

Summer's End

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Summer's End

by [Allthephils](#)

Summary

Dan's magic is something to be hidden but a new tutor brings him out of the dark.

This was written for the Phandom Big Bang. Go enjoy the absolutely beautiful art drawn by [@fay-pepper](#) To accompany the fic [here](#)

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Chapter 1

Dan has read the same paragraph at least three times when he finally gives up and sets his book aside. Sleepless nights are nothing new. He shifts and turns with each new worry until he's tangled in his linens and no closer to sleep. He kicks and kicks until he's free of what binds him, physically if not otherwise, and shuffles over to sit at the open window. He'd rather look at the sky than not look at the sky and there aren't a lot of other options at this time of night.

Outside Dan's window, an unkempt courtyard stretches to the edge of the woods. He's asked the groundskeeper to let it grow a little long, let the wildflowers and weeds take over just a little bit. It's a nice reminder that not everything around him is tidy and tamed. He watches the still world outside, enjoying the quiet until a faint rustling pulls his attention to the right. There's someone in the garden. Nothing grows there just now though seeds have been sown, the soil working just below the surface. Dan can't fathom who would be out there at this hour. Whoever it is is crouched down low, hands on the ground. It makes a curious picture and Dan remains perfectly still and quiet as he takes it in. Soon, the stranger is standing and brushing the dirt off his hands.

Dan is startled by the sight of him. He's tall, maybe taller than Dan, and his ivory skin stands in stark contrast to hair so black, it reflects the moonlight. He's definitely never seen him before. A moment passes and the man is walking toward the courtyard. Without thinking, Dan ducks back behind the curtain where he can watch without being seen. The stranger moves slowly, eyes downcast, thumbs hooked in his pockets. Every few feet he stops to crouch again and regard the odd plant, running a finger over a leaf or cupping a flower in his hands. Dan can hear him speaking softly, too softly to make out what he's saying.

Carefully backing away from the window, Dan waves a hand in the general direction of his desk and the oil lamp dims. Feeling a renewed bravery, he sits on the bed, under a veil of darkness and watches the figure outside. He can just make out his profile now and his mind supplies a word most unfitting for a man. Pretty. He's ethereal in the moonlight, his nose pronounced, his bone structure sculptural. He's so pretty.

The man sits now, right down on the ground in the center of the courtyard, and the quiet murmuring starts again. His arms raise above his head as if to pull the moon and stars into an embrace. Dan's heart beats wildly in his chest and he stares, frozen in place, breath held unknowingly until the stranger's arms drop and Dan finally exhales. Suddenly, the man turns and looks straight at the window. There's no way he can see Dan in the dark. There's no way but he glares directly at him. Dan's not afraid, something about this man says he isn't

dangerous, but he finds himself trembling all the same. He watches the man's eyes narrow and then soften, something like a small smile on his lips. And just as suddenly, he turns back, stands, and walks away, right into the thick of trees that leads into the woods.

The library has always been Dan's favorite room in the house. It's a beautiful space with a big brick fireplace and huge windows looking out onto the lawns. Mahogany shelves stretch as high as the ceiling, chock full of books. Dan remembers craning his neck to see the top when he was only 5 or 6. Those shelves may as well have been skyscrapers for how unattainable the top seemed. Dan had already started reading by that age, working his way through facts and charts, myths and legends. Most of the words were too much, but the pictures told stories of love and cruelty, magic and violence, joy and utter devastation. The best ones had a little bit of all of that. It didn't take long for Dan to learn that the best pictures, the best stories, were up high, out of his reach.

Ladders on wheels are not made for children, but that didn't stop Dan. The nanny had been in the hall gossiping with one of the maids when he fell from near the top rung. He'd been reaching out for an especially enticing book, bound in burgundy leather with gold writing on the spine, but he'd lost his footing. The break was awful, bone poking through the skin of Dan's tiny arm. His mother held him and cooed, sending her lady's maid to telephone the doctor. Poor Daniel had wailed in pain and his mother thanked the heavens her husband wasn't home to see it. The last thing she needed was a grown man fainting at the sight of his child's blood. Her hand held pressure to the wound, pushing past the churning in her stomach.

"Shhh, Daniel. I've got you," she sang as a mother does, "you're just fine. Be good as new soon."

Dan had calmed and laid his head on his mother's shoulder. It didn't take long for his tears to dry, and when they did, he pushed his mother's hand away from the wound and settled his own hand there in its place. He closed his eyes. He can't remember what he thought or did, only the quiet and the sudden absence of pain. When his mother brought her handkerchief out to clean Dan's hand, she saw. He can clearly remember the moment when she held his small body away from hers, practically tossing him onto a sofa. Even more vivid is the next moment, when she looked into his eyes, deeper than she ever had and, finding him behind them, scooped him back into her arms as her tears broke through.

“I’m so sorry, Doctor. Just an over-reactive mother, you know how we are. He’s absolutely fine. I feel just awful for bringing you all this way.” She hid her blood-stained hand behind her back as she spoke at the door, not allowing the affronted doctor inside. That was the first time Dan’s power had shown itself. It quickly became apparent that Dan was different from other children. His parents thought it best to limit his exposure to the outside world, and, more importantly, to limit the world’s exposure to him. It was to be just until they got a better idea of exactly what they were dealing with, and then just until Dan could learn to better control his abilities. Soon it became clear the arrangement would be indefinite. And so, when most boys Dan’s age from families like his were going off to school, Dan did not. Instead, Dan got Bryony.

She was 18, just ten years older than Dan was at the time. She was the daughter of one of the women in Dan’s mother’s women’s group. Bryony’s mother had complained about her daughter’s proclivity toward art and scientific experimentation, annoyed at her daughter’s insistence on working with her hands in spite of her academic brilliance. Dan’s mother knew she was the one.

Monday through Friday, from breakfast until dinner, Dan’s world was brought into full color. Bryony brought stories and games, retold tales from the theatre, ornate paper to fold into cranes and lilies, paints and charcoal and beautiful music on records. She’d take him out to look at the clouds, to weave flower crowns, and visit the stables. She’d gone from teacher to mentor to trusted friend over the last ten years. Dan doesn’t know how she knows so much, but he’s grateful. Most importantly, she knows Dan’s secrets, more than anyone, and she’s unafraid. She reminds Dan to be careful but smiles and ruffles his curls. “Don’t ever be ashamed, Danny. You’re special, be proud of who you are.” He owes her so much. And today is her last day.

It’s been a couple months since Dan’s 18th birthday. His primary education is complete and it’s time to prepare for a career. He’ll go into law just like his father, which means he needs to apply to law school. It also means he’ll need a new tutor to prepare him. It’s time for Bryony to say goodbye.

There’s a nicely-shaded clearing where Dan and Bryony often find themselves. Bryony leans against one of the big tree trunks and Dan stretches out on the grass, picking at the tiny daisies that grow all around. It always starts with a history lesson but quickly evolves into a passionate discussion of politics and current affairs. Every bone in Dan’s body aches to be where Bryony has been, and yet his skin prickles with fear when he thinks about actually heading out on his own.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving me here to rot.” Dan throws an arm over his face to shield it from the sun, pleased at the dramatic effect he inadvertently created.

“Oh, stop it. You aren’t going to rot.”

“I am. I’ll be stuck with some stodgy old man jabbering on about the law,” Dan whines, “no more art, no more revolution. I’ll turn into my father in no time.”

“There are worse things you could turn into.” They go silent for some time and Dan lets his eyes slip closed. He misses her already and he doesn’t know how to tell her. With everything he’s learned, honest expression of emotion is still just out of reach. It’s easier to keep things buried, not too deep, just enough that he knows he’s in control. That’s the most important thing, to stay in control.

“Hey, Dan,” Bryony breaks through the serenity of rustling leaves and chirping birds, “It’s 4 o’clock. Do you know what that means?” He doesn’t answer. “It means I’m not your teacher in more.”

Dan moves his arm and turns his head to look at her, squinting, bottom lip jutting out in a pout.

Bryony reaches into her bag and pulls out a bottle, holding it out toward Dan and waving it side to side. “Elderflower wine, made it myself, and it is a kick.” She pops the cap open and takes a swig before holding it out again, “Go easy. Don’t get me in trouble.”

Sitting up, Dan brushes hands off on his trousers. “Are you serious? You’re not gonna pull it away at the last second?”

She just smiles and waves the bottle again so he takes it and drinks. He’s only had champagne at Christmas and New Year and then only one glass. This is not champagne. It’s sickly sweet and floral, but the alcohol burns when it hits his throat. He winces but keeps drinking until the bottle is pulled away.

Eventually, they are both lounging against tree trunks, passing the wine back and forth. Dan's limbs feel heavy and warm, so warm from the sun and the alcohol and the genuine friendship, something he's never really had until now. It feels like a beginning, like a turn into the next phase of his life. In reality, he knows they'll get up soon and head back to the house, that this was just Bryony's way of saying welcome to adulthood. She wanted to give him a little taste of what he's been missing but he knows a taste is all he'll get.

"Come on, Danny boy. I've got to get you back."

The world around him sways and rolls as he stands, and he giggles at the absurdity of it all, but he feels like crying all the same.

"Oh dear, look at you." Bryony shakes her head as she wraps a steadying hand around Dan's arm, "You should probably go straight to bed. I'll make an excuse to your mother."

