

Chapter One



It sometimes felt as if the lonely sorcerer had willed her into existence. She was lost, wandering in the woods he had made into his kingdom, and he had accepted her without question. His other eyes made no more than a cursory sweep over her before he extended his hand. He carried himself through the woods as though he expected the dawn-poppy, ferns, and orchids to bow before him, and the towering oak and maple trees to move out of his way, an easy smile on his face and his hands clasped loosely behind his back.

His castle was a large thatched cottage with a stone chimney, and he invited her to live with him inside of its moss-covered walls. She fell into his life easily enough, claiming a small room in the east as her own, accumulating charms and trinkets to solidify her sense of belonging. This arboreal king kept his belongings in some sort of order, but she could not differentiate it from chaos. Despite the lack of discernible organization, she soon found a trove of books and journals. She loved to look through his journals detailing the creatures in his kingdom, marveling at the accompanying hand-drawn illustrations. Everything from the looming *leshya* to the irritating mosquitoes indexed and accounted for.

“These insects make a sweet substance,” she said one day. Her and Ivan were both seated at the oaken kitchen table on either side. Ivan was either sorting his ceremonial dagger collection or hunting for one that was missing. He nodded in what passed for a response.

“Do you think we could construct a home for them?” Her words came out all in one breath, and her eyes were wide as she shoved the open book in his face. “Here,” she jabbed her finger at an illustration. “We could build it out back, the book says this ‘honey’ is good for baking, in tea, and to keep wounds from festering.”

“Katya, I am busy!” His shoulders tensed and he tapped one of his knives on the table with slow *thunks*.

She raised an eyebrow as she looked at his dagger collection and then back up at him. “With what?”

“You are impossible.” He threw the dagger down and grabbed the book from her, “let me see the book. Should be simple enough to build a hive for them, the problem would be getting a queen to relocate.”

“Could you use... well, you could do that with magic, right?” She tried to keep her voice light. Despite living with a sorcerer, magic made her uneasy.

He put the book down and squinted at her, frowning. “I could, of course.”

“We could try to coax a queen without magic first, but maybe I would ask for a small bit of magical help if it has been a few weeks and there are no bees.”

He leaned back, rubbing his chin. “But with the seasons changing, you would want them established sooner rather than later.”

Her shoulders sagged. “We could wait for next year.”

“You asked about magic, but now you seem to want to avoid it. What is going on?” He leaned forward again, resting his elbows on the table and his chin on his fists.

“Nothing.” She grabbed the book back, clutching it to her chest. Her face felt like it was on fire, and she suddenly wanted to be anywhere but here.

“All right, I will not pry, but if you want to talk about whatever is bothering you, I am here.”

She was glad when he made no comment the next day when he found her taking a saw to the woodpile. The construction of the beehive distracted her for a little while from the pile of books she still had to get through, and the joyful arrival of a queen and

her workers prolonged that diversion. She screeched when she went outside that morning to check for new inhabitants.

“What happened? Are you all right?” Ivan said, standing disheveled and out of breath in the doorway.

“I think I have bees!” She beamed, not taking her eyes off of the tiny entrance.

“You scared me! I thought you were hurt!”

“I’m fine, come look at my bees!”

She felt his arm settle over her shoulders as he kneeled down to peer inside. “You did it! We should celebrate tonight.”

He went into town that afternoon and came back late. Ingashino was outside the woods, a fair bit of distance away, and Katya had never been there, though she often wondered what it must be like. When Ivan arrived back home, he brought with him seeds for many types of plants. “You can make a garden,” he explained. “I hear the honey tastes different depending on what sorts of flowers the bees pollinate.”

Her bees safely home and enjoying a variety of flowers, she returned to her neglected pile of unread books. As the pile dwindled, she asked Ivan if he had any more hidden in a cranny she had not noticed. He stared at her for a long time, as if she was a puzzle he was trying to solve, rubbing his chin. She was beginning to think he would not answer her when he got up from his desk, and headed into his room, motioning her to follow.

She hesitated, her stomach in knots. She’d never been in his room before, and her eyes hopped from one corner to another as she entered, taking in all the odds and ends, tools and instruments, he had collected. He heaved a trunk out from under his bed, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a key. He held it in his hands, scrutinizing it. He took in a quick breath and then opened the trunk. “If you are interested,” he said as he stood back up and backed away from the trunk, allowing her to approach and look inside.

All the books held inside of this trunk were on magic. She backed away, but she

wanted to lean closer, she wanted to pull out each book linger on the title, her fingers tracing the inlaid gold lettering. Her heart was racing, the desire to flee from or dive into the trunk twinned and paralyzed her. Ivan looked at her and frowned, his brows knitting together. He let out a sigh and closed the trunk.

Katya wanted to yell, to tell him to wait, but the words would not leave her mouth. But instead of locking the chest, he dragged it out of his bedroom. Katya followed him, one uneasy step after another, her heart still pounding in her head.

“I’ll leave these here, so you can get them if you are interested.”

For days she resisted, glancing at the books in the trunk while holding one of the better worn, but mundane tomes in her lap. Magic was *his* thing. But there might have been more to her hesitation than that. “Katya,” he said to her one day, “I can tell you want to read them, why not just read them?”

