cillian is younger than me, but only by three years. Puck and Mitch live in Petaluma with their wives and kids and I don’t see them very much, so they don’t even know that I’m a witch. Bri lives in Ballard with her husband, and she thinks it’s hilarious that her name is Sabrina but I’m the one with magical powers. Cillian lives in Puebla with his wife. I’m flying down to Mexico for their second wedding ceremony in August, since I wasn’t in Poulsbo for their first wedding ceremony last summer.”

Paul blanks so hard it must be forced. “You can’t go,” he says, “no imprint has ever gone that far from their wolf before. Something bad might happen.”

“You could go with me,” Merrick points out, “my mom’ll be thrilled if I tell her that I’m dating someone—she’ll probably make my dad pay for your plane ticket.”

Paul has been on a plane once before: when he was five and he flew down from Seattle to Uruapan with his mother to visit his grandparents in Lázaro Cárdenas. After his parents split up and he moved to La Push, he spent a month with his mother in Tacoma every summer until she moved back to Mexico when he was seventeen because her mother was diagnosed with stomach cancer—his grandmother had made a miraculous recovery even though her insurance only covered one cycle of chemo and he’s pretty sure his mother and grandfather used magic to cure
Paul had phased the winter he turned eighteen, and he hasn’t seen his mother since before the battle with the newborns over the leech-lover. When he was twenty-one, she moved to Mexico City and remarried. It wasn’t like he could go visit her without shirking his werewolf duties, so instead he put her out of his mind. Until now. Puebla isn’t anywhere near Lázaro Cárdenas, but it’s eighty miles from where his mother lives in Mexico City. Maybe he can go visit her and get some answers.

“I’ll talk to Jake and Leah about it,” he tells her, “but we don’t leave our territory unless we’re hunting. I wouldn’t get my hopes up.”

Merrick narrows her eyes at him behind her glasses. “Why can’t you leave?” she wants to know.

“There was a coven of leeches who came through our territory almost thirteen years ago,” Paul explains, “one of them was intoxicated by the leech-lover and he tried to track her down and eat her so her mate had to kill him. Which pissed his mate off so much she decided to get revenge by killing the leech-lover, but she couldn’t get through our lines of defense even with just Embry and Sam and Jared and me out patrolling in shifts. After the Cullens left Forks temporarily, Jake and Quil and Leah phased and we spent months chasing our tails because the bitch had a gift for evasion.”

Merrick nods, short but sweet. “Escapomancy,” she informs him, “the magical art of being able to preternaturally evade capture.”

“There was a battle,” Paul growls, “our pack and the Cullens versus her army of newborn bloodsuckers. When the leeches invaded our territory, Brady and Collin and Josie phased even though we killed them all. Other vampires have shown up sporadically ever since to pick fights with us, and that’s why more people from our tribe keep phasing even though only two leeches still live in Forks.”

“Carlisle and Esme Cullen,” Merrick says. There’s an insatiable curiosity in her soft voice that sets his teeth on edge. Merrick isn’t dazzled by vampires; she just wants to study them. Paul can’t decide if that’s better or worse.

“Yeah,” Paul mutters and ekes the ah sound out into a grimace. “I know they’re vegetarians who only eat mountain lions or bears or whatever,” he says, “but they’re still creepy as fuck and they smell like shit. I don’t want them anywhere near you.”

Merrick huffs. “Carlisle Cullen is probably the only vampire in the country who is not only interested in the science of magic and has the money to conduct supernatural research,” she says, “but also has a personal code of ethics that prevents him from experimenting on anyone without their consent regardless of their species.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” Paul retorts. “Jake was hurt during the battle with the newborns. Sam—he was alpha back then—let Dr. Cullen into our territory to reset his bones and bring him a morphine drip. When he put in the IV, he took blood samples and Jake didn’t find out about it until Seth convinced Leah to get Dr. Cullen to run tests on her to find out why she wasn’t getting her period anymore. Which is how we found out that we have twenty-four pairs of chromosomes, not twenty-three.”

Merrick uses two fingers to adjust her glasses. “Wolves have thirty-nine pairs of chromosomes,” she says, “canid karyotypes show thirty-eight pairs of acrocentric chromosomes and two sex chromosomes. Maybe the first Quileutes had thirty-nine pairs in the beginning after your creator god changed them into people, but after generations of breeding with more or less ordinary humans that number dwindled to twenty-four pairs. I’d love to sequence your genome and see
how many of your DNA base pairs are wolf genes.”[70]

Paul frowns, the space between his sharp dark eyebrows furrowing. “I thought it was just one gene,” he says.

Merrick shrugs again. “There probably could be just one genotype that confers shapeshifting,” she says, “but that doesn’t mean you don’t have other canid genes lurking in your genome. If the first Quileutes were people with thirty-nine pairs of chromosomes, it would’ve taken four generations of breeding with humans to bring that number down to twenty-four. Those diploid human and wolf chromosomes would’ve split into haploids during meiosis and recombined with the fertilization of hybrid gametes to create human-canid crossbreed diploids. Subsequent generations of Quileutes would’ve had less canid DNA because more human DNA would’ve been added to your gene pool in every new generation, but obviously you still have some wolf genes or you wouldn’t be a werewolf.”[71]

Paul thinks about the implications of that and frowns even harder. “So does that mean you have some crow genes?” he asks.

“Yup,” Merrick says and pops the p sound. “I have corvid and canid DNA. I don’t have any bovid or eascann genes, for some reason.”[72] I also don’t have any extra chromosomes. Just twenty-three hybrid diploids. Which isn’t all that anomalous, since humans and canines share approximately eighty-four percent of the same DNA.”[73]

Embry clears his throat awkwardly before Paul can make the dirty joke about doggy-style that pops into his head. “Hey,” he says. “Sorry to interrupt what actually sounds like a pretty fascinating preternatural TED Talk, but I wanted to ask if you could unbind my magic too.”


Embry flicks his gaze to Paul before he answers. “After I phased,” he says, “Mrs. Foster and Mrs. Lahote got my mom to bind me so my magic wouldn’t interfere with my ‘duty’—” he crooks his fingers like quotation marks around the word duty, “to protect the people of La Push. Since we moved down here from the Makah rez and the daughters of the last Quileute chief have pull with the housing authority, she didn’t really have a choice.”[74]

Paul snarls as he starts to shake and seethe with the need to phase and bite something. “You’re in on this?” he growls.

Embry flinches and holds up his hands in surrender. “I didn’t know that your mother was a witch too,” he says urgently. “I had no idea they were dosing you with the same binding potion. I just thought the elders didn’t want to take the chance that I would be a half breed in more ways than being half Makah and half Quileute.”

Jeepers, Merrick thinks, I need to call May and get her to hold a seminar on magical hybrid speciation at the tribal community center. This is what happens when scientists don’t share our data: what people don’t know hurts them and their children. Or grandchildren. It’s not like they have the resources to study magical inheritance patterns themselves. Hell, I don’t have the resources. Otherwise I wouldn’t’ve gotten a job in the town where Dr. Carlisle Cullen, reclusive vampire billionaire and clandestine research scientist, lives so I could have a chance to pitch a supernatural research study to him. “Were you only dosed once,” she asks out loud, “or with subsequent weekly doses?”

Embry slumps his shoulders as Paul stops growling at him. “Just one dose,” he says, “my mom told Mrs. Foster that she didn’t need to keep making the brew for Paul, but Mrs. Lahote wouldn’t
Merrick narrows her eyes at him. “If you only had the one dose,” she says, “your mother could undo the binding spell herself.”

Embry shakes his head slowly, his long dark hair oscillating around his shoulders. “Mrs. Foster made her swear a blood oath to never unbind my magic,” he explains.

“What?” Paul glances at his imprint over his shoulder as she makes a gnarled noise of discomfort in the back of her throat. “Is that bad?”

Merrick nods, a quick bob of her head. “If a witch breaks a blood oath,” she says, “their blood curdles in their veins. I’ve seen it happen, and it’s not pleasant.”

Paul exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils. Tiffany is a great mom—the kind of mother that he used to wish he had. It makes his stomach churn to think that his aunt bewitched her with magic that could kill her, but he’s not surprised because she let his grandmother poison him once a week for almost fifteen years. “Shit,” he hisses under his breath.

Merrick sighs. “I don’t know how things work around here,” she says. “I won’t unbind your magic without permission. I don’t want to make any more enemies.”

“Why don’t we add that to the agenda of our next meeting?” Jane suggests.

Merrick turns and looks over her shoulder at the elder Quileute woman looming in the doorway behind her. “What meeting?” she asks.

“Oh,” Jane says and bares her teeth in a predatory smile to make it blatantly obvious to everyone in the room that her father was a werewolf, “the meeting where the tribal council is going to decide how to deal with you, my dear.”

**June 15, 2018**

Merrick stays in La Push for a handful of days, conjuring the bare necessities from her parents’ house in Poulsbo and teaching Paul basic stoicheiomancy every night after he gets home from the jobsite out in Port Angeles where he’s working construction. Since her contract with Peninsula College doesn’t start until September, she’s free to read voraciously all day and try out intricate recipes from her vegetarian cookbook that she never had time to make as a harried graduate student. Paul has a bottomless pit in his belly that moonlights as his stomach, and the way he smiles at her across the dining room table after he wolfs down his food almost stops her heart in her chest every time. There are never any leftovers in the fridge, but she’s not complaining.

Paul comes home angry most nights because he spends most of his work day pretending to be an ordinary man with no preternatural strength whatsoever and that can be fucking exhausting, but seeing her cooking in his kitchen or taking a nap in his reading nook makes his fury melt away. It’s the magic of imprinting, but he doesn’t give a shit. Only being imprinted on Merrick is kind of excruciating, because he has no fucking idea how to make her love him like he thinks he might love her.

It’s not a deep true love yet, more of a shallow infatuation with certain parts of her that catch his eye and stick in his mind until all Paul can think about is Merrick. The way she blushes pale blotches of pink in some places and lurid red in others. Her soft voice that reminds him of the starlets in old movies from the forties that his grandmother likes to watch. The way her gorgeous eyes narrow when she finds something that fascinates her, or when she focuses on him. Her
eyes narrow when she finds something that fascinates her, or when she focuses on him. Her freckles, especially the constellations sprinkled on top of her tits. The way she lights up inside when she talks nerdy to him during their magic lessons or whenever she changes the subject to science during their dinner conversations, or during their sunset walks along the shore of First Beach with Beckham plodding happily in the sand. It’s mindblowing how fast he gets hooked on the feeling of being with her, how thoughts of her get him through yet another day of manual labor before he drives home to find her in his house with books from her personal archive magically filling the gaps in his shelves.

Paul follows her around the kitchen while she cooks and inhales her mouthwatering anise scent every chance he gets, but he doesn’t touch her—even though he desperately wants to. Merrick has serious issues, and he respects her and the bond between them enough to take things slow. Hell, during mating season in the wild, it’s the she-wolves who choose to accept or reject their potential mates. Merrick still has a choice to make: if she wants to live on the reservation with him, she needs to ritualistically accept the bond and become an adopted member of the tribe like the other imprints who aren’t shapeshifters or Quileute enough to qualify for automatic membership according to their constitution. Paul wants her to accept him more than anything, but he’s trying not to put any pressure on her because he needs her to choose him on her own terms.

Merrick eventually makes the herculean effort of reaching out to him: she taps on his shoulder with her fingertips, she tentatively splays her tiny hand over his bare chest or fists her hand in the fabric of his shirt and leans into him when her Achilles tendon aches because of her inflamed ankle, she takes a nap on the couch next to him while he watches Santa Clarita Diet and nestles her head against his upper arm before she dozes off. After he learns that not even the howl of his laughter wakes her up, Paul scoops her up and carries her to bed. It takes all of his self-control not to crawl into bed with her, to spoon her from behind and bury his face in her soft frizzy hair.

Paul loves her hair. Merrick always pins it back to keep it out of her face or twists it up in a clip to cage the frizzy tendrils with a messy knot, but it can’t be tamed. Paul has a hunch that she’s as wild and untamed as her hair underneath the glasses and periodic table patterned skirts.

After he tucks her in, he goes upstairs to his room and thinks about her while he jerks off in the shower. When he comes, Paul bites down on the sound of her name. Merrick stirs in her sleep and makes a soft noise as the primal chthonic energy of his orgasm seeps into her—an offering of little death to a demigoddess.

---

[67] Uruapan is located in the Mexican state of Michoacán, at the western edge of the Purépecha highlands. It’s where the second largest international airport in Michoacán lives. Lázaro Cárdenas is a port town located approximately 145 miles away from Uruapan, in the southernmost part of the state.

[68] Paul is sixteen in the books (see: New Moon, Chapter 7) and in the official illustrated guide his birthdate is 1990. However, in the movies, he’s eighteen. Which is how I’m writing him, so his birthdate in this fic is 1988.

[69] Mexico City is the capital of Mexico and it’s the most populous city in North America. Puebla de Zaragoza—also known as Puebla de los Ángeles—is the capital of the Mexican state of Puebla. Mexico City is approximately 386 miles from Lázaro Cárdenas.

[70] If canids were genetically compatible with humans, their offspring would ostensibly have thirty-one pairs of chromosomes (like how mules have sixty-three chromosomes because horses have sixty-four and donkeys have sixty-two). Since the first Quileutes were a pair of wolves transformed into people, their offspring might’ve had thirty-nine pairs—depending on how thorough the transformation was. If they bred with ordinary humans, those offspring might’ve had thirty-one pairs. If those offspring had children with ordinary humans, their offspring might’ve had twenty-seven pairs. If their offspring had children with ordinary humans, those offspring might’ve had twenty-five pairs. Following that logic, the great-great-grandchildren of the first Quileutes would’ve had
twenty-four pairs of chromosomes. Since that extra pair didn’t render then genetically incompatible with ordinary humans, it would’ve ostensibly been passed down to every generation of Quileutes after that.

[71] On average, the human genome contains approximately 3.2 billion DNA base pairs (each of our chromosomes has anywhere from 50 million to 300 million base pairs) and canids have a genome that contains approximately 2.5 billion DNA base pairs. Since chromosomes split from diploids to haploids during meiosis and recombine during fertilization and later during mitosis, the Quileutes as they are fictionalized in Twilight would ostensibly have some base pairs in their DNA that are more canid than human.

[72] Eascann is the Irish name for European freshwater eels, a critically endangered species. This is probably the kind of eel that the Mórrígan could shapeshift into.

[73] Merrick has approximately 96 million nonhuman genes, a whopping three percent of her genome. Which isn’t all that weird, since humans and dogs share 84% of the same DNA; humans and chickens share 65% of the same DNA; humans and cats share 90% of the same DNA; and of course we share at least 93% of the same DNA with other members of the Hominidae family: monkeys (93%), orangutans (96.9%), gorillas (98.4%), chimpanzees and bonobos (98.8%).

[74] It’s explained in Eclipse that Embry’s mother (whose name is Tiffany in the official illustrated guide) is Makah and she moved to La Push from Neah Bay while she was pregnant with him. Until he phased, Embry didn’t know he was Quileute. It’s established in Breaking Dawn that Embry has been keeping his werewolfism a secret from Tiffany, and this is where things stop making sense for me. If she didn’t know werewolves are a thing and that her son was going to phase someday, why did she relocate to La Push? Which is why I’m writing her as a witch.

[75] According to Article II, Section 1 of the constitution and bylaws of the Quileute tribe, the membership of the tribe consists of (a) anyone whose name appears on the official census roll of the tribe from 1935, (b) all children born to any member of the tribe who is also a resident of the reservation at the time of the birth of their children, (c) anyone who’s at least half Quileute born to nonresident members of the tribe (e.g. Paul was born in Tacoma, but since his father was full-blooded Quileute he automatically qualified as a member of the tribe), and (d) all children born to parents that are both members of the tribe. Section 2 states that the tribal council shall have the power to adopt people into the tribe. After he phased, Embry would’ve retroactively qualified for automatic membership and designated as Makah-Quileute by Tiffany since the parent with custody of a child affiliated with two or more tribes gets to choose the order of the hyphenate. Angela, who’s ⅛ Quileute in this story, would’ve had to get approval from the council to officially join the tribe. Emily is half Quileute and half Makah in this fic, and she was born on the reservation in Neah Bay; she would also be designated as Makah-Quileute, and since her mother is a nonresident member of the Quileute tribe she would’ve qualified for automatic membership as per Section 1 before Sam imprinted on her and she moved to La Push because of him.
Paul wakes up late on Saturday morning and finds a pile of strange things on his porch: molted crow feathers, mismatched buttons and earrings that glint in the sunlight, moon rocks and pieces of sea glass from the beach, dented bottlecaps, metal nuts and bolts, safety pins, a few loose screws, the fragile wings of dead butterflies, tarnished coins and crumpled dollar bills. Since no one on the rez has been complaining about a murder of blackbirds ripping the earrings out of their ears or stealing their bottlecaps after they crack open a cold one, he’s pretty sure the flock that Scald assembled to protect his imprint has been finding lost things and piling them up like offerings.

Auntie Mary had told him that his ancestors had called the Mórrígan by the name Káyò with the Crow—another name for a goddess with too many aspects—and that she flocked with Báyaṣ, the Raven. Kaheleha had been a half Quileute child of Káyò who bound himself to the 2ixwaló-la and wi-saš-patů-kať of the tribe to create their first witch circle and drive invaders from their land. Auntie Mary obviously wants that power of mythic proportions for herself and for her circle. Paul doesn’t have the heart to tell her what Merrick told him: that her kind of power is too strong to share with human witches, especially human witches in their twilight years. According to legend, Kaheleha had shared his power with other demigods: a daughter of Báyaṣ, a daughter of Tsayà·ka·pił, a daughter of Hawíłxib, and a son of Pó·kokwó-sidat. Mary Foster is many things, but she’s not a demigoddess. Bringing a witch as powerful as Merrick into her circle would burn his grandaunt out like a badly cooked marshmallow at a bonfire.

Paul waits for Jared on the porch in his jeans and nothing else. When he was a teenage werewolf, one of the first lessons he learned was that going commando is the best way to avoid phasing and obliterating his underwear in the process. Paul exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils and taps his feet against the wood of the weathered steps, anticipation bubbling up and simmering under his skin. Jared lets out a quiet bark at the edge of the forest. Paul unceremoniously drops his pants and phases seamlessly, the ancient pine trees that tower over his cabin in the woods obscuring him from any human eyes. Jared lets his thoughts sink in, slow and precise. Paul thinks like a bomb going off, everything in his head primed to spontaneously combust and explode.

I can’t believe you’re playing hard to get with Merrick, Jared thinks after he sorts through all of the disjointed thoughts and secondhand memories, giving her space isn’t going to make her want you more.

Paul huffs. You don’t know her, he retorts, she’s fucking terrified of how attracted she is to me. I want her to want me, but I need her to feel safe with me.
I get that, Jared thinks, old memories of how terrified he was of phasing in front of Kim floating on the surface of the river in his mind.

Paul snorts. Kim, despite being a timid wallflower at sixteen, had been unfazed by the reality of lycanthropes and leeches. When he shifted in front of her, she tried to ride Jared like a pony. Literally. Paul had given him shit about that for weeks.

Good times, Jared thinks with a pinch of sarcasm that oozes in their shared minds.

Paul griggles, a sound caught in between a giggle and a growl. I smell elk, he thinks as the scent of prey wafts into his nostrils, let's go hunting.

Merrick has spent a handful of days reading voraciously and researching the history and dynamics of the La Push werewolf pack. So far, the facts are these:

(1) There are seventeen werewolves in the pack and their hierarchy of dominance is different from wolves in captivity or wolves in the wild. It has four tiers and a complex system of classification.\(^{[83]}\) Nothing like the more traditional alpha-beta-omega pecking order some of the Children of the Moon use, even though the pack still uses terms rooted in those letters from the Greek alphabet like “alpha” for their leaders and “omega” for whoever is stuck at the bottom of the pack totem pole. Although calling people “the low man on the totem pole” isn’t as insulting as white people think. Paul, whose family has been practicing the traditional art of woodcarving for generations,\(^{[84]}\) told her that woodwork on the lowest parts of a totem pole is often the most intricate because they’re carved by the masters while the higher parts are sometimes carved by the apprentices.

(1a) First tier of the hierarchy consists of the alpha pair, Jacob and Leah—their standing in the pack hierarchy is equal, and each of them has their own second and third-in-command.

(1b) Second tier consists of four werewolves. Paul and Sam are second and third-in-command under Jacob. Seth and Beatrice are second and third-in-command under Leah.

(1c) Third tier consists of eight werewolves. Embry and Angela are second and third-in-command under Paul. Jared and Kim are second and third-in-command under Sam. Quil and Collin are second and third-in-command under Seth. Brady and Josie are second and third-in-command under Beatrice.

(1d) Fourth tier consists of two wolves. Dess and Judy are second and third-in-command under Jared. There aren’t enough werewolves in their pack for everyone on the third tier of their hierarchy to have a second and third-in-command.

(1e) Rachel is the omega of the pack, on the bottom of the pecking order because she lives in the city and makes a habit of avoiding La Push at all costs. Sam, the former alpha male, is only third-in-command under the current alpha male because he has a wife and three kids and that means his family responsibilities take priority over his pack duties.

(1f) When they’re hunting, the werewolves split into five pods of three to attack while a lone werewolf is left behind to defend their territory and protect the imprints who aren’t shapeshifters. Rachel was part of the hunt in Poulsbo, so two of the other werewolves stayed home.

(2) Twelve of the werewolves are imprinted on each other: Jacob and Leah, Embry and Angela, Quil and Collin, Jared and Kim, Brady and Josie, Dess and Judy.

(2a) Rachel, Beatrice, and Sam all imprinted on more or less ordinary humans with Quileute
ancestry they assumed were carriers of the werewolf gene.

(2b) Josh and Angela are only an eighth Quileute: their father is a quarter Quileute and white-passing, their mother is second generation Mexican-American.

(2c) Ash is multiracial: her mother is black; her father is half Quileute and half Irish. Mirabelle Uley,[85] her paternal grandmother, left the reservation to marry an Irish-American man named Ashton whose parents had immigrated to Seattle before he was born.

(2d) Emily is half Makah and half Quileute—her maternal grandfather was Daniel Clearwater, whose daughter Amy married a man from the Makah reservation and moved from La Push to Neah Bay decades ago.[86]

(2e) Collin, Dess, and Ash are trans and that means all of the imprints are technically breeding pairs. Which supports the mating instinct theory, especially now that Sam and Emily aren’t the only people in the pack with kids.

(2f) Kim and Jared have a six-year-old daughter. Leah and Jacob have fraternal twins, Embry and Angela have a daughter, and Quil and Collin have a son, all on the cusp of the terrible threes. Emily is pregnant with her fourth child and Judy is pregnant with her first. Beatrice and Josh don’t want to have children, biological imperatives be damned.

(3) Twelve of the werewolves are full-blooded Quileute: Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Seth, Beatrice, Sam, Dess, Judy, Jared, Josie, Brady, and Collin.

(3a) Quil is ¾ Quileute and ¼ white. Embry is ½ Quileute and ½ Makah. Angela is ⅛ Quileute, ⅜ white, and ½ Mexican. Kim is ½ Quileute and ½ white. Paul, of course, is ½ Quileute and ½ Purépecha.

(3b) Old Quil had thought it took his grandson longer to phase than any of the other sixteen-year-old boys in the pack because his wife, Molly Swan, had been white.[87] Charlie Swan, the chief of police in Forks, is her nephew.

(3c) There are three old families—the Blacks, the Uleys, and the Atearas—descended from the sons of the first shapeshifter, a Quileute chief born in the thirteenth century named Taha Aki. According to their legends, he lived for two hundred years and he might’ve lived even longer if his third wife hadn’t died.

(3d) Moses Clearwater married into one of those old families five generations ago when he wed Eliza Smythe, the daughter of Josephine Black and ostensibly a carrier of the werewolf gene.[88]

(3e) There was a white settler who tried to stake his claim on their land in 1889 and burned all of the houses in the village that would become the La Push reservation to the ground. Josephine and her twin brother Jacob almost died. Eliza was born three months after the fire, five years before they were able to rebuild the village.[89]

(3f) Jen is ⅛ Quileute, ⅜ white, and ½ Portuguese. Merrick is ¾ white and ¼ Japanese—the only imprint with no trace of Quileute ancestry. Which is a very Eurocentric way of quantifying the wolves and their imprints, since the blood quantum laws determining tribal membership were created in the eighteenth century by white Euro-American settlers who ignored the Native American practice of adopting new members of European and African ancestry into different tribes and used those laws to limit the civil rights of those with Native American ancestry on their own land.[90]
There are only two other imprint bonds that formed in the history of the tribe: Taha Aki imprinted on his third wife, and Ephraim Black imprinted on Martha Young before he married her.

Martha was half Quileute, half Makah. Emily is her great-grandniece.

Fighting the connection formed by the imprint bond is metaphysically painful for werewolves. Jacob and Leah almost died trying to break the connection between them from both sides. When he was injured during the battle with the newborns, it was because he acted on instinct to protect his mate and they were both too stubborn to acknowledge it until years later.

Angela didn’t phase until after she accepted Embry and their bond. Kim didn’t phase until a year after Jared imprinted on her. Judy didn’t phase until after she accepted Dess and their bond. Although correlation does not equal causation, this constitutes a pattern of the imprint being a potential catalyst for expression of the werewolf gene in the female of the species.

Rachel, Leah and Beatrice were the only she-wolves who phased independent of imprinting before Dess joined the pack. Dess is trans, and she thought she was a boy when she phased. Leah got PCOS because her adrenal glands started producing more androgens before she phased, but Dess’ HRT hasn’t impacted her ability to shapeshift.

Jen hasn’t phased because ostensibly her vampire half supersedes her werewolf gene. Which doesn’t explain why neither Emily nor Josh has phased, but it begs the question: if the proximity of bloodsuckers is the primary catalyst for expression of the werewolf gene and imprinting can function as a secondary catalyst, then why hasn’t Jen phased? Merrick has two hypotheses, but she can’t run an experiment to test either of them without access to a lab and genetic sequencing equipment.

There’s a consensus among the wolves that while the imprint bond theoretically could be platonic, historically the relationships forged by their ancestral magic have never manifested any other way than romantic.

Merrick has never felt so overwhelmed. Not just because of the imprint, but also because of how much she doesn’t know. There’s no way for her to cram a thousand years of Quileute history into her head. Psychometry can help her glean context from objects, but it’s not a comprehensive research methodology. Which is why most of her afternoons were spent with Emily Uley, who brought her a basket of almond poppyseed muffins on Monday as a precursor to female bonding. Most of the werewolves think of Emily as their den mother, so the repository of sense memory in her home runs deep. Walking around barefoot in her house was...educational.

Paul is still in the woods by the time she wakes up late on Saturday afternoon. Merrick yawns without bothering to muffle the sound and shuts her eyes to scry for more knowledge she can use to keep herself from exploding in a paroxysm of pure anxiety. Being the daughter of a sovereignty goddess means that navigating political clusterfucks should come naturally to her, but she’s out of her depth because she’s emotionally invested in how this all unfolds.

There are clusterfucks that she can’t power through. Unfortunately, this is one of them.

Merrick shuffles into the kitchen in a loose camisole and a pair of black leggings dotted with yellow and white daisies. After she pours herself a cup of water, she hobbles into the great room and finds a she-wolf in the reading nook. Rachel grins at her with a flash of blunt white teeth and shuts the paperback copy of Feedback by Mira Grant around her bookmark. “Good afternoon, sleeping beauty,” she says.

“Good afternoon,” Merrick echoes and rolls her eyes as a buoyant warmth unfurls in her chest at
the sight of her friend. “What are you doing here?” she asks.

Rachel puts the paperback on the coffee table Paul had carved himself out of scrap lumber from one of his jobsites and stands up with the sinuous grace of a predator, lethal from the pedicured tips of her toes—painted an electric hue called Blue my Mind—to the crown of her head. “I’m here for the meeting,” she explains. “I thought you might want someone other than the pack hothead in your corner.”

Paul huffs and leans against the edge of the doorway to the back porch in nothing but the pair of jeans he stripped out of before he phased that morning. Rachel just waltzing into his cabin like she owns the place sets his teeth on edge. When he catches Merrick staring at him, he smirks and folds his arms tight across his chest in a way that makes his biceps flex and bulge to show off for his mate. “You’re the pack outcast,” he says. “You being in her corner won’t do her any favors with the council.”

Rachel puts an arm around Merrick and squeezes her shoulder; she’s tall enough to tuck the shorter girl under the crook of her elbow and rest her sensitive ear on top of her head. “Us against the world,” she murmurs at a pitch almost too low for a human to hear, “right?”