"I can't say goodbye like this." Dan can't understand why he's slurring when he feels so great.

"No goodbyes today," Bryony says, "I'm staying on for the weekend, as a guest." She waves a hand in the air in a stately gesture, chin raised proudly. She giggles around a hiccup then giggles some more until Dan joins her and they have to stop walking to double over and get it out of their systems.

When they catch their breath, Dan reaches up as if to catch a gnat midair and two figs, pink and veined in green, appear in his hand. "Hungry?" He says holding them out to Bryony.

Bryony looks suspicious, "Are those even ripe?"

Dan places his free hand over the figs for a moment before exclaiming, "Tada!" He removes his hand with a flourish, the figs now a deep plum purple. Dan moans as he bites, crimson seeds rolling over his chin.

“Dan,” Bryony says, looking left and right before taking a ripe fruit for herself, “since when do you that out here?”

He only shrugs, happy in his moment of recklessness, even if all it got him was a fig a few weeks early. They walk in silence, until the house is in sight. “I’m going to miss you.”

“No you won’t,” she answers, “you’ll go to law school next year, find a wife, start the next chapter of your life. You won’t miss this.”

“I will.” Dan’s voice is low, barely audible, “and that’s not my life, Bry. You know that. There’s no wife in my future.”

They’re stood at rear entrance to the house now. “Daniel, don’t say that.” She takes one of his hands in both of hers, and stares straight into his downcast eyes.

“Someone out there will understand you and love you for everything you are. Everything. Do you hear me?”

He doesn’t move or speak.

“Dan,” she’s whispering now, “wife or not, the right person will want you just as you are. Okay?”

Though he doesn’t entirely believe her, Dan nods and tries his best to give a smile that conveys his gratitude.

It’s Dan’s bladder that wakes him up, but it’s his dry, pasty mouth that motivates him to actually get out of bed. There’s a tray outside the door with a sandwich and a pitcher of water. The house is quiet and Dan figures it must be later than he realized. Bringing the tray back

into his room, he sits down on the window seat. He pushes the window open just enough to feel the cool summer night air and to hear the sound of crickets. There's no rustling in the garden, no mysterious man making Dan curious. There's just the sky, dark but illuminated by a million stars, the clouds few and far between. He's never gulped a full glass of water so quickly in his life and the relief is heavenly. Still, his head is throbbing dully behind his temples, and his stomach sits sour and empty. Food has never sounded less appetizing than it does right now but he picks up the sandwich and nibbles at a corner anyway, tearing off a bit of crust to work on while he watches the rare wispy cloud drift past.

The breeze has the end of summer woven all through it. Dan's hand dances in the cool of it and he watches his fingers shape the starlight, encumbered only by the glare of the nearly full moon. It's comforting, all this beauty. It draws his focus and quiets his mind and soon he's yawning. He has to curl up in a tiny ball to lay down on the window seat, but he manages. The view is even better from here but his eyelids flutter heavily, determined to close.

In his dream, the man from the garden sits at the window beside him. He draws vines onto the walls with a wave of his finger, vines that bloom in vibrant blue and pink and lavender. They wind around the bedposts and snake across the floor until the room is a jungle. Dan draws the night sky on the ceiling, and now his room is the whole world.

"How beautiful," Dan says in his dream, blushing. And the man cups Dan's jaw and leans in until his lips brush his cheek. His breath smells like sugar and violets. Dan would turn and kiss him but he doesn't know how. "What do I do?" He whispers, closing his eyes. And the man laughs softly, so quiet, just loud enough to stir Dan from sleep.

The sound is next to him, then in his head, and then behind him and he sits bolt upright, feet on the floor, back twisting to look outside. The laughter comes again, high and musical, floating in from somewhere distant. Dan scans the courtyard, squinting to see further in the dark but there's no one. Soon there's a rustling in the woods and a figure steps through the trees. He's unmistakable, tall and broad, blending in perfectly with the birch and chestnut trees. He's glancing around and smiling, laughing like he's having a right bant with the bark and branches all around him.

Dan only stares for a moment before he practically leaps into bed and pulls the covers up to his chin. He supposes the man could be mad. Or maybe it's Dan who's lost his mind. Either way, Dan can't risk being seen at the window. Tomorrow, he'll ask around; someone must know something. For now, he'll hide and try his best to re-enter a dream that ended too soon.

Chapter 2

Morning comes, and the open window brings nothing but still, warm air. The tray is gone, the courtyard empty, and Dan is sure it was all a dream born of drinking straight from an unmarked bottle.

He's still sat on the bed when there's a knock on the door, and he jumps to his feet to throw on a robe. It's later than he thought.

"I think I owe you an apology," Bryony says as she walks through the door, "I didn't realize you were such a lightweight. Olive branch?" She extends her arm and in her hand is a glass of something. "Proven cure for over indulgence." She winks.

"I don't trust that wink." Dan sniffs the brown liquid and recoils. "What is it?"

The glass is almost to his lips when she answers, "Raw egg, Worcestershire sauce, and black pepper."

With a disgusted retching sound, Dan thrusts the glass back into her hands. She's laughing now, way too hard.

"Remind me to never drink anything you give me ever again."

"Oh come on. You loved it." Bryony says, setting the glass aside and having a seat by the window. "And this will help, I swear."

"I'm fine, really. Got up and ate last night, thanks for sending that up. Think I already got through the worst of it." Watching Bryony gaze out at the garden, Dan continues, "Saw the new gardener again. Young, eccentric type. You'd like him."

“New gardener?”

Dan nods.

“Handsome?” Bryony keeps her eyes trained outside and Dan is grateful as he feels his cheeks flush with heat.

He shrugs, but since she’s not looking, “I guess. I mean, he seemed, he was perfectly acceptable looking, I suppose. He...”

“Dan.” She gives him a look he’s seen so many times. It’s a look that says, it’s ok, it’s just me.

He moves to the window and sits down right next to her, he watches his fidgeting hands. “Yes. He was handsome.” He whispers.

“Nope!” Bryony smacks a hand on Dan’s knee and he jumps. “Definitely would have heard about an attractive young man joining the staff. The maids never shut up. Last week, one of the drivers changed his hair and you should have seen the way they carried on. You’d think they all had the vapours.” She laughs again and pulls her legs up to fold them underneath her, her skirt bunching and wrinkling.

“Are you sure?” Dan looks out the window, hoping to find some trace of the man he saw last night, unsure of what he’s looking for. “There was definitely someone.”

“Probably just a traveler come in from the road to steal some food. Too bad there’s nothing in this part of the garden. Hope he found something to eat.” She stands and smooths her skirt down before heading for the door. “Come out of your cave soon, little goblin, I’m only here till Monday.”

With a sigh, Dan returns his gaze to the courtyard and something catches his eye. Among the goosegrass and the nettles and the dandelions, there’s a shock of purple. Columbines, with

long, green stems and bright blooms reaching for the sun. A ring of them grows right there in the center of the courtyard. Dan could swear those weren't there yesterday. Nothing seems to be making sense today.

Dan spends the rest of his day listening to Bryony tell stories of his own childhood. Memories reconstruct in his mind, but they're dull, faded at the edges. There was the time he'd painted constellations under the desk, systems of stars that he'd seen in a book. He'd illuminated them with his fingertips and the glow almost got him caught when one of the maids came through. Bryony had arrived just in time and explained it all away. That was the day he learned that people believe what they want to believe. It's not hard to hide. Bryony recounts the day he discovered his power over things that grow. He could pull fruit from a tree without reaching, without leaving the comfort of the shaded ground. He could summon handfuls of strawberries just walking through the patch with his hand held open. Those were her favorite stories, of how she found him, covered in red juice, trousers caked in dirt from where he'd plopped down on the forest floor to eat his bounty.

"I met your new tutor."

The chatter had died down and they'd fallen into a comfortable silence. Dan looks up to read her expression. There's a knowing smile there and he wants to know why.

"And?"

"And I filled him in on your progress and interests, general learning style, blah blah blah."

"You know that's not what I was asking," Dan says. "What is he like? Is he gruff? Horribly dry? Does he rule with an iron fist?"

"None of those things, actually. He's rather sunny, a bit awkward, maybe. Quiet."

"Oh great, they hired Ichabod Crane."

Bryony huffs a laugh and opens her arms to Dan. Moving to sit next to her, he leans his head on her shoulder. He misses her already, and though he won't say it, he hopes she knows that she's been more than a teacher and a friend. She's become like a sister.

"Give him a chance, Dan. I think you are going to be really surprised."

Dan sits up and glares at her. "You know something." Bryony shakes her head. "What do you know? Oh god, Bry, what horrible fate awaits me tomorrow?"

"Oh, Lord!" Bryony says, eyes rolling as she stands. "I think he's right for you, Dan. I really do." She smooths her skirts down. "As your teacher, I mean. Alright then, up you go. I'll be gone before your lazy arse gets out of bed tomorrow. This is not goodbye, but farewell."

Dan sniffs as he stands and throws his arms around her. "You'd better write me."

"You know I will."

Dan thinks he hears a crack in her voice, but he can't be sure. She clears her throat.

"Promise me you'll stay true to yourself, Dan. You're on a precipice. And it's scary, I know. But when you feel that fear, promise me you won't turn away from the edge."

He nods, wiping his tears. She hands him her handkerchief.

"What do I do then? When I'm there on the edge. Where do I go from there, Bry?"

