

“Call your flame.”

Dara’s hands are cupped together, one flesh and one steel; Faolán has wrapped his own around Dara’s to cradle them. Their foreheads are nearly touching, close enough that Dara can feel the heat radiating off the man’s skin and, even in this darkened room, can still make out the elegant dips and planes of Faolán’s face.

Faolán’s skin is warm to the touch, like a flame of his own runs through his veins to heat his blood. Dara wonders how cold his clammy flesh feels in comparison.

“Call it,” Faolán says, softer this time. “You’ve spun fire before. I’ve seen how skilled you are at it.”

He shakes his head minutely. “I never called it. I can’t.”

Faolán has taught him the technique called *spinning fire*, the act of pyrokinesis. Locking your thoughts and energy with the flame before you, and making it move at will. Dara can dance with it by now, can roll it down his arms and back or swallow it or breathe with it, the little (or large) flames bending to his command. It feels natural by now. It feels *right*.

But he’s never called it before.

“You can,” Faolán counters gently. “All witches can, and you’re born of flame. I can feel it in you.”

That’s what all the witches say. That by being born in the lion’s month, Dara was born of flame, and is predisposed to such magic. He knows well enough that birthright magic is truth; Faolán, born in the fish’s month, was born of water and carries such a rhythm in his blood, his magic like a slow river at times or crashing waves at others, sometimes a still pond or a lashing rainstorm or a bubbling brook. Dara ought to feel fire in his own veins.

But he doesn’t.

He ought to, and he doesn't. Other witches carry the steady heat of a cooking flame or the punishing ferocity of a forest fire, perhaps the playfulness of a fire-eater's torches or even the crackling heat of a lightning strike, but Dara's own blood is silent. If he's born of flame, then he's a dry and deadened coal.

"I can't—"

"*Try.*"

Faolán's face is earnest, brows raised. Dara has to try, if only for his sake.

He shuts his eyes, focusing on his breathing and any and all warmth that surrounds him, willing it towards him. In his mind's eye he sees trails of heat, spinning through the room towards his palms like tiny comets, coming together to form a greater warmth at his hand, and silently he calls them forth. Dara imagines a small orange flame, flickering over his skin, and then he breathes deeply and opens his eyes.

The fire burns brighter than he could have ever hoped for.

He breathes and wills it to grow and it does, licking upwards and turning whiter at its center, hot enough that Dara can feel it on his face, nearly a foot away. He wills it smaller, weaker, until it's a single tendril struggling to dance and then he breathes with it again, turning it into the small but constant flame he saw dancing in his mind's eye.

"I did it," he whispers. Faolán is smiling.

"You did. You called your flame."

Hesitancy suddenly flares in Dara's chest and he finds himself struggling not to snuff the flame, to keep his hand open and let it burn. When he thinks of fire he thinks of the pyres the witch-hunters build, to tie witches to and set alight. And when those witches scream, it is the terrible flames that cause their cries.

Perhaps it's only right that he be born of fire. How many times did he stand by when witches were dragged to the stake, in all those years he served as a witch-hunter? How many times did Dara himself shackle one of his brethren and tear their clothes so their witchmark stood for all to see, knowing that they would be sent to the stake? Fire is the only thing that ought to mark him.

He lets his arms drop, the flame flickering out. "I can't call it. Not again."

"Dara?"

"Not again." His voice is hoarse. Dara drops his eyes, looking into the black beyond Faolán's shoulder. He can't quite bring himself to meet the man's gaze.

"What does fire do?" he whispers. "It *burns*. It'll destroy everything in its path if given the chance. When I call it, all I have is a weapon."

"Look at me."

He does as Faolán commands, however reluctantly. Faolán is cradling a small yellow flame in his hands, just enough to give his face a soft glow. He doesn't smile, but he doesn't frown, either. He simply holds the flame.

Faolán flicks his hand, and the room's temperature drops so far and so fast that Dara gasps aloud, breath crystalline in his lungs. He's surprised that the saliva in his mouth hasn't turned to ice.

"Are you cold?"

He musters a nod. Faolán raises his hand, pushing the flame out beyond them, and it grows and stretches until it's formed a steady-burning circle all around them. It grows higher, and Dara doesn't shiver anymore.

The cold leeches from the room. The air turns to its normal temperature, and Faolán claps his hands and every light goes out at once, leaving them in total darkness. Dara’s heart beats in his chest, and he fights to stay present, to forget the memories of a cold cell and the hopelessness within. He feels a hand on his right wrist, warm and humming with magic like a gushing waterfall. Dara breathes in deeply, and ties himself to Faolán’s hand.