“Yup,” Merrick says and softly pops the p sound.

Paul growls low in his throat. It’s not that Rachel is touching his imprint. Merrick can touch whoever the fuck she wants. It’s her body, her choice. Paul is just seething with jealousy over how easy Rachel makes touching her look. Merrick has only known Paul for a week, but she’s known Rachel for over a decade. There’s so much history and trust between them, and Merrick doesn’t seem to have any room for Paul in that equation.

“Hi,” Merrick says and smiles at him shyly, “how was your shift?”

Paul snorts at the pun and grins at her. It’s unfair how contagious those smiles of hers are. “Good,” he says, “we hunted elk.”

“So you had a big lunch,” Merrick quips.

Paul grins exponentially wider. “Yeah,” he tells her, “you could say that.”

“Ugh,” Rachel grimaces and gags in the back of her throat, “raw meat is the worst. Please tell me you don’t kiss him after he eats that shit.”

Merrick shakes her head slowly. Paul hasn’t laid a hand on her because he doesn’t want to spook her. Merrick hasn’t been kissed in nine years and she has no idea how to tell him that without embarrassing herself. It’s mortifying. “We haven’t kissed yet,” she mumbles.

Rachel gapes at Paul in sheer disbelief that her cousin—the resident manwhore of La Push—has been shacking up with his imprint for almost a week and they haven’t even kissed. After she imprinted on Ash, they didn’t leave her apartment for a week. Rachel can’t believe Paul hasn’t spontaneously combusted from sexual frustration by now. “Seriously?” she blurs out. “Some boyfriend you are.”

Paul cocks one sharp dark eyebrow and shifts his weight from one foot to the other because his wolf is wagging his metaphorical, metaphysical tail. It makes his chest puff up with a primal swell of pride at the implications of the word. “Who says I’m her boyfriend?” he asks.

Rachel gags in the back of her throat again before she rolls her eyes at him. “Who else?” she asks. “I heard it from the witch’s mouth.”
Merrick gulps and blushes from her ears hidden by her frazzled hair to the hollow in between her breasts. **Yup,** she thinks, **this is mortifying. I like him, but we’ve only known each other for a week and we’ve only technically been on one date and that might not mean we’re boyfriend and girlfriend to him. It might’ve been presumptuous of me to call him my boyfriend, even though I’m his imprint and that means we’re literally mated for life by his weird ancestral magic. “I’m sorry,”** she mumbles, “I thought…”

Paul shrugs and smirks as her gaze snags on the iliac furrow of muscle just above the waistband of his jeans. Feeling her eyes lingering on him while he watches her turn red makes his dick twitch and throb with aching want. It’s all for her—every inch of his skin, every muscle, every beat of his thundering heart. **Fuck,** Paul thinks. **I’m so whipped and we haven’t even kissed yet. “I’m yours,”** he tells her, “call it what you want.”

Merrick tilts her head crowishly and looks him in the eyes. Which just makes his dick get harder. **“If you’re my boyfriend,”** she says, **“you have permission to touch me whenever you want unless I explicitly tell you otherwise.”**

**Okay.** Paul exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils and clenches his jaw so hard it makes his teeth hurt. **Rachel needs to get the hell out of here.**

Rachel is perceptive enough that she doesn’t need to read his mind to hear him screaming internally at her to GTFO. **“I should go,”** she says. **“I’m meeting Ash for dinner in Forks,”** she flicks her gaze to Merrick before she clarifies, **“she went to drop Ellie off with the Crowleys. I just wanted to see how you were holding up before the meeting.”**

Merrick nods, a sharp descent of her chin. Lauren Crowley, née Mallory, is Ash’s ex. Elodie, their daughter, spends two weekends a month in Forks with her other mom. Rachel only visits La Push twice a month because of Ellie. **“It has been a hell of a week,”** she says.

Rachel grins at Paul, who’s glowering at her. **“Bye,”** she says and waves to him with a flutter of her fingers, **“don’t forget to practice safe sex.”**

**“Bye,”** Merrick yelps and telekinetically slams the door behind her friend as she flushes a brilliant shade of red.

---

[76] Crow makes a brief appearance in the Quileute myth “The Children of the Dog” (alternately titled “Dog Husband”). It’s pretty much a werewolf story, at least from a modern perspective. Crow isn’t a prominent figure in Quileute mythology and folklore. Báyaḵ, the Raven, is a very prominent figure in Quileute legends (second only to Qati, the changer). Hell, their monthly newsletter is titled **Bayak: The Talking Raven.** (There’s one staff member that writes, edits, designs and distributes the newsletter, but still.) Qati in Quileute legends is similar to the Raven in Tlingit folklore and other Native American cultures, in that sometimes the Raven is depicted as a creator god.

[77] Ɂixwałó·la (ih-wix-oh-LAH) is Quileute for “medicine man.”

[78] According to the timeline in the official illustrated guide, Kaheleha and other spirit warriors used magic to vanquish intruders in the Pacific Northwest in the eleventh century (see also: **Eclipse,** Chapter 11). Kaheleha is not a figure in Quileute legends or history as far as I can tell, so this is ostensibly where Stephenie Meyer started mythologizing the Quileute tribe. However, it does mean that Quileute witches canonically exist in the fictional world of **Twilight** and that’s why it’s a plot point in this fic.

[79] Báyaḵ has a daughter in two of the Quileute tales I’ve read, although one of them—the daughter he mentions in “Raven and Deer,” a supremely fucked up tale in which Raven kills Deer and feeds part of her corpse to her children—might have been made up. “Raven Invites the Supernatural Beings” is a much shorter tale in which the supernatural beings come for a potlatch and spear his daughter to death. Yikes.
[80] Tsayà·kà·pîl (sah-ya-kah-PITH) is one of the gods who imbues the people of the tsixwsłlayo society with an elk or hunter guardian spirit.

[81] Hawíłxib (ha-weh-ch-XIB) is a legendary monster who lives on the beach and gives people a whaler guardian spirit.

[82] Pô·ɂokwó·sidat (poh-oh-KWO-sa-DAT) is monstrous sea goddess who causes bad weather and sinks whaling ships.

[83] This is how Stephenie Meyer says the pack hierarchy works in the official illustrated guide (p. 309-310). I actually think it makes perfect sense for werewolves to have pairs in the same roles of the hierarchy, especially in such a big pack. Also, the whole alpha-beta-omega hierarchy people write for werewolves is erroneously based on wolves in captivity so it’s no more accurate to wolves in the wild than what I’m writing. THE MORE YOU KNOW.

[84] A Native American Encyclopedia: History, Culture, and Peoples (1998), p. 189. “NOTABLE ARTS: the many Quileute arts and crafts included basketry, weaving, and woodcarving.” According to the anthropological records of the Quileute tribe: “All the canoe-carvers and a great many other Quileute carve model canoes or figures of men and mythological creatures, either as a source of income or as gifts.”

[85] Mirabelle Uley appears on the Uley family tree in the officially illustrated guide (p. 318). Mirabelle is the younger sister of Jonathan Uley (Leah and Seth’s maternal grandfather).

[86] Daniel Clearwater appears on the Clearwater family tree in the official illustrated guide (p. 317). Daniel is the brother of Lucy Clearwater (Brady’s paternal grandmother) and Peter Clearwater (Leah and Seth’s paternal grandfather).

[87] Molly Ateara, née Swan, is married to Quil Ateara III on the Ateara family tree in the official illustrated guide (p. 315). It’s not a stretch to assume Molly was related to Charlie and Bella. Here, she was his aunt.

[88] Eliza Clearwater, née Smythe, and Moses Clearwater are canonically the great-great-grandparents of Leah, Seth, and Brady. Here, they’re also the great-great-grandparents of Emily, Kim, Beatrice, Angela, Josh, and Isaac.

[89] According to quileutenation.org: “In 1889, all 26 houses at La Push were burned to the ground by a settler who had wrongly claimed the land. The fire devastated the last carved masks, baskets, hunting equipment and sacred regalia from pre-contact days, except for what may have been relocated to museums or private collections.”

[90] When the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 was passed, blood quantum laws became the standard for determining whether or not someone was eligible for membership of most Native American tribes. Guess what constitution and bylaws with blood quantum laws determining tribal membership were approved by the Secretary of the Interior in 1936? (Spoilers: the constitution and bylaws of the Quileute tribe were approved by the Secretary of the Interior in 1936, and later amended by the Assistant Secretary of the Interior in 1949.)
Pressed Suits of Discreet Armor

There are two things that make the conscious world move, decision and desire.

Toby Barlow, *Sharp Teeth*

---

*The Myth of Blackbirds*

Chapter 10

Pressed Suits of Discreet Armor

After the sound of the door slamming fizzles out, it occurs to Merrick that Rachel left her alone with a wolf in the skin of a man. Paul comes up behind her before she has the chance to turn around, splaying one of his warm hands over her flabby stomach to hold her with her back against his bare chest and skimming the other in a line of heat up from the bend of her wrist to the soft crook of her neck. Merrick whimpers as the rough pad of his thumb strokes the hollow of her throat.

Paul hunches over her to rest his chin on her pale shoulder and nuzzles the words tattooed on her skin in a language that he doesn’t know. “I didn’t think you wanted this,” he murmurs and gently curls one fingertip over where her pulse is thrumming under the thin freckled skin on the side of her neck. There’s an inkling of vulnerability in his deep voice, and it makes her knees go weak.

Merrick shakes her head and bites her bottom lip to stifle a quiet moan at the perfectly subtle pressure of his calloused fingers. Something uncoils in the visceral pit of her stomach and it burns like hunger, brutal pangs of desire pulsing inside of her. “I didn’t think you wanted me,” she says.

Paul inhales deeply through his nose to burn the scent of her soft hair into his brain and tilts her chin up, savoring the sound of her breath catching softly in her throat. Merrick turns and looks at him over her shoulder as she trembles with anticipation in his arms. “What do you want?” he asks her in a low voice that makes her arch her back and clench her thick thighs together.

Merrick clutches at the crook of his elbow with one hand and reaches back to touch his wild hair with the other, curling her small fingers into the soft black spires at the nape of his neck. Those strands are short and it makes her wonder why he’s wearing one of the countercharms she made so the pack could grow their hair out. Quileutes traditionally cut their hair in mourning after a death in the family. Which is why Merrick hasn’t asked him that question, even though she wants to know the answer. “I haven’t been kissed in almost nine years,” she tells him softly, “I want you to change that.”

Paul growls as the shreds of his self-control are blown to smithereens by the glorious sound of the words *I want you* spilling out of her mouth, and slants his lips over hers to kiss her so hard and so hot that she opens up for him and claws her fingers into his hair. *Fuck*, he thinks and digs his fingers into the soft flesh of her voluptuous hip to stop himself from slipping his other hand under the waistband of her leggings to dip inside her panties and feel the dripping wet heat between her legs. Paul groans in the back of his throat as the scent of her arousal seeps out of her and she lets him nibble on her lips, to suck and nip and bite until her mouth is swollen and stained with his kiss.

Merrick tastes like black licorice and pure raindrops, and a little bit like her mint toothpaste.
because she brushed her teeth before she hobbled out into the great room. Paul turns her around with his hands on her hips and pins her up against the wall to take their substantial height difference out of the equation before he licks into her mouth. Merrick clings to him with an arm around his neck and maps the arch of his spine with her other hand while he crowds her against the wall, his body all hard muscle and badly contained howls resonating under his skin. Paul tangles his fingers in her hair and thrusts his bold tongue deep inside her mouth, as if he can bring her to the brink with his lips and make her come with just a kiss. Merrick gently sucks on his tongue and he shudders as her small fingers clutch at his shoulder, her palm splaying over his tattoo.

There’s magic in his tribal marking, since getting inked was part of the ritual to join the pack. It’s actually one of the most traditional forms of hemomancy, since bloodletting was integral to the process of tattooing prior to the invention of modern armature bars and electromagnetic coils. Merrick can sense the pack bonds: cords of ancestral magic binding the wolves together. It’s not a paragravitational force like the imprint, more of a magical closed circuit. If she were capable of focusing on anything other than his tongue in her mouth or his hands on her body, she might have been able to sense each of the wolves by mapping the bifurcations in the metaphysical circuitry of the binding.

Paul breaks the kiss to rest his forehead against hers and nuzzles her nose, the heat of his breath fogging up her glasses; with her eyes closed, he can see the luminous blue veins in her pale eyelids behind the plastic frames. Merrick sucks in a sharp breath and feels her breasts squish against his bare chest. Paul is shirtless and glistening with a fine sheen of sweat; his dick twitches at the apex of her thighs and it occurs to her that he could fuck her up against the wall right here, right now. Merrick is also uncomfortably aware that she isn’t wearing a bra and her nipples are so hard they hurt, but she’s too awkward to steer into the skid and whip her tits out for his perusal so instead she tries and fails to calm the storm of her pulse as thunder booms in the chambers of her heart.

“Sorry,” Paul rasps.

Merrick opens her eyes and frowns, her brow crumpling up with confusion under the frazzled sweep of her bangs. “Why?” she asks breathlessly.

Paul holds her gaze and puts his hands on her waist to lower her back down from where he pinned her up against the wall and pretty much fucked her mouth with his tongue. “I got a little rough,” he mutters.

Merrick tilts her head crowishly and narrows her eyes at him. “I wasn’t complaining,” she points out. “I know you’re physically a hell of a lot stronger than me, but metaphysically you’re like a Molotov cocktail and I’m like an R-36 ballistic missile.[91] If you ever do anything you actually need to apologize for in the heat of the moment, I can literally translocate you into an active volcano.”

Paul makes a noise in the back of his throat that sounds like hnnng and reflexively digs his fingers into the soft hyperbola of her waist. Okay, he thinks, mark me down as scared and horny. “Risks of dating a demigoddess,” he says and grins at her with a hint of teeth, “got it.”

Merrick gnaws on the inside of her cheek and hobbles over to sit on the couch, since her knees are still weak in the aftermath of that bombshell of a kiss he dropped on her lips. “Okay,” she says and ekes the oh sound out into a soft ooh, “we need to talk about the council meeting tonight.”

Paul folds himself onto the section of the couch next to her and leans back against the cushions, his legs spread and his dick still hard between them; he’s not wearing any underwear, so the worn material of his jeans clings to the curve of his cock and the head is almost peeking out from under
Merrick bites her lip and makes a valiant effort not to stare at the bulge in his pants. There’s a meeting in four hours and she has to focus on that, not on how badly she wants to suck him off and feel his fingers in her hair again. Jeepers, she thinks, one kiss and my sex drive is waking up like Sleeping Beauty after a hundred years of enchanted slumber. What fresh hell is this? “I need to know if going to this meeting will be anything like going to war,” she says.

“It probably will,” Paul says, “my grandmother doesn’t fuck around.”

Merrick smiles innocuously, a slow unfurling of her lips. “Good,” she retorts. “Neither do I.”

There’s an outcropping of rock in the shape of a crescent moon on Second Beach near the cape of Quateata that claws at the ocean like stone fingers, the waning sun casting long shadows over a fire pit surrounded by circles of wooden seats carved from red cedar and hemlock trees. It’s a mile away from the reservation, but Merrick can sense the magic in the sandstone: a ward rooted deep in the sedimentary rock meant to protect the fire pit from prying eyes and ears. Kaheleha must’ve been the witch who worked this magic. It tastes too much like iron and brackish water on her tongue to have been cast by anyone but another child of Morrígu.

Three generations of Blacks, Atearas, Uleys, and Clearwaters are sitting around the dancing flames waiting for Paul to arrive with his imprint. Allison Ataruk, the council vice-chair and a member of the ţsayík society, is seated to the left of her only son—Sam Uley, the former alpha of the pack. Bonnie, the council secretary and a member of the ţcalá’lāyo society, is sitting with Jen on a pair of collapsible beach chairs that sink into the sand. Ben Lahote, the council member-at-large and a member of the ţsixwstålayo society, is seated next to his wife—Jane, of course. Billy, the council treasurer and a member of the tłókwalité society, is sitting in his wheelchair; Merrick has a hunch that Jacob and Leah had to carry him and his chair from where the Route 15 bus stops on La Push road because she knows from personal experience that bringing a wheelchair to the beach is a terrible mistake. Joy Ateara, chair of the tribal council and a member of the sibáxwoláyo society, is seated in between Quil and Collin—both of whom tower over her, but nothing can obscure the authority in the adamant set of her shoulders. Merrick knows a powerhouse when she sees one, and this woman is bigger than her body implies.

There’s a tribal elder who represents each society. Jane is a member of the ţsixwstålayo—elk or hunters—society. Mary is a member of the ţcalá’lāyo—weather—society. Old Quil is a member of the tłókwalité—wolf—society. Peter Clearwater is a member of the ţsayík—fishermen and sealers—society, and Douglas Uley is a member of the sibáxwoláyo—whaler—society. There are eight people sitting around the fire who aren’t pack, but Merrick knows who they are:


(3) Jennie Miller, née Black. Judy’s mother. Billy’s younger sister; Rachel and Jacob’s aunt. Connie’s twin sister. Baxter Miller, her late husband, died in a freak storm along with Quil Ateara II, Michael Clearwater, and a few others.

(4) Emmie Fuller, née Black. Brady’s mother. Eddie Fuller’s wife. Billy’s younger sister; Rachel and Jacob’s aunt.
(5) Janie Uley, née Wilde. Dess’ mother. Thomas Uley’s wife. Sarah Black’s younger sister; Rachel and Jacob’s aunt. Sam’s aunt-by-marriage.


(7) Ellen Cameron, née Uley. Jared and Josie’s mother. Matthew Cameron’s wife. Thomas and Joshua Uley’s younger sister; Sam, Embry, and Dess’ aunt.

(8) Tiffany Call. Embry’s mother and a member of the ñcalá’låyó society. Allison is holding her hand, their fingers intertwined. Joshua Uley isn’t at the meeting, probably because his ex-wife and ex-mistress fell in love with each other and that’s all kinds of awkward for the man that fucked them both over.

Merrick catalogs them all in her head as she hobbles over to where Rachel saved her a seat. Emily smiles at her with a twitch of her ruined mouth and Merrick smiles back shyly. Rachel and Paul aren’t the only people in her corner tonight, she hopes.

Paul slips an arm around her shoulders and cuddles her against his side to make her more comfortable on the wooden seat beside him. It’s cold on the beach with the wind blowing in between the cusps of the outcropping and he makes her feel warm from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes, so Merrick can’t bring herself to mind. When she feels the weight of their eyes on her, she bites down on the inside of her cheek and gnaws anxiously. Jeepers, she thinks, this is like being the new kid in elementary school and having to introduce myself to everyone at the beginning of class. Only worse.

Merrick clears her throat. “For those who don’t know me,” she murmurs, “I’m Merrick Corrigan. I’m biologically the daughter of Morrígu, the Celtic goddess of battle—among many other things—and Richard Malone, the supreme leader of the witches in North America. Also, a tech mogul with a net worth of eighty-two billion. I’m pretty sure he’s plotting to make the Volturi come after me again because none of the very expensive contract killers he paid to assassinate me could get their bullets or knives or poisons or explosives past my protection charm, but I almost died last time I fought the Volturi and they’ve recruited more vampires into their guard since then.”

Paul exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils and his grip on her tightens exponentially. “What the hell do you mean, you almost died?” he asks urgently.

Merrick flicks her gaze to where Jen is sitting with her grandmother and Seth. “After I killed Joham,” she says, “the Volturi came to exterminate his children. It’s illegal for vampires to have children with humans under Volturi law because dhampirs are born slayers: they’re faster and stronger than vampires, and they can hunt them down using a magical homing ability.”

Seth ducks his head to hide a proud grin. “Yep,” he says, “remember when the Cullens asked us for help on behalf of the Denali coven when those rogue vamps were terrorizing people in the national park where they hunt bear and caribou and you all said no way in hell because you didn’t want to freeze your asses off in Alaska or hang out with leeches? Jen and her sisters took out all six of them.”

Merrick frowns and narrows her eyes at Jen behind her glasses as the elders and members of the council all start whispering to each other in their native language—three dhampirs against half a dozen vampires is impressive odds if you’ve never seen dhampirs in action. Which the Quileutes haven’t, obviously. This must’ve happened last year when Nahuel, Pire, and Huilen were culling the newborn uprisings in Morelia, she deduces. [97]

“I grew up in an underground facility in Ohio,” Jen chimes in quietly and everyone stops whispering to hear everything the hybrid has to say, “my father kept me locked up because I’m
fertile and my sisters aren’t. After she killed him, Merrick helped my family organize his research and catalog his collections of magical artefacts. Demetri, the best tracker in the Volturi guard, led them to where we were. It took every drop of her strength to block all of their powers and help us fight them off.”

Merrick swallows thickly. “Blowback can be a bitch,” she mutters, “even for a witch like me. I was burned out for six weeks. I couldn’t walk for a month. I had Nahuel carry me from my bed to the toilet or the shower because it was that or use a bedpan. I’m immunocompromised and I didn’t want to risk infection, so I wasn’t going to let May put a urinary catheter through my urethra or hook me up to a colostomy bag.”

Paul snarls low in his throat at the idea of another man—especially a venomous leech hybrid freak—taking care of his imprint. Jen bares her teeth at him in warning. Paul growls at her, his lips peeling back in a feral sneer until the sharp angles of his face look more lupine than human.

Merrick rolls her eyes and turns her head to plant a quick kiss on the side of his neck. “Quit making that noise,” she murmurs as the muscles in the column of his throat unclench and his jaw clenches instead. “Nahuel doesn’t date humans because he’s venomous, and I wouldn’t date him even if his venom wasn’t part of the equation. I haven’t seen him in almost five years because he’s been in Mexico eradicating the warring covens of vampiros y vampiras[98] south of the border. Whoever orchestrated the newborn war in Seattle that you told me about took a page out of their book.”

“We’re getting off-topic,” Ben interjects. “We, of all people, know those bloodsucking parasites are a threat, but this meeting isn’t about them. First on the agenda for tonight is the question of unbinding Embry Call’s híḳshil.”

Mary slants her gaze to where Tiffany is sitting in between the vice-chair of the tribal council and her son. “Now that we know our ćıts·áɂtíłát can be shapechangers and witches simultaneously,” she says, “the elders see no reason not to undo the binding spell the witches of the ćkalá’láyo society cast on him.”[99]

“Seconded by the council,” Joy says and smiles at Embry. “Miss Corrigan will be the one who undoes the binding spell. I think Mrs. Foster and Mrs. Lahote have both done enough to ensure that our children would be able to protect us from the xwó·s ńkwńkwśa.”[100]

Merrick arches her eyebrows at that. Joy doesn’t approve of what the Quileute witches did to Paul, to Embry—enough to make an openly hostile remark in front of the pack and a generous portion of their families. Quil had told her that his mom had balls of steel, but damn.

“Second on the agenda,” Ben says, “the motion to revoke the tribal membership of Jennifer Ford —”

Merrick exhales an incredulous noise that huffs out of her mouth. “Jen ended her friendship with me because of you,” she bites out, “because she wanted to keep the secrets of your tribe. La Push is the first home she’s ever had, and she wanted to protect that. Forcing her to choose between her mate and her best friend was a mistake. If you believe the imprint bond is more than just a mating instinct, then logically Seth imprinted on Jen of all people because this is where she belongs. Kicking her out of your tribe because her father was an immortal piece of shit would be a mistake.”

Paul smirks and nuzzles his cheek against the soft burnished hair on top of her head. Jen wasn’t his favorite person even before he found out that her father was a bloodsucking parasite, but he loves how loyal his girlfriend is—even though he doesn’t think Jen deserves her friendship or her
loyalty. This is how he knows that Merrick is the daughter of a battle goddess: she’s the kind of girl who’d fight a war for the people she loves—and she’d win. Someday, he hopes like hell that he’ll be one of those people.

Maybe, if the way she verbally bitch-slapped his grandmother for poisoning him meant what he hopes it means, he already is.

---

[91] Molotov cocktails are improvised hand grenades made out of bottles filled with explosive brews of chemicals—or sometimes filled with the flammable alcoholic beverages that were just in the bottles to begin with. R-36 missiles are literally the most powerful ballistic missiles in the world. Merrick is the magical equivalent of ten nuclear warheads, is what I’m saying.

[92] There’s no actual correlation between the secret ceremonial societies of the Quileute tribe and them having five members of their tribal council. It’s something I made up, but Stephenie Meyer said everything about the Quileute tribe in her books were facts except their vampire legend and that was a lie so I feel the need to designate between facts and fiction.

[93] Stephenie Meyer doesn’t seem to realize that a tribal elder and a member of a tribal council are different things; in the official illustrated guide she claims the Quileute tribe is governed by a council of elders, but that’s not accurate. Those who become tribal elders have a ceremonial and educational role within the tribe, and members of the tribal council are part of the governing body of the tribe (e.g. the Quileute tribe currently has five elected council members: a chairman, a vice-chairman, a treasurer, a secretary, and a member-at-large—someone designated to represent the entire council in dealings with other communities and organizations—each of whom serve three-year terms). There’s some overlap, but most of the members of the council aren’t elders. Sue Clearwater also wouldn’t have been able to just take over a council seat after her husband died without being elected by the tribe. Just so you know.

[94] Peter Clearwater appears on the Clearwater family tree in the official illustrated guide. Leah, Seth, Beatrice, and Kim are his grandchildren. Emily and Brady are his grandniece and grandnephew.

[95] Douglas Uley, the younger son of Levi Uley from the wolf pack that formed a treaty with the Olympic coven in 1936, appears on the Uley family tree in the official illustrated guide. Sam, Embry, and Jared are his grandnephews. Dess is his grandniece.

[96] Billy canonically has four sisters, all of whom appear on the Black family tree in the official illustrated guide; none of them are canonically married, but I used their characters to fill in some blanks instead of creating more original characters because I’m lazy. Kevin Littlesea is canon. Eddie and Matthew are textual ghosts (i.e. their characters are technically canon in that Brady and Jared ostensibly have fathers but they’re not mentioned in the series or the guide and they don’t appear on the family trees). Baxter is all mine, since Judy is mine, but Jennie is canon. Ellen Uley is canon, but she’s not canonically married. Jane Wilde and Thomas Uley are both canon, but they’re not canonically married; they’re Dess’ parents in this story and Dess is all mine. Stephenie Meyer is not cool enough to have trans characters in her stories, lbr.

[97] It’s mentioned in Eclipse and elaborated upon in the illustrated guide, but: Mexico as written in the Twilight series is fractured into territories ruled by small vampire covens that are constantly using disposable armies of newborns to wage turf wars (see: Eclipse, Chapter 13). Jasper describes the otherworld south of the border as “a world of bloodthirsty vengeance” (p. 172). It’s racist that brown vampires are seen as uncivilized and more bloodthirsty than white vampires—not as racist as dark-skinned humans turning white during the change in the books and becoming pale-skinned vampires, but still. Yikes.

[98] I think it should be obvious, but “vampiros y vampiras” is “male and female vampires” in Spanish. There’s no gender-inclusive term for children of the night in that language.

[99] Ťcits·ătilát (tuh-KAY-tss aah-til-AAT) is Quileute for “protectors of the people.” Ťci·ătilát (tuh-KAY aah-til-
AAT) is singular.

[100] Xwó-s kwíkwíša (hoo-WOS que-woh-TSA) is Quileute for “cold hungry ones.” Since all of the monster words the Quileute tribe has are for specific legendary monsters or guardian spirits as opposed to just a general word for monster, I made up a new word for vampires.
We Fled the Drama

Fresh courage glimmers from planets
and lights the map printed with the blood of history, a map you
will have to know by your intention, by the language of suns.

When you emerge note the tracks of the monster slayers where they
entered the cities of artificial light and killed what was killing us.

Joy Harjo, “A Map to the Next World”

---

The Myth of Blackbirds
Chapter 11
We Fled the Drama

Paul is hotter than any bonfire; blazing, as a matter of fact. Merrick feels every touch from him like
a lick of flame that ignites nebulous shivers under her skin, goosebumps crawling up her spine to
prick the nape of her neck and trickle down her arms. Paul isn’t gentle, but she’s not as fragile as
she looks. Merrick likes the way his fingers dig into her skin, how rough and possessive his hands
are. Paul is a werewolf and a witch, but he’s not a monster; he won’t hurt her with those ungentle
hands of his or hold her against her will.