She just smiles and hugs him quickly one more time. "Goodbye, Daniel." And with that, she's gone. Tomorrow morning, he'll meet his new tutor, the man who'll lead him through the last gate before he goes out into the world. It's what he's always wanted, the first step to the rest of his life. A new beginning. So why does it feel like the end?

The basement is a labyrinth of halls, workrooms, and servant's quarters. Dan used to play hide and seek here as a child. There was no one to find him, so really, he just hid and explored and ended up in the kitchen. He was definitely not allowed in there, but big brown eyes and dimples earned him clemency and a lot of cakes. He still gets a warm sort of comfort being down here, though now he's just looking for someone who might have seen the man in the garden, too, another night owl maybe.

It's Monday morning. Anyone that works in the garden or the stables is out there doing just that. He'd hoped to catch someone heading out from breakfast. He should have known better - they're probably up with the sun. There is someone sat at the table in the kitchen, someone in a crisp grey jacket. Definitely not a gardener, but Dan doesn't recognize him from the back of his head. The man is sipping tea at the staff table so he must be employed here.

"Excuse me, sorry to interrupt your tea," Dan walks round to the opposite side of the table to get a look at the man, "but I wondered if..." his mouth drops open. "You?"

"Me?" The man blinks his blue eyes and swallows before setting his cup down to stand. He wipes his hands on his trousers and thrust his hand out for a shake.

"You're the man from the garden."

His hand is still there, unshaken, just levitating before he finally drops it. "Hello, you must be..."

"What the hell have you been doing out there?"

"Oh. Well I..."

“Lurking outside my window?” Dan voice sounds sharp in his ears.

“No, surely not. I’m sorry if I bothered you. I’m...”

“Sneaking about under cover of night?”

“Actually I...” The man takes out his handkerchief and dabs at his brow.

“Who are you anyway?”

“Oh, I’m Phil. It’s lovely to...”

“Phil? Familiar, aren’t we?”

“Yes, well I thought we might...”

“I don’t have time for this. I meeting my new tutor today. I’ve got to get my self in order.”

Phil opens his mouth to speak but Dan is already in the hall, ducked behind a doorway. He peeks around to see Phil slump back into his chair. His shoulders are broad from the back, filling out his jacket in a way that makes Dan’s stomach swoop. He can’t figure out why he has to catch his breath or why his palms are sweaty. He just knows he doesn’t want to look away and that his arms and legs feel shaky like he’s been in a fight. Before he can think about it too deeply, he hears his mother call his name and he rushes up the stairs to find her.

“There you are.” She says, reaching out to neaten the configuration of curls at his forehead. “What have you been doing? You’re sweating. Seriously Daniel, clean yourself up. Mr. Lester and I will meet you in the library in fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, Mum.”

Soon, Dan sits in his favorite room, paging through the big atlas that sits on a stand by the window. He runs his finger over the shapes, tracing a silvery trail of light over the islands and continents. He writes a name, Mr Lester, perfect for a stodgy old law tutor. As it fades, he writes a different name. Phil. It shimmers on the page, and Dan holds it there until the silver turns to gold. The sound of his mother’s quick-stepping heels startles him to attention and he slams the book closed.

“Stand up straight, Daniel.” She says, nearly under her breath, and then she’s turning, reaching her arm behind her. Time seems to slow down. Dan’s eyes follow her hand until it lands on the arm of a crisp grey jacket. The man wearing said jacket stumbles a bit as he lets her nudge him to her side. “Daniel, this is…”

“Phil?”

“Daniel Howell. This is your tutor and you will address him by his surname, Mr Lester.” She’s not angry, just firm. She always says etiquette is what separates us from the animals. But what is the etiquette for meeting someone you’ve already watched through your bedroom window.

“It’s okay, Mrs Howell,” Phil speaks up, “Daniel and I met this morning, in the kitchen.”

He’s speaking to her but looking right at Dan and Dan can feel those eyes boring right through him. He’s absolutely sure Phil can read every thought he’s ever had, see his dreams, know his secrets. He wants to speak but he needs a moment.

“Oh,” Mrs Howell says, looking a little confused, “alright then. It’s all too familiar if you ask me but I won’t question your methods, Mr Lester.” Phil gives a slight nod and Mrs Howell claps her hands together. “I’ll leave you to it. The maids are at your disposal, Mr Lester. Please don’t hesitate, should you need anything.”

Phil acknowledges the offer with a smile and an awkward little bow. Mrs Howell approaches Dan and he bends forward so she can kiss his forehead. “Thanks, Mum, we’ll be just fine.”

She looks into his eyes and that steely look says so much. It says that she loves him and he's going to do great, it says that he'd better appreciate everything she does for him, and it says do not muck this up.

They're alone now in Dan's favorite place. It's so quiet in here, just the faint sound of birds coming through the open windows. It feels like a betrayal having Phil here, a betrayal to Dan's childhood self. This man, sent to usher Dan into adult life, though he doesn't look more than a few years older than himself. Not to mention his eccentric habit of traipsing around the woods in the dark. Dan can't fathom a reason he's a suitable replacement for Bryony.

"Hello, Daniel. Perhaps we can start over. It's lovely to.." Phil's hand is outstretched but Dan ignores it.

"Dan."

"Sorry?"

"I prefer Dan."

"Okay," Phil clears his throat, "That is familiar, are you sure?"

"It's Dan, Phil." His tone is biting. If you asked him why, he couldn't tell you. This is just all wrong. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-two." Phil says confidently.

"Twenty-two!" Dan practically shouts but he catches himself and brings the volume down. "Do you even know anything about the law?"

Phil huffs a small laugh, "Not really."

Utterly incredulous, Dan stops the pacing he hadn't realized he'd been doing and stares at Phil. "Then how did you get this job?"

"I lied." Phil shrugs before strolling over to the desk and idly paging through the atlas there. "Not to your mother. She knows all about me, mostly."

"Jesus. I need teachers, mentors, and she brings me a classmate!"

"Maybe she just wants you to have a friend."

"I don't need friends, I need qualifications so I can get out of this place and go out into the world and everyone can leave me alone." Dan knows he sounds like a petulant child but he's too worked up to filter right now.

"Well, which is it?" Phil asks.

"Which is what?"

"Do you want to go out in the world, or do you want to be left alone?"

Dan is defeated. In that moment, the only thing he wants is to go backward. He wants to run and play and eat sweets. He wants to be little enough to think hiding is fun and that the great big world holds nothing but adventure. He doesn't want to make plans. He doesn't want to talk about himself.

"Tell me what you were doing in the garden? In the woods?" Dan can see the corner of Phil's lips twitch.

"Let's go for a walk."

Chapter 3

Phil walks with purpose, turning just as the door closes behind them and walking straight toward the gardens. They don't walk around but through and Dan is quiet, just watching.

"Hello, lovelies." Phil says, glancing around and up and down the bed of vegetables. He stops and crouches at a patch of lush green, muttering softly, "Well, aren't you looking rich today, well done." His fingers gently brush past the leafy greens as he stands again and keeps walking.

Leave it to Dan's mother to not know the difference between a brilliant eccentric and absolute lunatic.

"Your gardens are beautiful," Phil says, "but that's not what we're here for."

They find themselves in the courtyard outside Dan's window. The circle of columbines stands tall in the center and Phil sits down right in the middle.

"This is where everything good grows. Nobody pushed these seeds into the ground, everything here chose to be here." Phil leans back on his hands.

Dan's hands are in his pockets and he kicks the dirt with the toe of his shoe. There's a grown man sat in the dirt surrounded by flowers and he's not entirely sure what the etiquette for this scenario is. Someone could see them. People don't often come to this part of the estate but they could. And they'd see Phil basking in the sun and Dan just staring. They'd know Dan's mother hired a mad person and she'd have to replace him with a real tutor to save face. For a moment he wishes someone would show up but then Phil breathes deep, closing his eyes. He tips his head back, face bathed in golden sunlight, his long neck exposed. There's a tension in Dan's chest, a feeling he can't name. Like a poem you read again and again though you can't decipher its meaning. You don't know why it's beautiful though you're sure that it is. It just is. He just is and Dan can't look away.

"So what do you do with it?" Phil asks, startling Dan who quickly looks away as Phil sits up, brushing the dirt off his hands.

Dan has no idea what Phil is on about. He slowly walks a little closer, like he's encountered a deer in the woods and doesn't want to spook it. "I'm sorry," he whispers, "what do I do with what?"

"Your magic?"

The breath catches on its way out and Dan crouches down to bring himself eye to eye with Phil. People in Dan's life don't just chat casually about these things. There are less than a handful of people who know and apparently now Phil is one of them.

Phil laughs a little and tips his head to the side like a curious puppy.

"I'm not sure I know what you're asking." Dan is shaking. He has to put a hand down to not fall on his arse.

"Of course you do. Your magic, Dan. Tell me about it."

No one has ever referred to what Dan does as magic and he scoffs a bit at the word. "It's not magic." he says, barely audible.

"Alright, what do you call it?"

Dan doesn't call it much. It's a whisper, a dirty secret. He must look terrified, because Phil stands and claps a hand to Dan's shoulder. "Come on."

They step carefully over roots and rocks, fallen branches and patches of green. When they are deep enough that the view is the same in every direction, they stop and sit on a fallen log.

"Feel less exposed?"