“Can you see a thing?”

“No.” His voice is a whisper.

A flame flickers to life between them. Dara can see again, and what he sees is Faolán Ó Corra looking like a painted angel, curls dappled with light and face glowing softly, his dark eyes shining in the firelight. The man’s wearing a simple cotton shirt, undyed, but right now he looks unearthly.

Dara feels for Faolán’s hand at his wrist, then wraps their fingers together. How lucky he is, an old witch-hunter with so many crimes, to cradle the hand of a man like this.

Faolán speaks gently. “Fire heats you in the bitter cold, lights your way in the darkest night. It brings life as much as it brings destruction. You’ve been born of flame. Denying that fire is a part of you just means hurting yourself, over and over again until you finally come to terms with it.”

“You were born of water,” Dara snaps. “‘*That which feeds all life.*’ How could you possibly understand?”

Faolán’s expression has turned hard, and he drops Dara’s hand. Dara doesn’t apologize or cower, simply glares back and wraps his arms around his waist.

“I hurt people for so *long*. I don’t want a birthright that makes it even easier to hurt them.”

“Ask a drowning man if he loves the sea,” Faolán says scathingly. “Ask the farmer whose crops were destroyed in the flood if she welcomes the river. Water destroys just as much as fire does. Keeping it in check—keeping *any* element in check—requires control and balance. I can’t teach you either if you aren’t even willing to accept your birthright.”

Dara stares at the floor, his fingers digging into his sides. Faolán sighs, and stands, and Dara stares at his sandals.

“I want to teach you.” Faolán’s voice is flat. “But you can’t learn if you keep denying what you’re meant to do.”

He jerks his gaze upwards. “Faolán—”

“Come to me when you’re ready.”

Dara drops his gaze. There’s a long pause, a heavy silence, and then Faolán sighs again and leaves, the door shutting softly behind him.

It’s a long time before Dara can make himself get up off the floor.

Sleep is difficult to come by, these days.

Dara’s never slept well. It’s even worse here: his room is tiny, barely big enough to house his bed and a slim set of drawers, and it’s always dark and smelling slightly damp.

(No grown man ought to be afraid of the dark.)

Few witches live in the manor above, because in name it’s an orphanage for children of the city beyond, and for such a ruse to be believable there can only be handful of adults within the house who look after the witchlings. The rest, like Dara, have rooms below ground, the hall hidden by a false wall that’s easy enough to find if you know what to look for, but undetectable otherwise. The rooms have no windows and the hall is only ever lit by a handful of torches.

Every night, he falls asleep with his eyes trained on the sliver of light beneath the door.

He should not fear the dark. He's not a child and he hasn't been fourteen for a long time; he can hardly even remember what that long-ago cell was like. But every night Dara shakes, and nearly every night he wakes from nightmares he can no longer remember, chest heaving and soaked with sweat as the fear fades slowly away.

One night he wakes trembling, throat raw from screams like any other night. He's still afraid, like any other night, and like any other night the damp smell of the underground burns his nose and he curls in the center of his bed, like any other night, and trains his eyes on the light beneath the door and waits for the terror to abate.

But the seconds and minutes pass, time ticking away, and Dara's heart still hammers a drumbeat in his chest.

*Call your flame.*

Despite himself, he shuts his eyes, and cups his hands in his lap. The room is cold and the warmth is little, but Dara finds it anyway and calls it to him. The heat comes in threads, looping through the cold and dark to spin itself together above his skin, and when he opens his eyes again he sees a small, golden flame that flickers almost hesitantly. For a moment, pride flares in his chest.

The flame dances a little longer, burning Dara's eyes. His heart pounds.

He snaps his hands shut abruptly. The room goes dark again and he smothers a panic attack, forcing himself to lay down. He focuses on the door, and ignores the voice in his head whispering that he ought to try again.

He will. Not yet.

But he *will* try.

The knife *schwicks* through the oyster's shell, silvery blade dulled by juices and muck, and then Dara snaps the oyster open and sets it on the plate before him. He is very careful not to spill any of the liquid inside. The flat half of the shell goes into the waste bucket, and Dara picks up another oyster and balances it carefully in his steel palm.