She turned to stare out the window.

“Are you afraid? I do this sort of thing every day.”

She glanced at him, his shaggy brown hair falling over his thick eyebrows and covering his eyes, and then returned to her intense study of the insects milling outside. She was afraid. She was afraid that the books might contain the answers to the questions that had lodged in her heart and scratched at her core every time she took a breath.

Where did she come from?

He out running an errand the day she opened the first book. She learned magic in the hours he spent away from the cottage, stealing away a text and secreting it back into the trunk when she thought she heard him approach. She learned that all magics required a source of power that you could not create something out of nothing. Each form of magics had laws or rules or ceremonies, but most of the books suggested that regardless of the form of magic, all required a small bit of life as the sacrifice, be in the caster's own well of aether, or that from the earth, or trees, or creatures.

Some darker texts suggested that great feats could be accomplished by using all of the life of a creature. Illustrations accompanied these somber spells, knives being

pressed to the throats of birds or goats. She did not linger on these pages.

She read about conjury, witchery, thaumaturgy, celestialism, and sorcery. All different forms of magic, each with their own styles, instruments, and accouterments. She read vociferously, a magpie stealing spells and styles and stratagems to make for herself a nest of daggers and crystals and wands. Soon, the magic she had feared came to her easily, and soon she was doing simple magics without error. She could light a candle, conjure a wind, and call a storm, and summon earth golems. She could make a healing tonic, or brew a pot of poison, and she could identify both by smell.

She thought she kept this learning to herself, but she was caught. She had stayed up late the night before, reading by candlelight in her room, her door closed. But she still needed to wake at dawn to tend to the chickens she had purchased from the nearby town a few weeks prior. After that, there were even more chores to be done. Ivan, disguised as always, left after lunch for an afternoon of bartering his teas, charms, and tonics at a market.

“Katya, go to bed.”

“What?” She sat up, the candle burned out, and looked around.

Ivan snapped, and several of their wall torches sprung to life. “I said, you should go to bed. I cannot imagine a book to be a good pillow.”

She looked down, the book still open to a page on using the stars to divine the future. “Oh, you’re right.” She tried to slam the book closed, hiding it as though she were a child caught with an extra sweet.

“Wait!” He called. Katya turned around, sure she had been found out. “I got you something while I was out,” he said. He pulled a ceramic mug out of his bag. “This should keep your tea warm much better than the one you have now.”

“Oh! Thank you!” She took it from him with her freehand, keeping the book’s title still out of sight by clenching it to her chest. The mug was hefty, and glazed with a beautiful blue paint. She always appreciated the small gifts he brought back for her when he went to town.

“Were you thinking of invoking the Boar?” Ivan gestured at the book that Katya clung to her chest. *He had seen, she thought. He saw the exact page the book was open to.*

She acted as though she had not heard him as she gathered her skirt and stood up, placing the mug on the counter in the kitchen, and then turning to head into her bedroom.

“Celestialism was never my strong point, maybe we can go the lake tomorrow night and see which stars are out, make some charts?” She paused in the doorway, her one hand braced on its frame as she tried to quiet the war in her head. He could teach her a lot, but if she took him up on his offer of mentorship, she might lose a friend.

“We can do that, but I would want to learn at my own pace, this feels like a private and personal journey for me. It’s not that I don’t trust you, but that I want this for myself.”

“I understand,” he said as he headed to his own room.

The following night they headed for the lake, scrolls and ink and quills bundled in small bags thrown over their shoulders. Ivan meticulously set up his supplies, neat stacks of scrolls, quills laid out just so. Katya plopped to the ground and scattered her materials in a mess that was more of Ivan’s style than hers.

“Have more care, Katya!” Ivan said as he unfurled a cloth star map in front of him, smoothing out the edges. “This is very complicated, and you need to get the measurements precise.”

“You’re one to talk, who was it that lost their reading glasses this morning?” He sighed, shoulders sagging in defeat.

“And, where were they, Ivan? Your glasses? Where were they?”

He rolled his eyes.

“Weren’t they in with your candles? No! No, they were inside one of your empty candle jars.”

He held up his hands. “You win! You win! It’s getting dark, we should be set up

already.”

Katya grinned and began re-organizing her tools. They each approached the craft in their own way, but their excited squeals were near identical in their enthusiasm as the night passed and they charted the heavens in search of answers.

“Look!” Ivan cried, startling Katya from the math equations she was scratching into the ground with a stick. “A falling star!”

Katya leaped to her feet, determined to give the star chase. She pealed through the clearing and into the wood, and a coven of crows followed behind, drawn to her laughter. She felt each leaf beneath her heel and smelled each flower in bloom as she passed by. Further behind, she felt Ivan’s presence, unsure if he was chasing the star or her.

She neared the edge of the woods, watching the star flew past the horizon. Just ahead of her was the edge of the forest, and beyond that open fields. She could keep chasing, but as the thought crossed her mind, she felt a wave of dizziness and nausea. Ivan’s hand found her shoulder and pulled her close. “Go and catch a falling star,” he said, a smile on his face.

She let out a laugh, the moment of unease passing. “What does it mean?”

“Change. I think it means that everything is about to change. And I am very ready for whatever that change may bring.”