Dan nods.

“So what do you call your magic?”

“Well,” his voice cracks and he pauses to clear his throat, “if anyone dares talk about it, father says the things Daniel can do. Mum calls them my abilities or my powers.”

“That’s daunting,” Phil says, eyes wide. “To be clear, I’m going to talk about it. You should probably get used to it.”

Phil smiles and Dan is surprised to find some comfort in that. He lets himself relax just a bit and wraps his arms around himself, chilled in the shade of the trees.

“Cold?” Phil waves a hand above his head, glancing up. When nothing changes, he stands and puts a hand on the tree behind them and then waves his hand one more time. The branches part, just enough to let a ray of sunshine pass through, shining down onto Dan where he sits. Phil sits back down.

“Whatever you call it, it’s magic. It just is. It’s magic and it’s yours. It’s a gift.”

Dan is frozen where he sits. The world spins fast all around him. Everything he knows, his secrets, his place in the world, it’s all different now. Just like that, with a few words and a wave of Phil’s hand, Dan isn’t alone. Suddenly, he’s overwhelmed, he needs to slow down. This is all too much.

“Did you think you were the only one?” Phil asks with so much kindness in his eyes, in his voice, but Dan just shrugs. Phil has a life and a job and isn’t locked away in a house somewhere. Phil is confident and strange and seemingly has no reservations about showing who he is. Dan can’t fathom what that’s like but he thinks he wants to be close to it. Either that or he wants to push it away, run back to the shadows where it’s safe. He’s not the only one. He’s not alone and maybe that is worth the fear. Maybe he can step out of the shadows if someone is out here waiting for him.

A few deep breaths calm Dan's frantic heart and he stands. He stretches his arms above his head and lets the sun soak in. Phil is patiently waiting, his fingers always moving, brushing over moss, walking over ivy, always exploring the textures around him.

"Um, I can draw, in light. I can pull the shimmer from the sky and bring it inside. When I don't want it to be dark, when I can't sleep, I draw the night sky on my ceiling."

Phil patient countenance cracks and he grins, "I would love to see that. That sounds beautiful."

"There's practical stuff too. I can ripen fruit, I can ask the trees to drop fruit for me."

"And your mother says you can heal. That's really extraordinary."

"My mum told you that?" Dan rubs his eyes hard, trying to understand. "She discouraged it, all of it. It makes her really uncomfortable. Why would she tell you when she's the one who held me back."

"She gave you a childhood Dan."

Dan's eyes are red from the effort of holding back tears. A piece of him thinks he'll wake from this dream soon and be back in his bed with no clue how to step into the rest of his life. He doesn't have much time to ponder that notion before Phil jumps up and takes him by the hand.

"We'll miss lunch." Phil says, suddenly urgent. "We've got to get back."

Dan lets himself be dragged behind Phil, stunned as he is until they reach the open courtyard where he pulls his hand away and walks beside him the rest of the way.

They spend every morning talking by the fire or the window. Dan shows Phil his favorite books, the illustrations that showed him a world he couldn't know first hand. He tells him stories of the few times his family ventured into town with little Daniel and the frustrations that followed when he failed to censor himself. Phil shares too but his stories have Dan laughing so hard, he's doubled over. His mishaps aren't so different from Dan's but somehow his life sounds like an adventure.

Most days, after lunch, they head to the garden or the woods. Phil talks with every plant and fills Dan in on how they're all doing. He identifies everything he touches, making Dan repeat the names back to him, eventually quizzing him, reviewing the subtle difference in stems and veins and shades of green.

"Wormwort, wormwood? No, it's wort. Something wort?" Dan's squinting as he thinks. He's always been a person who wants to do well, he wants to succeed, to make his parents proud. The desperate need to get the answers right is nothing new and when Phil smiles, pride blooms in Dan's chest.

"Mugwort." Phil walks a few feet and crouches, "This is wormwood. It grows taller. Smaller leaves and they're dusty, see? Important distinction. You have to be very careful with wormwood."

"But not with mugwort?"

"Always be careful, Dan. But yes, mugwort is your friend. Mugwort is going to be your protector, your guide." Phil sits down on the ground next to the patch of mugwort and pats the space next to him.

Dan looks at the dirt and crinkles his nose, "Nah, mate, it's muddy."

Laughter bubbles from Phil and he looks up, "You'll live through it. You can't talk to her from way up there."

Dan gives in and sits, but not without a dramatic sigh.

“Go on then,” Phil says, “say hello.”

Part of him wants to tell Phil off and go home, but a bigger part just wants to know the kind of ease around all of this that Phil knows. And so with the tips of two fingers, Dan touches the leaves gently. He can sense the warm glow of life move from the plant and up his arm.

“Hello,” he says, in a voice usually reserved for the horses and the baby goats.

“If you only learn one plant, Dan, this is the one.”

Dan nods and watches Phil reach down and hover his palm over the mugwort. “I’d like to harvest some of your leaves if I may?” He says, “for Dan here. He’s just learning.” After a beat he giggles a bit and nods his head before reaching into his pocket to pull out a small knife. Soon Dan has his shirt untucked and held out to form a makeshift basket for the leaves that Phil has cut.

They walk around to the back of the house to reduce the chance of anyone seeing them. Dan has a shirt full of plants, his shoes are muddy, and his trousers are caked with dirt. He’d been so angry about Phil’s arrival, so offended that his mother would put his future in the hands of someone like him. Now, walking next to Phil, he knows he has a peer for the first time in his life, maybe even a friend. He never wanted to be a lawyer, not really. What he wanted was security and independence. It’s only been a couple weeks, but he already trusts Phil somehow. He knows that all of this is going to lead to something better. When they reach the door, Phil holds it open.

“Drop our little harvest in your room, somewhere the maids won’t throw it out. We’ll reconvene after lunch.”

Dan gives a small nod in agreement and heads toward his bedroom but pauses after a few steps. “Phil,” he turns back to catch Phil’s expression, “we aren’t going to study law, are

we?”

All he gets in response is another wonderful smile.

Chapter 4

They don't stick to a schedule. It becomes clear that Phil will be around for dinner as often as he is for lunch, and it's not long before he's offered a room in the basement where most of the staff lives. Phil graciously asks if he might take over the empty cottage on the edge of the woods instead. There are a few unused structures on the Howell's land, left over from decades ago, when the gardens were more like a farm. This one is a little rickety, but it has good bones. Understanding why Phil might prefer a little isolation, Dan's mother acquiesces and has a bed moved from an unused staff quarters into the little cottage. Phil's made good friends on the staff-- they don't understand him, but they like him. They don't question when he and Dan walk into the woods in the mornings or after the sun has gone down. When he starts taking Dan right to the cottage for lessons, no one even notices the change.

The first time Dan sees Phil's little home, he does his best to resist the impulse to pull out his handkerchief and begin wiping things down. Of course it's dusty; it's old and it's not like the maids come out here. He shudders to think what his own room would look like if the cleaning were left up to him. It's actually rather pretty in its own way. There's a modest fireplace and a workbench and shelves filled with bottles and sieves. There's a mortar and pestle and a set of scales and plants hanging to dry from every beam. Dan wraps his arms around himself and shivers. The fire barely glows.

"I know it's cold," Phil says, shoving a quilted cloth under the door to block the draft, "I've never been good at building a fire."

Dan walks to the hearth and crouches down. He takes a log from the pile and adds it to the arrangement in front of him. With a wave of his hand, a small flame appears and he hears Phil take a few steps closer. Dan heaves a breath and focuses his mind, waving his hand again, this time with a flourish. The fire leaps up, roaring for a moment before settling into a nice warm crackle.

"Dan! I didn't know you could do that!" Phil is right there and when Dan stands, he finds himself pulled into a hug.

"Neither did I! I mean I can light the lamp in my room but that..." Dan is laughing and Phil is beaming and the room is warmer already.

Over the next few weeks, Dan learns to brew infusions strong enough to heal, learns how brandy can pull the potency from all sorts of plants. He knows how much belladonna cures and how much could kill and how to steep the willow bark to get rid of his mother's headaches. Phil's brilliance hides behind clumsy feet and bumbling hands. He makes a mess, he spills and breaks bottles, he trips over his own feet. He may be the one teaching, but Dan is keeping the whole thing from blowing up in their faces. Dan has never been so comforted by ineptitude. There's an odd balance with the two of them. He should probably question the direction they've taken so far, but he doesn't. It doesn't make any sense, what they're doing, but Dan is good at it and for the first time in a long while, he feels a sense of purpose.

Outside Dan's window is a carpet of gold and brown and yellow leaves. Autumn is his favorite time of year. The house is warm and firelit. At any given time, the kitchen is filled with steam from multiple pots boiling on the stove. The pantry is filled with jars of preserves, figs and apples and blackberries, and the gardens produce baskets of beetroot and squash. It feels abundant and safe in a way Dan wants to bask in.

Phil says this time of year is vital. They walk through the gardens, even in the rain, thanking every plant that feeds them. He says autumn is rich and ripe in every way, that now is the time for Dan to embrace his magic like he never has before. That sounds like nonsense to him, like something a traveling preacher would shout about on their doorstep. Still, Phil makes it all sound possible. It's difficult to deny the assertions of a man who's literally bouncing on his heels when he makes them. That kind of excitement is infectious, and Dan's got nothing else to do anyway.