The work is tedious. He still hasn't quite adapted to his prosthetic yet and holding each oyster is awkward, a game of chance as to whether he'll keep it upright. He does, most of the time, but the steel still shines with the juices of a few failed oysters.

He enjoys it anyway. Shucking oysters is simple enough, and Dara knows exactly how to do it. Always has. And menial work gives him a rhythm he hasn't found anywhere else, lately.

“Dara?”

He jumps, the knife jerking to scrape against his prosthetic. Dara glances over his shoulder to see the witch called Sorcha, a basket of clothes balanced in her arms.

Sorcha cringes. “Are you all right?”

“M fine.” He brandishes his steel as evidence, and Sorcha laughs a bit.

“Could you spare a moment, then?” She points her chin at the basket. “Faolán is down at the river washing clothes. I'd take this to him, but... witchlings.”

A small girl peeks around the doorframe, jam smeared across both her face and hands. She grins, waving at them, then darts away again.

“Witchlings,” Dara echoes. He looks at Sorcha and then down at the oysters again, one's damp shell glinting in his hand. “I—oysters.”

“Oysters?”

He holds up the mollusk. “I'm shucking them. Neve wants to make stew tonight.”

“I’ll take over, if you like,” Sorcha offers. She glances at the doorframe, which is still marked with the imprint of a sticky hand. “Teach the witchlings how to shuck them. It’d do them good to learn a useful skill.”

Dara snorts. “Are any of them older than ten?”

“Still does them good.” Sorcha sets the basket down on the table, then picks up an oyster and paring knife of her own. “Please, Dara? I can’t take them through the woods, they’d run off. And nobody else is free to do it.”

Dara sighs loudly, then snaps his knife shut and tucks it away in his pocket. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Much appreciated.”

The manor sits at the edge of a great forest, and if you walk deep within that forest you may come upon a small lake, smooth as glass with the coldest, clearest water Dara’s ever seen. If you walk deep within the forest, but eastward, you will eventually come to a gushing river, which runs white in its rapids. Both are difficult to find. But by now he’s walked the river path quite a few times, whether balancing the wash or water jugs on his hip, and he finds it easily enough.

He takes his time. He tells himself that it is because the forest is blessedly cool in the summer heat, and the whistling birds are calming to listen to. Dara does not admit, even to himself, that he’s simply dragging his feet to avoid seeing Faolán’s face.

They’ve spoken little since that day in the dark. Dara’s kept to himself since, even more than usual; it’s easier to cut himself off, keep his head down and work through his issues without bothering someone else. It’s better that way.



So he keeps to his room, and the kitchen, and ducks out of sight any time he sees Faolán's dark curls or flashing smile or sweet laugh. He tries to swallow the warmth that blooms in his chest.

(Once or twice Faolán has caught sight of him and Dara's seen the man's expression, which always brightens and then falls when Dara turns away. Like Faolán *wants* to see him.

It always gives him an ugly feeling, seeing Faolán's face fall like that. He tries to swallow that too.)

Too soon the path ends. Too soon Dara finds himself standing at the trees' edge where they part to let the river through, the clothes heavy in his hands and his tongue dry in his mouth. Faolán's figure kneels beside the water, and his dark hair is wet and gleaming. He looks beautiful. He looks god-kissed.

Faolán's hands trail through the water that flows in tandem with his heart and at first glance he's simply drawing his fingers through it, the cold current parting for him. But then Dara tilts his head, and looks again, and what he sees is that Faolán's hands are parting the river itself, splitting a crack across the water and then halving the stream in two. The bank is bared abruptly: still-moist stones gleam in the sunlight, and upstream water rages and struggles against Faolán's magic while downstream it drains away, the bare patch of riverbed growing larger and larger until it's nearly twenty feet long and forty feet across, still growing bigger with every moment.

And Faolán is simply sitting at the riverside, apparently oblivious to the fact he's parted a raging river.

Dara's heart is in his throat.

Faolán claps his hands together. The water snaps back into place, wilder and more ragged than it was before, as if the current once trapped upstream is desperate to reunite with its freer

twin. Then he spreads his hands again, brown fingers dragging slowly through the foam, and it starts to split once more.

The basket slips, Dara's steel hand still slick with oyster guts, and then it crashes down on the path and spills clothes out on the soft dirt. The sound is soft but loud enough to snap Faolán from his spell. He glances back, eyes wide, and Dara feels his face heat as he kneels to scoop the dirtied laundry back into its basket.

“Hello.”