*It’s my choice,* she thinks, *to accept the imprint bond or not, to become a member of his tribe or
not, to bind myself to him or not. Paul is the one who doesn’t have a choice. I know he wanted to
imprint, but he didn’t want me specifically. Paul wasn’t touching me because he was doing what
he thought I wanted. It’s my choice,* she bites her lip and chews anxiously, *and I want to stay here
with him.*

Jane narrows her sharp eyes at her grandson. Paul is mooning over his imprint, but he’s not
glowering in her general direction. Jane smiles more to herself than at anyone in particular.
Merrick, for all that she’s a hoquat and the daughter of a war goddess who brings a battle
wherever she goes, is a good influence on him; Paul hasn’t lost his temper or blown anything up
since she stepped out of thin air. Jane remembers the way her parents were, the way her father had
looked at her mother; she could tame the alpha with a rise of her eyebrow, a tilt of her head.

Ephraim and Martha had ten great-grandchildren, but Paul is the one who resembles his great-
greatfather the most in the eyes of his oldest daughter—he inherited his volatile nature, his loud
barking laugh, his vehement hatred of the parasites who bring the wolf out in their people, his
keen sense of injustice. Jane can’t help seeing her father in him, but Paul has never been anyone
but himself. Merrick being his likáťso is proof of that.[101]

Jane smiles wider. “Third on the agenda is the question of adopting Merrick Corrigan as a member
of the tribe,” she says.

“I don’t know.” Merrick holds up her hands in surrender, both arms bent at the elbow and fingers
awkwardly splayed. “It’s your culture and your identity, so I’m deferring to you on this.”

Mary slants her gaze to Bonnie and nods succinctly. “There were ɂixwaló-la and wí-sásò-pattí-ḵat
in our tribe for hundreds of years before Taha Aki became the first shapeshifter,” she points out.
“Kaheleha and his circle of spirit warriors used their combined magic to fight against Viking
intruders and enemy tribes in the eleventh century, and we prospered until our first contact with
the palefaces in the eighteenth century. I think we should adopt her into the tribe and bring her into
our circle—give us all enough power to incapacitate xwó·s ḱwíḵwísa and kill them with a flick of
our fingers.”

“Taha Aki used descensum,” Merrick says in a soft voice muffled by the buzz of the bonfire, “the
ability to astral project onto spiritual planes of existence. Which,” she tilts her head and looks at
Paul, “means he was a witch and a werewolf. Like you.”

Jane scoffs. “I still don’t believe you have the power to kill a vampire with one finger,” she says.

Merrick rolls her eyes. “What do you want,” she retorts, “a demonstration?”

Jane smirks in a way that spotlights the family resemblance between her and her cocky grandson.
“Yes,” she says.

“Hell no,” Merrick snaps back at her, “I’m not going to summon a vampire here and kill it. I’ve
provoked the Volturi enough.”

Paul frowns. “What,” he asks, “you’ve got a problem with killing bloodsuckers now?”

Merrick huffs. “There are vampires who don’t eat people at all,” she points out, “and vampires
who feed on people who deserve to die. Siobhan, the leader of the Mullaghcleevaun coven in
Ireland, only hunts rapists.[102] I didn’t have a problem with killing vampires who slaughtered
hundreds of homeless people in Seattle, but I do have a problem with killing vampires just because
they’re vampires.”

Paul frowns exponentially harder. “How do you know the leader of a coven of Irish leeches?” he
asks.

“Siobhan is also a daughter of Morrígu,” Merrick says, “we’re half-sisters. Since her coven is
nomadic, she traveled here to meet me four years ago.”

Paul growls low in his throat. “You didn’t tell me that,” he mutters.

Merrick sighs. “It’s not like I’ve been translocating myself to Ireland so I can hang out with her in
the massif of Mullach Cliabhán,” she says, “but we’re going to need her when the Volturi attack.
Siobhan is tychokinetic—she has the ability to manipulate probabilities and create whatever
outcome she desires in any given situation. It’s basically the power of wishful thinking.”

Paul stares at his imprint and exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils. “Why didn’t you let
her feed on your rapist?” he wants to know.

Merrick gnaws on the inside of her cheek as everyone sitting around the bonfire stares at her and
she tries not to choke on the horror in their muffled voices and roils of tension before she looks at
the women. Some avoid her eyes, but others hold her gaze without flinching. There’s still horror
with slices of pity on the side because rape is unequivocally a horrible thing, but a palpable
undercurrent of respect illuminates the shadows cast by the flames.

Jane looks mortified that her grandson blurted out intimate details about his imprint and put her
trauma on display in a public forum. “Paul,” she snaps.

“I couldn’t talk about it for almost two years,” Merrick says in a soft voice that ricochets in the
waning crescent of the outcropping, “but I can talk about it now because not talking about it made
me feel powerless. Like being sexually assaulted was something I should be ashamed of, even
though it wasn’t my fault. I’m not a victim anymore. I’m not ashamed. I’m a survivor. Paul knows
Paul strokes the words tattooed on her pale shoulder with the rough pad of his thumb. *Sic gorgiamus allos subjectatos nunc.* We gladly feast on those who would subdue us. Not just pretty words. Rachel takes her hand and holds it, the pressure of her palm smooth and soothing. Not being ashamed of what happened to her doesn’t make her less anxious. Merrick feels like a raw nerve, overwhelmed and overexposed.

“Why haven’t you amputated your foot?” she asks Billy to break the quiet and shift the focus away from the ugly victory of her survival. “I can see how much pain you’re in from here. It’s like a neon sign.”

Billy shrugs. “Insurance wouldn’t cover it,” he answers, “the nerve damage isn’t causing ulcers or messing with my autonomic function so the procedure isn’t necessary. Yet.”

“Okay,” Merrick says and slants her gaze to Jane, “you want a demonstration? I’m going to heal him.”

Jacob watches her as she hobbles over to where his father is sitting in his wheelchair and crouches in front of Billy, wet sand clinging to the skin of her bare knees. “How?” he asks.

“I’m going to pull the neuropathy out of him,” Merrick explains, “take it into my body using corporikinesis—the magical art of manipulating bodies on a cellular level—and convert the negative energy into raw magic.”

Billy frowns, his brow furrowing before he turns and looks at his aunts. “Can witches do that?” he asks.

Jen answers before Mary has a chance to open her mouth. “Merrick healed me,” she says. “I used magic to induce hundreds of miscarriages because I didn’t want to have children to further my father’s research. There were synechiae—intrauterine adhesions—inside me,” she gestures to her belly with one hand before she adds, “the damage was so extensive that it took her three days to heal it all, but she did it.”

Merrick huffs. “It took me three days because I’d never used corporikinesis before,” she clarifies, “and uterine scarring is delicate. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

Jacob narrows his eyes at her. “Could you hurt my dad?” he wants to know.

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered. “This won’t be painless,” she informs him matter-of-factly, “but when I’m done he won’t be in pain anymore. Hell,” she taps the tire and makes the herculean effort to look Billy in the eyes, “you might even be able to walk again.”


“There are factors that cause any illness,” Merrick says as she curls her hands over his knees and shuts her eyes, “environmental changes, genetic expression, and emotional states. Sometimes pain can be psychophysiological or psychosomatic, or physical conditions and injuries can be exacerbated by psychological trauma. Losing a wife,” she gnashes her teeth as Billy groans at the burning sensation of his peroneal, sural, plantar, and tibial nerves firing all at once. “Losing touch with Rachel and Rebecca. Resenting your son because Jacob phased and became invulnerable to human diseases like diabetes while you were suffering.”

Jacob flinches with his whole body, threads of tension stitching up the line of his spine and taking root in his broad shoulders. Leah rests her chin on his shoulder and nuzzles her cheek against his
“Let go of the pain,” Merrick says through clenched teeth before she chokes on the bile that rises in her throat as the negative energy of his pain oozes into her veins and makes her blood flow black, “or you won’t get better no matter what I do. Let it go.”

Magic is a certain slant of light invisible to the human eye. It’s electromagnetic particles and waves that can fall on the undiscovered long and short ends of the spectrum—beyond radio frequencies, beyond gamma radiation. When she casts, Merrick glows with a bioluminescence unseen by anyone but other supernatural creatures.

Paul has never seen anything more beautiful than his imprint lit up from the inside, never felt anything more intense than her power tingling like stardust on his skin while the scent of petrichor thickens in the salt air. It’s like watching a legend come to life: mythic and heartrending and bright. Paul has to fight the overwhelming urge to phase, to howl and egg her on with his wolfsong.

Merrick opens her eyes and uncurls her fingers as the light fulminating under her skin fades out. When she uses her cane to get back on her feet, she wobbles and hunches over to shake the sand out of her skirt. “I healed your atrophied muscles too,” she mumbles, “you can try to stand up now.”

There’s a disjointed intake of breath spiraling around the bonfire in a loop of centrifugal motion as Billy stands up slowly; his whole body trembles with desperate hope, but he hesitates for a few seconds that stretch out into a small eternity before he stops clinging to the armrests of his wheelchair and takes a step away from the chair and feels the physical force of his own weight for the first time in sixteen years. Jacob doesn’t hesitate before he bends and squeezes his father into a hug. Rachel sniffs, but stays in her seat as unshed tears scathe and sting the corners of her eyes; she’s the one who put the distance between herself and her family, and she has to live with that. Those bridges are still burning, and she’s not sure if she wants to put out the fire.[104]

Billy untangles himself from his sisters and his son as Joy stands up and smiles at him while he towers over her—he’s not as tall as most of the werewolves, but he’s still six-foot-two.

“Iit’s been too long since you were taller than me,” Joy quips with a jolt of something hushed and vulnerable in the cadence of her voice. There’s history in her tone: decades of friendship spiked with a more romantic kind of love.

Billy chuckles before he cups her face in both hands and bends down to kiss her. Quil wolf-whistles and sets off a cacophony of cheers from the werewolves around the circle, raucous and howling. Jacob is beaming in a way that almost seems to outshine the last vestiges of ebbing sunlight in the twilit sky.

Merrick doesn’t get a chance to sit next to Paul because he lifts her onto his lap and rests his chin on top of her head. Those warm hands of his on her waist is enough to calm the nausea brewing like a storm in her stomach—blowback getting up close and visceral. Merrick snuggles back against his chest and lets him hold her with his whole body, lets his heat seep into her sore joints as she yawns and muffles the sound in the hollow of her palm. It’s difficult to ignore the weight of all their eyes on her, their whispering voices obscured by the hissing fire and roiling tide. Merrick screws her eyelids shut and inhales slowly through her nose to calm herself down and block out some of the sensory overload. “I need a nap,” she murmurs.

Billy snorts and stops kissing Joy to grin at her. “Thank you,” he says, “for fixing my legs.”

Merrick opens her eyes and narrows them at him behind her glasses. I didn’t fix anything, she
After that, Merrick is unanimously voted into the tribe as the first adopted member without a trace of Quileute ancestry since the blood quantum laws became part of their constitution in 1936. It still feels weird and marginally appropriative to her, but she’s not going to argue with the council or the elders. La Push is her home now, for better or for worse. If they want to make that official, who is she to stop them? According to her research, being enrolled in the tribe subjects her to the jurisdiction of tribal court and makes her immune to search and seizure powers of the state. There’s a small police force on the reservation that consists of a chief and four officers, but they don’t have any jurisdiction outside the village. Paul doesn’t have to pay local property taxes even though he owns the cabin and a tiny chunk of land within the borders of what is technically a sovereign nation, but she has to pay income taxes—federal and state—because she won’t be working on the reservation.

Paul scoops her up and carries her back to his truck like a princess because her knees buckle when she tries to stand up. All magic requires sacrifice, and Merrick has a hunch that she won’t be able to walk for a few days. *I regret nothing,* she thinks as she telekinetically opens the door and Paul folds her into the passenger seat. Merrick gulps when he puts one of his warm hands on her face and holds her gaze.

“I’m not gonna kiss you again,” he tells her as she shuts her eyes in anticipation. “I want you to kiss me.”

Merrick huffs and rolls her eyes at how cocky he sounds behind closed eyelids before she tilts her head up tentatively and kisses him. Paul strokes her flushed cheek with his thumb and nips her bottom lip before he breaks the kiss and pulls back to shut the door. Merrick sighs and exhales a vociferous whoosh of air, a soft *woo.*

“Love at first sight is real,” she informs him after he starts the engine and backs out of the parking lot in front of the trail to Second Beach. “It’s not magical. It’s not even romantic. It’s just chemical. Lust is caused by the secretion of sex hormones, primarily testosterone and estrogen. Physical attraction is caused by a flood of neurotransmitters. Dopamine. Norepinephrine. Phenylethylamine. Vasopressin levels spike and that alters your blood pressure, your temperature. Serotonin levels are reduced and that makes you obsessed with the object of your affection. It’s like a total eclipse of the brain. Oxytocin levels spike during hugs and skyrocket during orgasms,” she bites her bottom lip and blushes hot before she adds, “I know you’ve come while thinking about me. Morrígu is a sex goddess and that means I can absorb chthonic energy.”

Paul exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils and inhales deeply through his nose to catch the scent of her arousal. Merrick is a virgin, but she’s not exactly shy about sex. Paul likes that about her, how blunt she is—because if you can’t talk about it, then you shouldn’t be doing it. Merrick isn’t trying to make him feel guilty for jerking off to her; she just has no shame and no filter.

“Oxytocin is crucial to forming a longterm attachment with someone,” she clarifies. “It’s called the cuddle hormone. Which is why I was kind of freaked out that you weren’t touching me.”

Paul guffaws. “You thought I didn’t want to get attached,” he deduces. “You were snuggling up to me while I was bingewatching shows on Netflix for science?”

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered. “Sort of,” she says, “we can’t choose who we’re attracted to, but we can choose how we act on those chemical reactions. I’ve chosen you. Piłtilá·ḳalá·woli.”[105]
Piłtilá-ḳalá-woli is Quileute for *I accept you*. It’s the phrase that imprints who aren’t shapeshifters use to ritualistically accept the bond. Merrick has made her choice. Paul stops in front of the cabin and parks his truck before he turns and looks at her, his heart caught somewhere in the vicinity of his throat. *I don’t have a choice*, he thinks, *but I’d still choose her.* I don’t think I can get any more attached to her than I already am. “So,” he says out loud, “there’s a scientific formula for love, huh?”

“Sort of,” Merrick echoes as she unbuckles her seatbelt. “It’s not totally cut and dry, since everyone’s brain chemistry is different. Like, my serotonin levels are reduced normally. Which is part of why I overthink everything, and part of why I’m clinically depressed. Also, those chemical reactions can go bad,” she adjusts her glasses and smiles at him knowingly, “too much oxytocin and dopamine causes irrational behavior, including jealousy and hyperaggression. Which is probably why you’re jealous of Nahuel and why you growled at Rachel for touching me.”

Paul snorts and shakes his head before he gets out of his truck. Merrick opens the door manually and meets him halfway, hooking an arm around his neck and holding her cane in her other hand while he carries her into the cabin effortlessly. “Rachel knows you better than I do,” he mutters, “and I fucking hate it. I’ve been dying to meet you for ten years, and she had you the whole time. So yeah,” he puts her down on the couch at the apex of the cushions and stays crouched in front of her like a wolf on the prowl, “I’m jealous.”

Merrick tilts her head crowishly. “No one else has ever had me the way you do,” she informs him, “but I would’ve left you if we’d met sooner. I would’ve gotten my scholarship to Mizzou and I would’ve moved to Columbia without you. Maybe we would’ve found a way to make it work, but I don’t want to dwell on what could’ve been. I like being with you, here, now. So don’t be jealous,” she puts her hands on his forearms and skims her palms up over his biceps to linger on his shoulders before she murmurs, “just be with me. I’m here now, and I’m yours.”

Paul swallows hard and pounces on her, tangling one hand in her hair and kissing her with snarls of impatience that unfurl from somewhere deep in his chest. Merrick can feel the weight of every second he waited to meet her in the fervent way he trembles above her, his body all hard muscle and smoldering heat. Paul shifts the bulk of his weight onto his elbows and knees to map out her soft curves with his other hand while he stakes his claim on her mouth, palming her flabby stomach and squeezing the voluptuous flare of her hips. Merrick clutches at the fabric his faded tight black t-shirt with one hand and skims the other from the hollow in between his shoulder blades along the arch of his spine. Paul sucks on her upper lip before he nips her bottom lip hard enough to bruise and breaks the kiss to pluck curiously at something on top of her head nestled in the soft frizz that makes her flinch and squawk indignantly. “You’ve got feathers,” he says, his breath on her ear hot enough to make her arch her back as a shiver of pure unadulterated want shoots down her spine. Paul smirks and and strokes her hair to feel the fluctuating strands of filament and fuzz of plumage on her head.

“You shouldn’t be able to feel those,” Merrick says and shudders at the sensation of him rubbing one of her fluffy semiplume feathers in between the pads of his fingers, “or see them…” she touches her earlobe and huffs as her thumb and fingertips snag on only bare skin, “…unless I forgot to put my glamour charm back on. Whoops.”

Paul frowns and pulls back to look at her. There’s more of a burnish in the dark ash brown of her hair, a sheen of copper instead of gold or silver highlighting the strands in contrast with the plumes of her black feathers; her eyes are still the same gorgeous shade of gray, but with a metallic tint in her pupils. Almost like the eyes of a wolf in the dark. “What’s glamour?” he asks.

Merrick sighs and looks up at him even though she wants to shy away. “It’s fey magic,” she informs him. “I don’t consider myself fey because I’m mortal, but Celtic gods and fey are
interchangeable creatures. It’s the ability to spin illusions out of thin air, to mask the inhuman parts of us…” she claws her fingers into her hair and tugs on another semiplume feather that fluffs up from where her bangs flop down over her forehead before she mumbles, “…the inhuman parts of me.”

Paul has only known Merrick for a week and a half, but he knows her well enough to understand that she doesn’t like thinking of herself as inhuman—the illusion of her more or less ordinary human existence was shattered after she turned eighteen and she’s not comfortable with the idea of being a demigoddess. Witch is the label she chose for herself, a human classification for a girl who paradoxically craves the company of werewolves and other supernatural creatures. Paul nuzzles her nose and pulls back to leer at her. “Where else do you have feathers?” he asks, but Merrick doesn’t get a chance to answer his question before he kisses her again.

[101] Likáfso (lee-kat-SOH) is Quileute for “mate” or “spouse,” but here it’s used as the word for “imprint” in their native language.

[102] I doubt that Siobhan, Liam, and Maggie are the only Irish vampire coven despite what their name implies, so I changed their name to something more specific. Mullaghcleevaun is a peak in the Wicklow Mountains. According to the official illustrated guide, Siobhan was raped and changed by a vampire named Sancar who had a harem of beautiful undead women. Siobhan used her newborn strength to kill him in 1511, met the newborn Liam approximately a hundred and forty years later in 1650, and changed Maggie in 1847. After what Sancar did to her, I think her coven feeding on rapists makes perfect sense.


[104] I’ve read a multitude of Paul/OFC stories where Rachel is villainized for being his canonical soulmate, and that always bothered me because I think she’s the one who got the short end of the stick. Rachel is a twenty-year-old engineer who worked her ass off to graduate from college early and get her degree in computer science. Paul imprints on her and she gets stuck with a hotheaded sixteen-year-old boy in the only place on the planet where she’d rather not be. There are ways their relationship could work—Rachel never appears in the series and we don’t know enough about her or Paul to say they’re doomed from the start—but I just don’t ship it. I love my version of Rachel, though; and I hope you like her, too.

[105] Piłtilá-ḳalá-woli (pith-teh-LAH kah-LAH woh-LAY) is Quileute for “I accept you.”


[107] Some vertebrates have a biologic retroreflector system known as the tapetum lucidum behind their retinas. It gives animals like wolves superior night vision by increasing the light available to the photoreceptors in their eyes. Basically, this means that Merrick is nocturnal and can see in the dark. It’s also a characteristic that primates lack—unequivocally inhuman.
Like murders in books, but with reverse precision, how anyone becomes herself is a mystery. A miracle. A myth.

Brenda Shaughnessy, “Vanity”

The Myth of Blackbirds
Chapter 12
Spiral of Power

June 20, 2018

After she extracts the neuropathy from Billy on the night of the bonfire and unbinds Embry the next morning, Merrick succumbs to a bacterial infection and spends ten days in bed with a bottle of antibiotic capsules that she cracks open and drinks every twelve hours with a tablespoon of water and a strawberry lemonade chaser. Paul reluctantly tears himself away from his imprint and goes to work every morning even though all he wants to do is stay home and take care of her. Beckham is back at her parents’ house in Poulsbo with her sister Bri, who’s staying over to water the garden and keep the foliage from drying out.

Merrick is left alone with her shitty immune system until Kim offers to keep her company—she teaches grade 7-12 English at QTS, and school’s out for the summer. Werewolves can’t get sick like mere mortals do, so Jared drives their daughter Lydia to the den for what the pack calls wolf pup daycare before he drops his wife off at the cabin and carpools to Port Angelus with a jittery Paul in the passenger seat. If the foreman wasn’t Lucas Uley, he would’ve gotten written up for snapping at the other guys on the crew every time any of them mentioned his girlfriend. Some of the guys were his friends in school, before he phased; they like talking shit because they don’t know shit about him anymore.

Since a bacterial infection can only be contagious for a maximum of forty-eight hours once someone has become symptomatic, Sue Clearwater brings her a batch of her famous fish fry on her third day of antibiotics. Billy has been her best friend for decades, and seeing him in pain broke her heart; she doesn’t think frying up some cod is enough to repay Merrick for healing the neuropathy in his legs and feet, but it’s a start. Jacob brings Merrick lunch almost every afternoon from the first day onward, and hangs out with her and Kim until his break is over and he has to get back to the mechanics shop where he works with his grandmother Doris and Aunt Janie.

“It’s horribly ironic,” Merrick says, her voice a hushed rasp because the infection got caught in her throat.

Jacob pauses while he wolfs down his footlong sub. “What is?” he asks her with his mouth full. It comes out sounding like Wha is?

“Your mother died in a tragic car accident,” Merrick deadpans, “her mother, sister, and son are mechanics.”

Jacob bursts out laughing while Kim side-eyes her. “Your sense of humor is dark,” she says.
“I…” Merrick stops abruptly to muffle a litany of dry coughs in the hollow of her palm and takes a gulp of water from her plastic cup before she wheezes, “…I’m the daughter of a death goddess. What’d you expect?”

June 23, 2018

Angela works at a small photography studio in Forks, one that specializes in wedding photos. It’s June, the beginning of their busy season; her boss has enough notoriety as a wedding photographer that she gets a plethora of gigs outside of town. After shooting in Sappho all morning and Port Crescent in the golden afternoon, she picks her daughter Marisol up from daycare and meets her husband at the cabin in the woods.

Mary, Bonnie, and Tiffany bound his magic before Embry had a chance to use it; he was only twelve years old when the Cullens moved back to Forks, and most witches don’t start using magic instinctually until they hit puberty. Something about the fluctuating hormones and subsequent catastrophic shifts in their emotional state triggers an onset of physical changes and a manifestation of metaphysical abilities. Merrick was an anomaly: her magic was bound from infancy and it had hit her like a kick in the teeth when she turned eighteen.

“I was alone with my power,” Merrick had told Embry matter-of-factly after she unbound his magic, “but you’re not. Don’t waste that.”

Embry took her words to heart, and that’s how Merrick got stuck teaching Thaumaturgy 101 to two werewolf-witch hybrids. Tiffany comes over to audit their magic class after her shift at the kitschy souvenir shop on First Beach ends. Embry also works at the shop part-time. It’s owned by Sam’s grandmother, Matilda Ataruk. Tillie had married the only son of Deborah Black, the younger sister of Ephraim Black. Sam became alpha when the pack was a new moon because he was descended from two of the three werewolf bloodlines, not just because his great-great-grandfather Levi had been Ephraim’s beta.

Angela has always been curious about the secret history of her tribe. So much was lost in the atrocities of assimilation—a violent indoctrination that began when a white man named A. W. Smith built QTS in 1882. Jacob and Josephine had been renamed by Smith, after the biblical Jacob and his son Joseph. If she’d been a boy, he probably would’ve named her Esau instead. Angela is the daughter of a minister, and knowing how violent her religion can be caused a lapse in her faith that put a strain on her relationship with her parents—her father is Lutheran, her mother is a devout Catholic, and they don’t know their daughter is a werewolf. Beatrice imprinting on her brother Josh only made things more complicated.

Merrick knows more about magical theory than the witches of the Quileute tribe, because none of them bothered to inquire about the logic behind the magic. Why question it when there were spells to cast and storms to brew and grants to secure by any means necessary because the council needs a hundred and fifty million dollars to move the reservation upland out of the flood and tsunami zone? Merrick talks about magic like it’s just science the rest of the world doesn’t understand yet: it has discoverable laws and rules that apply to all disciplines no matter where a witch is from.

There are words for witch in every culture, every religion—ɂixwaló·la and wí·saťsò·patťì·kák in Quileute, shikuápiri and sikuáme in Purépecha, strega in Italy, djambe in Cameroon, suwa’ye in Sierra Leone, kurioso or kuradó in the Caribbean, sangoma and tagati and inyanga in South Africa, kalku and machi in Mapuche folklore, brujos and brujas in Hispanic cultures and curanderos and curanderas in Latinx cultures, ведьма and колдун in Russia, cailleach feasa and cailleach phiseogach in Ireland and carline in Scotland, kitsune-mochi and tsukimono-suji in...
Japan.[115]

Richard Malone is half cailleach phiseogach and half tsukimono-suji; his mother is a Japanese witch protected by a kitsune, a fox spirit. Since tsukimono-suji families are matriarchal and their powers are matrilineal, Merrick should’ve gotten a kitsune to protect her; the guardians of the Komori clan are children of Inari—a Shinto deity who’s depicted as genderfluid—and Kuzunoha—the kami of the Izumi shrine in Shinoda forest—and they protect human witches for a thousand years to earn their nine fox tails before they become gods themselves.[116] Richard is protected by a kitsune named Misako with seven fox tails, his wife is protected by a kitsune named Akiko with three fox tails, and their son is protected by a kitsune named Momoko with one tail.[117] Mitsuba, her biological grandmother, is descended from Abe no Seimei: an onmyouji and the son of Kuzunoha and a human man named Abe no Yasuna.[118] Those kitsune chose to protect her clan because they’re family, and Merrick isn’t part of the family—she never was.


Merrick shrugs, one of her pale shoulders hunching to meet the silver rose-shaped stud moonlighting as a glamour charm in her earlobe. “What exactly were you expecting?” she wants to know.

Embry flicks his gaze to Paul, who’s glowering in his general direction. “Let’s just say you’re not exactly his type,” he hedges.

Merrick snorts, her nostrils flaring with the huff of sound. “Why,” she asks, “because I’m fat?”

“No,” Embry says, “because you’re smart.”

Paul frowns, the space between his sharp eyebrows furrowing indignantly. “I’ve dated smart girls before,” he mutters.

“Sure,” Embry says and stretches the u sound out indulgently.

Paul growls at him, the noise snarling deep in his chest and clawing its way out of his mouth.

“You’ve been handling the bond really well,” Angela interjects. “I was a mess after I met Embry and he told me why we couldn’t just stay away from each other.”

Merrick shrugs again. “I translocated myself into the lands of the Queen of Air and Darkness once upon a time. I also have feathers mixed in with my axillary hair and my terminal hair,” she says, “imprinting doesn’t even make my list of the top ten weirdest things that have ever happened to me.”

Angela chortles at that, a soft noise like popping champagne bubbles.

Merrick smiles at her shyly. “When my magic was unbound,” she murmurs, “it changed my life forever. There are pros and cons to being a witch and a demigoddess, but my magic made everything make sense in a way it didn’t before,” she glances at Paul and bites her bottom lip before she articulates, “and my bond with you feels the same way. I don’t want to waste time or energy fighting my feelings. I’m the daughter of a war goddess. I know how to pick my battles.”
On her tenth and final day of taking antibiotics, her allies descend on Forks like a flock of bats out of hell. Paul drives Merrick to the mouth of the Third Beach trailhead off Highway 110 while she bites all of her fingernails to the quick and scatters tiny half-moons on the floor of his truck beneath her feet.

“Hey.” Paul stops and parks the truck before he cups her face in one hand and rests his forehead against hers. “It’s gonna be okay.”

Merrick swallows thickly and exhales sharply through her nose. “I just thought I’d have another decade or two at least to plan for this battle,” she mumbles, “the leaders of the Volturi are thousands of years old. Their perception of time is hyperaccelerated to the point that years pass like days to them. I hoped they would wait until I died of natural causes to come after my illegal dhampir friends again, but my research says Aro and Caius are petty assholes so I assumed they would come after me specifically because I kicked their collective asses. I just thought I’d be middle-aged by then, not on the cusp of turning twenty-seven.”