It's the last day of October. Phil had wanted to be outside under the moon, but they would've been soaked through from the rain, so they settle for the cottage. The rain pelts the roof and tree branches scrape the windows. It's as if the woods want Phil as much as he wants them. Dan immediately sets in to getting the fire going. He hears a drip drip drip from behind him and turns to see Phil setting a bowl under a leak in the roof.

"Can't you fix that?" Dan asks.

"What? Like with a hammer?"

Dan shouldn't laugh so hard but he can't hold it back. "Lord, no. You can move the branches, I just thought," he shrugs, "wooden roof."

Phil shakes his head. "They only listen when they're still growing."

Dan watches the water slowly seep through a tiny gap in a rotten piece of wood and he wonders. He reaches up to touch one of the beams and there's not much, it's not alive, but there is something. Opening his hand under the water as it drips, he closes his eyes and focuses hard. It takes time but in a few minutes he doesn't feel the drips anymore. He closes his hand and opens his eyes to Phil looking up at his healed roof.

"Who's the teacher here?" Phil says, smiling as he picks up the bowl and sets it aside. "Thanks, Dan."

There's an old, worn rug on the floor that Phil begins to roll up. Underneath, a painted circle is revealed, a compass rose of sorts, with the four directions clearly marked. It's a beautiful bluish green, not unlike Phil's eyes, and Dan has the impulse to light it up with his fingertips. All of this medicine making, this talking to trees, it's been beautiful and rewarding, but this, this is like something from a storybook.

"Wow." Dan is breathless. "Did you paint that?"

Phil just nods and brings a bowl to the center of the circle. "Gather some dried mugwort Dan. And light the candles please, a small flame in the bowl would also be helpful."

Dan does as he's told and as he turns with his armful of leaves, he sees Phil is holding a long crooked branch.

"Is that..." Dan squints, disbelieving, "a magic wand? Are you gonna pull a bird out of your hat?"

“First of all, I seldom wear a hat. Second, do yourself a favor and forget everything you think you know.” Phil smiles and attempts a wink. “Not everyone can shoot fire from their fingertips Dan. It's just a branch I smoothed and oiled, it helps me focus my energy.” He motions for Dan to sit.

There's a jar by the bed with fresh flowers, marigolds and chrysanthemums and aster. Phil takes a few in his hand, and soon Dan is surrounded by a ring of gold and purple petals. Phil points his wand forward, turns slowly and carefully, then sits on the floor, facing Dan..

Dan just stares, waiting for something, words or smoke or lightening or something.

“What exactly am I doing?” Dan whispers.

“Have you been practicing? With your mugwort?”

“Mmhm. I burn a little in front of the window and I focus on the smoke.” Dan says.

“And?”

“And I feel, something. I don't know Phil, it just feels like my heart is too big for my chest, like I could fly.” Dan swallows, fidgeting with the leaves in his lap. “But nothing happens.”

“Doesn't sound like nothing to me.” Phil holds his gaze until Dan looks up and his blue eyes flicker in the light of the flame beneath them. “We aren't trying to do anything particular, Dan, but everything is magnified here in this place and on this night. I just want you to feel and focus and let yourself go. Let's see what you can do.”

Dan takes the mugwort in both hands and closes his eyes. With practiced focus, he asks the leaves to clear the way, he asks for guidance. His lips move just slightly as he struggles to find the right words. Shaking his head, he opens his eyes, frustration weighing heavy on his brow.

“Dan.” Phil lays his hands over Dan’s pulling them over the flame. “The words don’t matter, that’s all stories. It’s you that’s magic. Just let it out.” With that, Phil’s hands are gone and Dan lets the leaves flutter down into the bowl. Fragrant smoke rises up, curling in long grey tendrils. Dan’s senses are flooded and he breathes in deep, hands still outstretched. His heart pulls toward something, an all too familiar feeling since he met Phil, and he does his best to surrender to it, to let it out as Phil had said. The tiny flame in the bowl has grown, and the smoke now stretches to the roof.

Phil’s eyes are wide, a soft trusting smile on his lips as Dan watches his face, trying to stay grounded. He feels so full, every cell bursting with heat and vibration and wild energy. He doesn’t know how to contain it.

“Phil?” He drops his hands and Phil reaches out, wrapping his fingers around Dan’s. He’s grinning now, looking up at the smoke that has gathered like a fog above their heads. The little cottage seems to pull with the wind and Dan can feel the earth breathing beneath him. “Why aren’t you afraid?” Dan asks.

“Because it’s you, Dan.”

“It’s not me. I can’t control it, I feel like I’m going to shatter.” Dan sounds panicked. “It’s bigger than me.”

“It’s not,” Phil speaks softly, “It can’t be bigger than you. It is you.” He squeezes Dan’s hands before letting go and leaning forward and just like that his hand is over Dan’s heart. “You won’t shatter. I’m here. Let go.”

And so he does. With a gasp, Dan’s hands fly up to hold Phil’s where it lays. His eyes close and he tips his head back just like Phil had that first day in the courtyard. He imagines the warmth of the sun on his skin and he takes it in, letting that light twist and marble with the dark glimmer he so often feels swirling inside him. A bright glow shines through his closed eyes and he exhales. He’s been holding his breath without realizing and he pants now, catching up.

“Dan!” Phil sounds giddy, “Dan, open your eyes, look!”

Slowly, Dan raises his head and his eyes open to shimmering, silvery light. It beams in through the roof, filters through the smoke, and fills the circle where they sit. It's quite nearly the most beautiful thing Dan has ever seen. Phil's free arm is outstretched, fingers dancing in the light. His smile is brighter than any magic could be, eyes crinkling as he laughs, cheeks pink and Dan thinks he should always be lit just like this. That image is the most beautiful thing so Dan laughs too.

"Is it..." Dan hesitates, he can't believe his eyes. He's always been able to draw with light. He's always called it starlight but he never really knew. This is more, bigger, brighter than anything he's ever done. He takes a deep breath, looking up at the pillar of light. "Is it moonlight?"

Phil doesn't answer but his jaw drops open in amazement. He pulls his hand away from Dan's chest. It takes some effort but Dan finally realizes how firmly he's holding on and lets go. Leaning forward onto his knees, Dan catches his breath, trying to calm the wild beating of his heart. His focus is waning and the light starts to dissipate. It drifts up to where the smoke has gathered and stays there, shining down on Dan and Phil like they're outside under the bright full moon.

As soon as the smoke has cleared, the silver light is gone, and the flame in the bowl flickers, fighting to stay lit. As the light fades, Phil's face softens and he tips his head to one side, studying Dan. He's never looked at Dan quite like this and Dan doesn't want it to end. He holds Phil's gaze as long as he can.

"That was wonderful, Dan," Phil gets to his feet and extends a hand to help Dan up. "I don't know what to say." He reaches for the broom that leans on the wall and hands it to Dan, who begins to sweep the petals away.

By the time he's finished clearing the floor and replacing the rug, Phil has opened a bottle of wine and poured them each a glass. They sit on the floor in front of the fire and drink until they're both giddy, talking over each other, and retelling the night's events over and over. The more they drink, the more personal the stories get, and soon Phil is laughing so hard, he begs Dan for a break.

There's just a hint of daylight creeping in so Dan says goodbye. He means to give Phil a hug but his tipsy, tired body just sort of falls in his general direction. He can't be bothered to be embarrassed when Phil catches him and holds him up, wrapping his arms around Dan and

squeezing tight. They both giggle until Dan is out the door, finger to his lips, shushing Phil though no one could hear them way out here, not at this hour.

When he makes it back to the house, he climbs through his window to avoid being seen by any early risers. He can't imagine what his mother would do if she saw him coming home, drunk, at sunrise. And he's not going to find out today. Managing to wriggle out of his clothes, he falls into bed and it is divine. The night plays in his mind like some fantastic dream, Phil's laughter drift through like a song lulling him to sleep, a better sleep than he's had in years.

Chapter 5

The ground crunches under Dan's feet and he pulls his coat tighter. There's not enough snow for it to look pretty, just a few small patches with muddy grey edges. Phil had asked him to meet at the edge of the woods near Dan's courtyard.

Phil wanted to be sure Dan could identify plants even when they were dormant and Dan had been excited about it until he stepped out into this cold. Now, he mutters under his breath that there's a perfectly good library in the house with a perfectly good fireplace and all the tea he could drink. He's thinking about the limits of his patience. He's thinking that Phil's eccentricity is only charming to a point and this is that point. He decides, then and there, that he's going to set some boundaries. He makes that decision just as he looks up and sees Phil waiting. He wears a grey coat and a chunky scarf in a shade of blue better suited to a baby blanket. It's crooked, hanging loosely around Phil's neck with one end nearly resting on the ground.

Dan feels his irritation diminish. He knows he had something to say but can't for the life of him remember what it was. All he knows now is that Phil's nose and cheeks are rosy red. He wants to pull off his gloves and put his warm palms against those cheeks, to wrap up all that vulnerability and hold it for a while. When he reaches Phil, he's got his tongue stuck out and he's smiling around it.

"What are you doing?" Dan asks, amazed.

"Catching snowflakes!" Phil says, retracting his tongue.