He glances up from the clothes, expecting to see a pair of ankles, but Faolán is kneeling too. The man smiles when their eyes meet.

“Sorcha needed me to bring you these,” Dara explains, fidgeting with a soft blue blouse. “So.”

“So.”

He hesitates. “You're very good with the water,” he ventures, shutting the basket. “I... I liked watching you.”

Faolán's fingers loop round his right wrist, flesh on flesh. “Come sit with me.”

“I can't wash things.” His steel would rust.

“Then just sit,” Faolán says softly, and his eyes are earnest. “I like having you around.”

For a moment silence hangs between them, heavy as the summer heat and just as oppressive. Then Dara laughs without reason, mostly from nerves, and Faolán grins and laughs too and they're both smiling, both laughing, and Faolán is holding his hand and Dara doesn't mind it at all.

He dips his feet in the river when they've sat down at its edge, and the water laps at his skin almost gently. It's cold enough to make him shiver if the day wasn't so warm. Inexplicably he thinks of Faolán's hands, damp from the river and running gently through his hair.

(Dara banishes the thought quickly.)

He leans back, shuts his eyes. The river is cool on his feet and the sun is warm on his face, and he thinks he could be happy like this.

The day's been long. The rush of water beyond him is soothing and the sun's heat feels like a lullaby, turning Dara sleepy. His breathing slows, and the world starts to slip away.

*He's standing at the hangman's platform and there's a long row of nooses swinging before him, so simple and yet grotesque all the same and Dara thinks he sees blood on a few. His hands burn. A faceless someone in a navy hunter's coat is cutting a body down; Dara looks, and he sees a girl of eleven with sandy brown hair and black eyes and a scar on her lip, and he crumples to his knees at the sight of his sister's bloated body.*

*He chokes. There's rope at his neck and Dara can't be certain he didn't put it there, and suddenly there's only air under his feet and his hands are bleeding. He can't breathe and the rope bites at his throat he can't breathe he can't breathe, his sister's hanged and so's he and he's the reason for it all—*

Dara wakes up gasping, hands flying to his throat. His steel burns his skin.

How long has he slept? The sun's low now and the shadows are long, the river's turned sapphire in the evening light. His skin's sunburned. He's lying on soft grass, curled in on his side; his feet dried long ago.

"Dara?"

Soft fingers in his hair, cupping his face. Dara moans and reaches for them with his right hand, the real one, so he doesn't burn anything else.

The two of them shift themselves awkwardly. In the end Faolán sits cross-legged and holds Dara's head in his lap, hands soft on Dara's face, and Dara reaches up to make sure the man is real.

"How long—?"

"A few hours," Faolán says softly. "I didn't want to wake you, so I finished the wash and went swimming."

He did. Most of his hair's been swept back from his face but a few locks hang loosely, slick and shining black with water. Belatedly Dara realizes that the man's shirt is gone; Faolán's chest is bare, skin damp from the river and cool to the touch. His tattoos—*sun at collarbone, stalking river cat at his ribs, black band round his bicep*—stand out starkly. Beautiful.

"I..."

Faolán smooths Dara's hair. "You were muttering. I couldn't make it out and you wouldn't wake, either. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." His voice is a croak, and Faolán's brow creases.

"I can help, I think." Faolán glances at the river behind them. "If you want me to."

*Always do.* But he can't say that aloud, so instead Dara nods slowly and pushes himself into a sitting position, arms wrapped round his waist. He's still shaking. His throat is rough with the memory of rope, even though nothing ever choked him.

Faolán waves his hand and water rises from the riverbank, no more than perhaps a cup in total. It twists through the air like threads, spooling together into a sphere that hangs above Faolán's hands, and then he leans forward and sets four fingers on Dara's forehead.

With his free hand Faolán guides the water, dividing it into ribbons that come to cup Dara's temples. Dara shuts his eyes. The waters cool his skin, his heart, and when he takes a second breath he feels another ribbon of river curl around his right wrist, just over where his witchmark lies.

He breathes, in and out. The water whispers softly. His fear dims.

*If this is magic, then I want it.*

A strange thought. And yet—he can't deny it.

“Keep breathing. That's it, love. Breathe.”

Dara freezes, heart in his throat again. He has to force himself to focus on the water chilling his skin and the crickets chirping softly in the bush, the warm breeze. He wonders if Faolán can feel his heart, if the man knows exactly how his pulse spiked when Faolán called him *love*.