Paul nuzzles her cheek with his nose and kisses the soft jut where her chin melts into her jawline. It’s more an attempt at comfort than a seduction, and Merrick appreciates that. Paul has been sleeping with her—literally—the entire time she’s been coughing up a storm to keep her warm and help her regulate her body temperature while she fluctuated between stuttering chills and sweating the fever out. There’s still a pulse of unresolved sexual tension fulminating like a slow alternating electric current that charges and recharges between them, but no pressure to act on the feelings accumulating in the closed circuit of their bond. Merrick has never felt so comfortable with anyone. It’s kind of terrifying.

Merrick sighs and pulls back to look at him as Leah and Jacob park in the space next to them in their Rabbit. Jen is sitting in the back of a 1965 F-350 pickup truck with her feet dangling over the edge of the rusted cab while Seth leans with his elbow on the side of the open bed. “Okay,” she says. “Let’s do this.”

It took another council meeting for Merrick to convince the elders to let them bring vampires and more dhampirs onto Quileute land—they consider some of the coast and a sizeable chunk of the inland to still be Quileute territory despite what the American government thinks—but they agreed when she promised them enough cash to expand the reservation upland without scrambling for grants from the federal government. All magic has a price, and money always talks.

Leah side-eyes the witch as she hobbles over to prop her cane against the bumper of the truck and perches on the back of the pickup. Merrick is wearing a black sleeveless blouse with a row of buttons from her collarbone to her sternum over a black and green striped t-shirt with three-quarter length sleeves, a corset belt on top of a long green A-line skirt, and black lacy sandals. Leah, Jacob, Paul, and Seth are wearing some variation on the classic t-shirt and jeans look because if they’re going to hang out with parasites all afternoon, they might as well be comfortable. Merrick doesn’t look uncomfortable in her outfit, though; she’s just not a t-shirt and jeans kind of girl. “So,” Leah mutters, “who’s invited to your war council again?”

“Siobhan, my sister,” Merrick informs her. “Liam, her mate. Maggie, their daughter. I think they’re using the surname O’Connell now, ironically. Dr. Serena Melby and Dr. Maysun Trigano, Jen’s older sisters. Serena is the one who infiltrated the Science and Technology Branch of the F. B. I. for me five years ago, she’s a biochemist with a GS-13 designation—the highest level of security clearance for F. B. I. scientists. May is a cryptozoologist who’s been studying other
supernatural creatures and cultures for over a century, and she was coming to visit me anyway because she wants Dr. Cullen to fund her research. I’m going to make him an offer he can’t refuse.”

Jacob frowns at that. “What offer?” he asks.

“Why is the name O’Connell ironic?” Seth wants to know.

Merrick smiles, a feral twitch of her lips despite the lack of teeth showing. “O’Connell is rooted in the Irish Gaelic ó Conaill,” she says. “It means ‘strong like a wolf.’ Conall Cremthainne, an Irish king who died in 480 CE, was a werewolf. So were several of his descendants among the kings of Brega and Meath. It’s the main reason that Caius doesn’t send any of the hundreds of newborns the Volturi make every year to Ireland or Scotland. Those are werewolf countries. Siobhan was actually the daughter of a werewolf, but she was never able to shapeshift. Morrígu shapeshifted into a wolf to run with him and his pack. Siobhan is the only child of the Mórrígan born out of love, that I know of.”

Paul leans against the side of his truck and splays one of his hands in the hollow between her shoulder blades. Merrick tilts her head crowishly to look at him. It doesn’t bother her that her biological parents weren’t in love with each other because her adoptive parents—her real parents—are still enamored of each other even after thirty-seven years together and thirty-two years of marriage.

Merrick steers into the skid and rests her head on the flex of muscle where his upper arm meets the slope of his shoulder. It’s too hard to make a good pillow, but he’s hot enough to make up for that purely from a temperature standpoint. Paul Lahote, she thinks, fulltime werewolf soulmate and part-time chronic pain reliever.

“Edward told me that werewolves aren’t regimented,” Seth tells her with a furrow in between his eyebrows, “that when they shapeshift they’re not human anymore.”

Merrick rolls her eyes at that. “Volturi propaganda,” she retorts. “Caius is terrified of werewolves and he has a reason to manipulate the more softhearted vampires like the Cullens into thinking werewolves are monsters. Some of the more primitive strains of the lycanthropy virus do turn people into mindless killing machines, but most of the strains that’ve mutated in the last two thousand years are more humane. It’s rare for werewolves to become Úlfhéðnar—berserkers—these days. Oh,” she smiles wider, “Viking berserkers—specifically the wolf warriors who appeared in the fragmentary skadic poem Hrafnsmál and in the Vatnsdæla and Völsunga sagas—were also werewolves. ‘Neither fire nor iron had effect upon them,’[120] Hitler was a werewolf wannabe: he called himself ‘Wolf,’” she crooks her fingers like quotation marks around the word, “and named his first Eastern Front military headquarters Wolfsschanze: the Wolf’s Lair. Officially his death was a suicide, but he was actually killed by a member of the Soviet Red Army who used silver bullets.”[121]

Seth looks at her like she kicked his puppy. “Edward told me that silver bullets don’t kill werewolves,” he says.[122]

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered. “If a shot is fired execution style,” she retorts, “it doesn’t matter what kind of metal the bullets are made of.”

“So,” Paul mutters, “is Nahuel invited?”

Merrick hums, a soft mm-hmm. “Yup,” she says and pops the p sound, “he’s bringing his mother Pire, his ūkentu Huilen,[123] a curandero friend of his that he met in Mexico a few years ago, and
“Who’s George?” Paul wants to know.

“George is a vampire,” Jen says, “they’re Nahuel’s mate.”

“Yup,” Merrick echoes and elongates the *uh* sound before she pops the *p* again. “George is genderfluid, so use they/them pronouns and don’t misgender them.”

Paul exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils as a black 1951 XK120 Jaguar convertible pulls into the parking lot. There’s a caustic smell of venom in the summer air. It’s anathema to Quileute shapeshifters, and their hackles rise instinctually as the parasitic odor invades their nostrils.

“Shit,” Jacob intones as two Mapuche women step out of the sports car, “is that a modified Jag?”

Leah is the one who notices the anomaly first. “Okay,” she growls at Merrick, “how the hell are they walking in the sun?”

“Magic,” the witch deadpans and wiggles her nose in homage to Samantha Stephens before she hops down from her perch and goes to say hello.

[108] QTS is K-12, but it has five teachers who instruct middle schoolers and high schoolers: one for 7-12 science, one for 7-12 English, one for 7-12 history, one for 7-12 shop and P. E., and one for 7-12 math and art. It’s an itsy-bitsy school.

[109] Lucas Uley is the brother of Sue Clearwater, née Uley; he appears on the Uley family tree in the official illustrated guide (p. 319).

[110] According to the official illustrated guide, “he [Paul] had his own circle of friends, so when he abruptly stopped hanging out with them and instead became inseparable from Sam, it drew attention. People began to notice the wolf pack and speculate about it being a gang” (p. 351).

[111] Doris Wilde, née Ateara, is the daughter of Quil Ateara II, sister of Quil Ateara III (a.k.a. Old Quil), and wife of Hank Wilde; her daughters are Sarah Black, née Wilde, and Jane Uley, née Wilde. Jane prefers Janie. All of these characters appear on the Ateara family tree in the official illustrated guide (p. 316).

[112] Deborah Black appears on the Black family tree in the official illustrated guide (p. 317) along with her twin sister Susannah. I made her Sam’s maternal great-great-grandmother, because the pack being patrilineal in canon is sexist as fuck.

[113] A. W. Smith originally founded QTS as a way to colonize the tribe on behalf of the American government and renamed his students using biblical names, the names of white American historical figures, or butchered English versions of Quileute names. Yikes.

[114] Jacob in the bible is the patriarch of the Israelites who first appears in Genesis 25:20. Esau is his twin brother.

[115] Stregheria is archaic witchcraft, sometimes called the old religion in Italian. Strega are practitioners of that old religion. Stregonaria is Catholic folk magic appropriated from the old religion. Djambe is the word for the occult in Cameroon, and practitioners thereof. Suwa’ye is a Kuranko word meaning “extraordinary powers.” Caribbean faith healers are called kurioso (male) or kuradó (female). South African fortune tellers and healers are sangoma or inyanga as opposed to tagati, who harm people with curses and poison. Mapuche folklore calls anyone who does the black arts kalku and more benevolent shamans machi. Brujería is a Castilian word for witchcraft that appears in Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, and Galician dialects; brujos (male) and brujas (female) are practitioners
thereof. Contrariwise, a curandero or curanderia is a medicine man or woman from Latin America. Ведьма (phonetically “vedma”) and колдун (phonetically “koldun”) are Russian words for witches and sorcerers. Irish càillich feasa are fortune tellers and càillich phiseogach are sorceresses. Scottish carline are witches in general. Japan has witches that appear in their folklore who have either foxes or snakes as their familiars; kitsune-mochi (狐持ち) and tsukimono-suji (憑き物筋) are both families with fox spirits as familiars or guardians.

[116] When a kitsune has nine tails, it becomes a tenko (天狐)—a heavenly fox—and ascends to a heavenly dimension. Inari Ookami (稲荷大神) is a Shinto deity that is sometimes depicted as female, sometimes as male, and sometimes androgynous; hence, genderfluid. Kuzunoha (葛の葉) is the deity of the Izumi shrine in Shinoda forest.

[117] Misako (深青狐) is a name written using the kanji for “deep green” and “fox.” Akiko (紅月狐) is a name written using the kanji for “red moon” and “fox.” Momoko (桃狐) is a name written using the kanji for “peach tree” and “fox.” Komori (狐森) is a name written using the kanji for “fox” and “forest.” Mitsuba (光羽) is a name written using the kanji for “light” and “feathers.”

[118] Abe no Seimei (安倍晴明) was an onmyouji (陰陽師) born on 21 February 921 CE and died on 31 October 1005 CE, in the middle of the Heian period (c. 794 CE – c. 1185 CE). Seimei was a practitioner of onmyoudou (陰陽道), a system of occult divination rooted in the Wu Xing, the five Taoist elements of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water; he served the emperor and controlled the government ministry of onmyoudou. There’s a shrine in Kyoto dedicated to him. According to legend, his mother was Kuzunoha the kitsune.

[119] New Moon (2006), p. 260. Edward: “Time means something very different to them [the Volturi] than it does to you, or even me. They count years the way you count days.”


[121] Obviously this isn’t true. Hitler totally killed himself to avoid capture by his enemies. When the Soviet Red Army found him and his wife Eva Braun dead, their bodies were burned in a bomb crater in the garden outside the Führerbunker. If werewolves existed, things might’ve gone differently. Hence the historical inaccuracy.

[122] Breaking Dawn (2008), p. 471. “So there are real werewolves?” I asked. “With the full moon and silver bullets and all that?” […] “Full moon, yes,” Edward said. “Silver bullets, no—that was just another one of those myths to make humans feel like they had a sporting chance.”

[123] Ñukentu is the Mapudungun—Mapuche language—word for maternal aunt.

[124] George is mentioned in the official illustrated guide as the man who changed Alistair—the misanthropic tracker who appears in Breaking Dawn—into a vampire. Alistair was born at the beginning of the fourteenth century and changed in approximately 1320 CE, so George would be eight hundred years old at the youngest. I added a few centuries to explain why he was able to bite Alistair without losing control and draining him.

[125] Nahuel means “jaguar,” so he’s driving a Jag. I love bad puns.
Violent History

God of six supposedly impossible things:
weep of wolves, a drought of bullets,
the claws of a catawba, a mother’s unworry,
a wilderness of blood, the dead keeping count.

I, too, am rich in things I never asked for.

Ruth Awad, “Amor Fati”

The Myth of Blackbirds
Chapter 13
Violent History

Merrick has been planning a war since the Volturi came to Bumfuck, Ohio and she got stuck underground for almost six weeks because the blowback from the ensuing battle put her out of commission. Being immobile for a month gave her time to formulate a strategy, one that she’s been finetuning while she honed her witchcraft. Nahuel hasn’t changed much since then: his eyes are dark amber like the eyes of the jungle cat he was named for, his skin is dark brown and impossibly smooth in a way only people who’ve been airbrushed or people with accelerated healing can be, his mouth is full, his nose is long and flat, his black hair is over a foot longer but still tied in a long unadorned braid down his back, and he still watches the world around him with the gaze of a hunter. There’s only one obvious difference: he’s wearing a soft charcoal gray henley and a pair of crisp black jeans on top of his combat boots instead of the traditional handwoven makuñ, chiripa, and ekota he’d worn when they first met.[126]

George was born on the island of Cyprus the during the reign of Flavius Tiberius Constantinus Augustus, a Byzantine emperor who ruled the Eastern Roman Empire in the sixth century of the Common Era.[127] When they were twenty-one, they began writing a list describing the cities, towns, fortresses, and divisions of the Byzantium. After they visited the Exarchate of Ravenna in 602 CE, George was changed into a vampire by Caius. It took George nine years to finish their list because they had to stay in the city of Volterra during their newborn year and they could only travel inconspicuously at night in the aftermath. After that, George traveled all over the world as a geographer who recorded the rise and fall of empires. There was a century during the Middle Ages where they stayed in London and masqueraded as the demoness Ashtoreth—a blasphemous version of the Phoenician goddess Astarte they had worshipped as a human[128]—but they remained loyal to the Volturi. George had adopted the persona of a demon because they didn’t feel comfortable in their own skin and they had loved manipulating humans obsessed with the occult into sacrificing what they held most dear. Alistair, their progeny, was the son of William VII de Braose—10th feudal baron of Bramber and 2nd Baron Braose.[129] George had changed him under the false pretense that Alistair would become the next Charlemagne in exchange for a feast: the blood of his mother, his older brother, and younger sister. It wasn’t Nahuel who changed their mind, or their heart. Something about being alone for a thousand years got stale over the centuries, and they started to see humans as more than food. George fell in love, got a human woman pregnant, and watched the Volturi guard tear her apart. Chelsea used her power to spare their life, and George was exiled to Mexico where they eventually met Nahuel.

Merrick learns all of this by shaking hands with George, whose cherubic blonde curls and
beautiful face reminds her of the eponymous Dorian Gray. It’s no wonder medieval Europeans mistook them for a fallen angel.

Huilen and Pire are both wearing their sooty black hair unbound, instead of braided in the intricate styles they’d worn to defeat Joham because they’re not here to wage a war. Yet. Huilen is thin and sharp with downturned eyes, an authoritative arch to her eyebrows, a long thin nose tapering into a bulb, full lips with a downward tilt at the corners, and an angular jaw. She’s wearing a flowy black dress with a long hanky hem skirt and a wide brown faux leather belt around her waist, the gold eyelets swirling in flower patterns gilded and glinting in the sunlight. Pire is shorter and paler than her older sister, and that makes her look deceptively frail even as a vampire. She’s plump with round cheeks, wide dark eyes, the same full lips and sharp angular jaw as her sister, and a soft flat nose. Pire is wearing a colorful floral print yellow and blue sundress with short ruffled sleeves and a skirt that swishes just below her knees. Their bloodred eyes are bewitched to look brown to everyone but Merrick, who made daywalking charms for them and has the sight to see through illusory glamour magic.

Siobhan sends Merrick a text to tell her that Carlisle agreed to a meeting with her and May on Sunday, so she hears Paul growling before she looks up from the screen of her phone and sees the curandero emerge from the backseat of the Jaguar.

Maybe sikuamé is a more accurate term, Merrick thinks as her eyes go wide behind her glasses at the sight of a man that looks almost exactly like her alleged soulmate. “So,” she murmurs, “you have a twin brother. Was that not something you thought I should know?”

Paul exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils as his wolf howls and claws at the cage of his ribs and his raw magic pulses in the humid air, the bittersweet smell of saffron rising as primal rage boils in the visceral pit of his stomach. “I don’t have any brothers outside of the pack,” he says through clenched teeth.

Alejandro Lahote rolls his eyes at that and folds his arms tight across his chest. Alex is his identical twin, but he’s not as tall or muscular as Paul; he’s more beanpole than beefcake and he has an undercut with enough hair on top of his head to pull back into a messy bun. Still, they do look alike: they both have the same dark eyes, the same aquiline nose, the same thin lips, the same big ears, the same cheekbones and sharp jawline. “It’s been thirteen years,” he says, “and that’s all you’ve got? Nothing else you want to say to me?”

Paul shakes his head so fast he almost shakes out of his skin. “You were too busy to show up at the funeral,” he snarls, his deep voice shattering in the back of his throat like shards of broken glass. “You’re not part of my family. You haven’t been since I phased.”

Okay, Merrick thinks as she splays one of her hands over the contour of his waist, dating Paul is like defusing a bomb sometimes because he’s a hothead who only bottles shit up long enough to let it pressurize until he explodes. Nothing I didn’t already know about him.

Merrick curls her fingers into the fabric of his t-shirt and instinctually absorbs the magical energy he’s radiating. Paul turns and looks at her as the shreds of tension seep out of his shoulders and back. Merrick looks up and meets his eyes before she flicks her gaze to his twin and tweaks the spell on the lenses of her glasses to see if he’s wearing any charms or cursed objects he intends to use against her or the pack. It wouldn’t be the first time a witch she’s never met tried to kill her. “Enough,” she says flatly as May pulls into the parking area in her less conspicuous black 1968 Chevy Impala SS427 Custom Coupe with Serena in the passenger seat.

Dr. Maysun Trigano is a petite woman with black hair cut short and feathering around her cheeks, pale green eyes, thick dark eyelashes, a long and thin beaklike nose, a sharply curved jawline tapering into the point of her chin, and a downturned mouth with a thin upper lip. She’s wearing a
sleeveless white blouse with black piping and a pair of high-waisted pinstriped shorts on top of black ankle boots with stiletto heels and spiky silver studs protruding from straps wrapped around below the topline. May looks so young that she always gets carded when she goes to a bar or sees an R-rated movie in theaters, even though she’s almost two hundred years old.

Merrick tucks her cane in the crook of her elbow and waves to May and Serena with a slow furling that makes her fingers snarl like claws in the hollow of her palm. “Hi,” she says.

“Hello,” Serena grumbles and doesn’t bother to emerge from the passenger seat of the Impala. Since the Quileute pack isn’t a faction with preternatural or political clout in the otherworld, they don’t have to stand on ceremony.

Dr. Serena Melby has an eternal case of resting bitchface that makes her look more like the stereotypical mean girl from every teen movie ever made than a two hundred and eight-year-old dhampir. Serena inherited her name and her ice blue eyes from her Norwegian mother and an air of superiority from her father. She’s the oldest of the four hybrid siblings and Jen is the youngest, but they resemble each other the most: they both have the same thick wavy ash brown hair, the same full lips and warm ivory skin. Jen is soft where her sister is sharp and petite where her sister is plump, but even at a cursory glance it’s obvious they’re related. Serena is wearing a sleeveless baggy paisley tunic with giant buttons from collar to hem over a pair of leggings and scuffed white flip-flops; her hair is swept up into a messy bun held in place with six mechanical pencils and a stylus that stick out haphazardly. When she’s not at work, she’s not dressed to impress.

Nahuel ducks his head to hide a smile and nods, a sharp descent of his chin. “Don’t worry, Moyotil,” he says. “We aren’t going to ruin the alliance you made for us.”

Merrick huffs at the pinch of teasing in his tone. Nahuel is the grandson of a man named Quidel, a lonco and a therianthrope. Sometimes he can be arrogant because he was raised as a toqui, chosen to lead his people in times of war. Quidel didn’t exile his daughters or disown his grandson because he was a werejaguar, and he understood the difference between monsters and those who do monstrous things. Most female therianthropes are infertile because their changes are tied to the phases of the moon, so they always miscarry. Pire and Huilen weren’t shapeshifters before they became vampires. Their mother was human, and therianthropy is transmitted by exogenous retroviruses. It would be hereditary if female therianthropes were capable of carrying pregnancies to term, but they’re not so the point is moot. “I have generalized anxiety disorder,” she points out. “I’m always going to worry. It makes me better at battle tactics, not worse.”

“So,” Leah says and narrows her eyes at the witch. “You weren’t just being hyperbolic. You’re planning to start a war.”

Merrick shakes her head slowly. “No,” she says and something in the cadence of her soft voice shifts until her serrated tone slices the summer air like a threshing sledge, “I didn’t start this war. I’m planning to finish it.”

It would have been less of a hassle for her allies to meet her and the pack at the office, but the elders told her to introduce them to the alphas somewhere outside the borders of the reservation. Since they agreed to let Merrick use the conference room in their office building for her war council, she went along with their stipulation even though she thinks it was a waste of time.

Merrick flinches with her whole body as Paul slams the door of his truck. After he tries and fails to buckle his seatbelt because his hands are trembling almost violently, Paul glances at his imprint and stares at the way her hands are crumpled up defensively in front of her glasses with a stricken look on his face.
“Sorry,” he mutters fervently as guilt uncoils like a venomous snake in the visceral pit of his stomach. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Merrick bites her lip and exhales a soft whoosh of air that slips out of her mouth through the space between her teeth. “It’s not your fault,” she mumbles as she lowers her hands and uncrumplles her fingers, “loud noises just freak me out.”

Paul stops fumbling with his seatbelt and inhales deeply through his nose, mollified by the way her anxiety seeps out of her as she looks up into his eyes. Merrick is afraid, but she’s not afraid of him; she never was. “Why?” he wants to know.

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered. “I was bullied in junior high,” she tells him softly, “the boys would trip me in the hallway, take my books and tear out pages in front of me, ask me out as a joke and slam my locker door in my face, but the girls were so much worse. Sometimes they’d pinch me and tell me they were just showing me where I needed to lose weight. I was covered in bruises. Sometimes they’d steal my clothes during P. E. and dump them into the sink for dirty towels with the water running. I had P. E. first period, so I had to wear my sweaty gym clothes all day. There were two swirly incidents in the same bathroom, once in seventh grade and again in eighth. I had to borrow a turtleneck from my mom without asking, and I couldn’t explain why because my throat was so bruised from the rim of the toilet that I couldn’t talk for a week.”

Paul grits his teeth hard enough to make the hinge of his jaw ache. Merrick peeks at him over her shoulder to smile at him shyly and incongruously, the incandescent smile of a survivor. Paul sucks in a sharp breath as his heart lurches horribly in his chest.

“There was one boy who’d grab me every morning and hold me with my feet off the ground until the bell would ring,” Merrick says in the dissonant tone of voice she uses to put distance between her past and present self. “I’d say no and tell him to put me down, but he didn’t listen. After I got my red belt in Tae Kwon Do, I flipped him with a shoulder throw and fractured two of his ribs. I almost got expelled because the school had a zero-tolerance policy for violence, but I asked the principal to watch the security tapes because I knew the footage was proof that violence was my only option. There was nothing else I could’ve done to make him stop.”

Paul barks out a laugh even though all he wants to do is explode, to rage and rend the ones who harmed his mate. So many people have seriously hurt her, but still she clings to her humanity—her roots in the ordinary world—despite the otherworldly magic in her blood and monstrosity in her heart. Paul leans over the gearshift to tuck a stray tendril of her burnished hair behind her ear and drops his head to nuzzle the crook of her neck, inhaling the scent of ozone and sweetness. There’s a whisper of almonds from her conditioner in her scent and a sliver of lemon from the soap she uses. *Fuck*, he thinks as she curls her fingers over his bare forearm and turns her head to plant a soft dry kiss on the heel of his palm. *I love her.* “What did Nahuel call you?” he asks.

Merrick sighs. “Moyotil,” she murmurs, “the Mapudungun word for crow. It’s his nickname for me. I hate it because it has more syllables than my actual name.”

Paul snickers, his breath a hot flare that makes her pulse thunder in her throat as the skin of her neck tingles. It gives her something else to focus on beyond the intricate knot of anxiety twisting her up inside.

“It’s inefficient!” Merrick says indignantly as a smile blooms on her face.

Paul grins and lifts his head to look her in the eyes before he kisses her hard and ravenous and deep, his tongue slipping into her mouth as her breath hitches in her throat. Merrick clings to his forearm with one hand and digs the fingers of the other into the nape of his neck while she kisses him back. Paul takes her tongue into his mouth and tilts her chin to change the angle of the kiss.
before he slowly drags his teeth over her upper lip. Merrick whimpers as his tongue curls around hers and he kisses her like he wants to devour her from the mouth down. When he breaks the kiss, her glasses are fogged up around the rims and they’re both out of breath. Merrick tries to catch her breath while her heart thumps so loudly that she knows he can hear it, a throbbing sound that resonates in her ears as tingling flecks of gooseflesh rise on her arms in response to the sensation of his breath ghosting over her swollen lips.

“It was my dad,” Paul whispers.

Merrick opens her eyes and strokes the hair on the nape of his neck. “What happened?” she asks him even though she already knows the answer.

“He died six months ago,” Paul says. “He quit smoking when my mom found out she was pregnant, but he started again when they were separated. He smoked two packs a day, so I wasn’t surprised when he got diagnosed with type four lung cancer. There was a huge growth in his lung and small tumors metastasized into his heart…” he grits his teeth around a snarl and pulls back to stare at her with a flare of his nostrils and a fragile look on his face before he chokes out, “…I couldn’t do anything. We couldn’t afford treatment, so the cancer kept growing until it killed him. Maybe if I’d had my magic—”

Merrick shakes her head slowly. “There was still nothing you could’ve done,” she tells him softly, “healing is the most difficult form of abjuration. I’m one of the most powerful witches on the planet and healing magic still burns me out. If you tried to magically cure terminal cancer without a circle of ten or more witches to help you cast, you would’ve died.”

Paul squeezes his eyelids shut and exhales a shuddering breath. “Alex should’ve been here with me,” he growls. “Maybe he could’ve—”

Merrick swoops her arms tight around his neck and hugs him. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, “death is the worst.”

Paul barks out a laugh in spite of everything and hunches awkwardly over the gearshift to bury his face in her soft frizzy hair. “Yeah,” he whispers back.

Merrick, the daughter of a deity whose power is rooted in dead things, knows that better than anyone but death itself.

[126] These are clothes traditionally worn by men of the Mapuche tribes in Chile and Argentina: a makuñ is basically a poncho, a chiripa is a rectangular piece of cloth worn wrapped around the waist and thighs, and ekota are sandals (as opposed to wooden clogs called sumel).

[127] Flavius Tiberius Constantinus Augustus, also known as Tiberius II Constantine, ruled the Byzantine Empire from 574 CE to 582 CE. George of Cyprus was a Byzantine geographer who wrote his Descriptio orbis Romani (tr. “Description of the Roman world”) in the decade of 600 CE – 610 CE.

[128] According to the official illustrated guide, George was masquerading as the demon Astaroth when he made Alistair into a vampire (p. 275). Astaroth was originally a female demon mentioned in the Hebrew Bible by the name Ashtoreth, a derivative of the Phoenician goddess Astarte. Stephenie Meyer didn’t bother to research this, but: Astaroth wasn’t depicted as a male archdemon until he appeared in the Book of Abramelin—a grimoire written as series of twelve manuscripts that purportedly date themselves to 1458 but have actually been dated closer to 1608 at the earliest and 1750 at the latest. Astaroth was first depicted as a Duke of Hell in the Pseudomonarchia Daemonum (tr. Hierarchy of Demons) written by a Dutch demonologist named Johann Weyer in 1577. George going around using the name Astaroth in the early fourteenth century is historically inaccurate as fuck, is what I’m saying.
William VII de Braose (1260 CE – 1326 CE) was married twice and only had daughters with his first wife, Agnes. Elizabeth de Sully, his second wife, might’ve born him a son named William VIII who died in 1315. Here, they had another son: Alistair.

Quidel is a Mapuche name meaning “burning torch.” Lonco is a bastardization of longko, the Mapudungun word for chief (literally translated as “head”). Toqui literally translates as “axe-bearer” and is a title conferred by the koyag (parliament of chiefs) and rehue (Mapuche families or clans) to choose a leader in times of war.

There are endogenous and exogenous retroviruses. We carry endogenous retroviral DNA in our chromosomes, and exogenous retroviral infections are transmitted one of three ways: cell-to-cell, fluid exchange, and in rare cases airborne transmission (e.g. the Jaagsiekte sheep retrovirus, an airborne infection that causes lung cancer in sheep). If therianthropes were capable of carrying biological children to term, therianthropy would be hereditary in the same way that HIV is sometimes inherited by infants since they shared a blood supply with their infected mother in the womb.
Blackbirds Who Are Exactly Blackbirds

She’d gotten used to being invisible: to change the arrangement now would be to upset a balance. She was making difficulties where none existed. She was overstepping a line.

But where was that line?