"But there aren't any." Dan shakes his head. "Never mind." He stares at Phil for a good minute. Dan's not as cold as he was but, Phil looks like he's about to ice over. His coat isn't even buttoned. Without thinking, Dan reaches forward and fastens the buttons on Phil's coat. Just as the third button slips into place, it strikes Dan that maybe this isn't normal behavior for a student or even a friend. His hands still. He keeps his head low but looks up to see Phil looking at him. He remembers that look. Phil's eyes look like he just woke up, his mouth is soft with just the slightest curl to one corner.

Dan takes a steadying breath and allows his hands to continue their climb until his fingers close around the ends of Phil's scarf. He pulls until they're even then wraps one end around Phil's neck.

"You're a mess," Dan says, forcing a smile. Tucking one end of the scarf behind the other, Dan's knuckles brush over the skin of Phil's throat and everything slows down. He can't look up, he's sure he'll do something stupid if he gets one glimpse of blue eyes right now.

"It's a...very pretty scarf," Dan stutters, his hands finally drop. His own scarf is feeling rather stifling.

Phil clears his throat before he speaks. "Thank you Dan. My, uh, my aunt made it."

His breath puffs white as he speaks, mingling with Dan's in the narrow space between them. Dan can feel Phil's eyes on him and he steps back before finally looking up.

"Right then," Dan says weakly and he walks past Phil into the woods.

"Wormwood." Dan points to the ground on the right. "Mugwort." He points just ahead of him. He does his best to sound matter of fact but he can hear his own voice wobble. "Fox, foxglove, and deadly nightshade." He gestures toward a clearing and picks up his pace, stopping when it gets too muddy underfoot. "Here, there's primrose and..." Dan stops at the sound of a yelp and a thud behind him. When he turns, Phil is laid out on the forest floor, struggling to get up.

"Phil!" Dan is at his side in an instant.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Phil says, pulling himself up to sit with Dan's help. "Not my first spill, won't be my last." He wipes his hands on his trousers and winces.

"You're hurt." Dan looks to find the source of Phil's pain and spots a tear in his trousers, just above the knee. There's blood seeping through the fabric. Dan lays his hand over the wound

and closes his eyes. It only takes a moment.

“Okay?” Dan asks, letting his eyes flutter open and daring, finally to look into Phil’s.

“Right as rain.”

“Sorry I can’t say the same for your trousers.” Dan smiles. His hand is still on Phil’s leg, he just hasn’t thought to move it. No one can see them here, he could move closer. He could let himself touch, feel the soft blushing skin of Phil’s cheek in his hand. He would speak if he could only find the words. How does he say that he’s terrified even though Phil makes him feel safer than he ever has? How does he say that Phil has unlocked something in Dan, something vital and joyful, something he didn’t know he had in him? Dan thinks maybe he hasn’t lived enough to have words for gratitude this deep. So he just stares, so still in this place they’ve spent so much time in, this place that is theirs now. He watches as Phil blinks slowly, his gaze flicking down to where Dan’s hand rests softly on his thigh before he’s scrambling to his feet.

“I should change these.” He turns away from Dan.

“Phil, wait.”

“I have to go.” He doesn’t head back toward the house, but but heads straight for the cottage.

Dan calls out Phil’s name, but he doesn’t stop. Dan can only watch as Phil disappears into the trees.

The weekend passes slowly. They’ve never stuck to a weekday schedule before, but Phil doesn’t come round. It’s nearly Christmas, and Dan is painfully aware that Phil will be leaving soon, taking a few weeks off with his family in the north. Regret sits like a stone in his gut. He shouldn’t have touched him, he shouldn’t have let him see what Dan’s been

holding inside. He should have kept his head down, focused on learning, taken what Phil was willing to give. He should have known better than to think he can have more he has. He doesn't get to come out of hiding. Not ever.

He's got books spread out over the floor of the library and a stack as high as his knee still waiting for him. Every book he could find on crafting remedies, botanical identification, magical lore, and a few stories of witchcraft. If he can't be normal, then he'll be really good at being strange. He'll be so impressive, Phil won't notice the way Dan's touches always linger, the way he holds on when he embraces him. It's just camaraderie, just supportive touch. Phil's a person who touches, it's how he communicates. Still, he never lets go until Dan does.

Before his mind can wander further down that dangerous path, he hears his family coming home from church. Quickly, he gets up to close the doors lest his mother come share any stories from the sermon. From the door, he can take in the full breadth of the chaos he's created. It's not just books. There are pillows on the floor and papers strewn about, scrawled with notes and drawings, some of them glow from the page. He's getting too comfortable, he needs to be careful.

With a wave of his hand, the pillows fly back into place and he moves to pick his teacup off the floor. He's just about to gather the papers into a pile when he jumps at the sound of a knock on the door. There's no way around it now. His mother will see all of this and she'll worry and he can't stall-- that'll just make it worse.

The door opens and Dan turns. "Mum, before you say anything."

"Oi, I'm not that old." It's Bryony and Dan could actually cry from the rush of relief and comfort that comes over him. He practically runs to pull her into a hug.

"Saw your parents at church and thought I'd tag along back here. To see the holiday decor, you know?"

"Is that so?" Dan says, beaming.

“And to see you, I guess.”

“Wait, you were at church?” Dan says, incredulous.

“Excuse. me Daniel, I am a god fearing, pious woman. Okay, I was sitting just outside the church. I like the bells.”

Dan snorts a laugh. He hasn't thought much of Bryony since Phil got here but now he sees how much he's missed her.

She's only there for a few hours so they sit among the mess and chat. He's got so many questions, keeping her talking till it's nearly time for her to go.

“Dan.” She finally stops his inquisition. “Why aren't we talking about you?”

He shrugs and gnaws on his thumb for a bit, then starts putting books away the old fashioned way.

“Dan, come on. It's just me.” She gets up and helps him straighten the room. “How are things going with Phil?” She's not looking at him, just putting books on the shelf.

“Fine. Really good. He's taught me a lot.”

Bryony walks to the doors to the library and pulls them closed before walking right up to Dan and taking him by the shoulders. She's grinning. “Daniel Howell, I swear to god, if you don't talk to me, I'm going to break down. What has he taught you? What amazing things can you do now?”

What has he taught him? Dan opens his mouth to answer but nothing comes out. His eyes sting and he feels his face contort. He's not going to cry. That's ridiculous. He's not going to cry.

“Oh. Danny.” Bryony’s arms are around him and he can’t hold back so he lets it out. It’s just a few shaky breaths, maybe a tear or two, but it’s more than he’s let anyone see in a long while.

He tells her what he can, but there’s really nothing to tell. He and Phil aren’t star crossed lovers, they aren’t destined to be together. This isn’t a story of great romance. It isn’t a story at all. Phil will teach him everything he knows about using his magic to heal and to bring beauty and joy into the world and then he’ll leave. He’ll leave Dan behind and find a wife. He’ll grow trees and flowers and food and children and have the beautiful life he deserves. Dan will just be a memory.

Bryony’s head shakes softly as Dan speaks. Occasionally she wipes a tear, from her cheek or from Dan’s. He knows she has to go, the driver is already here, and he wishes he would’ve just opened up the moment she got here. Of course, she dismisses Dan’s apologies, pointing out the fact that the driver doesn’t work for free and it won’t kill him to wait.

She pulls him in, holding his head to her shoulder just like his mum would and it’s so comforting that he cries a little harder.

“Do you remember what I said to you? On my last day?”

“You told me not to be afraid.” Dan snuffles and picks his head up before he gets snot on Bryony’s dress.

Bryony shakes her head. “No. You can’t help that. Life is scary, Dan. It’s messy and dangerous and so scary. But it’s yours, don’t run from it.”

“You aren’t talking about magic anymore, are you?”

“You had better write me, Dan.” She kisses his cheek just as the sound of a horn honking comes from outside.

That night Dan lays under the covers drawing constellations on the ceiling above his bed. He draws Orion, he draws Aquarius, he draws the freckles on the side of Phil's neck, on his forearm, the mole on his cheek, the shape of his eyes. He makes them blue like the summer sky, a ray of sunshine in the dark night of his room.

Morning slinks in, grey and dreary. Dan stretches and rubs the sleep from his eyes, sitting up to look out on the courtyard. There's a fog hanging low to the ground but he spies a splash of color in the midst of it. He climbs out of the sheets and off the end of the bed. With his forehead right against the cold glass, he can see them: A perfect ring of purple columbines. Phil was here.

Dan dresses and makes his usual hurried appearance at breakfast before rushing over to Phil's cottage. He straightens his coat and does his best to squish his untamed curls a bit. His knock is timid and he hates the sound of it.

"Dan, hi." Phil looks genuinely surprised. "I was just heading over. Thought we could work in the library today. Just let me grab my coat."

"Actually," Dan says, stepping in behind Phil and closing the door. "I spent all weekend in the library studying." He ignores the fact that Phil is clearly wrapping up to go out and instead kneels at the hearth and gets a fire going.

"Dan, put that out. We aren't working in here anymore."

"Why not?" Dan takes off his coat.

"I don't think it's a good idea."

“Why were you in the courtyard last night?”

“Dan I...” Phil looks defeated as he pulls his scarf off. “I needed to think. I like that spot.”

“Weren’t you cold?”

“Not really.” Phil rolls up the rug. “If you insist on being here, we’re going to get some work done.”

“Alright,” Dan says, gathering the candles and setting them in place around the circle. “I learned some new lore about the chestnut trees. Did you know that chestnut wood aids the mind in learning? That it centers energy and grounds it. Your cottage is right under the chestnuts, it’s the perfect place for lessons.”