Slowly, slowly, he opens his eyes. Faolán is smiling at him, their faces inches apart, and something flutters in Dara's gut.

Faolán flicks his hand and the water drains away, spilling back into the river. “Better?”

He takes a deep breath. “Better.”

“Good.”

Faolán loops their hands together and they stand, Dara swaying slightly. The sun is setting, turning the river gold. *Fire on water.*

“Let's go home.”

Faolán's voice is gentle, soothing, no matter how rough it may be from drink and smoke. Dara obeys without a second thought.

*Call your flame.*

The catacombs are often cool, this deep in the earth. Even in the summer months, when the air above is heavy with heat, Dara's skin still often raises high with goosebumps when he walks below ground.

He sits at the mouth of a tunnel, the only light the few flickering torches on the walls, just enough to make long shadows that dance and trick Dara's eyes. He breathes deeply. The catacombs smell like mildew and damp and it lies heavy on his tongue, reminding him of that cell so many years ago, but he draws his jacket closer round him and grounds himself in the chill of his steel fingers. When he was young all ten were flesh and bone. If his left hand is no longer a living thing, simply a prosthetic, he knows he is safe.

*Call your flame.*

Heat is scarce here. Dara doesn't close his eyes today, simply looks to the ceiling—more accurately he looks to where the ceiling *ought* to be; it's too dark to see more than a few feet forward—and feels for the warmth around him.

It does not come easily. It feels almost reluctant, if warmth could be so, as though it knows him and fears coming. Dara grits his teeth, deepens the call. Only the barest hints of flame shine over his hand, teasing glints of fire that vanish as soon as they come.

He tries for a long, long time. The flame does not answer his call.

At last Dara drops his hands and pulls his legs up, putting his head on his knees. His prayer beads bat against his thigh. He spreads his palms out and breathes slowly, one breath after another.

*In, and out. In, and out.* He tells himself that this is okay. He's okay. It is okay to be born of fire as long as he can—*it is okay to be born of fire.* There's no requisites or conditions. Dara can simply exist as he is and that is *okay*.

Warmth brushes against his fingers. Dara closes his hand automatically, and even when he realizes his mistake and opens it again, the flame does not return.

Today his hands shake, even the steel one.

He doesn't know what set him off today, only that his head is buzzing and he has to fight to stay present even more than he usually does, a long-dead voice ringing in his ears and mildew in his nose. He's drying dishes and he clutches the plates a little harder than he needs to to keep himself grounded. The washcloth he's holding is probably dying of suffocation.

*Why are you crying? You're devil-marked, boy, I'm only helping you. You'll figure it out eventually.*

Hearn is dead. He reminds himself that Hearn is dead. The old witch-hunter Andrew Hearn died in Dara's twenty-first year, killed by a witch of earthen birthright consumed by grief and fury. The witch burned for it, and at the time Dara wept; by now he knows it freed him, as much as he could be freed.

Hearn is dead. Hearn is dead and can't hurt him anymore, but Dara's fingers tremble anyway.

Dread is dripping down his spine and pooling in his stomach. He shudders. It's the middle of summer but his skin still prickles with cold, even though sweat gathers on the back of his neck, and he drops the pewter cup in his hand.

"Are you all right?"

Sorcha. Sorcha with her crimson headscarf and gentle words, who's scrubbing the dishes beside him. Dara shrugs awkwardly and picks the cup up again. His mouth tastes like mildew.

"I'm fine."

*It's your devotion that saves you. I take pity on you because you are one of the faithful, but you must prove your devotion. Show our god how much you love him.*

His prayer beads are hanging at his waist, always heavy. Dara reaches for them with damp, living fingers and traces the whorls beneath his fingertips, memorizes the well-worn wood all over again. He tells himself that he does not need to prove his devotion. He prays often. There is no devotion in killing.

He *knows* that.

What is he afraid of? A cell that smells like mildew, in an always-darkened jail where whims were law and guards were gods? Hearn, who never hit him because Dara obeyed anyway, the threat of the cells or worse always hanging heavy in the air, possible punishment for any misstep? His father, who threw him to the witch-hunters and whom Dara hasn't seen since, but who's always loomed in his memories and nightmares even so?

(*Yes, some part of him whispers. Yes to all of them.*)

Dara squares his shoulders and keeps drying plates and cups and bowls as quickly as he can, so fast that Sorcha can't wash them quick enough to keep up with him. He crushes the washcloth in his hands. He's shaking and he's sure Sorcha notices but she doesn't comment on it, and Dara's so glad she doesn't; let him suffer in peace, he's just a witch-hunter among witches who cries at night and can't shake the terror of a dozen years past; *it's your duty to wipe out that filth more than anyone else because you're filth too, and you've got to make up for it—*

He's broken a bowl.