Margaret Atwood, “Monopoly”

The Myth of Blackbirds

Chapter 14

Blackbirds Who Are Exactly Blackbirds

Paul drives to the tribal council office and parks his truck in front of the windswept gray building with its weathered wooden walls painted the color of coastal fog and its corrugated red steel rib panels rippling on the roof. Merrick hangs her spare placard from his rearview mirror so they can occupy the parking space designated for disabled people as a 2010 Tesla Roadster Sport 2.5 parks in the space to her left. Paul blinks at the brightness of its cherry red paint job gleaming in the sunlight and snorts. “Your sister isn’t subtle,” he deadpans, “is she?”

Siobhan is Atlantean Irish\[132\] with pale skin and black hair; her eyes are glamoured to appear the shade of violet blue they were in her human life, but underneath the illusion they’re vermillion. She’s six-foot-two without shoes and muscular like a Hellenistic statue of a Greek goddess, with arms that would make Venus de Milo jealous.\[133\] Siobhan was only twenty when her sire attacked her, but every move she makes showcases her true age. It takes centuries of practice to move with such predatory and sinuous grace.

Liam is six-foot-five, an inch taller than Paul. Which is impressive, since he was born in a century when the average height for men was five-foot-seven. Liam has dark brown hair, bloodred eyes glamoured to look pale gray, and a perpetually harsh expression—the male equivalent of resting bitchface. Although he’s technically a hundred and twenty-five years younger than Siobhan, he became a vampire when he was thirty-five and that makes him look substantially older than his mate.

Maggie, contrariwise, is five-foot-two and petite with auburn ringlets and eyes glamoured to look pale blue. Siobhan found her dying of starvation in 1847, after her family had fled to America to escape the Great Famine and left her behind with her grandparents in a small village in Cork. Maggie was, in fact, a changeling: half human and half fey. Herla, the Erlkönig and husband of the Mórrígan, had asked Siobhan and Liam to find his hybrid daughter.\[134\] Maggie was cursed with the innate fey inability to lie, but she was also blessed with the ability to tell truth from a lie. Siobhan was curious about whether or not Maggie would be able to become a vampire, since fey blood is delicious to vampires but the fey themselves cannot be changed; but she was human enough to become a vampire and being changed amplified her ability.

“Nope,” Merrick says before she arches her eyebrows at Liam. “Where’s the old man sweater?” she asks. “I thought you welded it onto your body.”

Liam chuffs and shrugs his lean muscular shoulders. “Sorry to disappoint,” he says as the corners of his mouth curl in a semblance of a smile. It’s the closest a stoic man like him gets to gut-busting laughter and grinning from ear to ear.
“It’s summer,” Siobhan points out mildly, “we’re not human, but we’ve got to keep up appearances now that we’re daywalkers.”

Merrick tilts her head in corvid acknowledgment. “What did Caleb say?” she wants to know.[135]

“Who’s Caleb?” Paul asks her before Siobhan has a chance to answer her question.

Merrick uses two fingers to adjust her glasses before she looks at him over her shoulder. “Caleb is the alpha of the British Isles,” she informs him, “every pack in Great Britain and Ireland is loyal to him.”

“Yeah,” Liam says, “and he’s agreed to join our rebellion.”

Merrick frowns at that. “It’s not a rebellion,” she tells him sharply.

“Call it what you want,” Liam retorts, “but I survived the Éirí Amach in 1641 and died in the Battle of Macroom in 1650. I know a rebellion when I’m plotting one.”[136]

Merrick snorts. “Your side lost the Battle of Macroom,” she murmurs, “six hundred Irish soldiers were killed and Lord Broghill captured the castle of Carraig an Drochid. It was a feast for Morrígu, and for the vampires who circle human battlefields like vultures. You were spoils of a war that Oliver Cromwell won.”

Liam sighs. “Don’t remind me,” he says gruffly and goes to open the door for Siobhan. “It was such an ugly war.”

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered. *I’m the daughter of a carrion crow,* she thinks, *but I’m not going to watch the bodies pile up anymore.* “Colonialism is always ugly,” she deadpans. “Cromwellian or otherwise.”

Paul holds the door for her and instinctually splays his other hand possessively over the small of her back as she hobbles into the building. Until they actually mate—in the conjugal sense of the word—the wolf in him is going to feel the need to mark his territory. Merrick doesn’t seem to mind, if the way she shifts her weight and leans into the heat of his rough touch means anything.

There’s a conference room off to one side of the office building. It’s cramped with sixteen people crowding around the circular wooden table inside. Jacob, Leah, and Seth are standing—partly to put themselves above the others in a lupine display of dominance and partly because they only have twelve seats. Jen, Serena, May, Nahuel, George, Huilen, Pire, and Alex are occupying eight of them. Siobhan, Liam, and Maggie sit down while Paul holds the door for Merrick and glares at his twin. Merrick folds herself into the chair in one corner of the room, drops her messenger bag on the floor to her left, and props her cane against the wall. It makes a hollow metallic sound as May slides a yellow paper box full of savory Russian pastries called piroshky across the wooden tabletop. Merrick inhales deeply through her nose and makes a soft, decadent noise in the back of her throat. “I love you,” she intones.

“I’d say that I love you, too,” May says, “but I’m pretty sure you’re talking to the piroshky.”

Merrick nods, succinctly. “Yup,” she retorts and pops the p sound as Serena muffles a sliver of a giggle in the palm of her hand and a wave of discordant laughter ripples around the conference room.

Paul snorts and moves to stand with Jacob, who towers over the others. Being in a confined space with six vampires and a venomous dhampir sets his teeth on edge, his instincts howling at him to eliminate the imminent threat and extinguish their revolting scent. Paul folds his arms in a way that
makes his biceps flex and watches his imprint eat a potato and cheese pastry before she ducks to put the box under her chair.

Merrick stops chewing and leans back in her seat, tucking her inflamed ankle in the smooth hollow behind her knee. “Seattle had a homeless population of approximately twelve thousand people in January,” she says, “but in the last six months that population has declined to approximately six thousand. There were fifty-two vampires nested in the city feeding voraciously, the kind of feeding habits the Volturi are typically quick to quell. I perused the memories of those vampires posthumously and confirmed my suspicions that my biological father was responsible for their deaths. Those people died because he wanted to galvanize me into battling the Volturi again, and he hopes I’ll die trying to avenge them,” she adjusts her glasses and glances around the circular table before she says, “you’re here to back me up so I can stage a twofold coup and stay alive in the aftermath.”

“Why fulfill the prophecy now?” Alex wants to know.

Merrick tilts her head crowishly and narrows her eyes at him. Most witches in North America know of her. There are only a hundred circles on the entire continent: seventy-seven full circles of thirteen witches and twenty-three circles of anywhere from three to twelve witches. Only seven of those circles are unlinked from the chain that binds the other ninety-three circles into a kingdom ruled by Richard Malone, and those witches are still living under his authority as the Supreme—but they’re not sharing their magical power with him through the blood oath the bound circles take. There are fifty circles in America, thirty-one in Mexico, seven in Canada, five in Central America, and four in the Caribbean. Alex ostensibly belongs to either the Michoacán circle or the circle of Edomex, both oathbound to her biological father. Which is why Merrick had thought he might’ve come to kill her.

“Why now?” Alex echoes. “Why not stay out of circle politics, since you’re the first unbound witch in three hundred years?”

Merrick gnaws on the inside of her cheek. There are too few true witches left in the world. Most of those who survived the burning times were thinblooded, the kind whose magic pales in comparison to someone from one of the ancient bloodlines that had been hunted and killed by witchfinders. Colonialism almost made the indigenous witches of the Americas extinct—a tribe as small as the Quileutes having two witches and three witchling hybrids among them is a testament to the strength of their ancestral magic. Richard Malone is descended from two of the ancient bloodlines: Ó Conchubhair and Abeno. One of his ancestors was Amalgad, son of Queen Medb of Connacht and King Conchobar mac Nessa of Ulster—who himself was the son of the druid Cathbad. Those ancient bloodlines mingled with the wild magic of the Mórrígan and created a hybrid with the vigor to surpass both of her parent species. Merrick isn’t the first unbound witch in three hundred years, but she’s the first in centuries with too much power to risk being part of a circle.

“Why don’t you tell us what the hell he’s talking about?” Leah interjects.

Merrick turns and looks at her. Leah is standing with her arms crossed and one hip cocked, a potent concoction of curiosity and confusion in her eyes and tension rooted in her shoulders.

“Most witches are bound in a circle of anywhere from three to thirteen witches,” Paul informs her, “they do a ritual that involves taking an oath and drinking ceremonial wine mixed with the blood of each witch. By mingling blood, they share a specific magical skill with everyone in the circle and that makes each witch more powerful. Merrick can’t bind herself to human witches, because she’s too powerful—she’d kill anyone who’s not another demigod or a witch hybrid with a healing factor if she formed a circle.”
Merrick smiles at him shyly. “So you do remember what I talk about during our lessons,” she says.

Paul nods, a sharp descent of his chin. “I remember everything you say,” he tells her. Merrick doesn’t know him well enough to hear the unspoken I love you in those five words, but his packmates do. It’s not deep true love yet, because he still doesn’t know her well enough for that; but she’s his imprint and that’s all he needs to know for now.

Merrick, who minces words like an Italian chef minces fresh garlic, bluses from the roots of her burnished hair to the hollow where sweat pools in between her breasts. “Okay,” she says and ekes the oh sound out into a shrill ooh, “first things first: I’m going to topple the Volturi. I don’t want to annihilate them totally, since they’ve spent two thousand years making themselves into the things monsters have nightmares about—and that makes them a necessary evil because they do the dirty work of keeping the bloodsuckers from bleeding the world dry.”

Alex stares at her, his sharp eyebrows furrowing into an expression of intense scrutiny that makes him look more like Paul than any superficial genetic similarity in their identical faces. “You didn’t answer my question,” he says.

Nahuel lets a grin unfurl on his face. “Moyotil doesn’t answer questions she doesn’t want to answer,” he says, “she ignores them because she’s fey enough that she can’t lie.”

“It’s true,” Maggie says to add her own ugly truth to the conversation, “she can’t. We can’t. It’s just not in our nature.”

Merrick shakes her head so fast she all but shatters her fragile equilibrium. “Untrue,” she tells her sharply, “all of the fey are liars. Being physically incapable of telling lies doesn’t make the folk honest.”

Paul stares at his imprint as the implications of her words sink in. Merrick can’t lie, but that doesn’t make her honest—she didn’t answer when Jacob had asked her about the offer that Carlisle Cullen couldn’t refuse, either. There are things he doesn’t know about her, things she doesn’t want him to know; and that hurts like a bitch.

Merrick slumps her shoulders and leans with her elbows on the wooden tabletop before she drops her glamour. It fades out with a fizzle of power, the burnish in her hair going from copper to auburn flecked with black feathers as the smell of petrichor seeps into the stale air. “You want to know why I’m doing this now,” she says, “after nine years of avoiding my destiny or whatever. Fine. I did my research on Richard Malone after I heard the prophecy from Morrígu, and I chose not to fulfill it because I thought he was a king who deserved his seat of power. Things changed when I found out that six thousand people were sacrificed because my death is more important to him than protecting those he’s bound by blood oath to protect. I don’t want his throne, but he’s not worthy of being the Supreme and I’m the only person with enough power to unseat him before more people die. I’m not doing this because I want to do it, I’m doing this because I can’t avoid it anymore. I won’t let anyone else die because of this chosen one malarkey.”

Alex stops interrogating her with his eyes and hunches over the wooden tabletop with his hands folded in front of his face, obscuring the way his mouth trembles with grief. “When the Supreme broke his threefold oath,” he says, “he found a way to transfer the blowback. It killed my tatíta instead of him, and a witch in every circle bound to him.”

Merrick gapes at him, gobsomacked—the human sacrifices didn’t come as a surprise to her because her biological father is a billionaire and rich men exploit the poor and powerless by the hour, but his own witches? If she knows her enemy, then he used the blowback from breaking his oath to kill the strongest witches in each circle and steal their power for himself. Ironically, working such
black magic still didn’t make him powerful enough to kill her—but it’s chilling that he’s gotten
desperate enough to kill his kith. So, she thinks, this is personal for Alex, but he’s not here for
Paul—he’s here for revenge. “I put a geas on him after I found out about the nest of vampires in
the city,” she informs him, “he’s prohibited from causing more death in any context—directly or
indirectly. If the geas is broken, he dies. Which is the magical equivalent of loading a gun with
blank cartridges, but he’s not in direct or indirect control of the Volturi. It’s safe to assume they’re
going to attack me instead of him, because the geas breaks when I die.”

“Yes,” Siobhan interjects, “but geasa are nasty curses. If you die, so does he.”

Merrick hums, a soft mm-hmm. “I’m not going to die anytime soon,” she murmurs, “but I want
him to waste energy plotting a way to get around the geas while I make my move against the
Volturi.”

Leah keeps her arms folded loosely across her chest and meets the eyes of anyone who looks in
her direction with a tilt of her chin and an arch of her left eyebrow, an unspoken challenge that
always makes them look away first. I’m the baddest bitch in town, her body language says. Loud
and clear. “I want to keep the pack out of this,” she says, “we’ll protect you if they bring the fight
into our territory because you’re pack and we like you, but we’re not going to die for you.”

Merrick nods and ducks her head to hide the slice of her smile. Leah is like thornmallow: prickly
on the outside, but squishy within. Merrick still isn’t going to let her see that she knows how warm
and fuzzy Leah is, if you substitute warmth for snark and fuzziness for ferocious protective
instincts. It’s too intimate a thing for someone who only became part of the pack a few weeks ago
to illuminate. There’s something visceral and exquisitely strange about being among an assortment
of other supernatural creatures—other hybrids and changelings and outcasts. Merrick doesn’t have
to hide anything from these people, doesn’t have to pretend that she’s less than what she truly is. It
feels like she fits in here, like she’s home. “I don’t want the pack involved in this either,” she
admits. “If everything goes according to plan, my enemies won’t come anywhere near our
territory. I like you, too, and I don’t need you to fight my battles for me.”

Paul growls low in his throat and digs his fingers into his arms to stop his hands from shaking.
“You’re mine,” he says in a deep voice that makes heat shoot down her spine. “You aren’t doing
this alone.”

Merrick bites her lip and squeezes her thick thighs together under the table. Unfortunately,
everyone else in the room has a hyperosmic sense of smell and that means they all know about her
voice kink now. Awesome. Paul smirks at her, smug and numb with rage because her biological
father murdered his grandfather. Merrick can feel his anger wafting to her in wisps of grief
tangling along the cord of their bond, and she can feel his wolf howling a hunting song. “There
are thirty-two vampires in the Volturi coven,” she says, “only sixteen of them actually live in
Volterra—the rest are embedded in other cities in Europe where vampires rule and they only come
out to play if they’re fighting a powerful enemy. Like me.”

“Volterra is located in Tuscany,” George says. “It’s inhabited by approximately eleven thousand
humans, and some of them are what we call Renfields—people descended from local families that
have been aware of the Volturi for centuries and serve them in the hopes of becoming vampires
themselves. There are no witches in Volterra, since most of the prominent strega and fattucchiera
bloodlines in Italy were hunted down and wiped out during the Inquisition and those who
remained didn’t want to live anywhere near vampires.”

Leah narrows her eyes at him, more curious than cautious. “Which one?” she asks, “the Medieval
Inquisition, the Spanish Inquisition, or the Papal States Inquisition?”
George nods lackadaisically. “Let’s say all of the above,” he says, “but the strega families who survived the Roman Inquisition left Italy before the Papal States Inquisition. After the activities of the Congregation were outlawed in Spain and Portugal, they got the hell out of dodge.”

Seth extracts one of his hands from the pocket of his jeans and muffles a huff of laughter in the hollow of his palm. “Edward told me the Volturi are monsters,” he says, “but they’re not villains. If they didn’t exist, vampires would’ve been exposed a long time ago.”

“Edward Cullen’s a leech,” Paul snarls at him, “he doesn’t know shit.”

Merrick gnaws on the inside of her cheek anxiously. “There are five members of the Volturi ‘family’ and eleven permanent members of the Volturi guard,” she says and crooks her fingers like quotation marks around the word family. “Aro is a mindcaster—a telepath—capable of reading every thought a person has ever had by touch. Caius has no magical gift, but he’s the oldest and he’s cunning. Marcus can sense what binds people together and he can sense how to break those bonds. Sulpicia, Aro’s wife, and Athenodora, Caius’s wife, were locked in a tower over three thousand years ago because their husbands are paranoid and they don’t want their love to become a weakness that can be used against them. Corin, a member of the guard with the ability to induce addictive contentment, lives with the wives in the tower to keep them both sedated. Chelsea, another member of the guard, can make or break the bonds people share—she’s the lynchpin of the Volturi. Corin uses her gift to keep Chelsea happy and loyal. If they die, the effects of their empathic manipulations will go poof. Like magic.”

George looks at her with something akin to respect. “Chelsea has smoothed over everything from resentments to petty disagreements among the Volturi for almost three thousand years,” he says, “every whisper of dissent was dealt with by her on Aro’s orders after he and Caius murdered his sister. If she dies, the coven will crumble from within.”

Merrick ducks her head and nods. “Yup,” she says and pops the p sound, “that’s the plan.”

[132] Irish filmmaker Bob Quinn (b. 1935) proposed a theory he called the Iberian hypothesis in his Atlantean documentary trilogy (1981-1984): that Irish people with darker coloring got those phenotypes from immigration along a route of ancient sea-trading between Connemara, the Iberian Peninsula, and North Africa (as opposed to the popular speculation that “Black” Irish people are descendants of the Spanish armada that has been thoroughly debunked). Quinn called them Atlantean Irish.

[133] This is a terrible joke, since the Venus de Milo statue has no arms. I regret nothing.

[134] Herla as written by the medieval Walter Map (b. 1140 – d. 1210) in De Nugis Curialium (tr. Of the Trifles of Courtiers) was a king of the Britons who spent over three hundred years in the Otherworld (i.e. Faerie) and became the leader of the Wild Hunt upon his return to the human world. Some identify him as a version of Woden (i.e. Odin), while other scholars equate him with the Erlking or Erlkönig (tr. alder king) in eighteenth century German ballads and poems or the elverkonge (tr. elf king) of Danish folklore. Basically, he’s king of the fairies; him being married to the Mórrígan is not mythologically accurate, it’s something that I made up for purposes of this fic.


[136] Éirí Amach 1641, or the Irish Rebellion of 1641, was part of the Irish Confederate Wars, an ethnic conflict between Irish (and English) Catholics and English Protestants (and Scottish Presbyterians) with Ireland as the battleground. It was part of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, a series of civil wars in England, Ireland, and Scotland—all ruled by Charles I. Oliver Cromwell and his New Model Army succeeded in their conquest of Ireland in 1653 after the Irish troops in Cavan surrendered. According to a survey conducted by William Petty in the aftermath of the wars, at least four hundred thousand of the 1.5 million people inhabiting the island of Ireland died in between
There’s both the country of Mexico and Estado de México, a state within the country, sometimes abbreviated to Edomex. Hence, the circle of Edomex.

Irish mythology has four great cycles. Medb and Conchobar mac Nessa are both prominent figures in the Ulster cycle, the stories of which take place during or before the first century of the Common Era. *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, a story referenced in a previous annotation, is part of the Ulster cycle. Medb is Queen of the Connachta, a group of medieval Irish dynasties supposedly descended from High King Conn Cétchathach. Conchobar mac Nessa (whose surname means “son of Ness”) is the only son of Ness, princess of Ulster, and either Cathbad the druid or High King Fachtna Fáthach depending on what version of the myth you’re dealing with. (I’m ignoring the version where Ness is the mother of Cormac Cond Longas—the eldest son of Conchobar mac Nessa—because incest is not my jam.) Conchobar mac Nessa was married to Medb and three of her sisters: Clothru, Eithne, and Mugain. Medb is a warrior queen sometimes depicted as the sovereignty goddess of the ancient Irish kingship of Tara, and some interpretations cast her as another aspect of the Mórrígan. I’m writing her as a granddaughter of the Mórrígan, but more on that later.

Tátita is the Purépecha word for “grandfather.”

Geasa are obligatory and prohibitory spells that appear in Goidelic mythology, placed on someone to stop them from violating a taboo. It’s typically a power that mythic women have, in particular sovereignty goddesses.

Since people often say “the Inquisition” when they mean “the Spanish Inquisition established in 1478,” I feel the need to clarify that I’m talking about the Inquisitions from the first established in 1184 to the modern Papal States Inquisitions that ended in the late nineteenth century. Spain outlawed the practice of Inquisition in 1834, but Italy kept the Papal States Inquisitions going for decades after that. Their holy office that condoned the methods of torture used during the Inquisition still exists in the form of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, formerly known as the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition.

Breaking Dawn (2008), p. 369. Edward: “The Volturi aren’t supposed to be the villains, the way they seem to you. They are the foundation of our peace and civilization. Each member of the guard chooses to serve them. It’s quite prestigious; they all are proud to be there, not forced to be there.” This is contradicted by the discussion of Chelsea in Chapter 31 of Breaking Dawn and a lot of the information in the official illustrated guide, so I’m going to assume Carlisle doesn’t know about what Corin can do and therefore Edward doesn’t know about her either.
Merrick stops talking to conjure a pitcher of ice water and a teetering stack of plastic cups—the cheap red solo kind sung about in country songs. Jen uses her magic to pour the water for everyone around the wooden table by manipulating the water in streams out of the pitcher and into the cups. Merrick gnaws on the inside of her cheek and translocates one of the solo cups into her hand. Jen used her magic to abort her father’s attempts to impregnate her with his science experiments, but she had no grimoire of her own and no one to show her what being a witch meant until she met the witch who killed her father. Merrick taught her stoicheomancy, but Jen was better at weather magic than elemental magic. It’s difficult for a witch like her to control one element at a time instead of instinctually combining air, fire, and water into cumulonimbus clouds and brewing a thunderstorm.

Technically earth and water aren’t opposing elements, but water is persistent enough to beat a sharp rock edifice into smooth weathered stone or carve itself paths of rivers and creeks into the stubborn but immobile earth. Merrick takes a sip of her water and ignores the metaphor. There’s no reason not to make up with Jen at this point, but she’s too petty to forgive and forget.

“Carabosse put a curse on the princess in Sleeping Beauty because the king and queen didn’t invite her to the banquet celebrating the birth of their daughter, she thinks, the fey can hold a grudge for centuries and I’m more fey than I like to think I am.”

“There are nine other permanent members of the Volturi guard,” Merrick says out loud. “Jane and Alec, twins born at the beginning of the ninth century and changed when they were thirteen years old; one has the power to psychosomatically make all your nociceptors fire at once and cause pain, the other can shut off your ability to process any kind of sensory input.”

George nods. “Jane can make you feel like your throat is being ripped out,” he says. “Alec can make you feel nothing, so you don’t notice your throat is being ripped out until it’s too late and boom—” they smacks both palms against the edge of the wooden tabletop with enough force to make the whole table shake and grins when Merrick flinches at the abrupt sound, “—you’re dead.”

“Or you wish you were,” Serena murmurs. Merrick was able to shield her and her siblings from Jane, but she got a taste of unimaginable pain first.

Merrick takes another sip of her water and smiles against the plastic rim of her solo cup. Paul is growling at George because the vampire made her flinch. Merrick has never had anyone but an enemy at her back during political machinations before. It’s her first time playing the game as a queen instead of a pawn. Paul isn’t a king or a knight-errant, but he’s hers. Merrick doesn’t need
him to protect her or sit beside her on a throne; she needs him. Paul backing her up and being protective of her makes her feel safer than she’s felt since her magic was unbound, even though she’s perfectly capable of protecting herself with or without him.

“Felix and Santiago are mated,” she says, “they both have superstrength—Felix uses brute force while Santiago is physically strong and very fast even for a vampire. Caius uses Santiago as his personal bodyguard. Demetri is a tracker, and he can find anyone he’s ever met in person anywhere in the world no matter where they are. Heidi and Valentina are mated—Heidi is basically a succubus, only her seduction ability works on people of all genders, and Valentina can absorb kinetic energy. It’s impossible for even Felix to beat her in a physical fight, because every hit she takes only makes her stronger. Afton is mated to Chelsea, and he has a gift for invisibility. Unfortunately for the other members of the Volturi guard, he can’t use his power on anyone but himself. Renata can generate a psionic field that repels physical attacks on whoever she’s protecting and forces any opponent to retreat. Aro uses her as his personal bodyguard. Bianca is mated to Renata and she can generate a TTK field, a psionic field of telekinetic energy that makes her invulnerable. Demetri, Heidi, Renata, and Bianca only joined the Volturi because Chelsea whammied them. Mele is the last member of the guard. Mele was never able to make her magic work like that.”

George nods. “Volterra was founded by the Volturi in the sixth century,” he says, “two hundred years before Etruscan society emerged in ancient Italy. Aro, Caius, and Marcus were all born in the Koine Era of the Mycenaean Age—the twilight ebb of the Bronze Age. Caius is over a century older than Aro. Supposedly his sire was Lilith, the first vampire.”

Alex slants his gaze to Merrick and frowns when she doesn’t meet his eyes. “Your bloodline created the Lilith curse,” he says, “do you have the Ó Conchubhair grimoires?”

Nahuel exhales a frustrated noise and narrows his eyes at the curandero. “Alex,” he says, “you promised you wouldn’t ask Moyotil about her bloodline.”

“Come on,” Alex huffs. “What self-respecting witch wouldn’t want to watch the casting of the Lilith curse? Ó Conchubhair witches are notorious curse workers. I might be able to learn something that would help us take her father out—”

Alex stops talking and shuts his mouth abruptly at the pulse of raw power that resonates in the conference room, the kind of power he’s only felt once before: when he ran afoul of the Angamu Curacha—Purépecha forest gods—while he was visiting a monarch butterfly colony in El Rosario. It’s the supernatural equivalent of a threat display, but instead of puffing up like a blowfish or posing like a praying mantis she externalizes her internal energy and forces other supernatural creatures to feel her intrinsic power. Alex winces at the ringing in his ears, the eldritch sensation of magic crawling over his skin.

Merrick puts her solo cup down and looks him in the eyes, unflinching. “What do you think you could do with my legacy that I’m not already doing?” she asks him.

Alex folds his arms loosely over his chest and shrugs. “Maybe nothing,” he answers with forced lightness, “but someone with your kind of power should be doing a hell of a lot more.”

Jacob scoffs and shakes his head. “Merrick hurts herself to help other people. After she helped my father walk again for the first time in fifteen years,” he says, “she couldn’t get out of bed for a week. If you think her being so powerful doesn’t cost her anything, you’ve got another think coming.”
Paul smirks at the gobsmacked look his twin is giving his imprint. Merrick wasn’t fucking around when she told him that healing is the most difficult form of abjuration. “All magic requires sacrifice,” he says and reaches out to touch the feathers at the nape of her neck. “First lesson she ever taught me.”

Jacob narrows his eyes at the black protrusions of her plumage and blinks to make sure that he’s not imagining them. “Are those feathers?” he asks.

Merrick gnaws on the inside of her cheek anxiously. Paul actually seems to like her feathers—she’s been falling asleep with his fingers stroking the fluffy line of pulviplumes below her navel almost every morning since he’s been sleeping in the same bed with her. It made her feel exposed to wake up with his rough palm on her bare stomach, his nose buried in the frazzled tangles of her hair, his mouth open so the soft huffs and puffs of his warm breath skimmed over the nape of her neck; she would’ve felt overwhelmed if she hadn’t been too sick to overthink everything. “Yup,” she mumbles. “This is what I meant when I said I’m a freak.”

“So,” Jen interjects to stop anyone from asking what he meant by that because the pack mindmeld is a trade secret and slants her gaze to Siobhan before she asks, “your coven was making alliances overseas?”

Siobhan nods, a succinct dip of her head. “Caleb, alpha of the British Isles, has agreed to run interference against the members of the Volturi guard who don’t live in Volterra,” she says, “in exchange for what you offered the Emerald City werewolf pack.”

“What offer?” Paul wants to know.

Merrick tilts her head crowishly. “Bri—my sister—is a werewolf,” she admits. “When she was nineteen, she was attacked by a feral werewolf in Santa Cruz. It happened before I was born. I didn’t know she was a werewolf until my magic was unbound. Our parents still don’t know. Puck knows because he’s a park ranger and he helps the Golden Gate werewolf pack run in places where people won’t shoot them or put footage of them on YouTube, but Cillian and Mitch are in the dark. After my parents got married and moved here for work, she joined the Emerald City werewolf pack and found out that female werewolves can’t have biological children because they change on the nights when the moon is full and shapeshifting is too violent for a fetus to survive the process. It’s lucky that she never wanted kids, but most lycanthropes don’t feel so lucky. I’ve been making countercharms to help the Emerald City werewolves carry pregnancies to term for years. Sarah and Chris—the alphas of Seattle—let Rachel live in their territory because I asked them to.”[146]

Paul barks out a laugh. Merrick is the daughter of a sovereignty goddess whose name means “great queen” in Old Irish.[147] It’s her nature to get tangled up in supernatural politics, even though she doesn’t want to be queen of anything.