“Why do think I asked to live here?” Phil grabs a handful of dried petals to cast the circle with.

“Wait.” Dan puts a hand over Phil’s. “I had an idea. Can I?”

Phil nods his agreement and steps inside the circle.

“Can I borrow your wand?”

“You don’t need it.”

“Maybe I like the feel of it.”

Phil raises a brow but he pulls out the willow branch and hands it to Dan. Dan bites back a smirk. It’s nice to be joking with Phil again. They’re ok. Dan just has to let it be what it is.

Turning his back to Phil, Dan faces the window that looks out on the woods. He holds the wand out and closes his eyes to focus until the wand grows warm in his hand. When he opens his eyes, a thin beam of silver light extends from the end of the wand. He extends his arm until the end of the beam touches the circle painted on the ground and the light traces a path around it in an instant.

“Beautiful.” Phil’s voice is right in his ear. Dan’s not sure when he stepped up so close behind him. He reaches around to take the wand back and Dan holds his breath for just a moment. “Open your hands now, Dan. Focus.”

Dan holds his open palms toward the window, his breathing calm and slow, Phil is just behind him, and Dan knows he’s smiling. It’s been a while since he did anything but practice what he already knows. He wants to do more, he wants to find the place where he always pulls back and keep going. He wants to see awe in Phil’s eyes again.

He watches the branches sway and crack outside the window. The only place in the world he’d rather be right now is in those woods with Phil, watching his long fingers dance along the bark and moss. He can see it in his mind, clear as day. He can feel the uneven ground under his feet, hear the twigs snap as if he were stepping through. His eyes slip shut and he’s there, surrounded by brown and yellow and a hundred shades of green. He can feel the cool air on his skin, under his skin, in his lungs, and all through his blood. When he looks again, the window is gone, the wall too, and the forest spills over into the cottage.

Moss creep in over the floor and the chestnut tree bows to bring its branches under the roof. The fog rolls in too, dancing around their feet and brings the rich smell of soil with it. Dan can hear Phil inhale slowly.

“Dan.” Phil’s hands are on Dan’s waist, he’s steadying himself. Dan can hear the excitement in Phil’s voice and that’s all he needs. “How are you doing that?”

Dan huffs a laugh because he has no idea. “It’s just me, the woods, all of it. I’m not pulling it in, I’m letting it out.” He turns to face Phil and his hands, still on Dan’s waist, grip harder. Dan can see his chest rise and fall with heavy breaths and then he smiles, so big and bright, and it’s beautiful. Dan can pull the light from the moon but it doesn’t compare to this. Nothing will ever be as magical as putting a smile like this on Phil’s face.

“I feel like I could step out and fall, straight through the ground, through the mud, and the roots, and come out on the other side.” Dan skin prickles with goosebumps, his heart pounds. “What do I do, Phil?”

Phil shrugs like it's obvious and says, “take a step and fall.”

So he does. It's just one step but now his lips are on Phil's and his arms rest on Phil's shoulders. And he is falling, he must be because he can't feel his feet on the ground. A press of the lips doesn't take long. Eventually, Dan has to let his heels drop and pull away from Phil. The fog is rolling out. Phil's eyes open and he's searching Dan's face, eyes flitting all over, and just as Dan is about to speak, Phil surges forward. Dan stumbles over roots and rocks and vines until they both step beyond the circle and Dan's back hits the wall, the wood floor now solid under his feet.

It happens fast but the kiss is slow. Phil has a hand in Dan's hair though the other never left his hip, his chest is pressed against Dan's just enough to hold him steady. Dan has no idea how to do this so he just feels and tastes and holds Phil close. He's lost in it, enveloped. Phil's mouth moves carefully, like Dan is some precious thing to be savored. His fingers comb Dan's curls and it's so tender, Dan could cry. He does his best but a whimper escapes his lips and Phil freezes, stepping back.

“Oh god.” Phil's hand flies over his mouth, his expression is pained. He rushes to gather Dan's coat and scarf. “This can't happen.”

“Phil. It's ok.”

“It's not. This can't happen.” He's pushing Dan toward the door. “You have to go.”

“Wait. Talk to me.” It's so cloudy that no light comes through the windows. Dan waves his hand to light the lamp by the bed. “Just talk to me Phil.”

In the lamp light, Dan can see the shine of tears in Phil's eyes.

“Phil, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to put you in a difficult position.” He takes his coat and scarf from Phil and sets them on the workbench. “Please don’t make me leave. That was the most incredible thing I’ve ever done and it only happened because of you.”

“That’s not true, Dan. There’s not one thing I could teach you at this point. I just stand here and watch you flourish and I’m so grateful to be a witness to it but,” he scrubs a hand over his face, “we just got carried away in the moment.”

“No we didn’t, Phil.” Dan walks past Phil and sits on the bed. “Every beautiful thing was just pouring from my fingertips and it didn’t make sense to be even a step away from you.

The quiet is deafening. Dan wants to bring the chestnut right through the glass, shatter it to pieces just to break this tension. He would bloom every dry flower in the room if it would bring a smile back to Phil’s face. None of the magic he’s worked so hard to master has any use right now. Magic can’t slow his heart or stop his twisting stomach or make Phil want to be anything other than a mentor to Dan.

“If you won’t talk to me, then listen,” Dan says, “You are the only person I’ve ever been totally honest with. And not just about my magic. You’ve seen sides of me I’ve never shown to anyone. And I showed you those parts of me because I trust you, more than I’ve ever trusted anyone.”

Phil’s sighs, his shoulders slump, he looks so small.

“Do you know what your mother said when she hired me?” He doesn’t wait for an answer. “She said, ‘keep him safe, Phil.’ That’s what she said, because she trusted me. And I failed.”

“You didn’t fail!” Dan says, his voice louder than he means it to be, “I feel safe for the first time in my life, like I can finally breathe. I’m not afraid anymore Phil, and I don’t want to hide.”

“But you have to hide,” Phil says, “and I do too.”

“Then let’s hide together.” Dan means it. He’d run away right now. He’d choose this life with Phil over any other he can imagine but Phil opens the door and stands aside. Dan has no choice so he leaves Phil there and walks out into the cold.

Chapter 6

Spring

Dearest Phil,

It's been nearly three months since you left. My mother said you had some emergency but I know there was no truth to that. I can only hope that I'm correct in that assumption as the thought of you in distress causes me such pain that my current heartache pales in comparison.

I do wish you would have had enough faith in me to say goodbye. The respect I have for you outweighs any grief I may feel over losing your friendship. I'd never stand in your way. Somewhere in my heart, buried deep beneath layers of sorrow, there is gratitude I wish I could have shared with you. I am, of course, grateful for everything you showed me, everything you taught me. However, what I am most grateful for is what you saw in me and what you allowed me to see in you. You are the only person to ever truly stand beside me, equal and honest and simply next to me, in my life.

There is a void there now, where you used to stand. It walks beside me, cold and dark. Even as spring arrives and the forest bursts with color, I find myself unable to see more than a muted and dull imitation of the world you shared with me. When I last saw you, you said there was nothing left for you to teach me. Now I know that wasn't true. You could have taught me to gather mugwort without hearing your voice in my ear. You could have shown me how to pick flowers for my mother and not smell your sweet violet fragrance in every bloom. I wish you were here now to explain how I am expected to enjoy my favorite music when your laughter seems to run through every piece.

I miss you every moment of everyday. Bryony says time will heal this wound but I hope it doesn't. The pain is a token, a memento, and it's all I have of you.

Yours,

Dan

Summer

Dearest Phil,

The chestnut trees weep for you, they scratch at the windows of your cottage, wondering where you've gone. I go there still, to work. I don't roll back the rug or light the candles or bring the moon with me. It's only me and the herbs and the roots and the flowers. I practice often and my instincts are good. Law school is a distant memory and I haven't used my magic since you've gone but I can heal with plants, like you taught me. I'm going to leave for London in the fall and make my way with hard work and wits. An unassuming life in search of happiness is all I want.

Your columbines still stand outside my window, tall and beautiful, like you. No one seems to notice them, growing there in the mess of weeds. I see them though, every day when I wake and every night before I go to sleep. They remind me of a better time, a time when you allowed me to watch you, to be near you. What a strange person you were to me then. I had no idea that strange was exactly what I needed.

It hurts a little less some days and that terrifies me.

Yours,

Dan

Autumn

Dearest Phil,

I leave tomorrow. All of my things are packed, all of your things too. The cottage is gone, torn in two by that eager chestnut. She couldn't bear to look at it anymore.

I've secured a flat above a shop with the help of my parents. I could only afford a room but my mother insisted that I have privacy, despite my ultimate goal of independence. I suppose money like ours breeds dependence.

There's a chemist in London with whom I've been corresponding. He'd like to contract me to consult on botanical constituents in drug compounds. It's a step toward independence and I'm also considering education after all. Not law however, botany, or maybe I'll study French and be a tutor. I've never met a tutor I didn't admire.

Last night I dreamt of your lips on mine and woke with a start. I was short of breath and drenched in sweat as if I'd suffered a terrible nightmare. In reality, it was the sweetest of dreams, a recollection of one of the clearest moments in my life.