Dara stares at it and his heart sinks, the dread in his stomach creeping up his spine and swallowing him all over again. It was a bowl and now it's just blue-and-white shards, ribbons of red intermixed between and he realizes, numbly, that he's cut his hand open as well.

"I'm sorry."

The words are thick on his tongue. He can't bear to look at Sorcha.

(There's nothing to fear here but he does anyway. He doesn't know what he fears, simply that he *does*, the terror enveloping him like a great blanket, and all he wants to do is sink to his knees and beg forgiveness.)

(He's always begging.)

Sorcha lays a hand on his arm; he flinches. "It's okay."

"I'm sorry." Dara's voice is a rasp.

"It's *okay*. We'll fix your hand, and then we'll clean it up, all right? It's just a bowl."

It's more than a bowl. It's a bowl and he broke it, and now he's so afraid. He's so fucking *afraid*.

"I'm sorry," Dara whispers. He backs up, knocks into the table behind him. "I'm sorry Sorcha I'm sorry I'm sorry *I'm sorry*."

"Dara—"

He runs.

Two strides and he's out of the kitchen. Ten strides across grassy lawn and he's in the forest, trees swallowing him, but Dara keeps running anyway. Sweat is soaking his back and he aches inside and out but he *runs*. He has to.

He runs as fast and far as he can go, lungs burning in his chest and muscles burning in his legs and then he stumbles through a line of trees onto cool grass followed by cool sand, the

woods giving way not to the river but the crystal-clear lake and Dara stumbles forward, collapses on his knees. He gasps and gasps, like a drowning man, and the sand is rough beneath his knees and fingers and Dara focuses on that, the tiny kernels scratching against his skin all at once.

He's crying. Dara only realizes when the world goes blurry and tears drip down his chin, soaking into the hollows of his throat. He rocks forward, wraps his arms around himself. A sob rises in his throat and first he chokes it down, afraid, and then he remembers that he is alone. He remembers there's no one to hurt or pity him, not here, and he can sob and scream and wail all he likes.

He lets himself sob.

The sounds tear themselves from his throat, guttural and ugly. Something breaks inside him.

Years of swallowed wails pour from him, one after another, ripping themselves from his lungs and mouth and throat and Dara lets them, the tears streaking down his cheeks as he weeps. His frame heaves. There are no words for his sorrow; Dara simply wails and mourns over and over and over, so much grief stacked on itself now finally spilling.

He can't say how long he sits there, cradling his head in his hands and weeping. All he knows is that after a long, long time, the fear and grief and raw feeling finally begins to ebb and the tears begin to slow and finally dry. His breath steadies. The sobbing stops, fading away, and Dara comes back to himself.

He is kneeling beside the lake. The water laps against the shore, glittering and calm as ever; he reaches forward and trails his fingers through the small, small waves. It isn't quite cold enough to make him shiver, and so Dara stands shakily and wades out into the water until it reaches his thighs.

He breathes. He breathes.

The water laps against him softly, a strange sort of caress. Dara runs his hand through it and it makes him think of Faolán: the man's birthright that feels like a rushing river some days and a still lake others but always swallowing Dara down, pouring inside his heart and washing all his worries away. Faolán, who found him at his lowest moment and never turned him away but drew Dara into his arms and healed him, and shared his own wounds so Dara knew he was not alone.

He doesn't have to be afraid anymore. Dara is safe here and he has a place to call home, and it is because Faolán stretched out a hand when he was drowning.

*Fire brings life as much as it brings destruction.*

*Call your flame.*

The sun beats down on his back. Dara doesn't have to think to draw heat to him; it simply comes, spooling into a flame that burns white and orange and Dara pushes it outwards, forming a flaming circle round him that dances and jumps at his command. The lake shimmers white and gold and orange, a phoenix's wings reflected upon it in the most beautiful patterns.

*I am good.* Dara lets the fire surround him, heart beating in rhythm with the flames as it was always meant to do. *I am a witch, born of flame, and I am good.*

The fire spins at his command, painting jewels on the water, and it might be the most beautiful thing he has ever seen.