Merrick smiles at him shyly over her shoulder and takes another sip of her water before she speaks. “There’s another Caleb on my side,” she says, “Caleb Danvers from the circle of Ipswich.”[148]
“Let me guess,” Alex mutters, “you’re going to break the curse of damnation?”

Merrick hums, a soft *mm-hmm*. “Sarah Osborne was my ancestor,” she explains for those who don’t know the secret history of the Salem witch trials, “she was one of the first people accused of witchcraft in 1692.[149] Thomas Putnam Jr., the man who accused her, was a witch—he accused forty-three people and stole the magic of those sentenced to death to make the circle of Ipswich more powerful. After she died in jail, her daughter Elizabeth put a curse on him and his circle. Elizabeth bound their magic to only express itself by taking a physical toll on their bodies and made their metaphysical power addictive so they couldn’t help using it until they burned themselves out. John Putnam, one of Thomas Jr.’s twelve children, cast a spell to limit the number of witches born into each of the five cursed bloodlines to one male in every generation to ensure their families would survive. There are four witches in the circle of Ipswich now: Caleb Danvers, Pogue Parry, Reid Garwin, and Tyler Simms. Chase Collins, the last witch in the Putnam line, died in 2006. I offered to break their curse in exchange for their oath, since the circle of Ipswich isn’t bound to Richard Malone. Which,” she enunciates the *ch* sound and slants her gaze to Paul, “means I’m going to Massachusetts or they’re coming here.”

“Bring ’em here,” Leah says, “make ’em work for it.”

Siobhan covers her mouth with one hand to muffle a guffaw and hunches over with her elbows on the wooden tabletop. “I think our mother would like you,” she says.

“Ugh…” Merrick groans out a noise that garbles in the back of her throat and shakes her head so fast her glasses slip on the slope of her nose. “Don’t say that,” she mumbles. “Don’t give Morrígu an excuse to visit me. It won’t end well if she does.”

Maggie nods. “It’s best if the gods don’t pay attention to you,” she says, “they’ll ruin your life if they do.”

“Even if you’re one of their children?” Seth asks, more curious than skeptical.

Merrick snorts. “Especially if you’re one of their children,” she says.

“So,” Huilen interjects before the godlings in the room get a chance to invoke any other meddling deities. “When are we going to move against the Volturi?”

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered. “August fifteenth is the deadline,” she says. “I’m flying to Mexico on the seventeenth.”

“We’re dillydallying until August first,” Siobhan says, “because her parents are traveling in Europe until July twenty-eighth and July thirty-first is her birthday. Caleb sent werewolves from the packs in London and Dublin to guard them.”

Merrick ducks her head and nods. Since her adoptive parents are mundane humans without a drop of magic who can’t protect themselves from the things that go bump in the night, making her move while they’re on the same continent as the Volturi is out of the question. Merrick cast protection charms on them before she drove them to the ferry, but she’s not going to risk the lives of the people who fought to bring her into their hearts and into their home before she was born. “I want to unseat Richard Malone at least two weeks before my job at Peninsula College starts on the seventeenth of September,” she says, “do you think we can do this in four or five weeks?”

Paul exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils. There’s no spinetinglyling pulse of power lingering in the conference room, only the stench of her anxiety. Alex unclenches and meets his eyes for a few seconds before he looks away. It should make him feel bad that he doesn’t know his twin brother well enough to understand what that look meant, but he just feels numb. Alex
doesn’t matter to him right now. Merrick does.

Nahuel cocks his head sideways like the jungle cat he was named for and smiles, lazy and slow as molasses. “Yeah,” he tells her, “for you, we will.”

[143] Carabosse is the name given to the evil fairy godmother in the fairytale The Princess Mayblossom (1697) by Madame d’Aulnoy, a French baroness. It’s a Sleeping Beauty variant later collected by Andrew Lang in The Red Fairy Book (1890), an anthology of French, Russian, Danish, and Romanian tales and some retellings of stories from Norse mythology. Carabosse is also the name of the evil fairy godmother in The Sleeping Beauty (1890), the ballet by Tchaikovsky based on the Charles Perrault version of the fairytale.

[144] Bianca and Valentina are human secretaries who appear in Breaking Dawn: Part 1 (2011). Valentina is killed in a deleted scene and Bianca dies in the post-credits scene. I’m too lazy to make up more original characters, so I adapted them both into the Volturi guard.

[145] Stephenie Meyer says the leaders of the Volturi were all born sometime before or during the thirteenth century BCE, in the Koine era (c. 1450 BCE – c. 1250 BCE) of the Mycenaean Age (c. 1600 BCE – c. 1100 BCE). So, they date back to the twilight ebb of the Bronze Age—pun intended. According to the official illustrated guide, they’ve controlled the city of Volterra for three thousand years, “since the time of the Etruscans” (p. 150). Which was actually twenty-eight hundred years ago at the earliest since the early writings of the Etruscans only date back to 700 BCE and culturally their earliest influences on ancient Italy go back to 800 BCE, but whatever. Aro was born around 1300 BCE and turned in 1260 BCE. Marcus was born in 1350 BCE and turned ostensibly before 1330 BCE since he “was transformed into a vampire before he was twenty” (p. 163), and Caius was born at least a century before Aro (p. 160). It’s anachronistic for Marcus and Caius to have Roman and Etruscan names that predate the founding of ancient Rome in 753 BCE and Etruscan civilization in 800 BCE, but I digress. Aro as a name is rooted in the ancient Greek verb ἀρόω (phonetically aróō), meaning “to plough.” It’s cognate with the Latin verb arō, meaning “to sow,” or “to beget.” Caius is rooted in the Etruscan version of the Roman name Gaius, meaning “to rejoice.” Marcus is either derived from the Etruscan name Marce (in turn derived from the word mar, meaning “to harvest”) or the Latinate form of the name Mark, meaning “dedicated to Mars.” Those can’t be their original names, since they all predate the societies and languages that etymologically spawned them by anywhere from 450 to 650 years. I know Stephenie Meyer is bad at research, but damn—her margin of error is literal centuries.

[146] Christopher is the alpha of the Seattle pack of werewolves in the Kitty Norville series by Carrie Vaughn, specifically Kitty Goes to War (2010). Sarah is his mate. I’m borrowing them, since I just reread that series.

[147] There’s some academic dispute about the etymology of the name “Morrígan.” I’ve been writing her name as “(the) Mórrígan” because I’m writing her as both the crow goddess of battle and as Danu, the Irish mother goddess. Mor is a prefix derived from the Old English word maere (tr. “nightmare”) while Mór means “great” in Old Irish and rígan, of course, means “queen.” It’s the feminine form of the word rí, meaning “king.” Ergo, “Mórrígan” translates as “great queen” while “Morrígan” translates as “nightmare queen” or “phantom queen,” in a modern context.

[148] When I was fifteen, The Covenant (2006) came out. I actually read Twilight a few weeks before that, since I was gifted the first book in the series for my fifteenth birthday, and then I read New Moon a few months later. Caleb Danvers is one of (spoilers) five witches called the Sons of Ipswich for whom magic is basically meth and they’re all trying not to get addicted while also using the hell out of their magical power. The Covenant is totally a trashy movie, but it’s my trashy movie; I still love it, even though it’s objectively terrible. Hence, this stealth crossover. Their grimoire (or book of shadows) is called the Book of Damnation. Hence, the curse of damnation.

[149] Sarah Osborne, née Warren, formerly Prince (1643-1692) and Thomas Putnam Jr. (1651-1699) are real people who lived and died in seventeenth century Massachusetts. Sarah was related to Thomas by marriage (her first husband Robert Prince had a sister who married into the Putnam family) and both of her sons inherited wealth from their father that she managed for them. Thomas, whose father and father-in-law excluded him from major
inheritances, ostensibly accused Sarah and forty-two other people of witchcraft for petty reasons; he was also feuding with his half-brother Joseph Putnam (1669-1722), and many of the people he accused were related to his sister-in-law, Elizabeth Porter (1673-1746). Ann Putnam Jr. (1679–1716), his oldest daughter, accused sixty-two people. Enders A. Robinson (b. 1930), the author of *The Devil Discovered: Salem Witchcraft, 1692* (1990) and a professor of geophysics at Columbia University, had a theory about a conspiracy of men—an inner circle that consisted of Reverend Samuel Parris, Sergeant Thomas Putnam, Dr. William Griggs, Deacon Edward Putnam, Captain Jonathan Walcott, Constable Jonathan Putnam, and Lieutenant Nathaniel Ingersoll, along with Thomas Putnam’s two uncles, John Putnam, Sr. and Nathaniel Putnam, his cousin Edward Putnam, Joseph Houlton, Thomas Preston, and Joseph Hutchinson, co-conspirators outside the inner circle—who took advantage of the accusations from the afflicted girls (including Betty Parris and Abigail Williams, the daughter and niece of Samuel Parris) in order to eliminate an opposing faction in the Salem Village Church.
Merrick wakes up without Paul spooning her from behind for the first time in ten days and in the ephemeral haze between dreams she never remembers and reality she wishes she could sometimes forget, she misses the warmth of his body so much it makes her heart ache. *Jeepers,* she thinks and claws the grit out of the corners of her eyes before she conjures her phone into her hand and squints at the screen. *Falling in love is the worst.*

It’s still fuck off o’clock in the morning so instead of putting her glasses back on and doing something productive, she just goes back to sleep and stays in bed until someone knocks on the door. Merrick swallows in spite of how dry her throat feels and groans when she tastes cayenne pepper and honey on her tongue. *Alex,* she thinks and swipes her thumb across the screen of her phone to shoot Maggie a text before she gets out of bed.

Alex is waiting on the porch when she emerges from the cabin in a green sundress with a hanky hem, her frazzled hair swept up into a messy knot and jawed into submission by the plastic teeth of a clip; he’s wearing a plaid flannel shirt over a t-shirt with something written on the front in Spanish that she can’t read and a pair of fraying and faded blue jeans on top of black Converse high-tops. Merrick arches her eyebrows at him as she hobbles over and folds herself into one of the mismatched deck chairs arranged haphazardly around the table that his father hand carved out of red cedar before he died. Paul wouldn’t be caught dead in flannel even in winter because he runs too hot for such heavy fabric, but Alex has been living in Mexico since he was a teenager so the Pacific Northwest must seem cold to him even in summer. It’s fifty-six degrees and overcast, the perfect kind of weather for unseelie fey and for vampires who live in the daylight. Merrick tilts her head up and looks at the clouds looming overhead before she uses two fingers to adjust her glasses and focuses on her uninvited guest.

“Paul isn’t here,” she informs him as she folds herself into one of the empty chairs and sweeps her skirt underneath her thighs more out of habit than any semblance of conscious thought.
Alex sighs and hunches over in his seat. “You know I’m not here for Paul,” he says, “not that he’d talk to me if I was.”

Merrick cocks her head crowishly and cackles softly, keeping her mouth shut to muffle the sounds bubbling up from beneath her sternum and condensating in the back of her throat. “Your problem,” she retorts, “not mine.”

Alex turns and looks at her with his eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You should be stalling,” he says. “Maggie’s coming, isn’t she?”

“You can’t out-witch me,” Merrick points out. “You’re not going anywhere until I find out what I want to know.”

Alex sighs and puts his chin in the palm of his hand. “You could put a geas on me to keep me from lying,” he suggests.

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered. “I made fifty countercharms last night,” she says and stretches the sound in night out into a loud yawn that she muffles in the hollow of her palm. “I don’t have the spoons to put a curse on anyone right now.”

Paul dropped her off at the cabin in the aftermath of the war council and ran into the woods. Merrick spent most of the night casting, using her blood to make the countercharms. There was a Strawberry Moon rising and residual solar energy floating around in the aftermath of the solstice on the first day of summer that she used to make the charms more potent.[150] Merrick fell asleep sometime after midnight with Scald watching over her from the sill of her bedroom window. Paul was still howling at the moon.

“There was a turf war,” Alex tells her, “Mexican vampiros y vampiras don’t survive unless they’re smart enough and bloodthirsty enough to stay in power for centuries. It’s not enough for the old covens to make armies of disposable newborns anymore—they all want to either recruit people with enough magic in their bloodlines to become a gifted vampire or keep the gifted out of the hands of their enemies. Nahuel and George were looking for witchlets who went missing in Jalisco when La Reina del Ciudad de México came for my mother. Paul called to tell me our father was dead the night she went missing.”

Merrick gnaws on the inside of her cheek anxiously. La Reina del Ciudad de México—the Queen of Mexico City—is the vampire who founded the city of Tenochtitlán in 1325 CE.[151] There are rumors that she predates Mayan civilization. Some vampires are powerful because they’re gifted, but others are powerful because they’re ancient. La Reina is one of the ancient ones. “You missed the funeral to rescue her from La Reina,” she deduces, “and Paul has no idea because you didn’t know he knew about vampires until yesterday.”

Alex swallows hard and nods abruptly, a sharp jerk of his head. “Yeah,” he says, “pretty much.”

Merrick bites her lip and stifles the smile unfurling the corners of her mouth. Alex thought Paul was human, she thinks, and he cut himself off from his family here to keep them safe. Oh, the irony. “You were trying to protect them,” she murmurs, “Paul and your father.”

Alex frowns, the space between his eyebrows furrowing in a way that makes him look more like his brother. “You’re not a telepath,” he says. “You shouldn’t be able to read my mind.”

Merrick yanks at the strap of her sundress before it has a chance to droop over the soft curve of her shoulder and conjures a mason jar onto the cedar tabletop in front of her. “I don’t need to read your mind to understand how you feel,” she informs him as she unscrews the lid and dumps out an assortment of lead. “I was human for eighteen years…” she taps the empty jar with one
fingertip and it shatters, “…until I wasn’t.”

Alex flinches and flings his arms up to shield his face as he squeezes his eyelids shut. Merrick snorts and he opens his eyes to see glass floating in midair, the shards glimmering in the sunlight and refracting slivers of iridescence onto the weathered red wood. Alex inhales and exhales as his breath hitches in his throat and fear twists up inside him like the vines of an invasive plant.

Merrick tucks a stray tendril of her frazzled hair behind her ear and shoots him a sliver of a smile. “There’s an ancient art in Japan called shikki,” she says. “Or lacquerware. When a piece of pottery breaks, they use urushiol-based lacquer mixed with gold dust to fill in the cracks. It’s called kintsugi, literally translated as ‘golden repairs’—but tsugi also translates as ‘inheritance’ or ‘success.’ When people break, they can stay broken. Or they can become something else,” she conjures a bowl of lacquer and starts turning scraps of lead into pure gold dust, “something unbroken and unashamed. When you’re brave enough to survive and thrive in a hostile environment,” she mixes in the gold before she pours the mixture over the floating shards of glass to fill in the cracks with poison oak sap and precious metal, “the broken parts of you become something that makes you beautiful. It can be like that with brokenhearted people, too. Paul misses your father and blames you for not being here, but your relationship with him isn’t beyond repair,” she looks past him to smile at the ginormous wolf standing at the edge of the forest and says, “am I right?”

Alex turns and looks over his shoulder as Paul steps out of the shadows of the pine trees so his silver fur catches the light. There’s a big difference between him knowing his brother is a werewolf and seeing his brother as a wolf. Alex unclenches and slumps in his seat as Paul walks up onto the porch, his claws making clacking noises against the wood.

Merrick covers her mouth with one hand to muffle another litany of cackles. “I think Alex thought I was going to kill him when I broke my jar,” she wheezes, “didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” Alex mutters as a flush of embarrassment creeps up the back of his neck. “Maybe.”

Merrick grins at him behind the hollow of her palm. “Sorry I scared you shitless,” she says, “but if I wanted to kill you, I’d use magic to burst a bunch of blood vessels in your brain to cause an intracranial aneurysm. You’d never see it coming.”

Paul snorts and sits on the deck to her left. Gray wolves can be up to four feet tall and they can weigh anywhere from fifty to a hundred and eighty pounds, but he’s five and a half feet tall as a wolf and he’s almost three hundred pounds of pure muscle. Alex tries not to laugh when he wags his tail in soft thumps because his girlfriend can’t help stroking his ruff and scratching him behind his ears. If she called his twin a good boy, he would lose his shit.

Merrick yelps when he licks her chin gently and nuzzles his snout against her cheek before he phases back. Paul crouches to kiss the corner of her mouth before he goes to put on some pants and brush his teeth. Merrick bites her lip and sighs as she blushes hot enough to attract a heatseeking missile and averts her eyes away from his naked ass.

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered. “I thought he should have all of the facts before he made the choice to forgive you or not,” she says, “but I’m not the one that dumped a steaming pile of emotional crap on a total stranger…” she taps her kintsugi jar with one fingernail and muffles a
yawn in the palm of her other hand before she adds, “…that was all you.”

Alex narrows his eyes at her. “You were really shy yesterday,” he says, “was that all an act?”

Merrick shakes her head slowly. “Nope,” she says and pops the p sound, “yesterday I was under a lot of pressure and today I’m tired. I’m more acerbic when I have negative spoons.”

Paul walks out of the house in nothing but a pair of low rise jeans with the waistband of his underwear peeking out from underneath the strip of denim. “What the hell’re you doing here?” he asks his twin.

Merrick stares at him with her mouth ajar for a few seconds too long before she shuts her face and groans internally. Those muscles should be illegal, she thinks, especially his iliac furrow. It’s like a buff arrow pointing at his dick. I cannot even. “Sometimes it seems like you’re allergic to wearing a shirt,” she mumbles, “and he’s here because he’s in cahoots with Domnall Malone—my half-brother.”

“Your half-brother,” Paul echoes and glares at his twin before he growls, “the one who tried to kill you?”

Alex holds up his hands with his palms out and his arms obtusely bent at the elbow. “I’m not going to hurt her,” he says urgently, “I’m here because she keeps sending his calls straight to voicemail.”

“Yeah,” Merrick says and ekes the ah sound out awkwardly, “because he tried to slit my throat with an iron athame.”

After her magic was unbound and she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, Merrick spent most of her college fund on private investigators and genealogy websites because she wanted to find out who her biological parents were. If her magic wasn’t hereditary like she thought, then at least she could get their comprehensive family medical histories and make sure that she wouldn’t get caught unaware by another genetic disease. When she knocked on his door, Richard Malone welcomed her into his home and slipped flunitrazepam tablets—roofies—into the glass of water he brought her.

Merrick woke up with Dom standing over her with an athame in his hand, the sharp edge of the iron blade slicing into the skin of her throat. There’s still a slub of thin old scar tissue on her neck. Richard was drinking ceremonial wine out of a silver chalice, wine he was probably going to dilute with her blood to siphon her power out of her while she bled to death. Only twelve of the witches in his circle were participating in the ritual. Mitsuba, her grandmother and matriarch of the Abeno bloodline, wasn’t in the room for some reason.

Rohypnol is a hell of a drug. Merrick doesn’t remember much about that day, but the one thing she does remember is translocating herself to downtown Tokyo by accident. It took her ten days of teleporting all over the Kantō region to figure out how to use her new power instead of letting her magic use her.

“How many siblings do you have?” Paul wants to know.

Merrick cocks her head crowishly. It’s the second time he’s asked her that question, only now she can tell him about her inhuman siblings too. “Mitch and Puck are my adoptive mother’s biological children with her first husband,” she explains, “they adopted Bri in a futile attempt to save their doomed marriage before he left her for his secretary like the scumbag he was. Cillian is adopted, too. Richard Malone has a son named Dom, my half-brother. Morrígu had eleven other children: Kaheleha, Siobhan, Mab, Titania, Áine, Áillen, Diancécht, Mechi—a son with her ex-husband
Néit who died at the hands of Diancécht because he had snakes in his heart—changeling twins Fír and Fial, and Bodb Dearg.”[153]

“All true,” Maggie says and plops into one of the empty chairs situated across from Merrick and Paul before she adds, “Alex believes he isn’t here to hurt you.”

“Dom wants to show you that he deserves to be in charge,” Alex clarifies, “he actually has a lot of good ideas. Richard is technically a king, but this isn’t a monarchy. Dom wants you to crown him because he deserves it, not because he’s the heir. If you talked to him, you’d see that.”

Merrick slots the nape of her neck back into the bend of the elbow behind her head. Paul strokes the rough pad of his thumb over the soft hyperbola of her bare shoulder and skims his calloused fingertips over the curve of her upper arm. Merrick has to resist the urge to stick her tongue out in response to the all too knowing look Maggie gives her. Alex is blushing, a dark flush on his cheeks. Merrick flicks her gaze to the hand on her shoulder. Paul has warm russet skin, but Alex is a shade darker—he must’ve gotten more sun in Mexico than anyone gets in Washington state. “You aren’t just his messenger,” she deduces. “You like him. You have a crush on Dom.”

Alex flushes brighter. “It’s not a crush,” he says, “we’ve been dating for a year and he…” he exhales a frustrated noise before he articulates, “…he regrets what he did to you.”

Merrick rolls her eyes at him. “You mean he regrets not slitting my throat when he had a chance,” she retorts.

“Ay dioses mío,” Alex mutters under his breath, “he tried to kill you seven and a half years ago. Get over it.”[154]

Merrick bites down on the inside of her cheek to stop herself from saying Fuck you. “There’s no statute of limitations on attempted murder,” she deadpans.

Paul inhales deeply through his nose and sifts through a smorgasbord of scents: the brittle stench of a leech, the pepper spike of anxiety, the blend of sweat, detergent, shampoo, deodorant, and fibers that clings to everyone in different ways. Underneath the stink of her venom, Maggie reeks like a rowan tree in full bloom—a putrid smell that reminds him of rotten meat. There are bees and flies buzzing around her auburn curls, looking for something to pollinate. Merrick is using a new conditioner that makes her hair smell like apples, ripe and sweet. Alex smells frustrated and nervous: a stench that invades his nostrils and makes his stomach churn.

Sometimes he can smell a lie. It’s blatantly obvious, because the stress lying causes has a pretty distinctive smell. Sulfurous, like boiling eggs. Alex isn’t lying—he’s just overwhelmed.

“I was planning on passing the crown to him anyway,” Merrick says. “I don’t take his calls, but I’ve been paying attention to his pericula—” she glances at Paul before she clarifies, “—the pericula are a series of trials where a prospective Supreme visits each circle for a month and a day to get to know other witches and learn how to address the unique needs of each circle in their ‘kingdom,’” she crooks her fingers like quotation marks around the word kingdom, “the trials end with the concilium: a council where the votes are cast by a representative of each circle and a new Supreme is elected.”[155]

Alex nods, succinctly. “Dom called for a new Supreme the morning after he tried to kill you,” he says, “a periculum takes eight years and three months, but he’s been visiting therianthropes and hybrids and thinblooded witches in between his pericula with the circles so he’s still getting the votes he needs for a concilium. It’s only a matter of time before the existence of the supernatural is exposed and documented by modern technology. Dom thinks we need to form a coalition and talk
about exposing the existence of the supernatural ourselves so we’re in control of the narrative.”

“So,” Maggie says, “our plans to topple the Volturi feed into your agenda—because we all know
they’re dead set against unmasking the world.”

Alex nods again. “Yeah,” he says, “pretty much. Look,” he tries to make eye contact with Merrick
and wilts because Paul is glaring at him for the umpteenth time, “Dom swore a blood oath to do
no harm to you before he sent me here. I know you have no reason to trust us, but we can’t do this
without you.”

“It’s true,” Maggie says, “he believes in you.”

Merrick bites down on the inside of her cheek and exhales a pissed off puff of air through her
nostrils. *I’m not what they need, she thinks, they only care about what I can do for them. Paul is the only person here who actually needs me.* “Okay,” she says, “let me think it over. I’ll text Dom
my answer and arrange a meeting after we take the Volturi out of the equation. Until then, don’t
fucking bring this up again. I’ll do what I think is right, but I don’t like being used for my
power. If you do any harm to me or the people I love, I’ll cast the magic out of your blood and
keep it—” she taps the glass rim of her kintsugi jar with one finger, “—in here. Got it?”

Alex swallows hard. It’s not an idle threat. There were witches who tried to kill her, witches that
she rendered mortal and mundane and geased to never fuck with her again. It’s a fate worse than
death for a witch to lose their ability to cast. Until he met her, he assumed Merrick thought she
was being merciful because she didn’t know better—but now that he’s actually had a conversation
with her, he’s pretty sure that she left them powerless and alive as a warning. When she looks him
in the eyes and holds his gaze, Alex clenches his jaw and looks away. “Got it,” he says.

Merrick grins, the unfurling of her lips sharp and caustic. It doesn’t take a telepath to know he’s
thinking that she’s a monster. Maybe he’s right. *If being a monster keeps my friends and family
safe, she thinks savagely, then I’ll be a motherfucking monster.*

“Good,” she retorts as she rises to her feet and turns her back on him before she conjures her cane
out of the corner by the pocket door of her bedroom and hobbles into the cabin.

It would’ve been a power move, if she didn’t have to pee.

---

[150] June is the month when strawberries are ripe, so the full moon that month is called the Strawberry Moon—to
remind the Algonquin tribes to harvest their strawberries. January, the month Paul was born, is the month of the
Wolf Moon. July, the month that Merrick was born, is the month of the Wort Moon.

[151] México-Tenochtitlán is what Mexico City was called in the pre-Columbian era. It was founded in 1325 CE
and became the capital of the Aztec Empire in the fifteenth century.

[152] Shikki (漆器) is the Japanese art of lacquerware. It’s also known as nurimono (塗り物) or urushinuri (漆塗),
depending on the context (i.e. shikki is a literal term for lacquerwork, nurimono is a word for painting or coating a
thing in lacquer, and urushinuri means “lacquering”). Kintsugi (金継ぎ) is the Japanese art of repairing broken
pottery with lacquer mixed with silver or gold powder. It originated during the fifteenth century as a variation on
makie (莳繪), the sprinkling of silver or gold powder onto lacquer as a decoration. There are three main styles of
kintsugi repair, but what Merrick uses is crack or hibi style (罅): using gold resin or lacquer to attach broken pieces
with minimal overlapping.

[153] Fir and Fial are twins born to Macha, one of the Morrígna, in the onomastic text *Dindsenchas* (tr. lore of
places). Their father is Cruinniuc, a wealthy farmer who owned a lot of cows. Bodb Dearg (tr. Red Crow) is a son of
the Dagda who succeeded him as king of the Tuatha Dé Danann and father of Aoibh and Aoife, both of whom
married the Celtic god Lir in *Clann Lir* (tr. Children of Lir). Áine is the goddess of summer, love, wealth, fertility, and sovereignty, a daughter of the Dagda who is either a daughter of the Mórrígan or equated with her aspect Danu; Áillen is her incendiary twin brother. Néit is the Irish god of war and the husband of Nemain or Badb, both aspects of the Mórrígan. According to *The Story of Ireland* (1894) by Standish O’Grady, the Mórrígan bore a terrible and fierce son. Diancécht, the healer and physician of the Tuatha Dé Danann and a son of the Dagda (who in this story is the husband of the Mórrígan), slew him because he foresaw the malignant serpents in his heart killing every living thing in Ireland (p. 17). Celtic myths are fucked up, is what I’m saying.

[154] Ay, Dios mío is Spanish for “Oh my God.” Ay dioses mío is the plural (tr. “Oh my gods”), since witches are polytheists whose gods sometimes believe in them.

[155] Periculum is a Latin word meaning “trial,” “risk,” or “ruin.” Pericula is the plural. Concilium is a Latin word meaning “a council” or “a meeting.” It’s used in *American Horror Story: Coven* to describe a magical form of mind control, probably because the Latin verb conciliō means “to win over” or “to recommend.” Conciliātum would’ve been the better word to use linguistically, but I digress.
Warning: This chapter may contain borderline pornographic makeouts and a copious amount of references to Celtic mythology. Beware.

There is a tenderness in explosions, in phosphenes spelling out I love you’s; to-do lists; almost-prayers; and the dark, heavy hull of what memory leaves behind.

Shinji Moon, “What I Mean When I Say ‘Touch Me’”

The Myth of Blackbirds
Chapter 17
Gentle Dawning

Merrick sits on the toilet until Alex drives back to the Quillayute River Resort with Maggie, who made plans to hang out with Huilen and Pire in Port Angeles that afternoon. Dom isn’t her enemy anymore, but thinking about him still brings up too many bad memories that fizz like someone popped open a can of carbonated trauma. Seeing his phone number when she looks at the list of notifications on her lockscreen makes her heart feel heavy, a hollow ache swelling in her chest and smothering her with suffocating attacks of anxiety.