Wherever you are, I sincerely hope you find the kind of clarity I felt that day. I've never been so sure of anything. Were you sure, Phil? Is that why you left? Do you dream of me? Do hear my voice when the wind blows?

It's getting more difficult to remember the exact shade of your eyes.

Yours,

Dan

Winter

My Dearest Phil,

It's been over a year since I heard your voice or felt your touch. One year since you looked at me like some wonderful, mysterious thing, like something to be celebrated. You made me believe it Phil and one day, I know I'll be worthy of everything you gave me.

I went home for Christmas. Your columbines are gone. Maybe they were my columbines.

London is dreary. Nothing grows here. I long for a little home with a garden. The chemist has a daughter my age. She's very bright, studying nursing. Do you think I could pretend? Are you pretending?

I caught a snowflake on my tongue this morning. Where are you, Phil?

Yours always,

Dan

Spring

My Darling Phil,

I think I'd like to leave London. It's loud and raucous and more frightening than I expected. I've made no friends here, no connections other than the chemist and his daughter. She is somewhat intriguing but the adoration of women is somewhat repulsive to me. Perhaps, I'll travel to Manchester, see if that city is of a pace more suited to my temperament.

These letters sit in my bedside drawer under a pile of handkerchiefs. They aren't serving any purpose. You'll never read them and god knows they do nothing to fill the space you hollowed out inside of me. This ache in my chest will always persist. In spite of letters written and fading memories, it persists. In spite of beautiful women and gentle touches that make me feel things even you never showed me, it persists.

And so, I've decided to stop writing. I have to move on, to stop clinging to the pain and regret that keep me linked to you. In my heart, I'm yours but it's time to step forward and try to heal. I miss your bravery. I could use a little of that right now.

Do you miss the things you saw in me?

Yours,

Dan

Manchester is bustling, just another city full of people and buildings and cars. There is something about it though. It's just a little friendlier than London, like everyone is working toward something together. In London, Dan always feels alone, like he's the only one who hasn't yet arrived at his destination. There is some appeal to the city. It's somewhat freeing being one in a crowd of many. No one knows him here and no one could. Eventually, it might be nice to have a home outside the city but right now, Dan needs opportunity so the city will have to do.

It's bloody hot outside. It makes Dan homesick for the shaded woods and lemonade and strawberry tarts from the kitchens at home. The first cafe he sees is packed with tables and well dressed people. It's not quite what he had in mind but he settles for it. He figures he can splurge on a pastry in a nice cafe in what might be his future home. The tart is stunning, so delicious that he doesn't even mind sitting outside in the heat to eat it. He's brought his case with him, with a change of clothes and his resumé just in case. There's also a small stack of letters in the case. He's not sure why he brought them along, he just likes to know where they are.

Dan's plate is cleared and he sips his tea and thinks through the rest of his day. He'll need to find a room for the night, look for potential places of employment, and ask around about flats available for sublet to a bachelor. There's always just a little sadness lurking for Dan and that piece of him that waits quietly for things he won't ever have. Right now though, he's actually excited. It takes him a moment to name the feeling, it's been so long.

Turning off the main road, Dan walks past a very posh looking boutique with a French name, a tailor's shop, and a law office. He's about to turn back, when a storefront across the road catches his eye. There's a sign hanging in the window with the words tinctures and remedies. This is clearly not a pharmacy but it doesn't look like scam either. He crosses for a closer look at the print on the corner of the window. When he reads the words, the air rushes from his lungs.

Lester Apothecary

Dan can't move. He's stood, staring at the words and every cell in his body is screaming at him to go inside, just open the door and find him. His better judgement is trying its best. It says you're doing so well, you're moving toward independence, he's known how to find you all along, move on Dan, keep walking.

But that hollow place in Dan's chest swallows all of those words and all that's left is his heart, reaching for even the smallest possibility that Phil could be behind that door. So he walks inside.

The bell jingles behind him as the door closes. It's beautiful in here, sunlight streams in through the jars of herbs that line shelves on the wall. It smells earthy and citrusy and Dan breathes deep. He can't help but think of Phil with his mortar and pestle. Every other thought falls away.

"Good afternoon sir," a sing song voice with a Swedish accent pulls Dan from his revelry, "and what are we looking for today?"

She's striking, with porcelain skin and curly red hair, standing behind the wooden counter.

"Oh." Dan clears his throat. "You have a lovely shop, are you the proprietor?"

She smiles. "I am. My husband and I."

Dan's heart sinks. Weakness washes over him suddenly, and he honestly thinks his legs may give out. Leaning on the counter for support, he tries his best to feign calm.

"Your husband?"

"Yes, my husband, Martyn," she says, "was there a particular ailment you needed help with today?"

"Martyn?" Dan nearly laughs with relief before turning to take a bottle of tincture from the shelf to his right.

"Poppy?" She takes the bottle from Dan. "Trouble sleeping?"

“Always.” Dan says with a smile. “I’m having some trouble with disturbing dreams as well.”

“Ah, branching out on your own is a shock to the system. Lemon balm is excellent for frightening dreams. We grow our own, very special strain.”

Dan ends up with two bottles of tincture and a custom blended herbal infusion to drink at bedtime. He can’t fathom coming here every day with that name on the door but it’s just a coincidence. He’ll regret it if he doesn’t at least ask.

“Mrs. Lester,” Dan begins, “My name is Daniel, Daniel Howell. I’ve studied botanicals myself, for two years. I’m in search of employment and I wonder, would you and your husband be in any need of an assistant?”

“Oh dear, no. We’re moving after the summer, thinking of starting our family.”

“Oh, of course, moving to the country?”

She laughs and it’s high and lovely. “I can’t stomach the country,” she says, “we’re off to London.”

It’s a shame they’re moving, these are just the sort of friends Dan would like to make.

“But we aren’t closing and Martyn’s brother will be alone when we leave. He’s the one you should speak with.”

He’s been traveling all morning, sweating in the sun, he’s not ready to meet a potential employer. Before he can ask to schedule a meeting, Mrs Lester is knocking on the office door behind the counter and it opens. Dan looks down at himself, brushes his lapel, straightens his jacket, and shoves the curls back off his forehead. When he looks up, there’s a man in the doorway, backlit but the sun.

“Dan?”

“You know each other?” Mrs Lester can only step aside as Dan walks around the counter. She busies herself, politely ignoring the sudden tension in the room.

“He’s an old friend,” Phil says.

Dan pulls the door shut behind him. It should be tense, there should be apologies, excuses, explanations. It’s been a long time, everything is different, but nothing is different.

Across the small room, Phil pulls the heavy curtains closed, leaving the room in near darkness and protected from prying eyes.

“I missed you,” Dan says but it’s barely a breath. He waves his hand and a silver glow shoots from his fingertips, hitting the ceiling and spreading until the night sky glows above them.

Phil’s looks up and exhales, taking in the beauty that Dan has so casually created.

“You’ve been practicing,” he says but Dan shakes his head.

“I haven’t, not once since you left.”

Questions flood Phil’s eyes but Dan doesn’t want to answer questions. He doesn’t want to talk at all, he wants to touch. Slowly, but with a clear purpose, he walks toward Phil.

“I thought of you everyday.” Phil’s eyes are dark and shining, his soft skin glowing in the starlight. “I’m sorry Dan, I...

Dan has hung on Phil's every word since the moment they met but right now, he couldn't care less what he has to say. He closes the distance between them and their lips meet softly. Phil leans back on the desk and lets himself be kissed. The stars multiply around them, every sigh bringing a shimmer of light. Phil has one hand in Dan's hair and the other on his waist and they're lost for as long as they can last, until they have to breathe.

"Dan," Phil says, "wait."

"I think I've waited long enough," Dan runs his hands over Phil's arms, feeling the muscle underneath.

"I know," Phil says, the warmth of his words brushing Dan's cheek, "I shouldn't have left. I didn't want to hold you back. I wanted you to have a chance at a normal life."

Dan's laugh is abrupt. "Bit too late for that I think. I don't need protecting, Phil. I've done quite well on my own."

"I believe that, I knew you would," Phil says.

Dan's hands have moved down to hold Phil's. He lifts one to his mouth and kisses the knuckles, closing his eyes, moving his cheek over the soft skin.

When he looks again, those ocean eyes are right there, golden flecks twinkling, more brilliant than the stars above them. There was a time when Dan would have looked away, lest he fall in and be pulled under, unable to come up for air. Now, he wants nothing more than to lose himself in clear blue eyes and pink lips and blushing cheeks.

"You aren't pulling away," Dan says, hopefully.

"No," Phil answers.

“You kissed me back.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me you want me,” Dan whispers. It’s not what he meant to say. He meant to say that he feels just the same as that day two winters ago, that he’s never believed in destiny but Phil is definitely his. He meant to say that he loves him. Instead, every broken piece of his heart begs for Phil to put them back together.

“I do. Of course I do, but Dan, if we try to be us, together, Dan and Phil versus the world. You know it won’t be easy.”

Dan smiles, filled with hope. “I don’t want easy. I want to be us.”

“We’ll have two lives,” Phil warns, “one for us and one for everyone else.”

“Two lives with you?” Dan says, “That sounds just right to me.”

They haven’t moved apart. There are only centimeters between them.

“Alright then,” Phil says, bringing their lips so close, Dan can feel the words, “let’s hide together.”

And it’s not difficult for two men to hide love and magic and a bedroom full of stars. People believe what they want to.

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