The path to the catacombs slowly becomes familiar to him. As the days pass Dara's feet begin to memorize the steps just as they've memorized the path to the river, taking him down

over and over until he's sure he could do it blindfolded. He weaves his way to the lake, too, though less often.

Under the earth, he shivers, and the fire warms him. The catacombs' chill helps remind him that his fire is *good*, a shield against the cold. No weapon, not as long as he keeps it in check.

It's been a long time since he's spun fire, and at first Dara fears he's forgotten the technique, lack of practice eating at his skills like moths gnawing on silk. But when he tries, the fire follows easily. His hands know the movements, his limbs the dance, and it's so easy to bend the flames to his command once more.

He never shakes, not while spinning. Control has always been easy to manage.

The fear lays in calling the fire, breathing it into existence. Dara knows how to use a knife, but would pale at crafting one; his fear of the flames, he supposes, is similar. How can he be sure he won't make a weapon that will kill and hunt and maim over and over again?

He keeps his catacomb travels secret. If he falters, if the flames no longer answer him, then no one will be none the wiser.

Often, he wonders how his heart beats.

Dara calls the flames, down in the catacombs or beside the lake. He dances with them. He grows surer, surer, until he can raise wildfires without blinking an eye. But his blood runs silent still.

He walks in the manor and if he listens, he can hear *dozens*. The slow ebb of lava or crashing earthquakes from witches of earthen birthright; leaves tumbling in the wind, and howling storms, and the echo of wind chimes always come from those born of air.

Whispering fog. The crackle of a forest fire, devouring all around it. Water dripping down branches or creaking ice or the still silence of a forest glade.

A rushing river, that tugs at his heart and roars in Dara's ears whenever its witch is around. Dara knows that one very well.

But when Dara sits still and listens, he can never hear his own current. He dreams of it sometimes, yearns to know if he's calm like a steady taper or playful like a campfire or as jarring as a lightning strike.

He knows, really, that he's none of them. He is not calm or playful or jarring. But he needs, *wants*, to know how his magic flows. He needs to know what the others hear when he walks down the hallways, and if it's loud enough to drown out the smell of hunter that Dara's sure still coats him.

His veins do not ache with flame and his heart never burns, no matter how many times Dara reminds himself that he was born to the lion's month and, by proxy, was born of fire. His hands still call the flame. His body still knows how to spin fire, the techniques etched into his mind so deeply and lovingly that he will never forget it. His birthright is the flame and Dara knows by now that he can never deny it, because fire feels too much like home. His blood runs silent anyway.

*Call the flame.*

Dara calls and the flame obeys, building itself over his palm until he feels like he could light the world with it. Perhaps he does not need to taste his blood's fire to call his own.

There are days when he slips, or falters. Once he dreams that the girl he snuck from the cells beneath the hunters' offices, all those months ago, has been lashed to a pyre, flames licking

at her threadbare dress and tears streaming down her face. She sobs and Dara's hands sting with rope burn, spent matches in his fingers and he's wearing a stiff witch-hunter's coat that smells of blood. The girl wails, so small and so *scared*, and when Dara wakes he's crying and he can't sleep again that night. The next time he goes to the catacombs, he thinks he sees that girl, her terrified child's face haunting the shadows, and he shudders and the flame does not come to him.

He struggles. The road is not straight, and he never hoped it to be.

But he tries.

He tries and the nightmares come less and less, and the fear and shame no longer dog his heels. He laughs more freely, these days. The world seems warmer.

Dara can't quite remember how heavy the hunter's coat was, or its exact color, or if it hugged his waist or hung loosely. He finds he's glad for it.

"Dara?"

His head jerks upwards, the flame flickering out. Faolán is standing at the entrance to the catacomb, lantern in hand. The man sets it down, gentle as ever, and Dara looks back at his hands nervously.

"I practice down here," he whispers. "So I can't set anything alight."

Faolán kneels next to him. "Don't worry about that. I've seen you spinning fire—it's a sight to behold."

Dara's cheeks heat, and he glances at his fire again.

"I'm trying," he says. He breathes, and the flames grow. "Trying to get comfortable with calling it, I mean. It isn't easy, but I..."

“You’re getting there.” Faolán’s hands come up to cup his own, skin warm against Dara’s. Dara hopes that the room isn’t bright enough to show his blush.

“It’s a long process,” Faolán says softly. “Overcoming that hatred, everything you were taught... it takes time. Years, often. You’re doing so *well*, Dara. I’m proud of you. I really am.”