Paul is leaning against the wall in the hallway when she emerges from the bathroom and he looks worried: his forehead pinched with furrows, his arms folded over his bare chest in a way that makes his biceps flex, his nostrils flaring. Unlike his brother, he doesn’t see a monster or a delivery mechanism for a prophecy when he looks at her. Paul wants to protect her because he needs her. Not because of her power or her bloodlines or her royal status in the otherworld. Just her.

Merrick smiles at him as the heaviness taking root in her chest scatters like motes of dust swept away by the bristles of a broom clearing out all the cobwebs in her heart. “Today isn’t your day off,” she says, “did you call in sick?”

Paul shakes his head. “I told Uncle Luke my brother was back in town,” he says, “and he called in one of the part-timers.”

Uncle Luke is Lucas Uley, who’s actually one of his second cousins once removed.[156] Paul works for a construction company based out of Port Angeles. It’s owned by the Uley family and operated by members of the Quileute tribe who live on and off the reservation. Lucas is the foreman of a ten-man crew, but they always hire part-time workers during the summer: teenagers from the reservation who need to make extra money while they’re not in school.

Paul inhales deeply through his nose. Merrick reeks of residual fear, her nails are bitten to the quick, and colorful Disney princess band-aids are plastered onto three of her fingers to stop the flow of blood from the nailbeds she tore into with her teeth. When she feels powerless, she hurts
herself by chewing on her bottom lip, biting her fingernails, or gnawing on the inside of her cheek. It makes him want to hold her hands over her head and pin her down, to kiss and suck and fuck her until all she can feel is him inside of her. Maybe he just has a dirty mind, but she’s the center of his universe and just the thought of her in pain throws his whole fucking equilibrium out of whack. “Sorry I left you alone last night,” he mutters and unfolds his arms to scratch at the nape of his neck.

Merrick shakes her head slowly. “I missed falling asleep with you,” she tells him softly, “but I never want you to feel guilty for doing your own thing. Bri wolfs out when she needs to process her feelings, too. There aren’t many forests in Ballard where she can run, so our parents think she goes on a lot of hiking and camping trips.”

Paul exhales in a huff and puts one hand on the wall by her face—he takes care not to slam his palm against the wood and tilts her chin up with his other hand while he holds her gaze and leans over her. “I’m not your sister,” he says in a low voice that makes the hair on her arms stand up and sends a flare of heat skittering down her spine.

Merrick snorts and bites her bottom lip to muffle a squawk of laughter before she tentatively skims her fingers over the soft warm skin of his stomach and feels him flex under her fingertips; his calloused thumb digs reflexively into her chin as she lets her bottom lip slip out from in between her teeth and curls her fingers over the hard divots of his exposed abs to where his stomach melts smoothly into his bare waist. “I’m aware,” she says and that soft look in her pale gray eyes is enough to undo him utterly.

Paul growls as the thin thread of his control snaps and he kisses her with a feral intensity that makes her knees go weak and tremble underneath her. Merrick hooks an arm around his neck and kisses him back gently; she’s so sensitive and responsive to his touch, shuddering all over and moaning into his mouth when he strokes his calloused fingers up the nape of her neck and tangles his hand in her hair. Paul drags her bottom lip into his mouth and bites it slowly, nibbling to make her moan again before he lets her coax him into her mouth and suck on his tongue.

Merrick inhales sharply through her nose in a futile attempt to catch her breath and slips her tongue underneath his to lick the frenulum there, tasting and teasing. Paul makes a sound caught somewhere between a growl and a groan and she can feel the murring sound reverberate in the depths of his chest as their bodies slot together. Merrick squeaks as the hard length of him twitches in his jeans and he ruts against the apex of her thighs where her arousal is seeping out of her to soak through her panties. I’m getting better at this, she thinks dizzily.

Paul hunches to nip at the hinge of her jaw and drops a hot kiss on her neck, swirling his tongue over where her pulse is fluttering under her skin and sucking hard enough to bruise. Mine, he thinks and nuzzles the juncture of her neck and shoulder before he scrapes his teeth over the freckled top of her left breast peeking out from beneath the neckline of her sundress. When she doesn’t tell him to stop, Paul takes his hand away from the wall and palms her other breast. Merrick has nice big tits and she’s not wearing a bra—he can feel how fucking soft and perfect she is through her dress and smell the mouthwatering scent of her sweet wet pussy. There’s only a thin layer of green fabric between him and her hard nipples. “You smell like me,” he murmurs. After ten nights of sleeping in the same bed, a hint of his scent lingers on her skin underneath the smell of her sweat and musk. It’s not enough, he thinks. It won’t fucking be enough until he’s balls deep inside of her.

Of course his stomach growls and gurgles before he has a chance to undress her. Merrick covers her mouth to muffle a squawk of laughter and he can see the smile crinkling the corners of her pale eyes when he pulls back to look at her. “We should have breakfast,” she says breathlessly, “do you want pancakes?”
Paul actually pouts and squeezes her breast petulantly. “I want you,” he says and huffs as his stomach growls again.


Paul reluctantly lets her go and dogs her steps into the kitchen. Merrick conjures the cartons of eggs and milk out of the fridge and the box of Bisquick and bottle of vegetable oil from the pantry. Paul leans back against the counter and watches the eggs crack themselves on the metal rim of the mixing bowl as she pours the pancake mix into a measuring cup. Merrick conjures the cartons back inside the fridge after she pours the milk and puts the Bisquick into the pantry with a flick of her fingers. “Take it off,” he orders.

Merrick stares at him with her gray eyes wide behind her glasses. “What?” she yelps and her voice lurches awkwardly into a higher pitch.

“Take off your glamour,” he clarifies, “let me see you.”

Merrick stares at him with her gray eyes wide behind her glasses. “What?” she yelps and her voice lurches awkwardly into a higher pitch.

“Take off your glamour,” he clarifies, “let me see you.”

“I like you,” he says. “This is the real you, so yeah. I like it.”

Merrick blanches exponentially brighter and points at the bowl of fruit on the counter behind him. “Mash up two bananas for me,” she mumbles. “Please.”

Paul grabs a plate from one of the cabinets and puts it aside on the counter before he tries to magic a fork out of the cutlery drawer, but he makes all of the cabinets open instead. Merrick was disappointed when she discovered that he didn’t have any talent for psionic magic like telekinesis and psychometry. So far, he has an affinity for thermogenesis and fortigenesis: he can blow things up, start a fire with only the power of his mind, and exert an external force to put objects into motion. Merrick has been teaching him to use a form of fortigenesis that she calls pseudo-telekinesis—magically generating a forcefield of kinetic energy to move things with his mind.

“Brute magical force isn’t going to cut it,” Merrick says as she flops onto a stool in front of the counter and uses telekinesis to whisk the batter, “focus on accelerating one piece of cutlery out of the drawer as opposed to exerting an external force onto everything in the kitchen.”

Paul smirks. Brute strength is only a small part of construction work—you need power and control to build things. Paul spent the last thirteen years learning how to control his temper, so he’s in his element now that he’s learning how to use magic. Merrick uses her physical sense of taste to translate her metaphysical sense of the magic around her in a way that her body can understand, but he uses his sense of smell instead. It takes him a minute to sift through all of the scents in the kitchen—pancake batter, heat suffusing surface of the griddle, motes of dust on the floor, soap and Simple Green cleanser, plastic cups and bowls and tupperware, the lingering copper tang of blood, garbage under the sink and compost in a canister on the countertop, an olfactory riot of food in the fridge and in the pantry, the intoxicating smell of his imprint—and focus on the metal objects in
the room. Screws and slats in the cabinets and drawers. Steel and copper wire in the appliances. Surges of electricity in the walls. Paul shuts the cabinets with his forcefield before he magically opens the cutlery drawer. “No sweat,” he says and snatches a fork out of thin air before it stabs the wall behind him.

Merrick rolls her eyes at him before he scrapes the bananas he mashed into the mixing bowl and puts the plate he used in the dishwasher. “When I went to meet Richard Malone,” she murmurs, “I thought I was finally going to find somewhere I belonged. I thought he might actually want me to be part of his circle—if not part of his family—but instead he tried to kill me, sent Joham to rape me, and cursed the people I love. My mom’s bladder cancer recurred and spread into her abdominal wall. My dad’s kidney ruptured, and he almost died of a heart attack. My brother got impaled at the skate park and while he was in the hospital, the hole in his foot got infected with necrotizing fasciitis—flesh-eating virus.”

Paul gnashes his teeth and growls low in his throat. Merrick didn’t learn the magical art of abjuration because she wanted to—she learned how to heal and protect herself because her family was in danger and she had no other choice. Paul clenches his fists to hide the way his hands are shaking. “He was trying to burn you out,” he snarls. “He didn’t know how powerful you are.”

“I didn’t know how powerful I was,” Merrick says and scoops a ladleful of batter onto the griddle. “I didn’t know anything. I didn’t know about the prophecy or the Mörrígan until the grimoires acknowledged me after I completed my first year and a day of studying the ‘great science,’” she crooks her fingers like quotation marks around the archaic euphemism for witchcraft and telekinetically flips the first pancake over before she adds, “and I didn’t meet her until I was twenty-two.”

Paul watches her scoop up the pancake with a spatula and plop it onto a plate before she pours another ladleful of batter on the griddle. Merrick is sitting on the stool with her back to him, tension rooted in the hunch of her pale shoulders. Paul clenches his fists harder to stop himself from touching her. There are things she’s not telling me, he thinks, maybe this is one of them. “What happened?” he wants to know.

Merrick swallows thickly and flips the second pancake. “I killed my brother,” she tells him softly. “Cillian and I got into a fight one night. I don’t even remember what it was about, but I remember that I told him to go to hell and my words made his heart stop beating. I’m not a god. I can’t heal the dead, so I summoned Morrígu. When I asked her to bring him back, she told me that it would cost me ten years. I thought she meant I would die a decade sooner than I would’ve otherwise, and I agreed,” she scoops up the second pancake and plops it onto the plate on top of the first pancake before she pours another ladleful of batter onto the griddle, “but instead of siphoning ten years off my lifespan she translocated me into Faerie. I spent a decade in the High Courts studying magic with her and the Dagda, and he gave me a title. Ard-Banphrionsa Rofhessa, High Princess of the Great Science. When I translocated myself home, twelve hours had passed in this realm. Nobody even got a chance to report me missing.”

Paul exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils. Merrick told him that magic is a combination of energy and intent; she didn’t mean to kill her brother, but she did want to hurt him and her magic took her words to heart—literally. “So,” he says and ekes the oh sound out into a feral grin, “you’re a fairy princess.”

Merrick snorts and flips the third pancake. “Morrígu is High Queen of the Unseelie Courts,” she explains, “the Night Court, Autumnal Court, and Winter Court. Aiden—the Dagda—is High King of the Seelie Courts: the Bright Court, Vernal Court, and Summer Court. Mab, my half-sister, is the Winter Queen. Titania, my half-sister, is the Summer Queen. Their consorts are Gwyn ap Nudd, the Oak King, and Gwythyr ap Greidawl, the Holly King. Herla, my stepfather, is
the Erlking—leader of the Wild Hunt and High King of the Unseelie. So technically, you could say that I’m a fairy princess. I don’t have any land in Faerie, though. Just a title.”

Paul has seen some shit, but it’s still kind of mindblowing to him that fairyland is real. There’s a whole other world inhabited by supernatural creatures that were once worshipped as gods, and he’s dating a fairy princess whose half-sister inspired *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. “What about Oberon?” he asks.

“Gwyn ap Nudd is Oberon,” Merrick informs him matter-of-factly, “the ancient Egyptians believed the name—or the *rn*—was part of the soul. According to the *Book of the Breathing*, the *rn* would live as long as the name was spoken and keep the identity and personality alive postmortem. Nobody in Faerie goes by their real names, because true names have power over people.”[160]

Paul leans back against the counter and watches her pour another ladleful of batter on the griddle. “What’s it like in Faerie?” he wants to know.

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered. “There are nine courts in Annwn,” she informs him, “three High Courts, three Seelie Courts, and three Unseelie Courts. Tír nAill, or Hightower, is ruled by the Dagda. Morrríg technically also rules from the seat of Túr Mór, but she and Aiden don’t live together.[161] Mag Mell, the land of the dead, is ruled by the sea god Manannán mac Lir. Tír fo Thuinn, the Undersea, are ruled by his father Ler Allód.[162] Tír na nÓg, the Bright Court, is ruled by Niamh—the daughter of Manannán mac Lir and granddaughter of the Dagda. Tír na hÓige, the Vernal Court, is ruled from the seat of Knockmagha by Oona, a daughter of Titania, and her husband Finvarra. Tír Tairngire, the Summer Court, is ruled by Titania and Gwyn ap Nudd from the seat of Elphame.[163] Mag Mhor, the Night Court, is ruled by the Mórrígan and Herla from the seat of Rathcroghan.[164] Mag Ildathach, the Autumnal Court, is ruled by Bodb Dearg—my half-brother and a son of the Dagda. Mag Findargat, the Winter Court, is ruled by Mab and Gwythyr ap Greidawl. There’s also the island of Mag Argaíchlí off the coast of Tír nAill, the island of Emain Ablach off the coast of Mag Ildathach, the land of the Sluagh off the coast of Mag Mell, the Goblin Kingdom off the coast of Mag Findargat, and the Dark Fields—the land of the dwarves—off the coast of Mag Mhor. Mag Argaíchlí is ruled by Nuada Airgetlám and Boann, my grandparents. I didn’t visit every court, but each seethe I did visit had its own kind of terrible beauty. It’s not a place I would ever go back to.”[165]

There’s no more batter left in the mixing bowl by the time she lists the last realm of Faerie and swivels around on her stool to look at him. Paul scoops a pile of pancakes onto another plate for himself and puts her plate on the small wooden table in the dining area outside the confines of the sunlit kitchen before he takes a seat. Merrick tilts her head crowishly and hobbles over to sit in the chair next to him. Paul bumps his knee against hers while he wolfs down his breakfast.

Merrick smiles as she dumps an obscene amount of powdered sugar on top of her buttery pancakes and basks in how comfortable the silence is between them. It’s rare for her not to feel compelled to break the quiet.

*I didn’t belong in Faerie, she thinks, but maybe I belong here. With him.*

[156] According to the official illustrated guide, Paul is the great-grandson of Gene Lahote and Ruth Uley—the younger sister of Levi Uley. Lucas Uley is the grandson of Caleb Uley, Levi and Ruth’s little brother. Since he and Paul’s father were second cousins, he and Paul are second cousins once removed.

[157] Stokes, Whitley. *Cóir Anmann* (1897), p. 254. Ruadh Rofhessa is one of the many epithets of the Dagda; it’s been translated as Lord of the Great Science (i.e. magic), but it literally means Redheaded One of Great Knowledge
—since the sídhe are traditionally described as a race of redheads.

[158] Áed is another name of the Dagda. It means “fire.” Aiden is the Anglicized version of Áed.

[159] Gwyn ap Nudd is a Welsh mythological figure and psychopomp who rules the Welsh otherworld, Annwn; he’s the king of the Tylweth Teg, the Welsh equivalent of the Irish aes sídhe. Nudd Llaw Ereint, his father, is sometimes equated with Nuada—the father or grandfather of the Morrígan. Gwyn appears in the Arthurian legend Culhwch and Olwen (c. 1325 CE) and is named as the leader of the Wild Hunt in Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin (tr. the Black Book of Carmarthen). Gwythyr ap Greidawl is the rival of Gwyn ap Nudd in Culhwch and Olwen, in which they fight over Creiddylad—Gwyn’s sister and Gwythyr’s betrothed. Arthur intervenes to stop the feud between them and they become fated to fight over her every year on Beltane until Judgment Day. Gwythyr is also named as the father of Queen Guinevere in Trioedd Ynys Prydein (tr. Triads of the Island of Britain). Wiccan seasonal rituals often interpret the archetypes of the Oak and Holly King to represent the shift during solstices: waxing and waning, light and dark, summer and winter.


[161] Tír nAill (tr. the other land) is one of the many names for Faerie in Irish mythology. Annwn (tr. the underworld or deep realm) is the name of Faerie in Welsh mythology. Túr Mór (tr. the high tower) is the stronghold of the Formorians. King Balor imprisoned his daughter Ethniu—who is sometimes depicted as the mother of both the Dagda and Lugh and often depicted as the wife of Nuada, whom the Dagda seduced—inside the High Tower in Lebor Gabála Érenn because of a prophecy that stated he would be killed by his grandson. Cían, son of Diancēcht and father of Lugh, seduces her anyway with the help of the druidess Bīrog.

[162] Mag Mell (tr. the plain of delight or the plain of honey) is the land of the dead in Irish mythology. Manannán mac Lir—or Manawydan fab Llŷr in Welsh mythology—is a sea god and a trickster who acts as a psychopomp and ferries the souls of the dead to the afterlife. Tír fo Thuinn (tr. the land under the waves) is the domain of Ler Allód (tr. the entire sea)—otherwise known as Lir (genitive form of Ler) or Llŷr in Welsh mythology—who married two of the daughters of Bodb Dearg.

[163] Tír na nÓg (tr. the land of the undying), Tír na hÓige (tr. the land of youth), and Tír Tairngire (tr. the promised land) are more of the many names for Faerie. Neve is the Anglicized version of Niamh (tr. bright), the daughter of Manannán mac Lir and his wife Áine: the Irish goddess of summer, wealth, and sovereignty. Knockmagha (tr. the hill of intoxication) is the hill inhabited by Finvarra, the Ard-Rí of the Connacht fey, and Oona, his queen. Elphame is the Anglicized version of Álfheimr, the domain of the ljósálfar (tr. light-elves) in Norse mythology.

[164] Mag Mhor (tr. the great plain) is another name for Faerie. It was sometimes used to describe a specific island that was inhabited by the souls of the dead, not unlike Mag Mell. Rathcroghan (tr. fort of Cruachan) is the home of Queen Medb in the Ulster cycle. Supposedly the Morrígan emerges from Rathcroghan every year on the night of Samhain to run amok in the mortal realm.

[165] Mag Ildathach (tr. the plain of many colors), Mag Findargat (tr. the plain of silver and white), and Mag Argatnél (tr. the plain of silver clouds) are more names for Faerie. Avalon, the island where Excalibur was forged inhabited by the enchantress Morgaine and sometimes by the Lady of the Lake, is called Emain Ablach (tr. the island of apple trees) in Irish mythology and Ynys Afallach in Welsh mythology. Niðavelliir (tr. field of the waning moon or dark field) is the realm of the dwarves in Norse mythology. Sluagh (tr. horde or crowd) are the fey host in Irish and Scottish mythology, depicted as spirits of the dead that were rejected by the Celtic gods and were unwelcome on earth and in Faerie. Boann (tr. white cow) is a Celtic river goddess who is married to either Nechtan or Elcmar, both aspects of Nuada, or sometimes Nuada himself. I’m writing her as the mother of the Morrígan instead of Emmas, who is depicted as the mother of Badb, Macha, and Anann—the Morrígna—in Lebor Gabála Érenn.
The Shape of Two Figures

You’re not a monster, I said.

But I lied.

What I really wanted to say was that a monster is not such a terrible thing to be. From the Latin root *monstrum*, a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once.

Ocean Vuong, “A Letter to My Mother That She Will Never Read”

The Myth of Blackbirds
Chapter 18
The Shape of Two Figures

June 30, 2018

Paul is volatile, so his magic is rooted in the detonation of his power. It’s fire, explosions, heat—ignition and exertion of brute external force. Embry, contrariwise, has an affinity for anemogenesis, potionmaking, and tychokinesis: he can manipulate air currents, brew poisons and remedies, and he’s never lost a bet or a game of chance. Merrick takes him to a casino in the city to see if his luck is magic or not, and he wins a hundred thousand dollars before lunch.

“Here,” Embry says and hands her a wad of cash, “finder’s fee.”

Merrick stares at the money he’s offering to her. “You’re giving me twenty grand,” she says dubiously.

“Yeah,” Embry says nonchalantly, “you’re the one who taught me how to focus so I could win consistently. So you get a finder’s fee,” she grins at her and wiggles the wad of cash in front of her face, “since you’re forty thousand bucks in debt.”

Merrick conjures a mason jar from the kitchen at the cabin into her purse and extracts it before she takes the money and puts the cash inside. “Yup,” she says and pops the *p* sound, “and this is going to help me pay off my student loans in five years instead of ten.”

“I’ll give you another twenty grand,” Embry says, “after I win at the next casino. This,” he flails one hand at the rest of his winnings, “is Marisol’s college fund…and my finally buying a dishwasher fund…and giving Angie a new lens she wants for that ridiculously expensive camera of hers…”

Merrick snorts. “There’s no limit on how much you can win at a casino,” she informs him, “theoretically. I made you stop at a hundred grand so they wouldn’t start to think you were cheating. If you win too much in a day or a weekend, the people who own the casino are going to think you’re a con artist who came to clean them out. Wait a month before you go back. If you do that, they’ll think you only gamble on payday—when you’re flush. Which isn’t as suspicious to mundanes.”
Paul watches her circle one blunt fingertip around the rim of her mason jar; he can sense her casting a spell, but he can’t tell what kind. “We should get back to the rez,” he says, “you said you wanted to make something for the bonfire at Second Beach tonight.”

Merrick smiles at him shyly. “I was just gonna make chocolate chip cookies,” she says, “my special recipe.”

*Dammit,* Paul thinks and clenches his fist reflexively to stop himself from putting his hand on her knee under the table, *she’s too cute. I can’t fucking take it.*

Merrick screws a lid on the jar and puts it back in her purse. “Tomorrow the simulacra of the Volturi that I made should be done fermenting,” she says, “and we can start pantomiming battle strategies.”

“What’s a simulacra?” Paul wants to know.

Merrick frowns at his incorrect grammar, although she can’t really blame him for not knowing a dead language. “It’s the plural of simulacrum,” she informs him, “artificial life forms made out of magical ingredients. I brewed the ones in our fridge to simulate the likeness and powers of the Volturi.”

“So that’s why you put those jars of weird pink stuff in the vegetable crisper,” Paul deduces.

Merrick nods. “I need to get a minifridge for my spells,” she says, “the only reason the fridge isn’t full is because we never have leftovers…and I need to start drawing fresh blood again.”

“Whose?” Embry asks.

Merrick points to her forearm. “Mine,” she tells him. *Obviouisly* goes unspoken, but he hears her loud and clear. “I used the last of the surplus I had making those countercharms. May is here, so I don’t have to use telekinesis to put in the IV for once.”

Paul has seen her collect her molted feathers, her bitten off fingernails and toenail clippings, the dead skin from the soles of her feet, the snarls of hair caught in her brush and coiled in the wire snare that she keeps in the shower. All magic requires sacrifice, even small offerings like the body parts that she’s outgrown. It would be dangerous if another witch got ahold of those pieces of her, so Merrick uses her castoffs to spicce up her casting. Nothing is more potent than blood, though—and ichor from the veins of a hybrid like Merrick is one of the most potent magical substances on the planet. “So we’re going to fight the simulacra?” he asks fervently, his fingertips tingling in anticipation of setting artificial leeches on fire.

Merrick smiles at him again. “Yup,” she says and pops the *p* sound, “after I convince Carlisle Cullen to fund the preternatural research project I’ve been planning with May.”

“What research project?” Embry asks.

Merrick gnaws on the inside of her cheek before she articulates. “May’s been sequencing the genomes of every supernatural creature she’s met who’s consented to having their DNA spooled,” she informs him. “It’s like the Human Genome Project, only the subjects aren’t human. There are diseases that mundanes can’t get, diseases that are specifically linked to genetic sequences only supernatural creatures have. May’s been working to develop gene therapies for those diseases and reaching out to creatures and communities that might need medical care, but can’t get treated at hospitals because they don’t bleed red or they don’t breathe air or they don’t look human and they can’t do glamour. There are gorgon communities she’s been to visit, for example—”

“Wait,” Embry says incredulously, “gorgons? Like, Medusa? Those are real?”
Merrick nods, a quick bob of her head. “There’s a strain of lycanthropy that causes berserker rage,” she says, “cryptozoologists and preternatural biologists call it lycanthropy-w. It can infect mammals other than humans—anything over a weight threshold of twenty-five pounds—but reptiles are immune. May started a program to help get some of the gorgons into medical school decades ago because she thought we might need a team of nonmammalian doctors and nurses someday. There are wadjet, too—”[166]

“What the hell is a wadjet?” Paul wants to know.

Merrick uses to fingers to adjust her glasses and exhales a soft hissing sound through the spaces in between her teeth. “Despite the Egyptian name,” she says, “they’re a species of Indian pseudo-reptilian venomous cryptid with extreme sexual dimorphism: the males resemble giant spectacled cobras, the females resemble women of Indian descent. Only unlike human females, they have fine scales and retractable fangs, and they lay eggs. There are no wadjet colonies or communities, because males can’t share dwellings with other adult males. Also, wadjet mate for life.”

“Like wolves,” Embry says and grins suggestively at Paul because one of the wolves at the table technically hasn’t mated for life. Yet.

Merrick shakes her head slowly. “Nope,” she says and pops the p sound, “wolves pair up for mating seasons in the wild and they can stay together for multiple seasons, but they don’t actually mate for life. It’s a myth, like alpha-beta-omega pack dynamics, that comes from studies done on grey wolves in captivity.”[167]

Paul frowns exponentially harder. “We mate for life,” he tells her softly.

Merrick stuffs her mason jar back in her purse and conjures it through subspace into her bedroom at the cabin as her stomach churns and constricts with the precursor to a panic attack. “I know,” she says.

“Okay,” Paul growls once they’re back on the highway in his truck. Embry took his own car into the city, so they’re not driving back to La Push together. “What’s wrong?”

Merrick gnaws on the inside of her cheek nervously. “I spent my first week in La Push studying the imprint,” she informs him. “I didn’t want to accept or reject you without understanding what being imprinted actually means to you, to your tribe. It bothers me that you didn’t choose to imprint on me, that I’m taking your choices away by choosing to be in a relationship with you. I’m still not human enough to give a fuck. I should want to do everything in my power to break the bond and let you go, but I don’t. I’m more of a monster than I thought.”[168]

Paul clenches his jaw and keeps driving, accelerating until he’s going a hundred miles an hour—forty miles over the speed limit. Merrick bites down on the inside of her cheek and grips the door handle next to her with the fingers of her arthritic hand. It’s awkward since her arthritic wrist has been immobilized by a steel plate that she would’ve been allergic to, if she wasn’t a changeling. Merrick inherited the hemoglobin in her blood from her father, who hoped the increments of iron in her bloodstream would kill her. Most fey hybrids are born without hemoglobin, since the ones born with the metalloprotein are often too weak to survive in the womb. Merrick had poisoned the Mórrígan when they were sharing a blood supply, but that didn’t stop her mother from bringing her into the world. Other, lesser sídhe wouldn’t have been able to carry a child like her or give birth without dying.

There aren’t enough fey left in the mortal realm for cryptozoologists or preternatural biologists to study how their respiratory systems work devoid of hemoglobin,[169] since the mass exodus to
Faerie in the aftermath of the burning times decreased the earthly population of fairytale creatures drastically five hundred years before Merrick was born. Most of the fey who stayed in the mortal realm died out because of the Industrial Revolution, and those who survived that died from overexposure to the carcinogens that accumulated during the twentieth century. While humans poisoned the earth, the membrane in between the mortal realm and Faerie thickened until only those worshiped as gods and goddesses could walk in both worlds. Undersea fey kingdoms are swimming with fairytale creatures who didn’t go back to Tír fo Thuinn, but they don’t come anywhere near the surface if they don’t have to because the acidification in the surface waters poisons them.

Paul is quiet for almost four hours on their way back to La Push, his hands clenched white and bloodless on the steering wheel and his jaw still locked tight. Merrick flinches when he stops his truck in front of the cabin by stomping on the brake and shifting gears abruptly. Paul opens the door for her and scoops her up into his arms before her feet get a chance to touch the ground.

Merrick blinks at him with her gray eyes wide behind her glasses and telekinetically unlocks the front door. Paul kicks it open, catches it with his foot before it bangs into the wall, and shuts it slowly. Merrick sucks in a sharp breath as her stomach flips over.

Paul gently puts her on the couch and glares down his nose at her with his black eyes narrowed into ferocious slits, his arms folded tight across his chest to stop himself from touching her in any way she doesn’t want. “No one cares that you’re not human except you,” he tells her sharply, “and you’re not taking my choices away. I could’ve fought the imprint, but I chose not to because I want you. If you’re a monster, fine. I’ll be a monster too. Now go make the fucking chocolate chip cookies. I’m gonna take a shower. I smell like the city.”

Merrick bites her bottom lip and hot tears stab the corners of her eyes, pricking like thorns that threaten princesses with a century of enchanted sleep. “I hate the smell of the city too,” she murmurs, her soft voice choked by unshed tears.

Paul exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils and crouches in front of her so they’re on the same level. Merrick swallows hard and forces herself to meet his eyes. Paul can see how incongruously fragile she is, in spite of her knowledge and power. Merrick has been hemorrhaging emotionally for years, bleeding out into the metaphysical space between two worlds and feeling like she doesn’t belong in either one. Paul doesn’t care about the other choices he could be making—all he wants is her.

Merrick tentatively puts her palm on his cheek, her fingertips curling into the curve between his neck and his jaw; she bites her nails to the quick, so her fingernails can’t dig into his skin. Those soft hands are paradoxically as blunt as the rest of her. Merrick is always brutally honest in everything she does. It makes him wonder how the sex is going to feel, with the girl of minced words and sharp tongue and gentle touch. Paul shuts his eyes before he leans in and nuzzles his nose against hers. Their foreheads bump together and Merrick swallows thickly around the lump snarling in her throat.

If the fey are liars, then she’s more human than she thinks she is.

First Beach is on the reservation, but Second Beach technically isn’t—although the pack still considers it part of Quileute territory. Merrick used to live on the water at her parents’ house, but that beach just wasn’t the same; at low tide, the bay was nothing but lumps of damp seaweed and sharp barnacles stuck to jagged rocks and noxious mud that was black like tar when her feet sank into it. There were miniscule crabs that scuttled when she lifted up the rocks, the smooth pebbles that her neighbor dumped over the muck on her waterfront slipping through her fingers.
Merrick crouches by a tidepool and pokes the column of a green sea anemone, careful to avoid touching its tentacles. “These are remnants of Faerie,” she murmurs, “flowers of the sea fey. If the membrane between this world and that otherworld wasn’t so thick, we could use tidepools as portals to Tír fo Thuinn.”

Paul watches her stroke the spines of a starfish with one fingertip and smiles. “What kinds of spells could you cast with them?” he wants to know.

Merrick turns and looks at him over her shoulder. “I wouldn’t kill creatures this beautiful just to cast,” she informs him, “unless I didn’t have a choice. All magic requires sacrifice, but that means the lives we take should mean something—no matter how small they are—otherwise the required sacrifice isn’t really a sacrifice. Which is where the line between a good witch and a bad witch is: whether or not a witch gets off on hurting others. I’d say it’s the difference between white magic and black magic, but I use black magic when I take power from my own pain and I’m not hurting anyone but myself, so…” she pokes the starfish gently, “…I could regenerate a limb with this as the catalyst. Maybe five limbs, as many limbs as the starfish has. I’ve used the husks of dead sea anemones in wards and traps. Their lifespan can be up to eighty years, fifty on average. If the anemones live that long, the husks are more powerful because they’re fey creatures and they can absorb the same energy that witches use. These are young,” she pokes the column of a pink anemone before she clarifies, “they’re only ten years old. If this war I’m brewing goes sideways, they might outlive us.”

Paul stares at her with his mouth ajar. Merrick saying that she could regenerate five limbs so nonchalantly is kind of terrifying, even though he knows she probably wouldn’t be able to walk for months in the aftermath. “We’re not gonna die,” he says and smirks at her, “your mom is a goddess of war. If you lose, that would just be embarrassing.”

Merrick laughs so hard she almost tips over into the briny tidepool and snorts helplessly as she curves both hands over her mouth in a futile attempt to muffle the sound. Quil kicking a soccer ball too hard and hitting Paul in the back of the head accidentally-on-purpose only makes it worse. “Go,” she wheezes into the space between her fingers. “Go play with them. I’ll be here, looking for husks.”

Paul hunches over and nips the nape of her neck. “Don’t scare too many sea creatures,” he says, his breath hot on the shell of her ear and his low voice deep enough to drag slowly over her skin.

It’s cold on the beach with the sunset dipping into twilight, but that’s not what makes her shiver. Merrick stops cackling and uses her cane to get back on her feet. Okay, she thinks and exhales a vociferous whoosh of air as she tucks a sand dollar shell in the pocket of her sweater, I am in so much trouble.

Sam finds her walking along the edge where the waves meet the shore with the straps of her sandals hooked to a clip on the strap of her messenger bag, wet sand clinging to her bare heels and toes. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to talk to you about,” he says. “What you did for Billy…”

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered; her first instinct has always been to downplay the miracles she’s capable of working, because she can’t take a compliment to save her life. It’s a bad habit, but she’s not going to change that anytime soon. “I won’t heal Emily’s face,” she informs him.

Sam frowns, his forehead crumpling in confusion. “Why?” he wants to know.

“Emily has scars,” Merrick says, “they’re not like the nerve damage in Billy’s legs because they’re visible and they’re on her face instead of her lower extremities. It’d be way more delicate than any of the abjuration magic I’ve done before and I don’t know how we’d explain her lack of scars to
people who don’t know magic is real. I doubt you two can afford reconstructive surgery, especially the intensive kind she would need if she wanted her scars removed. It’d take months, if not years, for Emily to get through her treatment and recovery. I don’t have the resources to fake that kind of thing,” she adjusts her glasses with two fingers and side-eyes him, “do you?”

Sam narrows his eyes at her as she bends down to pick up a sea anemone husk. “You’ve thought about this,” he deduces.

Merrick shrugs again. When she psychometrically absorbed the sense memory in the Uley house, it gave her a multitude of context that helped her think imprinting through. Sam didn’t stop being in love with Leah after he imprinted on Emily and it was tearing him apart. Emily felt the bond between them before Sam told her what the hell was going on, and unlike Merrick, she didn’t understand the magic at work in that aspect of her life and she had no way to protect herself against the para-gravitational force of imprinting. Sam didn’t mean to scar the woman he loves for life and Emily didn’t mean to break Leah’s heart, but they did it anyway. Merrick wouldn’t have been able to forgive her best friend-slash-cousin and boyfriend if they had done the same thing to her, but things ultimately worked out for the best. Leah and Sam are happy with Jacob and Emily in ways they they couldn’t make each other happy when they were still in love with each other. Maybe the magic behind the imprint was onto something when it fucked them all over. “Emily reminds me of my mom,” she informs him, “my real mom, not Morrígu, the one who raised me, they’re both…” she makes a noise in the back of her throat and says, “…warm, the kind of people who make a house feel like home. I’d help her heal if I thought I could get away with it.”

Sam is smiling at her despite the disappointment coiling in his stomach like a venomous snake when she catches sight of Paul in her periphery. Merrick turns and gapes at the crone hanging off his arm, one hand tucked in the crook of his elbow.

Speaking of mothers, she thinks ruefully. “Sorry,” she says out loud and conjures a pin from her sewing box in between her fingers.

Sam watches her as she hobbles over to Paul and pricks the soft pad of her thumb with the quilt pin. Merrick glares at the crone and offers her bleeding thumb to her boyfriend. Sam frowns again as the crone stares at Merrick with a feral expression that is less a grin and more a baring of teeth.

Paul sucks the drops of blood from her thumb reluctantly and suddenly the crone hanging off his arm isn’t an old crone anymore—she’s a pale girl with metallic eyes and hair so dark red it looks like blood spilling in rivulets over her shoulders.

Merrick bites down on the inside of her cheek in a futile attempt to stifle the internal screams of her anxiety. “Moir,” she says in a soft, deadly tone of voice. “What the hell do you think you’re doing here?”

---

[166] Seanan McGuire, *Pocket Apocalypse* (2015) *InCryptid* #4. I can’t take credit for wadjet or lycanthropy—w. I’m just borrowing some of the worldbuilding from the *InCryptid* ’verse, since this story is a toiling and troubling stew of myths.

[167] Rudolf Schenkel, “Expressions Studies on Wolves” (1947). This article is where the outdated idea of alpha wolves comes from. Schenkel was a Swiss professor from the University of Basel. L. David Mech, a wolf expert and research scientist with the U. S. Department of Interior, popularized the idea in his book *The Wolf* (1970) but later formally disavowed the alpha-beta-omega terminology in 1999. Basically, wolf packs in the wild are families that consist of a breeding pair and their offspring. There are some variations in pack structure, but nothing like the alpha-beta-omega hierarchies that emerged in the captive populations of grey wolves that Schenkel observed.

[168] I have mixed feelings about imprinting, especially how it’s written in canon. Which is why I’ve attempted to
make the bond seem more reciprocal and equal in this fic. I’ve also specified that imprinting doesn’t automatically make people fall in love (e.g. Jacob and Leah), so Paul has agency in his relationship with Merrick. While the imprint itself isn’t consensual, the choices made after that first look can make or break the bond. I hope my way of writing imprinting captures those nuances, and that you understand why Merrick feels conflicted about it even though she accepted Paul.

[169] Since hemoglobin is a protein most vertebrates can’t live without and fey are fatally allergic to iron, ostensibly they have some other protein in their bodies that helps them function. It’s the reason we bleed red. Which begs the question: how do fey share a blood supply with changelings without dying, if iron is poisonous to almost every species of fey? I love thinking about the possibilities of preternatural biology, even though none of this is real.

[170] Moir is the Manx Gaelic word for “mother.”
Darkness in the Sheer

How can I teach her
some way of being human
that won’t destroy her?
I would like to tell her, Love
is enough, I would like to say,
Find shelter in another skin.
I would like to say, Dance
and be happy. Instead I will say
in my crone’s voice, Be
ruthless when you have to, tell
the truth when you can,
when you can see it.

Margaret Atwood, “Solstice Poem”

The Myth of Blackbirds
Chapter 19
Darkness in the Sheer

Old sculptures of the Mórrígan from the Copper Age depict her with the head of a bird—a crow, a raven, or a vulture. Morrigu is a redhead in some myths and a brunette in others, a goddess of the underworld and of the earth itself; she is split into shapes that shift, into the phases of the moon, into false dichotomies and manifold trinities. Owls are also associated with her, because they see what others can’t see. Morrigu is Fata Morgana,[171] a battle crow, a white cow, a slithering eel, a coiled serpent, a wild red wolf. There are mountains in County Kerry that were once her breasts,[172] and a megalithic shrine to her is located in Newgrange. Now she’s a queen without a country; her only domain is the land she holds in another realm.

Morrigu is also the biological mother of his imprint, the woman that he loves. There’s a strong resemblance between them now that he can see through glamour: the spill of black hair burnished with violent dark red, the metallic sheen of their pale gray eyes, the pale freckled skin. Merrick did something with her blood—hemomancy—and let him borrow her magical sight and see the real Mórrígan instead of her crone aspect. Since they’re not bound in a circle, it’s only a temporary gift. Merrick is still reticent about sharing her magic with other people, especially other witches, because she’s afraid of burning them out; her offering even a small part of her power to him means she’s more afraid of her mother.

Paul squares his shoulders in a futile attempt to shake the line of tension in his neck and back off, and glares at the goddess. “This is our land,” he growls. “You don’t belong here.”

Morrigu fixes him with a stare that makes him feel like a dead frog splayed out on a dissection tray with the sharp edge of a scalpel about to slice open the flesh over his heart, like she can see inside his body and flay his soul apart with a stab of her silver eyes. “This is still the world I was born in,” she says, her voice hushed and harsh enough to make him struggle with suppressing an involuntary shudder before she flicks her gaze to Merrick, “and I belong where my bloodline is. I suppose my daughter hasn’t taught you that old, deep magic.”
Paul grits his teeth. Something about her gets his hackles up. Maybe it’s the confrontational odor mixed into her otherworldly scent—the distinct smell of a female alpha wolf. Leah and Jacob haven’t scented her because her glamour is too strong. Which is kind of terrifying, especially since Merrick told him that glamour magic is typically too weak to completely mask the scent of the caster. Only someone—or something—powerful could stop a pair of alpha werewolves from scenting another stronger alpha in their territory.

Morrigú could destroy them all, if Merrick wasn’t here. Paul can feel their raw power fulminating in the night air surrounding them, and Merrick is the stronger monster. Morrigú doesn’t seem to mind—she looks so proud, like the most terrifying mother hen in the history of the world.

Some changelings are born stronger than either of their parent species, Merrick had told him during one of their lessons, scientists call it heterosis or hybrid vigor. According to the overdominance hypothesis posited by Edward M. East and George Shull, heterozygous genotypes are more advantageous than homozygous genotypes because more diverse combinations of alleles yield a genetic advantage. Their research was on breeding different kinds of corn and maize, but still. It applies to hybrid speciation, in the context of both the natural and supernatural.\[173\]

Merrick stops oozing her supernatural threat display and exhales with enough force to flap her lips. “I asked you a question, Moir,” she says, “do I need to ask twice more to make you answer?”

There’s an old myth that says a fey must answer honestly if asked the same question once, twice, thrice. It’s not true, but snark is Merrick’s default coping mechanism.

Morrigú laughs, the sound dark and sharp like the beak of a carrion crow. “I’m here to see my precious changeling daughter,” she says. “Just be happy I didn’t bring your prospective husband along with me. Bodb Dearg misses you.”

It takes every ounce of self-control Merrick has to not flinch away from that. Paul snarls at the word *husband*. “Merrick is mine,” he says, “she chose me.”

Morrigú cocks her head in a curious way that makes her look more like Merrick than before. “Oh,” she murmurs caustically, “she did, did she?”

“Paul,” Merrick says, “shut up. Please.”

*Morrigú isn’t human*, Merrick had told him, *she loves me, in her own way, but that doesn’t mean she won’t kill you. Hell, she might kill you in front of me to see how I react. I love her, but that doesn’t make her less terrifying. When I say that she’s a monster, this is what I mean. If she thinks you’re in her way, she won’t care how I feel about you—she’ll kill you just because she can. Please don’t give her an excuse to murder you.*

Paul stops growling low in his throat and struggles with the urge to phase and shake himself out of his skin. If his imprint wasn’t standing too close to him, he probably would’ve thrown the shreds of his caution to the wind and wolfed out by now. Paul had no flight response before Merrick; his default response was always fighting until he couldn’t fight anymore. There are more intelligent ways to fight than going berserk and brawling. Paul never thought he would be having a vaguely threatening conversation with a goddess, but attacking the Mórrígan with tooth and claw is not an option.

Merrick sighs. “I was never planning on marrying Reed,” she retorts, “I don’t care how many children he has.”\[174\]

“It seems as though incendiary boys are your ideal type,” Morrigú says.
Merrick huffs. “Reed isn’t my type,” she mutters, “and neither was Àillen. I would say that I’m sorry your attempts to breed me during my staycation in Faerie didn’t go according to your plans, but I’m not.”


Merrick turns and stares at him until he clenches his jaw and stops growling at her mother. “I’m not planning on having children with anyone,” she clarifies, “not anytime soon. Paul and I have only been together for a few weeks and I’m too busy waging the war you started with Richard Malone. I’m the self-fulfilling prophecy you made,” she curls the fingers of her left hand into a fist around the handle of her cane and gnaws on the inside of her cheek before she asks, “am I not everything you wanted me to be?”

Paul watches as the Mórrígan phases, her body shifting until she becomes a crow—a carrion eater with silver eyes who caws at him in warning before she flies away unseen and unheard by any of the other werewolves or bloodsuckers on the beach.

Merrick sighs with enough force to roll the slump through her entire body. “Welp,” she mumbles as she buries her face in the palm of the hand she isn’t using to grip her cane, “Moir didn’t kill you on the spot. I guess that means she approves?”

“Yay,” Paul deadpans.

This is how gods are: they always come in like a bolt of lightning, legendary and devastating even if the immortal interaction itself seems anticlimactic. Merrick is shaking even though it’s not cold out; her shoulders are trembling underneath the dense knit of her sweater. Paul wishes he’d bothered to bring his leather jacket and settles for tentatively putting an arm around her. Merrick collapses against him with a soft whoosh of air escaping from her lungs, whispering in between her teeth like a deathly gasp.

“I wanna go home,” she tells him with a groan that gnars in the back of her throat, “every time I see Morrigu it’s like she takes another ten years off my life—even if she doesn’t actually do anything.”

Paul frowns at her from somewhere over the crown of her head. “Bodb Dearg and Áillen are your brothers,” he says, “aren’t they?”

“Technically half-brothers,” Merrick says, “but that doesn’t matter in Faerie. If a couple is fertile, they don’t care whether they’re siblings or not. Faerie isn’t like our world. Most of the fey are either omnisexual, bisexual, or pansexual. There are more healthy polyamorous relationships or casual relationships than monogamous couples even among the sídhe, so marriage only happens under one of two circumstances: either a couple or threesome want to swear eternal love to each other and party for weeks, in which case they have a huge ceremony and invite their entire kingdom, or a couple produces a child. Morrigu was married to Neit, but they divorced after Diancecht killed their son Mechi, she and the Dagda had four children: three sons and a daughter. Áine and Áillen are fraternal twins. Herla, the Erlking, is the father of another pair of twins by her: Mab and Titania. Siobhan, Kaheleha, Fial and Fír were all born to different human fathers, but Morrigu wasn’t married to any of them. It was called playing fairy spouse when Faerie was still rooted in every nook and cranny of this realm, but the fey don’t bother with the pretense of playing human anymore since they don’t live in our dimension. There are no unwanted pregnancies in Faerie, because their fertility rates are so low. Faerie looks down on changelings, but thinblooded children are loved and hated by their fey parents and grandparents because otherwise they wouldn’t have children or grandchildren at all. It’s why those legends about fey stealing human babies and young girls exist: because human females make perfect breeders. Most
fey women are wary of having changelings though, because of the hemoglobin.”

Paul frowns exponentially harder. “So you accepted me because you didn’t want to marry one of your half-brothers?” he asks her with a harsh edge of vulnerability in his deep voice.

Merrick snorts. “I accepted you because I like you,” she informs him matter-of-factly, “our bond does give me the illusion of a choice. It won’t deter Moir. I’m going to outlive you by two hundred years, so the imprint is just going to keep her waiting for a century while you get old and die.”

Paul arches his sharp eyebrows at her. “I don’t age if I don’t want to,” he says. “Unless I stop phasing for good.”

“Oh.” Merrick cackles and muffles her witchy laughter with the heel of her palm. “Let’s not tell Morrigu that,” she whispers conspiratorially, “it’ll be our secret. Until it’s not.”

Nahuel is staring at her when she quits giggling and opens her eyes. “I smelled blood,” he murmurs.

Merrick cocks her head crowishly and looks at the pricking of her thumb. “Yeah,” she says, “that was me.”

Nahuel inhales deeply through his nose and scowls at the illusory scent lingering in the air. It’s a residual fragrance that clings to Merrick after she breaks the spell that makes her look human, with a tint of different magic. “I smell glamour,” he says, “the old woman you were talking to…”

“Wasn’t an old woman,” Paul tells him.

Nahuel inclines his head and nods, brusquely. “I’ve never met the Mórrígan,” he says.

“Trust me,” Paul mutters, “you don’t want to.”

Merrick yawns and stifles the sound with one of her sweater paws. “Okay,” she says and ekes the sound out exhaustively, “Leah and Jacob and Seth wanted to discuss my meeting with Carlisle tomorrow. After that, I’m going home.”

Lydia Cameron, Marisol Call, Dinah Black, and Will Ateara-Littlesea are talking a ballet class together. It’s a beginner’s class, since they’re only three. Dinah has been wearing her tutu everywhere for weeks and crying every time Jacob asks her to take it off to wash the inevitable mess all three-year-olds make out of the shimmery fabric. Leah didn’t bother to change out of her forest green paramedic uniform, but she did undo her long hair from the sleek knot she always ties at the nape of her neck before work. It flickers in the shadows, the firelight getting caught in the pitch-black tendrils oscillating down her back. Harry’s bulky watch ticks around her wrist. Merrick can taste her power in the gears of the antique timepiece, the charm she cast glowing at the edges of her vision where the spell on her glasses can’t blot the pop and sparkle of magic out.

Paul, who doesn’t wear glasses, can see the magic in all of the charms and countercharms Merrick has made for their pack; he can see the imprints binding them to each other; he can see the curse seeped into the opaque venom that flows through the crystalline bodies of the leeches. No wonder she cast a sensory deprivation spell on her glasses, he thinks and winces at the bright flare of magical energy invading his eyeballs from every direction. This is only temporary and it’s still gonna drive me fucking nuts.
Jacob is dressed in a t-shirt miraculously devoid of grease and motor oil stains and faded black jeans, his boots perched on a piece of driftwood next to him while he squidges his toes in the sand. Merrick folds herself onto the smooth cedar across from him with Paul next to her, making sure to avoid the fumes of wood smoke and white ash from the bonfire in between them. Seth is sitting with Jen and May on a piece of driftwood to her left, his long dark hair twisted into a messy bun.

“So,” Leah breaks the silence with one word and slants her gaze to May, “you want Carlisle to fund a genome lab and you,” she narrows her eyes at Merrick, “want to sequence the pack’s DNA.”

Merrick nods. “It’s fine if you don’t want to,” she clarifies, “but I have so many questions. I get that you believe in the ancestral magic of your tribe, but magic and science aren’t mutually exclusive and believing in something doesn’t preclude scientific inquiry. How do you alter the mass of your bodies when you phase? Why is proximity to vampires the primary epigenetic trigger for phasing? How does genetic inheritance work in the context of your species? Why aren’t you able to shapeshift without proximity to vampires as a catalyst? What is the purpose of the elevated levels of testosterone in your systems that spiked in your human bodies when you were teenagers, before you phased? Why do you mate for life, since wolves in the wild don’t? I think all of that is worth researching, not only to indulge my scientific curiosity but for the sake of future generations of Quileutes—since the Cullens ostensibly aren’t going anywhere.”

“Wait,” Jacob says, “wolves don’t mate for life?”

Merrick shakes her head slowly. “Nope,” she says and pops the p sound, “they just pair up for mating seasons in the wild. Crows mate for life, though.”

Paul frowns, his brow furrowing in confusion. “What’s an epigenetic trigger?” he asks.

Merrick smiles at him shyly. “Contemporary epigenetics is the study of environmental and other external factors that influence the expression of phenotypic traits without altering DNA sequences,” she explains, “an epigenetic trigger is something that causes phenotypic expression of a heritable genotype. According to your history, Taha Aki shapeshifted because of external factors that predated the first contact your tribe had with vampires.[177] Taha Wi, Taha Yut, and Yaha Uta[178] also shapeshifted before the xwó-s kwíqwísta attacked the Makah in 1410.”

“Those are just stories,” Jacob says. “We don’t know how much of that is true.”

Merrick shrugs, one-shouldered like a bird. “Maybe you don’t know,” she murmurs, “but your land does. It remembers.”

“Wait,” Jacob says again, “what do you mean the Cullens aren’t going anywhere?” Seth wants to know.

Merrick sighs. “There aren’t many places where vampires can live in daylight,” she informs him, “they only left Forks in the fifties because people here started to notice they weren’t aging.[179] I’m going to offer them glamour charms in exchange for research funding, so they won’t have to move. Which,” she glances at the children playing in the waves ebbing and flowing over the sand where the skyline meets the water, “means your children will phase. Unless they don’t have the werewolf gene.”

Leah glares at her. “What if we don’t want our kids to be monsters?” she snaps.

Merrick shrugs again. “Use my glamour charms as a pretext to renegotiate the treaty,” she suggests, “and force the Cullens out of Quileute territory. With illusions to stop them from sparkling in the sunlight, daywalking vampires can live anywhere in the world. Why should they stay here? Or,” she cocks her head crowishly, “you could acknowledge that monsters don’t
always do monstrous things and that being a monster isn’t the worst possible outcome. I’m only alive because I’m a monster. If nothing else, your children will be able to protect themselves from the things that go bump in the night once they wolf out.”

Jacob puts a hand on her knee and Leah has to force herself to stop foaming at the mouth, figuratively speaking. “We’ll do it,” he says. “I won’t order anyone to participate in your Inhuman Genome Project, but I wanna know the answers to all of those questions you asked. Getting rid of the Cullens won’t solve the problem anyway, since the other vampires—like the Volturi—know the pack is here.”

Seth grins at his sister. “Better the monsters we know,” he quips, “than the ones we don’t.”

[171] Fata Morgana literally means Fairy Morgana, the Italian name for Morgan le Fay of Arthurian legend. Morgan (also called Morgana, Morgain, Morgaine, etc.) is written as a fairy or a sorceress/witch/magician in different myths. Fata Morgana in the context of phenomenology are mirages seen above the horizon, bending rays of light that distort the objects upon which they are based—like glamour.

[172] Dá Chích Anann, the Paps of Anu, are mountains named for a mother goddess of Ireland who is sometimes written as one aspect of the Mórrígan. I’ve also written the Mórrígan as a wild gray wolf previously, but she has appeared in myths as a red wolf too.

[173] There are two alternative hypotheses about the genetics of hybrid vigor: the dominance hypothesis and the overdominance hypothesis, both first stated in 1908. Charles Davenport wrote a paper on inbreeding and posited that dominant alleles from one parent suppressed “undesirable” recessive alleles from the other. Edward M. East and George Shull both independently developed the overdominance hypothesis by researching corn and maize, respectively. Basically, the dominance hypothesis posits that fewer genetic traits are underexpressed in homozygous individuals and the overdominance hypothesis posits that certain traits are overexpressed in heterozygous individuals. Neither hypothesis is perfect, since they both fail to explain the expression of certain phenotypes in heterozygotes and homozygotes. These hypotheses aren’t mutually exclusive, either. Merrick in particular is heterozygous, so the overdominance hypothesis applies to her.

[174] Bodb means “frightening” or “crow” if translated as cognate with “bádhbh” or Babd, one of the names of the Mórrígan. Dearg can mean either “red” or “burning” (literally translated as “being in a state of ignition”) and Reed means “red.” Bodb Dearg has nine biological children: sons Aedh, Angus, Artrach, Aodh Aithfhiosach and Fergus Fithchiollach, and daughters Sadb, Mesca, Scathniamh, and Doirend. Their mothers aren’t named in the myths, because of course they aren’t. Bodb Dearg also fostered Aoife, who married Lir.

[175] I wanted fey society to have a structure that is different from human society. There’s a plethora of fey species, so them being attracted to multiple species and genders makes the most sense. I also think monogamy would be rare in a society where pretty much everyone is functionally immortal. If a couple doesn’t have children, a marriage can be dissolved without issue—pun intended. There are many layers to where humans fall in the social hierarchy: magical humans are more valuable than mundane ones, and someone like Merrick (part human, part fey, part witch) is seen as marriageable because her lineage, power, and potential fertility transcend her humanity. Most changelings are born to fey fathers and human mothers, because fey women don’t want to share a blood supply with a child who carries hemoglobin in their bloodstream.

[176] NEXTGEN KIDS ROLL CALL:

Elodie Dowling: Lauren and Ash’s daughter, Tyler and Rachel’s stepdaughter, nine years old, a child of divorce with three moms and a dad.
Ruth Uley: Emily and Sam’s daughter, nine years old, Leah is her favorite aunt.
Adam Uley: Emily and Sam’s son, six years old, the middle child.
Levi Uley: Emily and Sam’s son, three years old, the youngest Uley spawn.
Caleb Black: Leah and Jacob’s son, three years old, the older twin by half an hour, never lets Dinah forget it.
Dinah Black: Leah and Jacob’s daughter, three years old, the younger twin.
Lydia Cameron: Jared and Kim’s daughter, three years old, only child.
Marisol Call: Angela and Embry’s daughter, three years old, only child.
Will Ateara-Littlesea: Quil and Colin’s son, three years old, only child.

Emily, Leah and Dess are currently pregnant so the list is going to get longer.

[177] According to the stories Bella was told in Eclipse, Taha Aki is able to shapeshift because he summoned Wolf in order to vanquish Utlapa—who stole his body while he was in the spirit world and impersonated him because he wanted to become chief—and shared the body of the wolf god until he was able to get Utlapa out of his body and regain his original form. Which begs the question: how could Taha Aki shapeshift after that? I’m postulating that it’s something he always had the genetic potential for, but he wasn’t able to express that genetic trait until after the whole Utlapa debacle. Since his sons were also shapeshifters, this hypothesis makes total sense. Quileute werewolves don’t shapeshift only because of vampires. There are other environmental triggers.

[178] Taha Aki canonically had three sons, one of whom is unnamed. Yut is a Ɂixwaló-la first mentioned in Eclipse who disobeyed Utlapa and was killed for attempting to bring Taha Aki back alive from the spirit world. Taha Yut is named for him.

[179] Carlisle and Ephraim Black made the treaty in 1936. I’m guessing the Cullens lived in Forks for about two decades before they moved away, only to make their comeback in 2003.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!