Dara tries to keep his breathing in check. “*Thank you.*”

He wants to lean forward and press his face to Faolán’s. He wants to cup Faolán’s neck and pull him close, wrapping their arms round each other as their warmth seeps together. He wants to kiss, to hold, to breathe together to intertwine to gasp into each other’s mouths—

He *wants*. God above, does Dara want.

But Dara says nothing, simply keeps staring at the fire between them, and he knows that Faolán’s eyes are locked there too. That even though one of Faolán’s hands is creeping up his back, curling around his neck and bringing their foreheads together, Faolán is still looking at that little fire.

“Dara, I—”

“Don’t say you were harsh.” His voice is shaky, but he speaks anyway. “It wasn’t something you could teach me. You can—you can help me keep growing, I suppose, and everyone else will too, but I had to take the first step myself.”

“Do you love the fire yet?”

He exhales. “Not yet. But I don’t hate it anymore.”

“Good.”

They sit like that for so long, the flames blazing between them, both so still and the only sound the crackling fire. And then Dara can’t bear it anymore, can’t be this close to Faolán without seeing the man’s lovely, *lovely* face, and so he pulls back and looks into Faolán’s eyes.

What a beautiful brown they are. Dark as rain-soaked earth and mesmerizing enough that Dara feels like he could fall into them like pools of water, tumbling down down down until he drowns in them, and he'd never shed a tear.

"I keep thinking about that day." Faolán's voice is barely audible, loud enough for only *them*, and his breath warms Dara's face. "When you brought us that little girl, and then I found you in the townhouse."

"Oh," Dara whispers, and tries not to remember it.

In this moment, the memory of his self-destruction is too much to bear.

Faolán is tracing the back of Dara's hand, fingertips so smooth against his skin. "I... I was so *afraid*. I only knew you as a hunter then, and I was still so, so afraid that you were too far gone. That I wouldn't be able to save you."

He threads his fingers through Dara's, and they clasp their hands, letting the fire flicker out together. The only light are a few torches on the walls and they paint Faolán's face so beautifully, brushing him golden.

Dara wonders if he's golden too.

Faolán shakes his head. "I get afraid I'll lose you, sometimes. I get so afraid I can't think of anything else, and it—it *hurts*." His eyes are wide, honest. "It's like a thorn in the middle of my chest, and I can't get it out no matter how hard I try."

Dara reaches up with his hand of steel, cupping Faolán's jaw as softly as he can, and Faolán leans into the touch. He can't feel Faolán's skin under his fingers but he knows it's there, knows how soft and smooth it is, and he caresses the man's cheek so, so gently.

"You're not going to lose me." He breathes deeply. "I'll hang on."

"You will."



“I will. And one day I won’t have to anymore, because I’ll be standing on my own two feet again.”

Faolán smiles at him, so beautiful in the firelight that it makes his heart ache. “I can’t wait to see it.”

He wants to hold Faolán tightly. He wants to promise over and over again that Faolán will never have to fear for him, because for the first time in a long, long time, Dara wants to live again.

“What does my birthright feel like?”

“What?”

Dara hesitates. “I can feel others’ birthright,” he whispers. “Yours feels like a roaring river, mostly, but now it feels like the stillest lake at dawn. Like when you walk along it and the sun isn’t quite out yet, and the water looks like glass and you can see it stretching for miles, a giant reflecting glass, and you just want to dip your hands in it and see if they come out again.

“I can feel everyone else’s, but I can’t feel my own. And I want to know what it’s like.”

Faolán is quiet for a while, stroking his fingers through Dara’s hair. Then he leans forward, close enough that their lips are almost upon each other and his every word echoes through Dara’s core, Faolán’s breath and blood coursing through him until their hearts and lungs pulse in tandem.

“Most days,” Faolán breathes, “you feel like a blazing beacon, like the ones at a city gate. Burning night and day to light the way for all travelers but hot enough that the archers dip their arrows in the flame when invaders come. *Blazing*. But now...”

He runs his hand down the side of Dara's face, and Dara realizes slowly that he's dropped his arm of steel and brought it up around Faolán's waist, tugging the man as close as he can get him.

"You're a glowing ember," Faolán murmurs. "White-hot. Calm, but ready to burn."

Dara shuts his eyes, resting their foreheads together.

*"Let yourself burn."*

When he kisses Faolán, it is with the burning passion of a hundred suns, and if Dara were capable of thought he'd think it's only right that he be born of fire.